An Initiators' Perspective on the Continuity of Citizens' Initiatives in Rural Areas[*]

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ABSTRACT Against the backdrop of depopulation and the shift toward Big Society, citizens' initiatives in rural areas are believed to be able to mitigate the decline of service provision in rural regions. Consequently, this mitigation requires the continuity of such initiatives. However, so far, we lack an initiators' perspective on the relevance of this continuity and the factors influencing it. From a theoretical standpoint, continuity of citizens' initiatives can be understood at three levels: the participant, group, and initiative levels. Based on empirical data obtained from 157 questionnaires distributed to a variety of initiatives, and using regression analysis, the focus of this paper is twofold. First, how and at which level the initiators understand continuity of an initiative is considered. Second, factors influencing the expected continuity of an initiative are researched. The results reveal that continuity differs from merely being successful and is influenced by other factors as well. Furthermore, continuity on the initiative level—the realization of a certain goal—is most prominent in analyzing expected continuity. In conclusion, we explore the roles that citizens' initiatives can be expected to play in service provision and which levels of continuity align with these expectations.

Introduction

In light of the shift toward the "Big Society," citizens' initiatives are often considered to be a potential way of dealing with the loss of public services in rural areas, where such services are under particular pressure

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(Brannan, John, and Stoker 2006; Cheshire and Woods 2009; Healey 2015; Jones and Little 2000; Shucksmith et al. 2006; Thiede et al. 2017). On the one hand, a number of studies have documented the benefits of citizens' initiatives, showing, for example, how such initiatives can lead to community empowerment and possibly provide alternatives to public service delivery (Bailey and Pill 2015; David, Abreu, and Pinheiro 2013; Diers 2004; Pestoff 2012; Sellick 2014; Thissen 2010; Van der Meer et al. 2008; Vermeij 2015). It has been argued that compared with local governments, citizens may be better able to tailor services to local needs (Healey 2015; Kelly and Caputo 2006; Swanson 2001). On the other hand, some scholars have illustrated the fragility of citizens' initiatives. One potential risk is that not all communities have the ability or opportunity to establish these types of initiatives (Skerratt and Steiner 2013), which can result in social exclusion and the decline of services in some areas or communities (Flinders and Moon 2011; Salemink and Strijker 2016; Westwood 2011). It is also not always clear whether citizens' initiatives necessarily lead to new or stronger social cohesion (as is commonly assumed) (Swanson 2001; Veen 2015; Vermeij 2015) or whether service delivery requires too much effort and time on the part of citizens (Allen and Mueller 2013; Kampen, Verhoeven, and Verplanke 2013; Salemink 2016; Tonkens and De Wilde 2013).

In an effort to better understand the risks and likelihood of citizens' initiatives taking over responsibility for former public services, several studies have focused on factors influencing the success of citizens' initiatives (Jones and Little 2000; Lambru and Petrescu 2016; Munoz, Steiner, and Farmer 2015; Salemink and Strijker 2016; Taló, Mannarini, and Rochira 2014; Wiseman 2006). From the viewpoint of professionals, an important indicator of success is not necessarily goal achievement, but continuity in the sense of continuously active citizens, while premature discontinuation of citizens' initiatives seems to imply failure (de Haan, Meier, et al. 2018). As such, continuity of citizens' initiatives can be understood as the prevention of premature termination of the project. However, the perception of professionals is only one side of the story. From the viewpoint of the initiators, continuity and the pressure of goal achievement are more likely to be burdens than signs of success. Thus far, little academic work has engaged with initiators' viewpoints on the need for continuity; the ability to be continuously active; or the individual, collective, and contextual aspects that lead to the discontinuation of citizens' initiatives (Salemink 2016). Under the political conditions of the "Big Society"— or "Participation Society" as it is known in the Netherlands—and the expectation of citizens taking over services that used to be provided by the government, it is important to gather more insight into the resources

and obstacles that affect whether citizens can be continuously active in providing former public services. Therefore, this paper focuses on the initiators' perceptions of continuity and aims to answer the following questions. First, how do founders perceive the continuity of their own initiatives? Second, which aspects or factors influence founders' expectations of the continuity of citizens' initiatives? Based on survey data gathered in the rural areas of the northern Netherlands, a framework of factors influencing continuity has been developed and estimated using regression analysis. We focus on depopulating rural areas in particular because there—in comparison with growing urban areas—citizens' initiatives play a very important role, as these areas tend to depend on local resources in order to maintain services (Syssner and Meijer 2017). A number of studies have shown that in depopulating rural areas, relatively more citizens' initiatives are launched (Syssner abd Meijer 2017; van Houwelingen, Boele, and Dekker 2014).

