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The Dynamics of Self-Governance Capacity: The Dutch Rural Civic Initiative 'Project Ulrum 2034'

Hiska Ubels *, Bettina B. Bock and Tialda Haartsen

Abstract

In this article, we use Kooiman's theory of governance in combination with key-conditions of community self-steering identified in recent studies to examine how the self-steering capacity developed of a community initiative aiming at improving the liveability of a small Dutch village. Using non-participatory observations and qualitative analysis, we obtained in-depth insights into how this initiative, 'Project Ulrum 2034' managed to build local autonomy from 2010 to 2018. We found that government support was crucial for many of its successes. Also, tensions came to light between 1. local autonomy, and its dependence on professional support, and; 2. broader community engagement, and accountability related to the public funding obtained leading to the formalisation of its organisation and the centralisation of tasks. We discovered that self-steering capacities fluctuate in time, are dynamic and develop in a non-linear way. The voluntary engagement was above all temporary, except for some activities when of direct interest to those involved. The continuity of community self-governance was fragile, due to its dependency on external funding and voluntary engagement.

Introduction

In recent years, welfare state reforms, austerity measures, and decentralisation have motivated Western European governments to endorse active citizens' engagement in the public sphere (Van Dam *et al.* 2015; Ubels *et al.* 2019). At the local level, public authorities increasingly experiment with various approaches that facilitate citizen self-governance and grant citizens prominent roles in initiating and steering local development projects and support the development of

their self-governing capacities (Sørensen and Triantafillou 2009; Healey 2014; Rauws 2016; Edelenbos *et al.* 2018). In the UK, for example, the Big Society agenda has devolved power to communities to respond to local social and financial challenges (Bailey 2012; Healey 2015; Hobson *et al.* 2019*)*. Something similar is happening in the depopulating rural areas in the Netherlands, where citizen initiatives play an important role in developing novel solutions for disappearing facilities and services, and degrading neighbourhoods (Korsten and Goedvolk 2008; Hospers and Reverda 2012; Ubels *et al.* 2019).

Recent studies approach citizen-led initiatives from different angles. Several authors emphasise the local government's influence on the development of such initiatives. They can support (or inhibit) their development by providing (or withholding) subsidies, by adapting their own routines and granting citizens more room for manoeuvre and entering novel forms of collaboration (or not) (Nederhand *et al.* 2016; Kleinhans 2017; Edelenbos *et al.* 2018; Van Meerkerk *et al.* 2018). Others underline that the relations between citizens and governmental actors may change over time, pointing at the dynamic of collaboration and conflict (Edelenbos *et al.* 2018; Ubels *et al.* 2019). Generally speaking, it appears that governmental support is vital for the effectiveness and success of citizen initiatives (Healey 2015; Ubels *et al.* 2019) and that the lack thereof may endanger their persistence (Van Meerkerk *et al.* 2018). Other authors identify factors that refer to dynamics within communities. They criticise the idealised image of rural communities as cohesive unities with high potential for problem-solving and self-governance (Shortall 2008; Sørensen and Triantafillou 2009; Skerratt and Steiner 2013; Johansen and Chandler 2015; Bosworth *et al.* 2016). Their studies have, for example, revealed that many civic initiatives are led by the most powerful and risk to exclude less powerful resident groups (Andrews *et al.* 2008; Skerrat and Steiner 2013). The success of citizen initiatives also depends on the resourcefulness of communities. In many cases lacking or depleting human, social and political capital and the loss of collective energy have impeded the persistence and success of citizen groups (Skerratt and Hall 2011; Healey 2014; Fischer and McKee 2017).

In line with Munoz *et al.* (2014), we argue that the self-governing capacity of rural citizens needs more reflection and critical assessment. More in particular, we want to understand better what defines the success of citizen-led initiatives in depopulating rural areas, in which both the community and formal authorities are involved. Recent studies have addressed citizens' capacity mostly in retrospect and concerning achieved goals and conditions of success (Munoz *et al.* 2014; Salemink *et al.* 2016; Hobson *et al.* 2019). Edelenbos *et al.* (2018), instead, applied an evolutionary perspective which identified different modes of citizen-government interaction at different stages of the initiative's development. So far, however, little is known about why the self-governance capacity of community initiatives changes in time and how it is affected by changes in their organisational structure and interaction processes. Our aim, therefore, is to address this gap in knowledge, by following how the changes in the internal organisational structure of a community initiative interact with changes in the collaborative interactions between the core actors involved, the broader community and the relevant public authorities and influence the community's self-governance

capacities. As such, we want to unravel how citizen self-governance capacities are being built, strengthened or weakened in time.

We followed the citizen's initiative 'Project Ulrum 2034' during a period of three years: 2015–2018. The initiative started in 2010 in the village of Ulrum in the North of the Netherlands, which has been experiencing since long population decline. During the last two decades, this has resulted in a continuous decline in facilities and the closure of the primary school, post office, General Practice centre, library, town hall, police station, bank, ATM, the supermarkets and around twenty shops (Christiaanse and Haartsen 2017). The main aim of the initiative has been to maintain and enhance local liveability by encouraging civic engagement in local projects that improve the social and physical living environment. In doing so, the initiative has been experimenting with different forms of collaboration within the village and with public authorities (at the local and regional level), all of which aimed at increasing local autonomy.

The study looked into the following research questions. First, how have changes in the project's organisational structure and governance process affected the self-governance capacity of the community? Second, what has been the role of the initiators, the broader community and the public authorities? Third, what were the main successes and setbacks in the development of the project that influenced such capacity?

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 presents a review of current research on community initiatives and self-governance; it also presents the analytical framework of this study. Section 3 discusses the case selection, data collection, and data analysis. Section 4 describes the results regarding the self-governance governance dynamics and capacity of 'Project Ulrum 2034'. The conclusions are presented in section 5.

Community initiatives and self-governance

Context

Recently, local governments in Europe have been searching for novel ways to organise community development and service delivery, in which the involvement of and collaboration with residents have played an important role (Healey 2015; Edelenbos *et al*. 2018; Ubels *et al*. 2019). On the one hand, this development has been interpreted negatively, as the result of neo-liberalist austerity strategies, in which citizens are forced to step in and to fill the gaps of a retreating government (Healey 2015; Kleinhans 2017). On the other hand, it has been approached as a laudable new form of citizen empowerment (Healey 2015; Hobson *et al*. 2019), even though it is often born out of discontent with the existing situation (Edelenbos *et al*. 2018). This is also the case in the peripheral areas in the Netherlands, where population decline and cutbacks in public budgets lead to the closure of services and degrading neighbourhoods (Korsten and Goedvolk 2008; Hospers and Reverda 2012). In this context, both local governments and citizens become aware of the need to share forces in order to address local liveability issues. This sense of mutual dependency encourages local governments to support initiatives, in which citizens accept the responsibility to become more self-reliant in the maintenance of local liveability (Bock 2019; Ubels *et al*. 2019).

