

Flexible relations, frail contacts and failing demands: How community groups and local institutions interact in local governance in the Netherlands

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Abstract

This paper explores the way community groups, central to new systems of local governance, are related to local institutions and how those relations influence them. We draw from two theoretical approaches – behavioural and institutional – that offer different answers to the question: what makes community groups thrive? Based on an analysis of 386 community groups in the Netherlands, we distinguish four types of groups: feather light, cooperative, networked and nested groups. Then, in a neighbourhood case study we focus on the relations between groups and local institutions to gain a deeper insight into the institutional dynamics of urban governance. Moreover, we combine the findings of both studies claiming that different groups need different things from local institutions, and that in the current NPM-driven world only the higher educated community groups have productive relationships with local institutions, while others are somewhere in between frail contacts and failing demands.

Keywords

local institutions, neighbourhoods, participation, social capital, the Netherlands

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Introduction

In the last two decades national and local governments in European welfare states

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have increasingly stressed the value and importance of citizen participation for dealing with local issues such as lack of liveability, public security problems, lagging emancipation of certain groups and social segregation (Lowndes and Sullivan, 2008; Lowndes et al., 2001). This shift from government to governance has received attention from a wide range of scholars (Kearns and Paddison, 2000; Newman, 2005, 2001; Swyngedouw, 2005; Taylor, 2007) and it can be seen as a response to a crisis of confidence in the ability of the European welfare state to create cities inhabited by responsible, public-spirited citizens and socially cohesive neighbourhoods (Coaffee and Healey, 2003; Garcia, 2006; Jones and Evans, 2006).

This type of local governance requires the redefinition of relationships between governmental actors, local institutions and citizens in order to open up space for a more active role of citizens in their living environment. These developments have become central to urban policy implementation in the UK (cf. Foley and Martin, 2000; Lawless et al., 2010; MacLeavy, 2009), Sweden (Bunar, 2011), Spain (Pares et al., 2012), Germany (Haus and Erling-Klausen, 2011) and the Netherlands (cf. de Wilde, 2013; van Marissing et al., 2006).

This paper explores the way community groups, which are central to these new networks of local governance (Bull and Jones, 2006; Lowndes and Wilson, 2001; Maloney et al., 2000), relate to local institutions and how these relations influence their ability to take on public duties. We will draw from two theoretical approaches – the behavioural and the institutional – which each offer different answers to the question: what makes community groups thrive? We will single out the main arguments of these approaches and use them to analyse the type of social relationships of community groups in the Netherlands. We distinguish four

types of groups: feather light, cooperative, networked and nested groups.

Subsequently, in a neighbourhood case study, we focus on the relationships between community groups and local institutions in order to gain a deeper insight into the institutional dynamics of local governance. Finally, combining the findings of both studies, we develop an interactional model to understand the ‘complexity’ (Brownhill and Carpenter, 2009: 269–270) of governance in local contexts, such as urban neighbourhoods. We conclude that community groups are not best left to self-organise as the behavioural approach would advocate, but should be actively stimulated by local institutions. However, some institutions are better equipped to give support than others. More specifically, we show that in the current NPM-driven world only the strongest, higher educated community groups have productive, flexible relationships with local institutions, while others are somewhere in between maintaining frail contacts and expressing failing demands.

Behavioural versus institutional approach

As stated above, there are two approaches with answers to what makes community groups thrive. Much of the *behavioural*, ‘neo-Tocquevillean’, understanding of community engagement builds on Putnam’s concept of social capital (Putnam, 2000, 2004). Putnam frames social capital as the connections between citizens, with face-to-face relationships being the source for co-ordinated actions, social trust and tolerance, which are then generalised to the broader community (Putnam, 2000: 19, 307–315). It is the behaviour of individual citizens that determines whether or not moral consciousness is increased and democratic norms developed: the burden of (re)engagement and ‘the

health of our public institutions' (Putnam, 2000: 336) thus lie with the citizenry.

Implicit in the behavioural approach is the 'crowding out thesis' (Rothstein and Stolle, 2003; van Oorschot and Arts, 2005), which claims that institutions tend to suffocate citizen involvement. They destroy the citizenry's sense of obligation, weaken ties between citizens or affect and diminish their trust (Berger and Neuhaus, 1977). If one wants to understand the working of local governance it is necessary to focus on the 'internal dynamics' of community groups and social networks (Raco, 2002).

Putnam sheds some light on the issue of these internal dynamics when he discusses two different forms of social capital: bonding and bridging social relations. Bonding social capital tends to reinforce the bonds between group members and the focus lies on group identification and homogeneity. Bridging social capital encompasses more loose and distant ties and tends to bring people together across diverse social divisions. Each form is helpful in meeting different needs (Putnam, 2000).

As much as the behavioural approach has helped to inspire debates and empirical findings on the role of social capital in networks of local governance, Putnam, and scholars in his wake, tend to focus exclusively on the quantity of relationships, while the quality of relations is often not taken into account. How *many* social relationships a group engages in, appears to be a more important question than *how* groups develop and maintain different social relationships.