Conceptualizing Citizens' Initiatives and Continuity

A plethora of concepts are used in reference to the voluntary work of citizens (Bock 2016; Bosworth et al. 2015; Brandsen and Helderman 2012; Fazzi 2011; Kelly and Caputo 2006; Li et al. 2016). In this paper, we use the term citizens' initiatives, which are defined as *formally or informally organized groups of citizens who are active in and contribute to the public domain* (de Haan, Haartsen, et al. 2018; de Haan, Meier, et al. 2018). Following May (2007), citizens' initiatives differ from citizen participation. Participation means—first and foremost—being involved in local governance processes, while citizens' initiatives entail projects in which citizens take the initiative to actively achieve a specific goal together, such as preventing the closure of a local supermarket, maintaining public green areas or arranging elderly care (following the definitions of, for example, Brannan et al. 2006; Calderwood and Davies 2013; Rosol 2012). In these initiatives, the main objective of citizens is either to replace an existing service or facility or to prevent it from disappearing. In the projects we have studied, citizens take the lead, but local or regional governments are sometimes involved in different ways.

Based on the body of literature on citizens' initiatives, continuity is characterized as the prevention of premature termination and can be understood in multiple ways. First of all, continuity has been considered at the participant level, exploring why individuals stop or continue their activities. An often mentioned reason for stopping is volunteer burnout (Allen and Mueller 2013), which is caused by the exhaustion of cognitive resources, unclear role patterns or expectations, or a lack of voice within the initiative. Experiencing excessive demands can also lead to a

cessation of the initiative (Allen and Mueller 2013). The above factors are important because participants in citizens' initiatives who stop their activity have a negative influence on the initiative as a whole. However, individual participants stopping prematurely with an initiative does not have to be negative for the participant since it then entails stopping the activity which was too strenuous and provides the opportunity to take up other activities.

Volunteers can have a variety of motivations for starting an initiative, but continuation depends on the extent to which the participants feel that the initiative reflects their motivations (Allison, Okun, and Dutridge 2002; Mallum 2016; van Schie et al. 2015). Welty Peachey et al. (2014) argue that volunteers are inclined to continue with their activities when their motivations for starting an initiative are fulfilled. Reasons for remaining committed, and thus reasons for the continuity of initiatives on the participant level, can be found in individual motivations. Newton, Becker, and Bell (2014) found a positive influence of learning and development opportunities on the motivation of volunteers to remain committed to an organization such as a citizens' initiative. The stronger the motivation of volunteers to participate is, the higher their level of commitment and intentions to continue. Especially, motives related to developing self-esteem have a positive effect on the intention to stay committed, while career motives seem to provide weaker motivation to stay committed.

Second, continuity can also be considered in relation to the entire group of participants in the citizens' initiative. Several studies have explored the role of social relations at the initiative level. Brandsen and Helderman (2012) argue that the success of citizens' initiatives depends on the long-term maintenance of group boundaries and on the development of an organizational form, i.e., clear task division and agreement on the course of action. The use of democratic principles in decision making is also essential. When goals and viewpoints are shared within the group, the initiative is usually able to continue in the longer term once it is off the ground. Other authors have also found social relations and social capital to be important (Jicha et al. 2011; Lambru and Petrescu 2016; Liu and Besser 2003). Social capital refers to the ability to develop and maintain social networks which "provide the channels through which we recruit one another for good deeds, and social networks foster norms of reciprocity that encourage attention to other's welfare" (Putnam 2000:117). Following Putnam, the development of social capital depends not so much on trust in the government or other institutions, but rather on trust in one another or other members of the citizen initiative. Thus, social capital is an important predictor of participating in collaborations such as citizens' initiatives, leading people to join and

strengthen the group, which ultimately strengthens the continuity of the group. Social relations relate to relationships among the participants as well as to reciprocity, leadership roles and decision-making capabilities. The better these processes are organized, the more likely the initiative is to succeed. When these processes are organized well they can prevent tensions among group members, such as feeling unheard or dissatisfied, which otherwise have a negative influence on the continuity of the group.