Literature review of community led-initiatives

Recent studies have approached citizen initiatives and their self-governance dynamics from different perspectives. Following Kleinhans (2017), we argue that community-led initiatives are firmly embedded in the spatially defined area in which they take place; for goal realisation, they mainly depend on community resources and the network of social relations within the community. According to Healey (2015), such initiatives are typically small-scale and undertaken by residents who want to improve their living environment. Their activities range from singular, well-defined tasks, such as the maintenance of a playing ground or organising weekly dinners for the elderly, to community enterprises that deliver a variety of 'products', such as a local renewable energy scheme, broadband networks or care cooperative (Farmer *et al.* 2012; Steinerowski and Steinerowska-Streb 2012; Healey 2014; Munoz *et al.* 2014; Kleinhans and Van Ham 2016).

Several authors point out that communities are not homogenous entities and include a variety of individuals and groups with different capacities, perceptions, attitudes and needs, which may change in time (Skerratt and Steiner 2013; Ruth and Franklin 2014; Healey 2015). Residents are, therefore, likely to judge and value community initiatives differently, supporting or counteracting them (Fischer and McKee 2017). In addition, several authors underline that community-focused initiatives develop in particular historical, political, social and geographical contexts and differ in activities and objectives, risk and potential, as well as in the way in which their mode of governance develops (Seixas and Berkes 2010; Bailey 2012; Healey 2015; Ubels *et al.* 2019).

Community initiatives are often seen as proofs of citizen self-organisation or self-governance. Recent studies, however, stress their continuous interaction with local governments, even when these governments retreat. Most forms of community self-governance are found to be hybrid forms, in which communities and public authorities collaborate and in which the intensity of their collaboration may vary and change in time (Nederhand *et al.* 2016; Edelenbos *et al.* 2018; Bock 2019; Ubels *et al.* 2019). On the one hand, government engagement is stimulating; for example, through public acknowledgement, financial or practical support (Nederhand *et al.* 2016; Edelenbos *et al.* 2018; Ubels *et al.* 2019). Reversibly, governmental involvement may hamper citizen self-governance. This may be the result of conflicts between a community and governmental actors or when public authorities push citizen initiatives to follow specific pathways by imposing regulation or monitoring or by withdrawing (financial) support (Nederhand *et al.* 2016; Edelenbos *et al.* 2018; Ubels *et al.* 2019).

In many studies, the self-governance capacity of community initiatives has, hence, been studied in relation to their interaction with public authorities. These studies often explain the potentialities and limitations of citizen self-governance through governmental interference. Hardly any research has looked into the internal dynamic of community self-governance and how its capacity may fluctuate under the influence of changes in its organisational structure and in response to internal and external processes of interactions. It is such questions that this article seeks to respond to as is explained more in detail below.

Self-governance capacity

In this article, we choose to use the concept of citizen self-governance, because we want to look into the 'do-it-yourself' capacity of citizens in solving local liveability issues. Based on Van Meerkerk *et al.* (2018), Edelenbos *et al.* (2018) and Nederhand *et al.* (2016), we define an initiative as self-governing when the initiative is initiated and managed by community residents to provide public goods and services. In its dynamics, it is characterised by a heavy reliance on volunteering and a strong commitment to involving residents and, often also, by collaborations with other informal and formal partners. The wider community, on its turn, will hold such an initiative accountable for its actions and decisions.

Following Kooiman (2003), citizen self-governance refers to the capacity of citizens to adopt the management of tasks that public authorities used to be responsible for. In recent literature, we identified various key-conditions of self-steering capacity: 1. a strong sense of mission, 2. skilled and competent volunteers with leadership qualities, 3. active support from within the community, 4. alliances with institutional players, 5. an effective business model in terms of achieving community goals set, and 6. ensuring the representativeness and, hence, legitimacy of community-focused choices (Healey 2015; Hobson *et al.* 2019; Van Meerkerk *et al.* 2018). We argue that an initiative has a high self-governance capacity when sufficient internal capacity is warranted, and the above-listed conditions are met. Which resources and skills are needed may vary during the development of an initiative: what is needed at the start may be different than what is essential in a later phase (Seixas and Berkes 2010; Meerkerk *et al.* 2018; Ubels *et al.* 2019). Moreover, such capacity can become depleted over time, as citizen self-governance requires much time and voluntary labour (Fischer and MacKee 2017). There are also many risks involved, like for example, losing the support of the community, not being able to meet requirements of funding, and retreating staff and volunteers (Bailey 2012; Salemink *et al.* 2016).

In the context as described, we study how the self-governance capacity of the studied initiative evolves in time in response to its changing governance structures and interactions.

Analytical framework

In our analytical framework to unravel the evolution of the self-governance capacity of the residents involved in a long-term community initiative (see Figure 1), we follow Kooiman (2003) by distinguishing two levels of governance: the structural and the intentional level of interactions.

According to Kooiman, the structural level of interactions points at the relatively stable contextual conditions and patterns that organise governance interactions. We explore the initiatives' evolving governance structure, first of all, by looking into the changes in its organisation model and formal and informal regulations and agreements. More in particular, we look into the division of decision making power and how decisions are communicated and accounted for internally and externally, towards both the community and public authorities. Following Kooiman, such organisational structures offer both flexibilities and rigidities that are of influence on

Long-term community initiative

Structural level of interactions:	Intentional level of interactions
Organisation model and formal and informal rules of the game	Governance process:
• Division of decision power • Accountability • Internal and external communication structures	actions and interactions between the involved residents, with the broader community and the involved formal authorities

T I M E

Evolving self governance-capacity:

