

New citizen collectives, their democratic potential and their implications for public management

Ingmar van Meerkerk, Joop Koppenjan and Robyn Keast*

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Panel: Self-organizing citizens in the 21th century: new citizen collectives and their implications for public management

Abstract

This issue-paper written by the panel-conveners introduces the panel's topic, delineating its focus and discussing its scientific and practical relevance. It presents core concepts and ideas, aiming to provide context, direction and a common language to the panel discussions and the panelist papers. The paper discusses the rise of new citizen collectives (grass roots initiatives, community trusts, social enterprises, citizen initiatives) as new forms of civic engagement in policy fields such as energy, spatial planning, social care, community provisions and social services more generally. Under such models, citizens take the lead in dealing with common, or localized problems and public issues and are directly engaged in developing and implementing solutions and services. The emergence of citizen collectives give rise to new practical and theoretical questions concerning the meaning of these citizen collectives for local communities and government. The implications of this growing reliance of citizen collectives as vehicles for policy development and service delivery on the community sector has yet to be fully explored. In this paper, we aim to describe the rise and the forces shaping these new citizen collectives and to analyze their institutional characteristics, including to what extent they are new. Furthermore, we explore what these initiatives have to offer in terms of their democratic potential and what they mean for government and public management in particular, providing an agenda for further research into this blooming topic. The paper ends by identifying a number of issues, which if more deeply examined, will better help us to understand the functioning of citizens collectives and the challenges they face from a public management perspective. We think these issues are worthwhile for further debate during our panel and are summarized in the concluding section of this paper.

*Corresponding author, contact details

Dr. Ingmar van Meerkerk
Postdoctoral researcher
Erasmus University Rotterdam
Faculty of Social Sciences
Department of Public Administration
Room T17-13, Burg. Oudlaan 50
PO Box 1738 - 3000 DR Rotterdam
T: + 31 10 408 2049
E: vanmeerkerk@fsw.eur.nl

1. Introduction

Several authors argue that new forms of civic engagement are on the rise in most liberal democracies (Bang, 2009; Marsh et al., 2007; Stolle & Hooghe, 2005; Dalton, 2008). In these new forms of civic engagement citizens organize themselves through informal and loosely structured organizations or arrangements which tend to be more issue-oriented and pragmatic (Bang, 2009; Hurenkamp et al., 2006; Stolle and Hooghe, 2005). That is, architects of these self-organizing, bottom-up initiatives are generally driven by personal experiences or interests to take care of one's own neighborhood or community, often in reaction to a (new) governmental intervention or as response to a lack of governmental action in certain sectors or policy fields. Such citizen-generated initiatives are emerging in many different domains, including for example urban and community development (e.g. Sorensen and Sagaris, 2010; Van Meerkerk et al., 2013), housing, social support and health care (e.g. Hurenkamp et al., 2006), energy and ICT (e.g. Seyfang et al., 2013). The pragmatic orientation and hands-on approach is evident in their focus: improving the quality of urban areas, organizing social care in a more personal way or producing sustainable energy by and for the local community (cf. Wagenaar, 2007; Van de Wijdeven, 2012).

Although in several of these fields there is a long history of citizen participation, we now witness the emergence of bottom-up citizen initiatives that are shaping different structures and in a different institutional context as compared to more traditional civil society organizations. In a break from traditional forms of citizen engagement that existed within – and were largely shaped by and focused on influencing – institutions dominated by government agencies, active citizens increasingly want to engage and associate in informal and loosely structured arrangements to advance their life projects (Bang, 2009; Edelenbos and Van Meerkerk, 2016; Stolle and Hooghe, 2005; Igalla and Van Meerkerk, forthcoming). The practical orientation of these initiatives does not mean they completely lack an ideological motivation. In this context, ideological inspirations are evident in the need and virtue of self-organization and autonomy of local communities in response to perceived shortcomings in the delivery of (public) services by the state or the market. In this respect, the rise of new citizen collectives may give shape to democratic innovations by what Hirst (1994) previously has called associative (forms of) democracy. This democratic virtue of citizen self-organization is interesting, but also far from clear. It gives rise to fundamental questions about how we can understand the democratic benefits and pitfalls of citizen self-organization and how this relates to representative and participatory forms of democracy.