However, this last question is important as it points to the influence of traditional social categories (e.g. class, gender and education) on the development of public relationships. To provide an answer to this last question, Lichterman (2009: 848) has introduced the concept of 'social capacity'. He states that 'the ability to talk and act reflectively, to coordinate and engage in problem

solving' with all kinds of actors, e.g. local institutions and other community groups, is actually essential to be able to organise and maintain public relationships. Lichterman shows that cultivation of social capacity depends on the level of education of volunteers and he locates this primarily among the higher educational strata.

Concluding, the behavioural approach is less demanding for policy-makers and therefore more attractive to politicians of different feathers when cut-downs need to be made in neoliberal times. The 'Third Way' (Giddens, 1998) and, more recently, 'Red Tories' (Blond, 2010) and 'Blue Labour' (Glasman, 2011) promote citizens acting autonomously as a win-win situation: it means saving tax money and simultaneously promoting community participation by freeing citizens from the hold of bureaucrats. The avoidance of 'traditional' categories – such as power, domination, exploitation (cf. Hibbit et al., 2001; Koch, 2013; Marinetto, 2003; Mayer, 2003) – and the picturing of contemporary processes of marginalisation as problems of insufficiently mobilised 'social capital', directs attention to the (potential) self-activation of communities.

In contrast, the other prominent view stresses *institutional* factors to be key in understanding the blossoming of community engagement. It argues that the local dynamics between government, local institutions and citizens are crucial for the flourishing of community groups. Requests to participate in partnerships, exposure to political or social cues and invitations to deliberative meetings spark the flame of engagement and activate individuals into public-spirited, responsible citizens (Lawless, 2004; Lawless et al., 2010; Lowndes and Wilson, 2001; Maloney et al., 2000; Verba et al., 1995).

In this perspective, Szepter (2002) reframes Woolcocks' (1998) concept of 'linking social capital' to examine the power-laden interactions between citizens and their

institutional environment. He refers to vertical ties and 'institutionalized relationships among such unequal agents, where those involved are nevertheless, despite the manifest inequalities, endeavouring to achieve a mutually agreed beneficial goal' (Szreter, 2002: 8). With this concept Szreter introduces a relational approach which shows that social capital can only be understood within the institutional relations that it is part of and builds upon. As such, power is brought back into the discussion. Thus, in the institutional perspective it is not the mere goodwill and public-spirited behaviour of citizens that fuels community action, but the action undertaken by local institutions to stimulate engagement and action.

The institutional perspective is more demanding for politicians and policy-makers as the burden is primarily on setting and maintaining an inspiring, facilitative policy scene, educating policy practitioners in more empowering ways of working and creating good networks (Buser, 2013; Silverman, 2009). If this happens, community groups will most likely thrive and local problems can be solved through concerted public action.

We develop a dynamic, interactional model to understand why local community groups flourish or wither away, combining elements from the behavioural and the institutional approach. By doing this we attempt to deepen and specify the local governance-argument, which states that citizen participation thrives in a 'multi-faceted' setting in which institutional opportunity structures and civic culture recognise each other (Barnes et al., 2007; Docherty et al., 2001; Taylor, 2007: 310).

Methodology

Beginning in 2006, we conducted a national study of 386 voluntary groups in the Netherlands that were randomly selected from four databases of several thousands of

groups. The selection criteria was that these groups had less than 20 active members and few or no institutional characteristics, such as owning an office, having paid staff, keeping a register of official members, conveying formal meetings at short intervals and making clear distinctions between different tasks in the organisation. We asked members of these groups about their motives, their goals, their ideas on civic engagement, their contacts with and connections to local institutions, the amount of time invested and the way they interacted. We did this through a predominantly pre-structured list of half-open questions. We further visited 20 members of these 386 groups for one-to-two hour in-depth interviews on the ambitions and frustrations concerning their civic engagement. These data enabled us to distinguish different types of community groups according to the amount and type of contact and relations that they maintained.

In order to gain insight into the interaction between community groups and their local institutional context we set up a qualitative case study of voluntary groups in one Dutch urban neighbourhood, *Kanaleneiland* in the city of Utrecht in 2007. *Kanaleneiland* is a disadvantaged neighbourhood at the forefront of Dutch policy activism combating (social and economic) deprivation. Local government, welfare organisations and housing associations make concerted efforts to facilitate community participation and local partnerships in order to collectively tackle pressing social issues.

During six months of fieldwork, we studied all 16 voluntary groups that we found in the neighbourhood, had one hour to one-and-a-half hour semi-structured interviews with 13 volunteers on topics including their motivation to become active, their activities, their connections with other groups, their issues of concern and institutional demands. We analysed the interviews on specific indicators: two types of behavioural aspects (the

amount and quality of social relationships) and three types of institutional aspects (the amount of linking capital, the nature of dialogue with institutional environment, and the needs of voluntary groups). In addition, we also conducted semi-structured interviews with ten professionals of the district office, a welfare organisation and housing associations in the neighbourhood. In these interviews we focused primarily on their interaction with community groups and their recognition of and responsiveness to the needs of groups in the neighbourhood.