Despite the negative effects on the initiative as a whole, individual or group discontinuity does not necessarily have to be problematic for the initiative, since replacing stopped initiators can still lead to continuation of the initiative. Therefore, in addition to considering continuity with regard to a participant or a group, third, continuity can also be considered at the initiative level, i.e., with regard to the existence of the initiative over time—despite changes in group membership—until the goal is achieved. Existence over time requires finding successors when the current participants stop being involved in the initiative. Continuity in terms of goal achievement depends on the type of goal the initiative focuses on. Initiatives may have a goal that is similar to that of a project; once the goal is achieved, there is no longer any need for the initiative. Examples of these types of goals are building a children's playground that requires no maintenance or creating a new meeting place for the elderly. For these types of initiatives, continuity seems to be of lesser importance. On the other hand, initiatives can have goals that require continuing the initiative once the goal is achieved. Examples of this type of goal include managing an (otherwise closed) supermarket, acquiring sustainable energy for a village, or providing an alternative to social housing. For these initiatives, continuity is important because stopping the initiative would result in the disappearance of the service or facility it provided. It should be noted here that goals are not fixed entities for citizens' initiatives, they can change over time during the development of the initiative (de Haan, Meier, et al. 2018). As such, the required continuity can shift as well, from an initiative being continuous by achieving a goal to an initiative being continuous by the maintenance of a goal.

de Haan, Meier, et al. (2018) discussed the role of goal achievement in relation to success. According to professionals, achieving goals is not the same as success; however, the initiative being active, and thus existing over time, is considered a form of success (de Haan, Meier, et al. 2018). This perspective contradicts the viewpoint of initiators and raises the issue of the differences between the concepts of success and continuity. Existing over time can also indicate a struggle to achieve goals, and as such be an indicator of failure instead of success. There is clearly a

relationship between these concepts, as it is likely that the continuity of an initiative depends on its success. However, it remains unclear whether continuity and success are the same thing and whether initiators relate success to continuity in the same way as professionals do. Therefore, this paper focuses on the perspective of initiators.

In order to understand the concept of continuity and its relationship with success, this analysis includes factors known to influence success (de Haan, Haartsen, et al. 2018). These factors can be divided into four themes (de Haan, Haartsen, et al. 2018): the characteristics of the initiative, functional success, social relations, and input. First, examples of the characteristics of the initiative are the type of goal that the initiative is pursuing and that goal's connectedness with the neighborhood. Second, functional success can be understood as the concrete output and results of an initiative. Third, examples of social relations within the initiative are leadership roles and trust. And finally, the input an initiative receives refers, for example, to particular skills and a sense of ownership over the initiative. Previously, these themes were studied in relation to perceived levels of success. In the current analysis, these four themes will be analyzed in their relation to continuity.

Methodology

Research Area and Sample

The dataset for this study contains information from a questionnaire on citizens' initiatives in the rural areas of the northern provinces of the Netherlands. We selected this research area because it is currently experiencing or expected to experience depopulation. The questionnaire was specifically aimed at initiatives related to maintaining or improving (former public) services and livability, such as initiatives that take care of a public green area. Questions were related to the three levels of continuity and to the four themes of factors influencing success.

An inventory of both active and discontinued citizens' initiatives was conducted. In order to build the inventory, we relied on various sources, such as information provided by local and regional governments and planning bureaus, and an internet search conducted by the researchers. Moreover, we adopted the snowball method and used various websites to place calls to complete the questionnaire; we chose this approach because our informants noted that there are also—in many cases smaller scale—citizens' initiatives that operate without governmental or other forms of support, such as funding or professional help (Green and Goetting 2010). In general, these initiatives remain unknown to our informants and were therefore initially not part of the inventory.

So that we could include these initiatives, the respondents who filled out the questionnaire were asked whether they knew of other initiatives in the area. The initiatives mentioned were included in the inventory, and their participants received a questionnaire later on. Despite our efforts to minimize the bias against invisible initiatives, we are aware that our inventory does not provide an exhaustive list of citizens' initiatives. Nevertheless, given the wide variety of initiatives and the large number included in the sample, our findings seem to be representative despite this limitation.

In total, 623 founders of citizens' initiatives were included in the inventory, of which 491 received an invitation to complete the questionnaire by e-mail and 95 by traditional mail. No contact details were available for 37 of the 623 initiatives, and one postal address no longer existed, resulting in a total of 585 initiatives being invited to respond. To increase the response rate, the invitation explained that three randomly selected participants would be rewarded with a €20 voucher, and reminders were sent after two weeks. In total, 157 respondents completed the survey, resulting in a response rate of 26.8 percent. Although both active and inactive citizens' initiatives were included in the inventory, the questionnaire was predominantly completed by founders of active initiatives (86 percent). Since only a small number of stopped initiatives responded, it was not possible to include an analysis on factors influencing continuity of stopped citizens' initiatives and compare this with initiatives with ongoing continuity. As such, our analysis includes 135 respondents (86 percent of 157 completed surveys) affiliated with active initiatives. Therefore, it is important to be aware that in the analysis only those initiatives are included who had, up until the point of the data collection, not stopped prematurely, and thus, are continuous. However, it seems to fit best to study continuity when it is ongoing, since expectations of continuity and the factors influencing it can be considered. As such, the data contribute to better understanding the concept of continuity by providing insights into the aspects which are perceived by the respondents to influence continuity.