Alerted to the perceived benefits of citizen self-mobilization some governments have also turned their interest and attention to stimulating and capturing these gains. The discourse of the so-called *Participation Society* in the Netherlands and the *Big Society* in the United Kingdom provide good examples of this agenda (see Kisby, 2010; RMO, 2013; Rob, 2012). Increased citizen engagement and contribution in the production of public services and dealing with public issues is an appealing strategy for governments in times of financial austerity and budget deficits (Schui, 2014). It allows governments to tap into and leverage from the energy and social resources held within communities, thus reducing some of the costs and responsibilities of internal provision (Keast et al., 2006). Supporting citizens' collectives may imply the transferring to or the sharing of power (e.g. budget, political and/or knowledge-based support) with these collectives. The way government relate to citizens collectives requires adjustments and this change is far from unproblematic, particularly due to the higher-order needs of government for fiscal transparency and equitable service provision. At the same time, supporting or facilitating emerging citizen collectives may intervene with the bottom-up process of citizen self-organization and its drive for more citizen control and autonomy.

The emergence of citizen collectives therefore give rise to new practical and theoretical questions concerning the meaning of these citizen collectives for local communities and government. Although their practical purposes and drive for self-organization suggests that they are not so much fighting the conventional system and structures of governance and service delivery (as compared to more ideological driven social movements), and rather appear to complement these, they nevertheless lead to questions about how government might relate to citizen collectives and other forms of community mobilization. On the one hand citizen self-organization offers opportunities for more direct engagement and empowerment of citizens. On the other hand, existing roles of politicians and public administrators are challenged and issues of democratic control and public accountability emerge. Furthermore, citizen self-organization could give shape to new divides between those citizens who are capable to organize themselves and those who are not.

In this paper, we aim to describe the rise and the forces shaping these new citizen collectives and to analyze their institutional characteristics, including to what extent they are new. Furthermore, we explore what these initiatives have to offer in terms of their democratic potential and what they mean for government and public management in particular, providing an agenda for further research into this blooming topic. The structure of this paper is as follows. We first delve deeper into the rise of citizen self-organization: describing some of the key societal developments which explain their rise. Next, we describe, based on recent literature in this field, common characteristics of contemporary citizen self-organization and their institutional logic. In the following sections we identify and discuss some fundamental tensions with existing institutions of representative democracy and the practical implications of citizen self-organization. In this respect, we discuss and explore the implications for public management vice á vice citizen self-organization. Furthermore, we will discuss the sustainability of citizen self-organization. Each of these sections closes with a research question, which will be wrapped up in the concluding section.

2. Societal developments leading to new forms of citizen engagement

Although citizens nowadays seem more reluctant to engage in traditional institutions of representative democracy, as often demonstrated by citizens' decreasing membership of political parties and by decreasing electoral participation, this does not directly mean they are less politically active. Instead, several authors argue that new forms of civic engagement are on the rise in most liberal democracies (Dalton, 2008; Marien et al., 2010; Stolle & Hooghe, 2005). One of these forms is less focused on influencing traditional institutions of representative democracy, but rather on citizen self-organization in response to needs that are not satisfactorily dealt by government or the market. In a break from traditional forms of citizen engagement that existed within – and were largely shaped by and focused on influencing – traditional institutions of representative democracy, active citizens increasingly want to directly engage in informal and loosely structured organizations to advance their policy and service agendas (Bakker et al., 2012; Hurenkamp et al., 2006; Marien et al., 2010). These citizen initiatives take different forms and are emerging in different fields. They range from running a community facility, such as a community centre, setting up a cooperative or charity to provide community-led care services for older people in the area, to environmental initiatives aiming to provide local renewable energy. Although it is difficult to assess the scale in which these practices are occurring, they are increasing evident in many Western European countries, such as the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden, Belgium and Denmark, but also in other Western countries, such as the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, in the last two decades. For example, the UK has witnessed an increase in community development trusts in the last decades (Locality, 2014), Germany a tremendous amount of

renewable energy cooperatives in the last decade (Müller and Holstenkamp, 2015) and The Netherlands energy and social care cooperatives, also particularly in the last decade (De Moor, 2013).