1. a strong sense of mission
2. skilled and competent volunteers with leadership qualities
3. active support from within the community
4. alliances with institutional players
5. an effective business model in terms of achieving community goals set
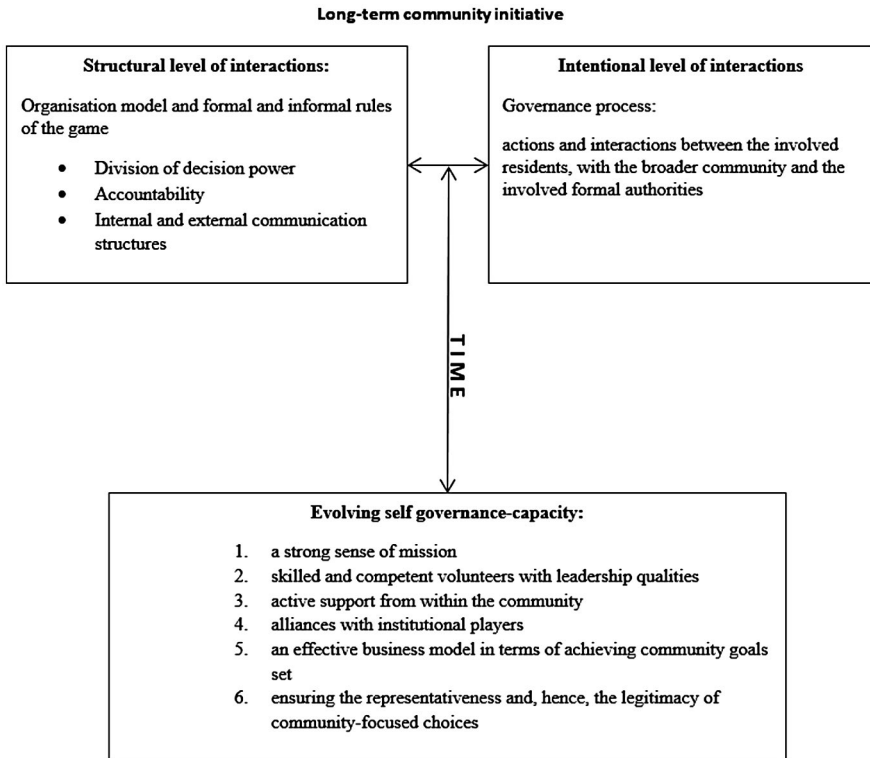6. ensuring the representativeness and, hence, the legitimacy of community-focused choices

Figure 1: *Evolving community self-governance capacity*

governance interactions. They also have systemic qualities that at least in the short term ensure a certain steadiness and predictability. Changes at this level are more likely to happen at the long-term and are beyond individual control.

According to Kooiman, the intentional or actor level of interactions points at the governance process itself. At this level, decision making and intended and unintended actions come about through interactions between the involved actors. Here we focus on the governance process of the initiative and the actions and interactions between the involved residents, with the broader community and the public authorities involved. According to Kooiman, the interaction dynamics are determined mainly by the clashing interests and ambitions of those involved and the related visible and invisible tensions and conflicts that go along with it.

Secondly, following Kooiman, we base our analysis on the assumption that the structural and intentional levels of interactions are interdependent. Kooiman argues, for example, that there is more freedom in decision making at the intentional level of interactions when there is little regulation at the structural level of interactions. At the same time, there are fewer possibilities for the realisation of the self-governance aspirations of the participating actors, when specific rules more control interactions or limited by material conditions. The lesser room actors (perceive to) have in realising their

goals and ambitions; the higher are the tensions in the interaction dynamics with more chances for disappointment and loss of energy of those involved. Following Kooiman, we argue that the ability to steer the interplay between both levels determines an initiative's self-governance capacity and its ability to achieve its goals. Thirdly, we look into how the successful realisation of goals and coping with setbacks was influenced by the evolution of the following key-conditions of self-governance capacity:

1. a strong sense of mission
2. skilled and competent volunteers also having leadership qualities
3. active support from within the community
4. alliances with institutional players
5. an effective business model in terms of achieving community goals set
6. ensuring the representativeness and, hence, the legitimacy of community-focused choices

Methods

Case selection

This article examines 'Project Ulrum 2034', an initiative in the village of Ulrum (1400 inhabitants) in the North of the Netherlands in the context as described in section 1 and 2.1. This initiative started in 2010 and had as the primary goal to encourage local initiatives that invested in the physical and social community environment and in doing so contributed to the capacity of the village to become more autonomous. This resulted in the establishment of a central Executive Committee (EC) of four persons, who were supposed to oversee and manage the initiative as a whole and the various working groups that focused on specific goals. This development is described more in detail in section 4.

We selected this initiative as a case study because of its long-term experimentation -from 2010 to the date of writing- with local self-governance in the context of rural depopulation. We also chose it for its comprehensiveness, as it includes many subprojects with different goals led by different working groups. Furthermore, it became an experimental and exemplary project in which public authorities actively and purposively supported local self-governance. As a result, its development is very well documented in various projects reports. Most important, however, is that the first author followed the project between 2015 and 2018, as is explained more in detail below. This initiative, hence, offered an excellent opportunity to look into how residents have been able to steer emerging and changing governance dynamics and to realise their goals over a longer time.

Data collection

The first author obtained access to the project through its professional facilitator who followed the agreement with the public authorities that the project would serve as a learning environment for both insiders and outsiders and, hence, a case for

research. The members responsible for the EC and the general Project Board (PB) of the project were confident that the reflections of an observer of project meetings and events could contribute to the project. The integrity of the first author was warranted through a mutually signed form for informed consent. Subsequently, we obtained a vast amount of information about the initiative in various ways. For the period until 2015, information about the governance structure and process of the initiative included the analysis of documents such as the project plan (Project Ulrum 2034, 2013), the covenant between the project and local public authorities (Project Ulrum 2034, 2014, Gemeente De Marne, Provincie Groningen and Stichting Wierden en Borgen 2014), and other governmental documents (Gemeente De Marne 2010; Provincie Groningen 2016), as well as informal conversations, and interviews with a member of the EC and a civil servant of the local government, involved in the project. The interview questions concerned the motivation at the start of the project and the governance dynamics up to 2015. From 2015 to 2018, such information was obtained by the first author's regular attendance of the project's EC meetings and activities and by observing its internal and external interactions. These observations were registered in a field dairy. During the same period, we obtained additional insights into the projects' dynamics, setbacks and successes in realising their goals by reading the detailed weekly meeting reports from 2015 to 2018. The first author was also included in the mailing list, which made it possible to follow all project related e-mails between project members containing technical information and personal observations. For the whole period, we received supplementary information through informal conversations and e-mails with key-informants. In this way, we obtained in-depth insights into the projects' self-governance dynamics.