In order to develop a behavioural typology of community groups, our national study of the Netherlands has been specifically designed to capture as much variance in community groups as possible in different social settings. The case study of Kanaleneiland has been designed to study the relations between community groups and local institutions within a highly institutionalized urban setting. As deprived urban neighbourhoods are at the forefront of policy interventionism, it is there that national and local social policy request and steer actions of local institutions.

The Netherlands

The Netherlands, a Western European country with a comparatively well-functioning welfare state and a historical tradition of cooperation between citizens and government, has always been a fruitful breeding ground for local community action (see Chanan, 1992). Based on our national data set, one could make a rough estimation that between 200,000 and 300,000 informal community groups exist in the Netherlands.

In general, citizen engagement in the Netherlands is about celebrating community rather than challenging power. Their goals and motives show that these groups are not vehicles for personal gain but rather communities in which people set out to improve the

lives of others. Self-interested action – often feared in the ‘neo-Tocquevillean’ approach – is not so widespread. Moreover, there is little explicit aversion towards government, local institutions and private actors (Hurenkamp et al., 2011). This is not an exclusively Dutch phenomenon though. Sampson et al. (2005: 675) have already argued that, in general, ‘civic engagement events tend to be overwhelmingly mundane, local, and initiated by relatively advantaged segments of society, and devoid of major conflict’.

While some of the Dutch community groups – in which discontent over the local state of affairs is a primary concern – have an explicit ‘not in my backyard’ character, these are surprisingly small in number. More than 85% of the initiatives either ignored local government or co-operated with it, rather than directly opposed it. Most citizens understand their engagement as a social, informal, rather than a political affair. When they set out to (re)construct society they soothe, feed, dance and play rather than march, write or protest.

As in other European welfare states, the Netherlands has seen a revived attention to citizen participation from the new millennium onwards (Uitermark, 2013). Nowhere has this become more evident than in the Dutch policy agenda for a new mode of local governance in neighbourhoods (de Wilde, 2013; van Gent et al., 2009). Inspired by the English National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, a Dutch Neighbourhood Deal was developed and implemented by the national government in 2007. Although national government provided the policy goals – i.e. improvement of public space, empowerment of residents and growth of social cohesion in deprived urban neighbourhoods – implementation became the collective responsibility of local networks of governmental actors, local institutions and residents.

The Dutch encompassing welfare state (cf. Cox, 1993; Wetenschappelijke Raad

voor het Regeringsbeleid (WRR), 2006) has made for extensive, formal state–citizen relationships whereas Dutch civil society has long been a lively public space in which governmental and non-governmental actors interact frequently and informally with citizens, both on a national and local scale (Dekker, 2001). The tentacles of the Dutch welfare state reach out to (urban) neighbourhoods, demonstrated by a wide social service landscape which is mainly operated by three local institutions: local government, welfare organisations and housing associations.

Local government performs two functions in the neighbourhood: first of all, it provides for a neighbourhood office with district administrators executing policy and working on the ground as true ‘street level bureaucrats’ (Lipsky, 1980): they perform social services, manage funds, organise neighbourhood meetings and are gatekeepers to local administrators on the one hand and residents on the other. Second, as policy concerning the neighbourhood is developed on the national level, with local authorities acting as policy executioners of national policy goals, district administrators play a co-ordinating role in policy interventions. For instance, local institutions, e.g. welfare organisations need to account for their decisions and practices to the local government through the mediating role of district administrators.

In every Dutch neighbourhood there are usually one or multiple welfare organisations present that execute local policy; they also provide social services, as well as social care, assistance and community work. They developed out of religious and ideological associations – primarily after World War II – and have developed into governance actors that perform public tasks for the community. However, the increasing entrepreneurial spirit in Dutch government (see Uitermark and Duyvendak, 2008) has had an impact on them. As a result alterations have appeared in the organisational logic of

welfare organisations in the Netherlands. The classic subsidy-relation, which is based on the cost of input, is replaced by forms of output-finance, with accompanying accountability demands and structures.

The Netherlands has a strong tradition of socially rented housing. This sector – generally managed by housing associations – is by far the most important element in the local housing market in Dutch cities, and housing associations own the majority of all social housing in neighbourhoods up for urban renewal (Kleinhan, 2004; Veldboer et al., 2002). In 1995, Dutch housing associations became financially independent after the so-called ‘grossing and balancing operation’. They became private actors, functioning within the frame of the national Housing Act (Priemus, 2003). With their mix of private status, public tasks and financial autonomy, housing associations are exemplary New Public Management (NPM) organisations.