All initiatives contained in the inventory received only one invitation and were asked to fill out the questionnaire once. Because the participants stated the name of their initiative, it was possible to check whether multiple questionnaires per initiative were returned, and no duplications occurred. In order to attain information on initiative level, we preferred the questionnaire to be filled out by (one of) the leader(s) of the initiative. The invitation stated this preference and made clear that the questionnaire was intended for the founder or someone in the lead of the initiative. The preference for questioning the founders of initiatives was based on our expectation that this person would have the most complete

overview of all the activities included in the initiative. Nevertheless, when interpreting the results, it should be recognized that they are based on the viewpoint of one initiator who spoke for the entire initiative.

Operationalizations and Analysis

The concept of continuity in citizens' initiatives is not unambiguously defined within the literature. Instead of looking back for how long the initiatives were continuous (duration), we adopt a prospective approach. On average, the initiatives in the sample have existed for 9.3 years, but this does not provide information on continuity in the future. In order to operationalize continuity, the dependent variable, the respondents were asked what their expectations were regarding the lifespan of their initiative. The respondents could indicate in years how long they expected their initiative to remain active. Four answer categories were available for the respondents: less than one year, one to three years, three to five years, and longer than five years. All 135 respondents included in the analysis answered this question. The dependent variable was included as a discrete variable in the analysis.

Using regression analysis, we constructed a model to predict the expected continuity of citizens' initiatives. Since, so far, little is known about factors influencing continuity, we derive the independent variables from known success and failure factors, following from a study on success of citizens' initiatives. As such, the independent variables were related to initiative characteristics, functional success, social relations, and input and were included in the analysis (de Haan, Haartsen, et al. 2018). Furthermore, respondents' suggestions on success and failure factors were included in the analysis. Table 1 provides an overview of all the independent variables per theme. The following will provide a brief description of these themes of independent variables.

The first theme, initiative characteristics, consists of seven independent variables related to the general characteristics of citizens' initiatives. Respondents were asked, among others, to indicate the development phase of their initiative, ranging from the initial starting phase (1) to being in operation (5). Also, an open-ended question allowed the respondents to describe the goals of the initiative, which were categorized into 13 dummy variables.[1] Examples of initiative goals which came forward are: livability, internet access, services, and health care.

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[1]The following 13 types of goals were identified and recoded into dummy variables: housing, social cohesion, education, youth, culture, neighborhood embellishment, physical exercise, sustainability, building re-use livability, internet access, services, and health care.

Functional success, the second theme in the analysis, includes five variables. This theme concerns the concrete results of the initiatives, such as self-evaluated level of success and goal achievement. On a scale ranging from 1–10, the respondents indicated to what extent they considered their initiatives as successful. Goal achievement was operationalized by asking the respondents to what extent, on a 5-point scale, they considered the initiative goals to be achieved. A score of 1 indicated the goals not at all being achieved, and 5 completely having achieved the goals. By formulating the question in this way, the analysis allowed for the adaptability of goals, which can, depending on the development of the initiative, change over time. The question referred to the current state of goal achievement, not necessarily the extent to which the initial goals of the initiative are achieved.

The third theme, social relations, concerns the social aspect of citizens' initiatives and consists of five variables. For example, the respondents were asked who started the initiative, with eight answering options. Also, an inquiry was made of whether or not group members had stopped with their activities for the initiative. Another aspect, social capital, is also included in this theme. The respondents were provided the above-mentioned definition of social capital in order to make sure all the respondents refer to it as the same concept. After reading this definition of social capital, the respondents could indicate on a 5-point scale to what extent social capital is present in their initiative.

The input theme includes nine variables. This fourth theme concerns the roles and skills related to citizens' initiatives. The initiators can feel responsible for the initiatives and have leadership, but also professionals or governmental organizations can be involved. Therefore, who has a say over the initiative is one of the independent variables. Furthermore, the respondents could indicate on a 1–5 scale, whether knowledge and skills were sufficiently present.