Data analysis

As we have not been able to observe the project from the inside from 2010 to 2014, we analysed the development in this period on the base of the project plan, the project website, informal conversations and, the interviews listed above. We studied the subsequent period from 2015-2018 more in-depth through the observations and resulting field diary of the first author, the weekly project reports, project e-mails, and governmental documents. The first step of our analysis concerned a document analysis of the project's organisational structure. We looked into changes in the formal division of decision-making power, by coding its communication structures and in the way the project both formally and informally accounted for its activities to the public authorities and the community. Secondly, we coded the actions and interactions that concerned the main successes and setbacks in the achievement of project goals and checked how these related to the organisational structure. Thirdly, we looked into how the self-governance capacity developed in time by coding its elements as presented in section 2.3 (see Table 1). By analysing the governance structure, dynamics and achievements at the level of both the 'Project Ulrum 2034' as a whole and the singular sub-projects we reconstructed how self-governance capacity evolved through time.

Table 1: *Coding and sources of elements of self-governance capacity*

Elements of self-governance capacity	Coding	Sources
'Strong sense of mission'.	The motivation of involved residents	Weekly reports, e-mails, field-work diary
'Skilled and competent volunteers with leadership qualities'.	Qualities of key-individuals of the core group that determined the course of events and level of goal achievement	Fieldwork diary, weekly reports
'Active support from within the community'.	Continuation of activities of different working groups over time	Weekly reports, field work diary, e-mails
'Alliances with institutional players'.	Interactions with relevant public authorities	Interviews, covenant, weekly reports, field work diary
'An effective business model in terms of achieving community goals set'.	Explanations of successes and setbacks in goal realisation of the different working groups	Weekly reports, field work diary
Ensuring representativeness and legitimacy	The way the project accounted for its activities both formally and informally to the community and the public authorities and the consequences thereof for the process towards goal achievement	Project plan, covenant, weekly reports, field work diary

Results

In 2010 the 'Project Ulrum 2034'[1] started as a long-term and comprehensive citizen initiative. On the base of the information we gathered, we distinguish three phases of the project. In the initial phase from 2010 to 2014, the project was mainly steered by residents, although the involvement of public authorities increased. In the second phase of 2014–2016, the project entered a formal co-governance arrangement, which clearly defined the roles of the participating residents and public authorities. In the third phase, from 2017-onwards, local independence increased again with a considerably lower and more informal involvement of authorities. The following sub-sections discuss the evolving self-governance capacity of this initiative. We look into the dynamics and developments of the organisational structure and governance process and search to elucidate how this impacted the self-governance capacity of the participating residents. Also, we highlight the role that the initiators, the wider community and the concerned authorities had in the main developments. Besides, we take into account of how setbacks and successes affected the citizens' capacity.

Preparatory phase 2010-2014: start and substantiation of self-governance initiative

In 2010, an advisory group of four residents of *Dörpsbelangen* (village interest organisation which represents most residents of Ulrum) had the 'sense of mission' to reverse the deteriorating housing market and the decreasing liveability of the village (see section 1 and 3). They prepared a plan to take local liveability issues in their hand and, upon approval by *Dörpsbelangen,* presented it to the municipality *De Marne.* In the period that followed, governmental actors played an increasingly important role in the development of the initiative. This happened in a political context that was favourable for new ideas, as the municipality was searching for innovative solutions for liveability issues and alternative ways of collaborating with its citizens (Gemeente De Marne 2010). Initially, however, according to the interviews, the municipality was reluctant; they considered the intention to self-govern as too provocative, and the plans were still vague. One of the residents, however, who was involved in the project yet also employed at the municipality managed to mediate between the advisory group and the municipality, facilitating their interaction and fulfilling a role as 'boundary spanner' (Nederhand *et al.* 2016; Edelenbos *et al.* 2018). The ongoing interaction convinced the local government to support the further elaboration of a self-governance plan. In this phase, the plan was actively supported by community members as is reflected in the establishment of various working groups and sub-projects (see also Table 2). The appointment of a local civil servant at the regional government of the province of Groningen played an important role in establishing supportive relationships with public authorities, also at the regional level. The regional deputy managed to secure a subsidy of EUR 1.5 million from the regional 'Liveability Programmes budget' (*Actieprogramma Werk Energie en Leefbaarheid*) for the initiative. When one independent working group completed a first sub-project (Playground *'Lotuspark',* see Table 2), governmental support of the project became more justified as it contributed to the then dominant discourse of rural citizen self- governance of local liveability. The next step for the municipality was to invite the Housing Corporation[2] to collaborate in the development of a plan on how to address the poor maintenance of the private and social housing stock of the village; this should also result in life cycle resistant housing and sustainable energy use. This resulted in various new sub-projects (see Table 2). In this way, external organisations and formal authorities became increasingly engaged in the definition of the initiative's goals. This was important, following the civil servant, to make sure that citizens would not use the public budget only to do '*the fun stuff*' and to ascertain that the village's urgent housing problems would be solved. The final project plan for self-governance was established in 2013 and included the organisational structure illustrated in Figure 2 (Project Ulrum 2034, 2013).

Following the interviews, it was essential to the project members that there were clear and transparent accountability mechanisms for the use of the public money which should ensure the legitimacy of the related decisions within the village. In consultation with the authorities, it was decided to formalise the initiative in the 'Foundation Project Ulrum 2034' and *Dörpsbelangen* taking final responsibility. The municipality *De Marne* and the province of Groningen were supposed to stay out of the way and offer their support only when needed (Project Ulrum 2034, 2013).

Table 2: *Overview of intended sub-projects in the self-governance plan (Project Ulrum 2034, 2013)*

Sub-projects	Goals
Touristic development/ Watercourse*	Development of tourism through the organisation of a sailing circuit and the restoration of old walking and cycling paths between villages
Foundation of Village Care organisation *Dörpszörg**	Support of care needing residents by establishing a volunteer network
The release of planning regulation in the village centre*	Stimulation of the establishment of local businesses in the centre of the village
Arts at the entrances of the village*	Raising the attractiveness of the entrance roads of the village
Playground *Lotuspark**	The realisation of a playground that attracts external visitors and fits the need of disabled children; Restructuration of a poorly maintained public area in the village; Park maintenance by residents
Spoorpark: demolition of social housing block and a land exchange between Housing Foundation, Project Ulrum 2034 and private house owners**	Adaptation of the housing supply and improvement of poorly maintained premises; Planning of a new green area on the place of the previous housing block of *Spoorpark* and organisation of its management by residents
Multifunctional centre*	Purchase of a vacant and poorly maintained building to house a health post, meeting point, Church History Museum and facilities for the playground *Lotuspark*
*Asingahof/park**	Redesign and improvement of a poorly maintained historical park by local youth
Historical landscape plan *Wierdeherstelplan**	Recovery of historic landscape within the village
Subsidy arrangements 'Upgrading houses'**	Adaptation of social and private houses to needs in different life stages; Realisation of investments in sustainable energy use in private houses, like, for example, isolation and solar panels

*Sub-projects that were started in 2010 by working groups of residents.