Apart from performing traditional duties – maintenance of buildings and public space – they have taken on more social responsibilities and have become a strong force in local governance networks in neighbourhoods, under the heading of urban regeneration. This expresses itself primarily in their search for new and creative ways to fulfil their additional social responsibilities (WRR, 2005). In this, they perform the same role as British housing associations (Cameron, 2003)

The Dutch case is thus very interesting for a study of local community participation in a highly institutionalised context. In order to do so, we will first develop a behavioural typology of community groups in the Netherlands drawn from our national study.

Behavioural typology of community groups

In our national study we set out to distinguish between different kinds of voluntary groups based on the intensity of contact

among members (the amount of bonding social capital) and contact with the outside world (the amount of bridging and linking social capital). Contact among members we understood in terms of direct dialogue, phone calls and email contact, the inclination to call out to others in case of emergent problems and the average period that volunteers contributed to the voluntary group. Contact with the outside world we understood in terms of direct dialogue, phone calls and email contact, frequency of cooperation with or active contribution to other voluntary groups and cooperation with (local) institutions.

First, *feather light groups* have little contact among their volunteers and little contact with the outside world. They made up 12% in our sample. Their loose connections may not produce much more than a website giving advice on environmental friendly behaviour and two people who sporadically maintain it, or several volunteers who place their phone number in local newspapers to offer lonely people a chance to talk. In general, little time is spent on the activities. Compared with other groups, these volunteers have slightly lower than average educational levels and the groups are the most recently formed, with only 15% existing for longer than 15 years.

Second, *cooperative groups* have a great deal of contact among themselves, but relatively little with the outside world. They made up 20% of the groups. They revolve around a specific place, yearly festivities in a neighbourhood or a specific community (often elderly, women or migrants). Three characteristics stand out. Like feather light groups, the educational level of their members is lower than average. Yet, they have existed for longer than their feather light counterparts. Finally, members consider socialising more important than achieving results. Their activities are aimed at strengthening communal bonds – e.g. interactions

stimulating cultural awareness, information meetings and festivities. In that sense, they fit well within the behavioural perspective that sees face-to-face relations and personal contact as the origin and medium of civic engagement (see Putnam, 2000).

Third, *networked groups* have little contact among themselves, but more with the outside world. They have developed these outside relations over time. In previous stages they were more like feather light or cooperative groups. Networked volunteers made up 19% of the initiatives. These groups often focus on liveability issues and policy strategic topics, such as safety arrangements or local youth at risk. They have two characteristics. First, participants are higher educated than the average of our respondents. And second, volunteers in these groups do not care too much about socialising. What matters is the result, such as reducing criminality in the neighbourhood or school drop-out among youngsters. All in all, the amount of external social contact refers to a high degree of linking social capital in these groups.

Finally, *nested groups* have both substantial contacts among themselves and with the outside world. These groups comprised almost half of the groups in our study (49%). They consist of highly educated citizens. This over-representation confirms existing research on civic engagement (Verba et al., 1995: 305–307), which shows that civic engagement is predominantly the affair of the higher educated. On average, nested groups have existed for much longer than other groups; with 38% older than 15 years (see Hipp and Perrin, 2006). We found that nested groups have sufficient institutional outlet for their ideas and have a high amount of both bridging and linking social capital.

The differences between these four groups, both in their internal structure and goals and in their external relations, raise

the question how local institutions react to them. This is dealt with in the next section where we introduce our neighbourhood case study.

Local institutions talk back: A neighbourhood case study

Our behavioural typology of community groups suggests that they have different needs and demands when it comes to performing a desired role in their local environment. Our case study of community groups in Kanaleneiland shows that some groups were quite successful and satisfied with their performance, while others did not do so well. Accounting for the differences in success were the relations and interactions between groups and local institutions.

We only found two types of community groups in Kanaleneiland: cooperative groups (75%) and nested groups (25%). It might be that we overlooked feather light groups, because of their higher chance of invisibility. After all, they hardly have any outside contacts. Nor do they have a supporting community to fall back on, unlike cooperative groups. However, the absence of groups with a low amount of bonding social capital fits with the type of community involvement in this type of deprived urban neighbourhood, where the physical proximity, strong ties to family and friends in the area and public familiarity (see Blokland, 2003) makes it easier to engage with each other and develop bonding social capital. This might also explain why those groups with linking social capital in Kanaleneiland could be qualified as nested instead of networked.

Under the heading of local governance-inspired policy – which proclaimed ‘open attitude’ and ‘accessibility’ as vital to the encouragement of citizen participation – district administrators in Kanaleneiland attempted to build a neighbourhood network. They organised deliberative meetings, which members of

community groups and policy practitioners from the welfare organisation and housing associations could attend and where they could voice their concerns. Nevertheless, a community worker noticed that ‘all those [community groups] are still very solitary; they do not really cooperate with each other’. He argued this was due to their bonding social capital – ‘they are too focused on their own community, their own little things, you know how it goes’.