The fifth theme includes the respondents' suggestions on success and failure factors. The questionnaire included an open-ended question in which the respondents could indicate which success and failure factors were present within their initiatives. The answers were classified into different dummy variables and were also included in the analysis. Urgency, enthusiasm, autonomy, and sufficient financial funds are examples of the success factors that were mentioned. Examples of failure factors are the relationship with a government, a lack of financial funds, and a lack of time. In total, 11 success factors and 10 failure factors were categorized and included as independent variables.

Lastly, we included the control variables for the analysis to control for the influence of gender, age, the presence of newcomers vs. locals, and

Table 1. Themes and Variables for Regression Analysis (Dependent Variable "Expected Duration of Continuing the Initiative").

Theme	Question/Variable	Continuity Level	Variable Characteristics	Answer Options
Initiative characteristics	No. of years of existence	Initiative level	Numeric	Years in numbers
	Development phase	Initiative level	5 answer options	Start; inventory; group coalescence; formalization; operational phase
	No. of people involved	Group level	Numeric	Number of people
	Time investment of initiative leader	Participant level	Numeric	Number of hours per week
	Type of goals	Initiative level	13 dummy categories	Open question
	Levels of communication	Group level	4 answer options	High vs. low levels and internal vs. external communication
	Type of financing	Initiative level	4 answer options	Governmental; societal organization; both; none
Functional success	Goal achievement	Initiative level	Scale 1–5	1 not at all–5 completely
	When satisfied with initiative	Participant level	4 answer options	Never satisfied; when operational; when goals achieved; already satisfied
	Reputation	Group level	Scale 1–5	1 low–5 high
	Continuation by others in case of stopping	Group level	Nominal	Yes; no
	Level of success	Initiative level	Scale 1–10	Grade for experienced level of success 1–10
Social relations	Who started initially	Group level	8 answer options	Fellow villager(s) and/or neighbor(s); (group) friend(s); myself; existing association; local government; regional government; societal organization; other
	Familiar with each other before starting	Group level	4 answer options	Yes; some, but not all; no; no other initiators
	Stopped members	Group level	Nominal	Yes; no
	Intentions to quit	Participant level	4 answer options	Yes, soon; yes, within a year; yes, in a few years; no
	Social capital	Group level	Scale 1–5	1 low–5 high

Table 1. *Continued*

Theme	Question/Variable	Continuity Level	Variable Characteristics	Answer Options
Input	No. of professionals	Group level	Numeric	Number of professionals
	Involvement of government/organizations	Initiative level	8 answer options	Involvement or not in supplying goods; professionals; network; knowledge
	Community support	Initiative level	Nominal	Yes; no
	Who has say over the initiative	Group level	7 answer options	Initiators; village; multiple villages; local government; regional government; professional(s); other
	Feeling responsible for goal achievement	Participant level	Scale 1–5	1 not responsible–5 very responsible
	Who is responsible for continuation	Initiative level	7 answer options	Villagers; local government; regional government; societal organization; professional; nobody; other
	Reasons to stop	Participant level	Scale 1–5	1 not relevant–5 very relevant for 9 potential reasons to stop
	Knowledge and skills	Group level	Scale 1–5	1 not present–5 all present
	Leadership	Group level	Nominal	Yes; no
Respondents' suggestions	Success factors present in initiative	Initiative & group level	11 dummy categories	Open question
	Failure factors present in initiative	Initiative & group level	10 dummy categories	Open question
Control variables	Gender	Group level	Numeric	% of men and women
	Average age	Group level	Numeric	Average age of participants
	Newcomers or stayers	Group level	Numeric	% of newcomers and stayers
	Education level	Group level	Numeric	% of lower, middle, and higher educated participants

education levels. These variables were included because they provide further information on the background of the participants, who are at times dismissed as "usual suspects" (May 2007) for being involved in multiple participation activities. Also, these characteristics can play a role in the continuity of initiatives. All the control variables were measured at the level of the initiative and were estimated by the respondents. The respondents could indicate the ratio of men and women within the initiative, as well as the ratio of locals and newcomers (i.e., residents living in the area for more than five years or less than five years). Furthermore, the respondents were asked the estimate the age of the participants of the initiative and provide an average age for the initiative as a whole. The fourth and last control variable indicates the percentage of lower, middle, and higher educated participants within the initiative.

Because the concept of the continuity of citizens' initiatives has not been researched extensively thus far and the literature does not provide clear starting points for the analysis, we added the variables in the regression analysis using the forward entry method. The conditions for using regression analysis were checked, and no inconsistencies were found.

Results

This results section first presents the characteristics of the citizens' initiatives included in our dataset. Second, the factors influencing the expected continuity based on the regression analysis are described.