**Sub-projects that were included in the plan as a consequence of the involvement of public authorities.

In retrospect, we see the initial motivation for citizen self-governance increase during this phase. Here a combination of factors played an important role: a skilled volunteer who acted as boundary spanner between the involved residents and the municipality; the resulting practical and financial governmental support; the high level of social cohesion in the village; the active engagement of several residents (Edelenbos *et al.* 2018; Van Meerkerk *et al.* 2018), and; the ability to achieve some of the goals quite quickly and proof efficiency through tangible results (Ubels *et al.* 2019). At the same time, formal authorities became more involved than initially
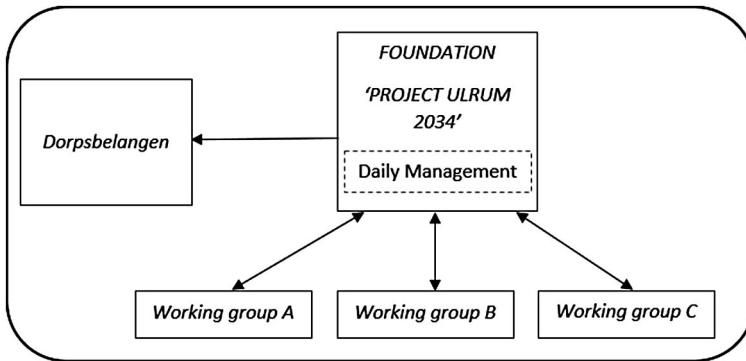
Figure 2: *Intended self-governance organisation structure (Project Ulrum 2034, 2013)*

foreseen, as a consequence of the large subsidy. Similar as in other research, there was the aspiration for local autonomy yet also the need for public funding and support to realise the transition to self-governance (Hobson *et al.* 2019). Governmental subsidies required changes in the organisational structure to ensure accountability and legitimise the use of public money. New objectives were adopted as well to match the local and regional policy agenda. At the same time, the support that accompanied the governments' involvement seemed crucial to build the organisation of the initiative and get its activities started. Nevertheless, then, local management and autonomy were still ascertained.

Second phase 2014–2016: formal co-governance arrangement between residents and local authorities

Community autonomy was, however, further compromised in 2014, when the newly established Foundation Project Ulrum 2034 agreed to enter a formal co-governance arrangement with the municipality *De Marne*, the province of Groningen and the regional Housing Corporation. All parties signed a covenant with explicit rules defining their roles and responsibilities regarding the project and the use of the subsidy of EUR 1.5 million. It resulted in another adaptation of the organisational structure (structural level of interactions) by the establishment of, at the initiative level, the Project Board (PB) and a Supervisory Board, and, at the government level, the Core and Steering groups (see Figure 3). As is more often the case with citizen initiatives active in the public domain, this development positioned the initiative more firmly in the local and regional government environment (Nederhand *et al.* 2016; Edelenbos *et al.* 2018).

The local Supervisory Board controlled the use of government funding and provided independent advice to the Foundation of Project Ulrum 2034. The PB obtained final responsibility for decisions about the expenditures of the EC. In that way, the Foundation could be held financially accountable by both the village and the municipality, which monitored the use of the financial support. Moreover, it was defined
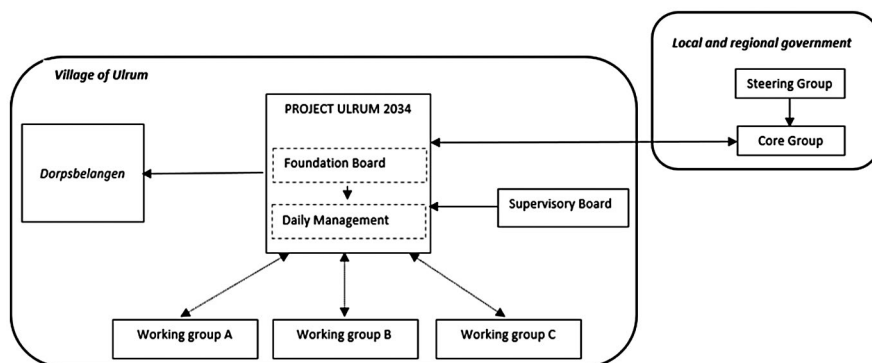
Figure 3: *Organisation structure since the covenant (Project Ulrum 2034, et al. 2014)*

that the civil servants (represented in the Core Group) and the Housing Corporation supported the project. The Core group was supervised by the Steering Committee including a municipal alderman and a regional deputy. The EC of the project was installed as the central point of contact for the formal covenant partners. The increasing complexity in the organisation and of the new goals set (see Table 2) convinced the project members that they needed professional support; they proposed to hire a professional process facilitator. The municipality agreed to finance this on top of the provincial subsidy (Project Ulrum 2034, *et al.* 2014). The residents were expected to co-finance the project by finding sponsors.

These organisational changes at the structural level of interactions affected the process dynamics at the intentional level of interactions, particularly for those of the sub-projects that were mostly dependent on the subsidy (see Table 3); this influenced the development of the residents' self-governance capacity as well. Three main dynamics came to the fore.

First, it appeared that the project organisation relied quite a lot on professional support for the realisation of its goals. The professional facilitator functioned as a boundary spanner and assisted the initiative in developing relationships with the broader community, external organisations and relevant public authorities. Besides, an external administrator was employed to take care of the administrative part of subsidy arrangements for the sub-project 'Upgrading houses' (see Table 3). Furthermore, a core group of relevant civil servants of the municipality *De Marne* and the province of Groningen were regularly present at project meetings for providing advice. Next, the governmental Steering group (see Figure 3) acted as mediators during several escalating conflicts between the EC and PB. Their belief in this particular initiative can explain their intensive and enduring support, as well as their wish to use this particular project as an example to promote a political agenda in favour of community self-governance. Also, at the regional level, the extraordinary high subsidy was politically contested, and a heavy pressure was felt to produce successful results. We observed that the EC and PB highly appreciated the governmental support; it nurtured their self-confidence and motivation for self-governance.