However, volunteers of cooperative groups did not express a defensive attitude towards contact with the outside world and other community groups. Most of them were bursting with ideas to open up their community to the neighbourhood, sometimes even thinking about future arrangements:

We organized these information meetings for parents in our community. It was really successful, so many of them came. There is a need for that. So we were thinking of developing a monthly parental course. Perhaps also with parents from other schools and, I don't know, other communities, because you know, it is important for our children. (Volunteer)

So what was going wrong then? Organising a more serious and structural parental course meant that these cooperative groups had to contact, among others, the welfare organisation for support. They had ideas, but now they needed a financial budget, a location and help with organising and co-ordinating these courses. However, the parental courses were not developed further, despite the initial enthusiasm. It appeared that volunteers of this group expressed reluctance to turn to the welfare organisation for support, as they struggled with holding on to their ‘independence’:

They [welfare organisation] took over our activities for youngsters in the neighbourhood. Suddenly, they wanted to organise everything and this year they organise the activities in the

community centre ... without us. (...) I see it this way, they hold up the umbrella for you as a volunteer, but as soon as you're not looking, they take it away and you're standing in the rain. (Volunteer)

In general, we found that volunteers, specifically of cooperative groups, complained about the welfare organisation in the neighbourhood. They found it difficult to get into a meaningful dialogue with community workers and voice their needs and interests. As one of them put it:

They [welfare organisation] wanted to support us. But 'how' and 'with what' we asked. What do they expect from us in return? It's so complicated. We also feel an increasing suspicion. We just have the feeling ... well, that it's better not to risk that they might run off with our projects or that we might lose our independence. We decided it is better not to have any contact at the moment. (Volunteer)

Aware of the unequal power relations between community groups and institutional actors, volunteers were looking for ways to pull themselves up to institutional actors without losing too much of their independence.

However, the welfare organisation had little space to manoeuvre. Over the years, because of NPM-inspired policy, financial support from the local government to the welfare organisations had dwindled. They were still assigned the task to support community groups, but now choices had to be made on where to cut expenses. Community workers stated that their working hours were cut back, affecting their ability to advise and support community groups. The performance-driven culture forced the welfare organisation to reach performance standards set by the local government. A welfare manager explained that this undermined their flexibility:

This is how it goes (...) A community worker who wants to support a group is told to spend

decreasing effort and time on that task. But volunteers actually ask for more support. Subsequently, they start to complain about the attitude of the welfare organisation. In the end we are the constant bogeyman, because local government first says 'you get money for performing this task in this way', and the next year 'you get money for that task performed in that way'. (Welfare manager)

Volunteers were concerned that the welfare organisation was preying on their activities, trying to embed them in their own organisation in order to increase subsidies from the local government. When asked, a community worker answered:

There is perhaps a tendency to take up activities of groups, due to the fact that we have to deliver efficient services that reach a lot of residents and solve a lot of problems at the same time. You might have invested time in those activities, but they [voluntary groups] have formally done it. Well, then you might write down the result under your own results (...) But does that mean that you're preying upon those activities? I don't think so. (Community worker)

Cooperative groups in Kanaleneiland were sometimes actively trying to reach out to other community groups, but the local government and welfare institutions played an ambiguous role in the process. In Kanaleneiland, the increasing influence of NPM meant that other (private) providers of welfare services were contracted to offer community services as well, thereby enhancing competition within the institutional environment. Subsequently, the public management of the welfare organisation tended to focus on those services and activities that were successful in solving problems, in order to display efficiency to service contractors such as local government and housing associations. This corresponds to findings on community participation in the UK, that 'a performance driven culture discourages risk

and encourages blame-avoidance, especially when results are likely to take some time to achieve' (Taylor, 2007: 313). Concluding, these findings show that it is not always the strength of bonding social capital that interferes with attempts to reach out to the wider public domain. It appears that institutional factors and structures of power also play an important role.

The nested groups in Kanaleneiland, on the other hand, displayed a lot of bonding, bridging and linking social capital. Like volunteers of cooperative groups, their public heart beats for their community and the neighbourhood in a truly 'neo-Tocquevillean' spirit. Moreover, just like some co-operatives groups, these nested groups were actively searching for contact with members of other community groups and for a meaningful dialogue with local institutions. The difference was that they actually succeeded in bridging and linking out.

Strikingly, all nested groups in Kanaleneiland had developed a partnership with a housing association in the neighbourhood while maintaining little to no contact with the welfare organisation. While the welfare organisation was increasingly struggling with cut-backs, accountability structures and other NPM-driven measures – and failed to perform an open and flexible attitude towards voluntary groups – housing associations in Kanaleneiland were taking up a new supporting role, as a result of repeated calls from the national government to take upon more public duties in neighbourhoods. Still, housing associations were not obliged to do so; they were bound by a moral plight, not by policy measures or accountability structures to the local (or national) government. They remained private organisations, making profit and only obliged by law to invest in a designated variety of public services and tasks.