Characteristics of Citizens' Initiatives

Our sample includes relatively large initiatives: on average, 24 people are actively involved in each initiative. The initiatives that were not initially part of the inventory but were approached via websites or snowballing consist, on average, of 27 people, illustrating that citizens' initiatives operating outside the scope of our informants are not necessarily smaller scale initiatives. Furthermore, the participants spend an average of 6.7 hours per week on their initiatives. A total of 18.5 percent of the questionnaires were completed by the current initiative leader who had also founded the initiative. Looking at who starts these types of initiatives, the data illustrate that the initiatives were mostly launched by fellow villagers (31.8 percent) and by associations that already existed (28.7 percent), for instance an initiative that was first started by a community organization. As such, it seems that in most cases the initiators are already familiar with each other before starting the initiative.

Most (31.2 percent) of the citizens' initiatives in the rural areas of the northern Netherlands have the goal of delivering a service (see Table 2).

Table 2. Typology of Citizens' Initiatives in the Sample.

Main Goal	%	No. of People Involved	% Male Participant	% Locals	% Higher Educated
Social cohesion	21.0	32	56.4	84.2	38.4
Education	3.2	20	62.5	82.8	44.7
Culture	3.2	15	64.6	85.9	52.0
Spatial adaptation	22.3	16	68.0	87.0	53.3
Sports	5.1	34	59.9	89.4	38.9
Youth	1.3	5	53.8	100	38.8
Livability	12.1	23	64.5	83.5	45.8
Service delivery	31.2	22	62.1	90.2	51.6
Missing	0.6	–	–	–	–

Additionally, many of these initiatives aim to facilitate social cohesion (21 percent) and to contribute to livability (12.1 percent). The initiatives focusing on youth have the smallest numbers of participants, with an average of only 5. The other types of initiatives consist of groups ranging from 15 to 34 individuals.

In general, the founders appear to be rather positive about the continuity of their initiative: 57.3 percent of the respondents expect their initiatives to exist for at least another five years. A small group of respondents (5.1 percent) expects their initiatives to stop within a year. However, these results can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, the expectation that an initiative will exist for more than five years can be related to the long-term goals of the initiative. On the other hand, such an expectation can also reflect the belief that it will take a long time, for any reason, before the goal is achieved. Since the respondents indicate their initiatives to be rather successful (7.9 out of 10 points) we believe the findings for expected duration are not caused by struggling initiatives that are unable to complete short-term goals.

Looking at the background characteristics of the people involved with the initiatives, we found that more men than women contribute to initiatives: 60.4 percent of the participants within initiatives were male. Regarding the ages of those involved in the initiatives, we observed that the age groups of 30–50 years (48.4 percent) and 50–65 years (45.2 percent) were of nearly the same size. Furthermore, the participation of locals (those who had been part of the community for more than five years) and newcomers was unequally distributed. On average, the initiatives were made up of 84.8 percent locals and 15.2 percent newcomers.

Factors Influencing the Expected Continuity of Citizens' Initiatives

Looking at the significant results of the regression analysis (see Table 3), no single, specific theme emerges as the most prominent in explaining the expected continuity of citizens' initiatives. Rather, continuity can be explained by a combination of themes. Except for that of initiative characteristics, all the themes play a role in predicting expected continuity. Considering the level of continuity, continuity at the initiative level is most prominent, but all three levels are represented in the findings. Six variables proved to have a significant influence on the expected continuity of citizens' initiatives.

Within the *Functional success* theme, two variables are significant. First, goal achievement influences expected continuity. The further the initiative has progressed in achieving its goals, the higher the respondents estimate the continuity of the initiative. It seems that achieving results reduces the respondents' uncertainty about the future of the initiative.

Table 3. Results of Forward Regression Analysis on Expected Continuity of Citizens' Initiatives.

Theme	Variable	Continuity Level	B Coefficient (Standard Error)	*t*	Sig
Functional success	Goals achieved	Initiative level	0.268 (0.067)	4.022	0.000
	Satisfied with initiative—when goals achieved	Participant level	-0.373 (0.144)	-2.599	0.011
Social relations	Who started initially—fellow villager(s)	Group level	0.353 (0.155)	2.286	0.025
Input	Government involvement—access to knowledge	Initiative level	-0.587 (0.214)	-2.739	0.007
Respondents' suggestions	Reasons to stop—no more energy	Participant level	0.136 (0.057)	2.390	0.019
	Success factor—urgency	Initiative level	0.368 (0.155)	2.517	0.013
	Adjusted R^2 = 30.6%				
	N = 110				