Table 3: *Sub-projects with a high impact of co-governance arrangement during the implementation process*

Sub-projects	Main influential characteristics/developments	Main goals and actions successfully achieved	Main setbacks
Subsidy arrangements Upgrading houses	Substantial use of available budget of 1,5 million (ca. 40%), besides, co-funding of Housing Foundation and participating house owners Support and facilitation by the covenant partners, the appointed facilitator and a paid employee for reviewing applications and administration PB and EC responsible for the implementation	Management of self-governance process leading to the successful upgrading of 158 private houses. Total investment of 1,2 million euro in the village, also by the compulsory contribution of house owners and the employment of local entrepreneurs Spin-off: upgrading of 98 rental properties by Housing Foundation (investment of 0,5 million euros)	–
Spoorpark: demolition of social housing block and a land exchange between Housing Foundation, Project Ulrum 2034 and private house owners	Substantial use of available covenant budget of 1,5 million (ca. 30%), besides, co-funding of Housing Foundation and external funders Support and facilitation by covenant partners and external facilitator PB and EC responsible for implementation Complex process with various stakeholders and interests An autonomous working group for planning and management of the new green area on the previous housing block of *Spoorpark*, coordination in the hands of a resident who was also the chair of the EC Difficulties in finding volunteers for maintenance activities green area	Management of self-governance process leading to the successful demolition of two social housing blocks; demolition and reconstruction of 2 private houses; purchase of released land and set up a green area	Pressure on the continuation of the self-governance ambitions, no structural volunteering for maintenance activities for the newly realised green area of '*Spoorpark*'.

(Continues)

Table 3: (Continued)

Sub-projects	Main influential characteristics/developments	Main goals and actions successfully achieved	Main setbacks
Multifunctional centre	Substantial use of available covenant budget of 1,5 million (ca. 20%), mainly covenant and to a lesser extent external funding PB and EC responsible for the implementation A complex interplay between architects, contractors, diversity of stakeholders, volunteers and formal procedures Facilitation by covenant partners and the project appointed external professional Erratic process with conflicts and many practical and financial uncertainties beyond the planned deadlines leading to the eventual change of plans from reconstruction to demolition and new construction	Management of self-governance process leading to the successful transition of a poorly maintained house in a multifunctional Finding potential users: health services, *DörpsZörg*, visitors playground *Lotuspark*	Long-term uncertainties about the process in terms of goal and actions and if and how to continue this sub-project. This fuelled the existing discordances between the PB and EC and contributed to the eventual withdrawal of the PB at the end of the co-governance arrangement period
Historical Landscape Plan *Wierdeherstelplan*	Covenant funding PB and EC responsible for the implementation Integration of goals subproject *Asingahof/park*, no continuation of the separate working group The shift of responsibilities from project to landscape management organization	Exposition archaeological findings Landscaping activities	Let go of self-govern-ance ambitions

Sources: project reports 2014–2018; Province Groningen, 2016; observations; e-mails with key-informants.

As a second dynamic, we observed that the initiative developed rather formal methods of accounting for their decisions and actions, also as a result of the agreements made around the use of public money. At the structural level of interactions, this was reflected in, for example, the frequent formal and written information about (financial) decision making, exchanged between the different groups of the project and the covenant partners, as well as in the detailed monthly accounts of proceedings in the village newspaper. As a result, both project members and civil servants compared the organisation with a 'mini-government'; they lamented this development as it undermined the flexibility and spontaneity aspired and expected in self-governance and impeded practical ways of communication and decision making (intentional level of interactions). Together with differences in the competencies, styles, and motivations of project members, and the scale and the complexity of the overall project and its different sub-projects, this rigidity contributed also to ambiguity and disagreements between the EC and the PB about their respective responsibilities and the use of the covenant budget. Although the members of the Project Foundation and the civil servants of the Core group (see Figure 3) searched since 2015 to render the organisational structure more efficient and transparent, they found no real alternative due to the formal accountability needed for the use of public money. The rigidity experienced within the project further compromised mutual understanding within the project and delayed in decision making in various sub-projects (see 'Multifunctional centre'; 'Church Historical Museum', Tables 2 and 4).

A third dynamic consisted of the increasing centralisation of tasks and responsibilities at the level of a few EC-members. They had a central position in the overall project (at the structural level of interactions) and as such understood the complex interaction between the sub-projects that all had their own set of goals, actions, and dynamics (at the intentional level of interactions) (see Tables 3 and 4). These four residents acquired a key position within the project as a whole (see Table 3); they were often both EC and working group members (see 'Subsidy arrangements Upgrading houses'; *'Spoorpark';* 'Multifunctional centre'; *'DörpsZörg'*, Tables 3 and 4). This massively increased their workload, with a real risk of volunteer burn out (Salemink *et al.* 2016). It gave them also access to a comprehensive learning trajectory which increased their skills to collaborate effectively with institutional partners; again, similar dynamics were found in other studies (Healey 2015; Nederhand *et al.* 2016; Edelenbos *et al.* 2018; Meerkerk *et al.* 2018).

The changes induced by the co-governance arrangement (at the structural level of interactions) had far less influence on the self-governance dynamics of the working groups that functioned more autonomously (see Table 4, Figures 2 and 3). Their self-governance capacity was mainly affected by the following dynamics. First, we see that funding played a crucial role. Sub-projects which were not successful in acquiring the funds needed for their projected activities never took off ('Watercourse/ Touristic development'; 'Historical Church Museum'; see Table 4)'. For those, which were successful, funding allowed them to unfold their activities without substantial problems (*'Dörpszörg'*; 'Treasure room *Ollerom*'; 'Cemeteries', see Table 4).

Secondly, some of these workgroups fell apart (the structural level of interactions) and lost their 'sense of mission' once they completed their initial goal, such as the

Table 4: *Sub-projects with low reliance on the co-governance arrangement*

Sub-projects	Main influential characteristics/developments	Main goals and actions successfully achieved[1]	Main setbacks
The route through the village and arts	Mainly external funding and supplemented by covenant funding An autonomous working group responsible for the implementation As the beauty of the two arts crafts was widely contested within the village, the initial plan of realising five art crafts was abandoned. Withdrawing working group responsible for maintenance of the realised planters	Management of self-governance process leading to the successful realisation of 17 decorative planters in the central streets, two arts crafts at the entrances of the village	Pressure on the continuation of the self-governance ambitions, no structural volunteering for maintenance activities at the long-term
Asingapark/hof	Under the responsibility of PB and EC Cancellation of sub-project and inclusion in sub-project *Wierdeherstelplan*	Exploration of students for youth involvement in planning and implementation	The non-realised goal of including youth, because of lacking interest Let go of self-governance ambitions.
Treasure room *Ollerom*	Mainly external funding and supplemented by covenant funding An autonomous working group responsible for the implementation that consisted mainly of elderly residents Ongoing self-activities for an undetermined period	Continuing self-governance process leading to successful results Gathering of historical information and artefacts about the village Well visited expositions	-

(Continues)