As a result they had financial autonomy. Nonetheless, market-driven incentives played

a somewhat different role in these local institutions. District managers of housing associations had more discretionary leeway than community workers or local administrators. Uninterrupted by bureaucratic bottle-necks, they were able to make decisions easier and faster, which enabled an ongoing dialogue with volunteers. Partnerships were created in an informal way, such as face-to-face talks or a phone call, rather than through official structures of deliberation. As a district manager of a housing association made clear:

Well, possibly you should try something, and if it doesn't work it is also fine. But you should at least experiment and dare to engage with volunteers. (District manager)

Housing associations have a vested interest in getting into a dialogue with groups that can mean something for them, because the groups reach residents that the association itself finds hard to reach. In one particular case, volunteers of a community group offered to approach individual residents (in this case Dutch-Moroccan women) to hear their opinions concerning neighbourhood issues, and – more importantly – ask them how they wanted to contribute in solving these issues. It offered the housing association an entrance to 'metis' (Scott, 1998) – specific local knowledge. Through the development of a cleaning project, done by women residing in their housing stock, they used this local knowledge to tackle the increasing deterioration of many porches in Kanaleneiland:

Well, we acknowledge that they [community group] reach out to an enormous group of women. That is something special and you should act upon that. That's why we thought about the idea to approach these women, through [the community group], to help in a porch cleaning project. (District manager)

This exchange of interests was not something members of nested groups were opposed to. They acknowledged it as a vital aspect of a dialogue with local institutions:

I do not think that there will be an organisation or association that will sponsor you and ask nothing in return. [The housing association] for instance can expect us to discuss with them what they find important in the neighbourhood. And we will help them with that and they are helping us (...) They are familiar with our activities, and recognize themselves in them. They think we do very good things and are willing to sponsor us, because we do different things to improve the neighbourhood. (Volunteer)

This last quote also points to a degree of 'social capacity' that we found among nested groups in Kanaleneiland. These volunteers talked reflectively about their role in the neighbourhood and actively voiced doubts and critique on their own proceedings and activities in interviews with us. They were outward-oriented and constantly in search for 'creative ways to improve and develop our activities', as one of the volunteers stated. In that creative quest, they were willing to experiment and engage with all kinds of actors in the neighbourhood in order to tackle social problems.

However, power relationships between housing associations and these community groups are not equal. For groups, options for meaningful dialogue with local government and welfare organisations were scarce and options for long-term financial support in the neighbourhood even more so. Yet, housing associations had an abundant choice of community groups to cooperate with. Subsequently, housing associations – as they were not bound to performance measures, policy agendas or accountability structures which steered their choice – were in a position to select those groups that were of most use to them and behaved as flexible partners.

An interactional model: Flexible relations, frail contacts and failing demands

Combining the findings from our two studies, we now return to the question why some community groups wither while others flourish. In Figure 1 we show the relation between the amount of bonding and bridging social capital that groups display, and the success of their relations with local institutions.

From our national study we learned that feather light groups sometimes strive in vain for some recognition by the local institutional environment. While some wished to keep their group small and their connections loose, the majority was not overtly happy with these relations. They demand a listening ear: the most urgently felt need among these volunteers is that someone cares about, and picks up, their ideas. For them it matters *that* someone in the institutional environment reacts, rather than developing a partnership with a local institution or other community groups.

We found that these volunteers found it hard to change this because of a lack of self-efficacy and connections with local government. Members were often unfamiliar with local politics or did not know how to make their voluntary activities more attractive to the wider community. Given that the level of education was below average, the lack of social capacity and opportunities to fulfil these modest demands are more plausible explanations than a lack of good will or time.

Even though we did not find these types of groups in our case study, drawing upon dynamics between other community groups and local institutions in Kanaleneiland, we would argue that local institutions under pressure to reach performance goals most probably see no logic in investing in these initiatives, as instant results are not given and no 'active subjects' are found who are

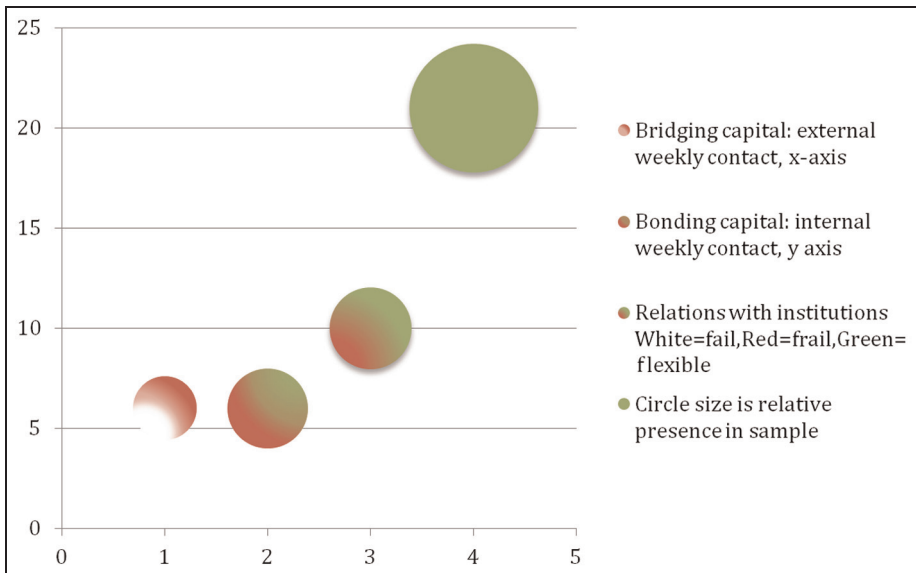


Figure 1. The interactional model: Community groups in terms of their bonding and bridging social capital in relation to their linking social capital.