And as such, continuity seems not to be a sign of struggling to achieve results. Given the role of goal achievement in the success of citizens' initiatives (de Haan, Haartsen, et al. 2018; de Haan, Meier, et al. 2018), we expected that the type of goals would also play a role in the expected continuity. As noted in the conceptualization, continuity can entail the achievement of a goal or the maintenance of a particular goal. Initiatives focusing on a single goal that does not require the initiative to be operational after the goal is achieved could imply that continuity is of lesser importance. Where initiatives have goals that require the maintenance of the initiative, such as the provision of housing, we expected to find that the founders of these types of initiatives would also expect their initiatives to continue for longer periods of time. However, this was not the case. Achieving goals leads to higher levels of expected continuity, regardless of the type of goals. It should be kept in mind that these findings are related to the current goals of the initiatives, and not necessarily—since goals can develop and change over time—the initial goals of the initiatives.

The second significant variable in the *Functional success* theme also relates to goal achievement. The respondents were asked when they would be satisfied with the initiative. Being satisfied with the initiative when goals are achieved has a negative influence on expected continuity. In other words, the respondents expect their initiative to continue for a shorter duration. Seemingly, a long-term view is needed to ensure continuity of citizens' initiatives and being satisfied simply as soon as goals are achieved seems to be inconsistent with a this long-term view. An outlook on maintaining the goal is required as well. Therefore, ideas about when initiators are satisfied with their initiative will influence continuity, illustrating that citizens' initiatives not only revolve around the primary goal but also serve other purposes. This finding is also supported by previous studies, where professionals stress the importance of the side effects that follow from these types of initiatives (de Haan, Meier, et al. 2018). It should be noted here, however, that this finding can also be explained by the notion that not all type of goals require continuity of the initiative, but end once the goal is achieved and as such, are successful.

We expected that the *Social relations* theme would play a relatively large role in the continuity of citizens' initiatives. For example, a participant wanting to stop the initiative could let the group processes—and therefore the outcomes—be disrupted. However, the *Social relations* theme includes only one significant variable. A possible explanation for this finding is that the initiators who filled out the questionnaire have a more positive outlook because of social desirability and as such do not want to disclose negative information on the collaboration within their initiative.

The significant variable within the *Social relations* theme is "which group of people initially start a citizens' initiative." When fellow villagers had initially started the initiative, respondents expected that initiative to continue for a longer period of time. Sharing a certain goal with people living in the same village seems to enhance the relevance of that goal, increasing the importance of the initiative and resulting in higher levels of expected continuity. Also, here an explanation can be found in the people who must take over when others drop out: if someone stops participating, there are others within the village with the same goal and willingness to continue the initiative.

The *Input* theme contains two significant variables. The first significant variable is the involvement of the government. If governmental involvement takes the form of providing access to knowledge, for example, by introducing an expert from their network, there is a negative influence on expected continuity. This finding indicates that governmental support—when it takes the form of providing access to knowledge—is not necessarily beneficial for the continuation of initiatives. Based on these results, government support seems not to contribute to the continuity of citizens' initiatives; or, government support should be improved and better adapted to the needs of these initiatives in order to be beneficial for continuity.

The second significant variable in the *Input* theme concerns reasons to stop. Respondents were asked to what extent a certain aspect could be a reason to stop their activities for the initiative. The respondents indicated that "being depleted of energy for the initiative" can be a reason to stop. However, when the variable was included in the regression analysis, there was a positive relationship between the variable and expected continuity. In other words, once "being depleted of energy" was indicated as a reason for stopping, the estimation of the initiative's expected continuity increased. A possible explanation for this finding is that the continuity of an initiative is not solely determined by the threat of one of the initiators dropping-out. Seemingly, the respondents trust on their fellow initiators to continue with the initiative even if they themselves are depleted of energy and can no longer contribute.

One variable is significant in the *Respondents' suggestions* theme: urgency as a success factor. There is a positive relationship between the urgency of the initiative and the expected continuity of initiatives. It appears that urgency provides legitimacy and relevance for the initiative. The urgency of the initiatives seems to raise the expectation that the initiatives will also exist for longer periods of time. Serving a purpose that is supported and seen as important on the community or village level appears to provide the founders of initiatives with trust in the continuation of their efforts.