Table 4: *(Continued)*

Sub-projects	Main influential characteristics/developments	Main goals and actions successfully achieved[1]	Main setbacks
Cemeteries	External funding	Continuing self-governance process leading to successful results	-
	An autonomous working group responsible for the implementation that consisted mainly of elderly residents	Restoration and maintenance activities at the cemetery	
	Ongoing self-activities for an undetermined period	The realisation of a memorial place	
Playground *Lotuspark*	Co-funding: mainly external, supplemented by covenant funding	Self-governance process leading to the successful realisation of a unique playground, also for disabled children	Pressure on the continuation of the self-governance ambitions, no structural volunteering for maintenance activities at the long-term
	An autonomous working group mainly responsible for implementation, the eventual involvement of PB and EC concerning partial covenant funding and the organisation of maintenance activities		
	Withdrawing working group responsible for maintenance of the realised playground. EC members occasionally filled up this gap		
Village care organisation *Dörpszörg*	Mainly external funding and donors, supplemented by covenant funding.	Continuing self-governance process leading to successful results	-
	An autonomous working group responsible for the implementation that consisted mainly of elderly residents, co-coordination of resident also active in EC	Becoming a foundation, involving a care professional for coordination, collaboration with three care providing organisations, establishing a network of 120 volunteers, the organisation of meetings, ICT-courses, and different activities mainly for elderly residents	
	Ongoing activities for an undetermined time		

Table 4: *(Continued)*

Sub-projects	Main influential characteristics/developments	Main goals and actions successfully achieved[1]	Main setbacks
Church Historical Museum	Mainly external funding and supplemented by covenant funding. An autonomous working group responsible for the implementation. Plan making still in progress in 2018	Self-governance process leading to intermediate results: establishment of foundation; agreements about use building with regional historical church foundation; provisional external funding supplemented by covenant-funding	Becoming entangled between subsidy providers, leading to long-term uncertainty about the continuation of this sub-project. This fuelled the existing discordances between the PB and EC and contributed to the eventual withdrawal of the Project Board at the end of the co-governance arrangement period
Watercourse/Touristic development	PB and EC responsible for the implementation	–	No funding and political support. No progress

Sources: project reports 2014–2018; Province Groningen, 2016; observations; e-mails with key-informants.

[1] At the moment of concluding the covenant period in 2016, it turned out that in addition to the covenant finances received, the project also managed to obtain approximately 1 million euros through self-employment and external subsidies (Provincie Groningen, 2016).

playground, yet needed to further engage in continuous maintenance activities, for which the members of the sub-projects generally showed little interest. This was a setback for the project as a whole, whose ambition was to go beyond singular ad-hoc activities and sustain self-governance in the long term. It also increased the work pressure of the EC-members, who were facing the recurring dilemma of how to approach and motivate fellow residents to engage in maintenance tasks (intentional level of interactions). At various occasions, the only option was to do the grass cutting, restoration and painting activities themselves. In one case the tasks were eventually delegated to professionals ('*Asingapark*'; see Tables 2 and 4). Other working groups managed to continue their self-governance activities also after the successful realisation of their initial goals. According to a key-informant, most of these groups consisted of elderly residents who were used to volunteering; moreover, many of them belonged to the target group that was intended to being served. The opportunity for social contact while engaging in the working group was also an important motive in particularly for elderly residents ('*DörpsZörg*'; 'Treasure room *Ollerom*'; 'Cemeteries', see Table 2).

During this phase of the initiative, the co-governance arrangement with institutional players has a positive effect on citizens' self-steering capacity. It strengthened, however, above all the capacity of a restricted group of residents -the EC-members- and not the community as a whole. Their responsibility to manage the subsidy budget on a daily base was decisive for this development and resulted in their central position within an increasingly complex organisation structure with different layers of responsibilities and control (structural level of interactions). The daily experience of managing the initiative and the intensive collaboration with institutional partners fuelled their 'sense of mission' and contributed to their gain in skills and leadership abilities (intentional level of interactions). The interplay between the interaction levels, however, also affected their governance capacity. The formal accountability for the subsidy resulted in a high degree of formality and rigidity in interactions. This contributed to internal tensions and conflicts and impeded the progress of several sub-projects. The concentration of self-governance tasks around a small group of residents who run the real risk of becoming overburdened made the project also more vulnerable.

The experience of Ulrum demonstrates that the involvement of public authorities in raising community self-governance may result in what Kleinhans and van Ham (2016) framed as a 'support paradox'. For the project as a whole, contrary to their intention and effort, the EC-members increasingly lost contact with the wider community. Weak communicative skills did play a role here; most important, however, is that the management of governmentally funded activities was very complex and time-consuming which fostered an inward orientation. The need to account for public money resulted in the centralisation and formalisation of management, which invoked conflict and at times obstructed goal realisation. Low levels of engagement with the broader community reflects low self-governance capacity, with weak scores in terms of democratic value, representativeness and legitimacy, as Van Meerkerk *et al.* (2018) and Kleinhans and Van Ham (2016) elaborate. At the same time, the success in satisfying community needs reconfirms the capacity to self-govern (Healey 2015). The situation is more variable for the working groups. Some managed to govern their

activities rather independently, with minor support from the covenant budget. Other working groups dissolved and lost their self-governance capacity when the 'sense of mission' faded away after the first achievement. Sub-projects focused on serving the interests of their members had more chance to continue and to expand their capacity. All sub-projects, however, depended on external funding, and none developed a self-sustaining business model, which would guarantee autonomy in goal realisation (Van Meerkerk *et al.* 2018). This affected self-governance capacity positively when funds were won and negatively in the case of long-term uncertainties around funding and rejections.

Third phase 2017-present: local autonomy with informal support of authorities

The closure of the co-governance arrangement by the end of 2016, implied the end of the formal governance arrangement. The tensions during the previous phase affected the 'sense of mission' of the PB-members who at this point decided to withdraw. These developments led to the return to the initial organisational structure of the project plan (see Figure 2), with the EC at the core of the project under the umbrella of *Dorpsbelangen*. The management of those sub-projects that were still running was now organised in consultation with *Dorpsbelangen* and with occasional support of the municipality. The dynamics of the autonomous workgroups continued as described in the previous section. By the end of 2018, the organisation changed again: the responsibility for basic maintenance activities was handed over to *Dorpsbelangen,* and the management of green spaces to the municipality and a landscape management organisation (see Table 3). The EC-members decided to withdraw because they felt overburdened after their long-term engagement. Although still uncertain if and how the project would continue, it was considered that it would continue int the reduced form of an advisory group of *Dorpsbelangen* again, as was the case in 2010.