willing to join a partnership with a local institution (Taylor, 2007: 297). As both are often needed in local governance projects, there is thus little hope in reaching performance targets with feather light groups. As a result, the groups often remain frail, both internally and externally.

In networked and cooperative groups, the need for some sort of dialogue with local institutions was expressed. From our national study we can conclude that networked groups manage to spiral outwards because of their outward, goal-oriented orientation. Members of networked groups do not just want to be recognised as volunteers but as experts as well. They have developed ideas on what is needed in their living environment, what the real problems are and they want to air these ideas in an institutional setting with a political audience and other citizens. In interviews, however, a recurring theme among networked volunteers was a familiarity with aldermen not showing up after being invited for a meeting,

or neighbourhood deliberations making no difference for the final planning of a local park or asylum centre. Thus, while they sometimes reach their goals, relations or partnerships between these community groups and institutions remain frail.

Unfortunately, as we did not find networked groups in Kanaleneiland, and our national study did not include interviews with institutions, we cannot reflect empirically on the role of institutional characteristics here. However, as these highly educated volunteers want to be recognised as experts, it might point to networked volunteers being more critical and headstrong when it comes to the public issues they are willing to engage in. This makes them less flexible partners for institutions (Hibbit et al., 2001) and less easy to control and regulate in local governance networks (Marinetti, 2003; Uitermark, 2013).

Cooperative groups had a hard time integrating into local networks even though we did find these volunteers sometimes actively

trying to reach out to the wider community. Cooperative groups are more often populated by volunteers with a low level of education – in Kanaleneiland 75% of cooperative groups could be qualified by a low educational level (see Table 1). Following our case study we can state that their frail contacts are partly due to the fact that in these groups little social capacity is developed. In Kanaleneiland we saw that cooperative groups sometimes doze off into sleeping mode or volunteers started something new, rather than seriously talk things over, critically reflect upon their own role and engage in the often complex and demanding task of opening up and trying to develop and maintain public relationships with others.

However, in Kanaleneiland the welfare organisation played an ambiguous role in this process. This has everything to do with the counterproductive effect of NPM-driven policies as performance targets conflict with an empowerment and support of community groups (MacLeavy, 2009). The result is that community workers fail to support and empower cooperative groups – e.g. in developing social capacity – and leave them to struggle and make failed attempts at organising activities and bridging out to other community groups. In short, frail relationships with local institutions, as a result of little social capacity of volunteers and limited interest of institutions, cause limited community outreach.

Finally, we found that only nested groups have flexible, productive relations with institutions. These nested groups are predominantly the affair of the higher educated – in Kanaleneiland we found 50% of the nested volunteers having a university degree and 50% of the groups being a mix of the higher and lower educated (see Table 1). These are people who possess social capacity and to which the sometimes strenuous work of negotiating with co-citizens, policy practitioners and politicians, thinking strategically

and claiming public attention comes naturally. Support and empowerment of community workers is not so much needed. Still, they do aspire to develop relations with other local institutions in order to play an active role in their living environment.

Our Kanaleneiland case study shows that their high amount of bonding and bridging social capital makes nested groups of interest to housing associations – those other NPM-driven local institutions – as their community network is seen as valuable social capital that can be used in tackling neighbourhood problems. However, it is their social capacity that makes them into flexible, reliable partners, open to creative solutions and public partnerships.

Conclusion

In discussions on local governance concern is sometimes expressed about the danger of pushing down too many responsibilities to communities (Dinham, 2005; Taylor, 2007: 314). However, we show that the Netherlands provides a fruitful breeding ground for local community action. Volunteers are motivated by their all-too-real worries and ambitions for their local environment, which leads them to organise in four types of community groups: feather light, cooperative, networked and nested groups. The dutiful, good citizen, admired by the behavioural, neo-Tocquevillean approach, is thus less of an ideal and more of a fact in the Netherlands. However, this does not mean that community groups are best left to self-organise as the behavioural approach would advocate. Rather, they should be actively stimulated by local institutions, as we also found that success rests more on institutional efforts to be responsive and to be able to cope with different demands from different types of groups than on the mere presence of institutions – let alone the good will of volunteers (see Putnam, 2000).