None of the background characteristics were found to have a significant influence on the expected continuity of citizens' initiatives even though continuation by others when a participant stops, i.e., transferring responsibilities in order to maintain the initiative, was expected to be related to the continuity of an initiative as a whole. Remarkably, the variable "continuation by others in case of stopping" was not significant in this analysis. A possible explanation for this finding is that the participants do not look beyond their own role in the initiative and do not focus on transferring responsibilities, in the case of stopping. Stopping seems not to be an option to consider. This blindspot regarding transferring responsibilities and continuation by others can be a vulnerability of citizens' initiatives and should be addressed through policy. Maintaining the services provided by citizens' initiatives requires the consideration of possible successors in the event that someone stops participating.

Conclusions

This paper discusses founders' perspectives on the continuity of citizens' initiatives. The concept of continuity was analyzed at different levels. The initiative level of continuity emerged as the most prominent, meaning that continuity until the goal is achieved is considered the most important level of continuity. However, the group and participant levels surfaced as well, via the influence on continuity of who started the initiative, the reasons for stopping, and the time at which the initiators are satisfied with the initiative. Considering the discussion of whether citizens' initiatives are a stable alternative to service provision, these findings are reassuring because the initiatives seem to be less fragile than expected (Allen and Mueller 2013; Flinders and Moon 2011; Westwood 2011). The continuity of initiatives is less dependent on the continuity of individuals or the group of initiators but more strongly related to continuity until the goal is achieved on the initiative level.

In addition to the level of continuity, the expected continuity was estimated and factors influencing expected continuity were analyzed. The empirical data illustrated that expected continuity is influenced by factors related to functional success, social relations, and input. Surprisingly, there is not one theme of factors that is particularly dominant in explaining and understanding expected continuity. A striking result is the role of goal achievement in the expected continuity of citizens' initiatives. On the one hand, achieving the initiative's goal predicts higher expected continuity of the initiative at the initiative level. This finding could reflect higher levels of confidence in the initiative once a start has been made toward goal achievement. On the other hand, there is a negative influence on expected continuity when the initiators are satisfied with the

initiative once its goals are achieved. This finding can be related to the relevant side effects of citizens' initiatives (de Haan, Meier, et al. 2018), as citizens' initiatives are not only valuable for the goals they achieve but also for the learning experiences they provide. Another explanation can be found in initiatives with goals that do not require maintenance, and as such continuity, once the goals are achieved.

Also, in the analysis the role of the government came forward. Government involvement, in terms of providing access to knowledge, appeared to have a negative effect on expected continuity. This finding seems to point toward an, at times, troubled relationship between citizens' initiatives and government institutions (de Haan, Haartsen, et al. 2018; Hurenkamp, Tonkens, and Duyvendak 2006; Verhoeven and Tonkens 2011). Government institutions need a balance in providing support on the one hand, but without interfering too much with the process of the initiatives on the other hand (de Haan, Haartsen, et al. 2018; Hurenkamp et al. 2006; Verhoeven and Tonkens 2011). This study illustrated that this balance is not only required for successful initiatives, but also applies to the continuity of initiatives.

Furthermore, the analysis reveals that continuity is influenced by factors other than perceived success (de Haan, Haartsen, et al. 2018), illustrating that success and continuity are two different concepts. However, both concepts are relevant to goal achievement. Goal achievement is necessary for both success and continuity. The expectation that success is a condition for continuity was not supported by our findings because the level of success was not one of the factors influencing continuity.

Research on citizens' initiatives, particularly in rural areas where services are under pressure (Brannan et al. 2006; Cheshire and Woods 2009; Healey 2015; Jones and Little 2000; Shucksmith et al. 2006), raises the issue of the relevance of continuity. Based on our findings, citizens' initiatives can be continuous on the initiative level, both by being temporal with an end date (achieving the goal) and by continuing over time (maintenance of the goal). This issue comes down to the existing expectations of citizens' initiatives with regard to their role in service provision. If these types of initiatives are expected to serve as a replacement for services and facilities, then continuity on the initiative-level is indeed important in order to maintain livability. Therefore, the importance and level of continuity depend on the existing expectations of citizens' initiatives.

When citizens' initiatives are seen as a replacement for services and facilities, another issue arises: can this level of responsibility and provision of continuity be expected of the volunteers who are active in these initiatives? In other words, are citizens' initiatives the appropriate alternative when seeking to replace services and facilities? Brannan et

al. (2006) also addressed this question and argued that the costs and benefits should be in balance for both (local) governments and communities. Considering this issue, attention should be paid to which level of continuity is suitable for the given situation and thus which level of continuity can be expected. Moreover, our findings illustrate that participants in citizens' initiatives seem not to anticipate or be prepared for the potential transfer of responsibilities when a participant stops being involved. Thus, professionals supporting citizens' initiatives should raise awareness and contribute to facilitating this transfer in order to establish continuity on the initiative level.

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