The end of the formal governance arrangement and closure of governmental funding had little effect on the self-governance capacity of the few remaining autonomous workgroups. It did, however, affect the overall organisation of the project and with it the self-governance capacity of the leading group. Although they had sufficient capacity to advance the remaining goals, the burden of establishing and managing a complex initiative for a long time, with often conflictual interactions, burned out their 'sense of mission' and exhausted their willingness to engage as volunteers (Healey 2015; Fischer and McKee 2017; Hobson *et al.* 2019).

They did their best to ensure the self-governance of the initiative by handing over responsibilities to *Dorpsbelangen* and professionals. The capabilities that this group had developed over time were however no longer put to use for realising local autonomy.

Discussion and conclusions

In the context of austerity, a retreating government and depopulation, the residents of Ulrum, a small village in the North of the Netherlands engaged in an experimental initiative -Project Ulrum 2034'- that aimed at improving local liveability through community autonomy. In this article, we examined how the capacity of the residents

to self- govern their community evolved over time and in interaction with the project. The article is based on research in which we analysed the development of the project during 2010–2018 using a mixed set of qualitative methods. First of all, we wanted to understand how changes in the project's organisational structure affected the governance process and with it the community's capacity to manage local liveability issues by themselves. We also looked at how tasks were divided and relations developed between the initiators, the broader community and the public authorities supporting the project. Besides, we examined how the self-governance capacity increased or decreased in relation to successes and setbacks experienced over time at various levels of the project. Our analytical framework combines insights of Kooiman's theory of governance (2003) with the following key-conditions of self-governance capacity that we identified in recent research: 1. strong sense of mission, 2. skilled and competent volunteers with leadership qualities, 3. active support from within the community, 4. alliances with institutional players, 5. an effective business model and 6. ensuring the representativeness and legitimacy of community-focused choices in goal realisation (Healey 2015; Hobson *et al.* 2019; Van Meerkerk *et al.* 2018). While analysing the evolving self-governance capacity, we distinguished between changes occurring at the structural and intentional level of interactions. Overall we identified three phases in the development process of the project from 2010–2018.

In general, we can conclude that government involvement has supported the development of the project and has been crucial for many of its successes; which is in line with research of Healey (2015), Edelenbos *et al.* (2018) and Nederhand *et al.* (2016). The role of the government and its involvement in the initiative has, however, changed in time. During the first phase, from 2010 to 2014, the community-led initiative managed most activities autonomously, but with the practical and financial support of public authorities. During the second phase, from 2014–2016, government involvement increased following the acquisition of a substantial subsidy of EUR 1.5 million. This development profoundly changed governance dynamics. In accordance with Brandsen (2016), the effects were both beneficial and disadvantageous. It contributed to the self-governance capacity of a leading group of residents: it strengthened their 'sense of mission', skills and leadership qualities, provided them with an effective business model which found support from within the community and ensured the representativeness and legitimacy of goal setting and realisation. At the same time, the increasing dependency on government support and its influence on goals setting corroded the aspired community autonomy and self-governance capacity. The subsidy allowed for the development of multiple sub-projects and increased the complexity of the project and its management. It also required the need to develop adequate accountability mechanisms to both the community and the public authorities for which the support of the government was needed. The tension between autonomy and dependency was also reflected in the pressure to match the initiative's goals to the policy agenda as to legitimise the project's eligibility for public funding. The need for public accountability required organisation adaptation, which resulted in the centralisation of responsibility and formalisation of internal and external processes of communication. It weakened the engagement of the wider community in the project management and with it the self-governance capacity of the community. Despite the intention to build

local autonomy upon broad community engagement, the rigidity of the new 'rules of the game' hampered the participation of community members and the inclusion of new ideas in sub-projects depending on government funding.

Our case regards a complex project that includes several sub-projects and working groups. Comparing those reveals the variability of self-governance capacity – among sub-projects and groups as well as across time. Groups that were more successful in maintaining community engagement and with it self-governance capacity managed to commit volunteers by rendering participation rewarding, among others by offering opportunities for social contact. Nevertheless, as most activities were dependent on external funding, full local autonomy was never achieved.

More generally, the case of Ulrum demonstrates that (public) funding of citizen initiatives has ambivalent effects. Financial support enables the enactment of certain activities, yet at the same time gnaws at the (sense of) autonomy due to the obligations that come along with it.

Our theoretical framework enabled us to understand civic self-governance as a dynamic process with capacities fluctuating in time, with diverging results in terms of goal achievement as well as self-governance ambitions at the level of the initiative as a whole and its sub-projects. This underlines the dynamic and non-linear way in which self-governance capacity unfolds. Self-governance capacity is likely to be constructed and get lost again; it may also be unequally distributed with capacities becoming most developed among those who are most involved. Our study showed that the degree of involvement of public authorities, the availability of public money, and the dependence of citizens on this support, can have a decisive influence on changes within the organisation of such initiatives and their ambitions. The structural and intentional level of interactions and their interplay, hence, importantly affect the chance that the key-conditions of self-steering capacity are being met. It indicates that how citizens' initiatives are organised and rules and responsibilities for the use of public money are formalised, matters not only for the ambition and motivation of initiative members; it also importantly contributes to a gain or loss in the sense of competence to self-govern. In the case of Ulrum, we have seen that a formal arrangement between citizens initiatives and public authorities can support the capacity to realise the intended outcomes. However, the continuity of self-governance is fragile not only due to its dependence on (public) funding; its vulnerability also results from its dependence on voluntary citizen engagement and, the community's resourcefulness in terms of social and cultural capital (Skerratt and Hall 2011; Healey 2014; Fischer and McKee 2017; Ubels *et al.* 2019). In the case of Ulrum, we witnessed that the initiative gradually fell apart once the collaboration with public authorities ended. The leading group of the initiative mostly gave in because the high demand on time and effort had exhausted their energy and motivation; and it was difficult to motivate others to step in, as the self-governance ambitions of the community as such had faded away over time. On the base of these findings, we can conclude that citizen self-governance is unlikely to provide a reliable and enduring solution for government retreatment from public services, paradoxically, because novel and tailor-made forms of intensive government engagement seem crucial for communities' self-steering capacity to ensure rural liveability.

Notes

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[1] The name 'Project Ulrum 2034' refers to a religious protest action in the year of 1834 by Rev. Hendrik de Cock which at the time caused a historical church schism in the Netherlands and resulted in the start of the 'Free Reformed Churches'. It was chosen as a wink to this change provoking initiative which made the village nationally famous and because the date of 2034 refers to its long-term intentions for realising local autonomy.
[2] An organisation that focuses on building, offering and managing and affordable social housing.

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