Table 1. Overview of community groups in Kanaleneiland ordered according to behavioural typology.

| Typology | Community groups | Community ^a | Sex | Age ^b | Education ^c | Activities | Interview |
|-------------|--|------------------------|--------|------------------|------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------|
| Cooperative | Buurtvaders Kanaleneiland-Zuid | Moroccan | Male | Old | Low | Education | Yes |
| Cooperative | Comeback Buurtvaders Kanaleneiland-Noord | Moroccan | Male | Old | Low | Education, Emancipation | Yes |
| Cooperative | Huurdersvereniging Kanaleneiland | Multi-ethnic | Both | Old | Mix | Liveability | Yes |
| Cooperative | Islamitische vereniging Kanaleneiland | Moroccan | Male | Old | Low | Emancipation | No |
| Cooperative | Marokkaanse Ouderraad | Moroccan | Male | Old | Low | Education & Emancipation | Yes |
| Cooperative | Oecumenische werkgroep: Samenleven | Dutch | Both | Medium | Mix | Meeting | Yes |
| Cooperative | Stichting de Hand | Dutch | Both | Medium | Mix | Education, Liveability, Meeting | Yes |
| Cooperative | Stichting Image Support | Moroccan, Turkish | Male | Medium | Mix | Sport & Emancipation | No |
| Cooperative | Turks Oudercomitee | Turkish | Both | Old | Low | Education, Emancipation | Yes |
| Cooperative | Werkgroep Sociale Veiligheid | Multi-ethnic | Female | Old | Low | Liveability | Yes |
| Cooperative | Werkgroep Kanaleneiland Schoon | Dutch | Both | Old | Low | Liveability | Yes |
| Cooperative | Comitee voor Leuke Dingen | Dutch | Both | Old | Low | Meeting | No |
| Nested | Al Amal | Moroccan | Female | Medium | Mix | Education, Emancipation | Yes |
| Nested | Sodaproducties | Dutch | Both | Young | High | Education, Meeting | Yes |
| Nested | Van en Voor Jongeren | Moroccan | Both | Young | High | Emancipation, Sport, Meeting | Yes |
| Nested | Ladyfit | Moroccan, Turkish | Female | Medium | Mix | Sport, Emancipation | Yes |

Notes:

^aMulti-ethnic = Dutch-Moroccan, Dutch-Turkish and autochthonous Dutch volunteers.^bOld = 50+, Medium = 35–50 years, *young = 20–35 years.^cLow = primary school or lower vocational, high = higher vocational or university degree.

We agree with Lowndes and Wilson (2001: 641) that 'institutional design in local governance has a potentially important role to play in facilitating the creation and mobilization of social capital among traditionally excluded section of the citizenry'. In this paper we therefore argue for an interactional approach that combines the internal dynamics of, and demands made by, community groups with the responsiveness of local institutions in order to understand the 'complexity' of community participation in local governance (Brownhill and Carpenter, 2009: 269–270). In line with other studies (Bull and Jones, 2006: 783; Hibbit et al., 2001; Jones and Evans, 2006) our study shows that community participation cannot be considered in isolation from issues such as an 'uneven distribution of power and resources'. On the contrary, community groups are deeply affected by the choices and preferences of local institutions and there is a continuous danger of the less well-educated losing out.

Reflecting on our findings, we are especially worried by the influence of NPM-type policies in the Netherlands on the way local institutions handle different types of community groups. The degree to which local institutions are subject to performance targets and accountability structures, influences their ability and willingness to support community groups and develop flexible relations with them. In order for groups to flourish, this is necessary.

In answer to a public call to adopt more social responsibilities in deprived, urban neighbourhoods, Dutch housing associations search for public partnerships with community groups. Untied by local accountability structures they are free to experiment with community groups whenever they feel it would benefit their social entrepreneurial goals. This sometimes leads the way to creative partnerships in local governance

networks. However the most flexible, competent groups (nested groups) are singled out as they can 'deliver' on their promises – such as reaching out to those groups of residents housing associations are not able to reach – and are easy to engage with because of their social capacity (Lichterman, 2009).

This bias towards higher educated groups turns away lower educated volunteers who are primarily organised in feather light and cooperative groups. Our findings suggest that as a result of NPM-driven productivity measures, other local institutions such as welfare organisations can either, after initially helping some of the cooperative groups, not follow through because they have to pull back or tend to colonise some community groups. In our Kanaleneiland case study we see that cooperative groups sometimes find themselves in the reversed situation, being there to support welfare organisations in reaching performance measures, instead of being there to support themselves and their community or the neighbourhood. Then, failing demands and frail contacts lie in reach.

Concluding, this paper shows how local institutions reproduce inequality among community groups rather than empower those who, taking their educational level into account, might need it the most. This is worrying as studies show that in deprived, urban neighbourhoods it is especially hard to engage residents into civic engagement, because of a high amount of low-educated residents (Docherty et al., 2001). As they are exactly the citizens that local institutions want to reach and empower, and who are often the target of social policy interventions, low-educated citizens that do spontaneously take up responsibility for their community should be empowered, rather than fall between the cracks of an NPM-driven local governance network.

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