This service experimentation points to a new wave of citizen or civil society initiatives, building on the earlier history of citizen mobilization. For example, De Moor (2013) in the case of the Netherlands and Healey (2014) in the case of England, refer to a previous wave at the end of the nineteenth century in which civil society initiatives emerge to address all kinds of needs arising from a rapidly expanding urban working class population. For an important part, such civil society initiatives on welfare provision were taken over by the state. After the Second World War, the public sector expanded in order to meet the objectives of the modern welfare state, which was developed in most Western societies. Under this governance model, governments took on and/or took over an increasing number and variety of political and societal matters (Hall, 2005; Salamon, 1994). In the period that followed, under the spell of neo-liberal NPM reforms during the 1980s and 1990s, many state-provided services were privatized and emphasizes was being put on the need for professionally trained nonprofit managers and entrepreneurs: “people who could master an increasingly complex and turbulent policy and funding environment” (Hall, 2005: 23). Further, by putting nonprofits into amplified competition with for-profits offering similar services and by demanding higher levels of accountability for decreasing government funding, the conservative revolution helped erode many of the boundaries between nonprofit and for-profit enterprises. As a consequence, nonprofits “were being driven by circumstances into being less and less responsive to client and community needs while becoming more businesslike in their attitudes and operations” (ibid).

Although the origins of contemporary citizen initiatives vary, there are some common drivers and conditions favoring the opportunity for a growth of these initiatives. Citizen initiatives emerge in policy and planning spaces that governments have withdrawn from due to budget cuts, as well as in domains that ‘slipped’ governmental attention (Barnes, 1999). Faced with crumbling public services and/or driven by dissatisfaction with large-scale organization of service provision, citizens have taken the initiative to organize service provision themselves (Healey, 2014). Furthermore, citizen initiatives arise from market deficits in meeting citizens’ needs or concerns, for example within the health care and energy sectors (e.g. Seyfang et al., 2013; Hurenkamp et al., 2006). For some time now there has been a questioning of the value of privatization in these sectors, with the view that it has not met all expectations (Davis and Rhodes, 2000; Kettl, 2000; Politt, 1995), for example in generating market competition and sustainable energy or providing tailor made, affordable and accessible health care. On this, Grimshaw et al (2002) for example noted that any reduction in cost from the introduction of market processes was probably offset by a decrease in the quality of service provision, the principle of equal and universal access to public services being threatened or by an erosion of the public sector ethos. Current Australian debates on child care and higher education privatization models further demonstrate that this issue has not been resolved and perhaps has been amplified, leading to increased citizen as well as academic mobilization (see for example, Cox (2015) on child care and O’Flynn (2015) on unemployment in the Australian context).

The current political opportunity structure and the public sector context seems to be favorable for citizen initiatives. The concept of political opportunity structure refers to “dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for collective action by affecting people’s expectations for success or failure” (Tarrow, 1998: 76-77). The last decades saw many experiments with and increasing practices of citizen participation, positioning it as a significant policy strategy in many Western countries. It has been put, for example, at the heart of spatial planning, social care, regeneration, housing and education policies (e.g. Edelenbos, 2005; Irvin and Stansbury, 2007; Marinetto, 2003; Roberts, 2004). In this

respect, citizen self-organization can be positioned as part of a longer tradition of participation and interactive or participatory policy-making, although there are specific differences (Edelenbos and van Meerkerk, 2016). A core aspect of these more conventional approaches to participation is that governments typically decide when and under which conditions citizens can become participants in what are otherwise governmentally regulated and controlled policy-making processes. Hence, citizen participatory processes are state-run and the fundamental discourse generally remains that of the state, not that of the communities it seeks to engage (Mathers et al., 2008; Sorensen and Sagaris, 2010). Nevertheless, these practices with citizen participation and the various partnership initiatives with civil society actors have contributed to the learning capacity of the public sector with citizen participation (Healey, 2014). This also becomes evident in the rhetoric of various government policies and strategies, which preaches interactive governance and, more recently, facilitation of citizen self-organization.

The relatively recent financial crisis has further enhanced the political rhetoric on citizen self-organization and in this respect further expanded the opportunity structure for citizen initiatives. This expansion seems to become a prerequisite for welfare states as they find it difficult to deliver goods and services once expected of them (Bang, 2004; Healey, 2014). In addition to previous calls for citizen participation, the financial crisis and its pressure for budget cuts in public service delivery has encouraged a more appreciative understanding of the capacity and contribution of citizen initiatives. In this respect, the rise of citizen initiatives is also viewed as an expression of a neo-liberal downsizing of the state. However, this is certainly not the whole story. The current wave of citizen initiatives already started before the financial crisis (e.g. De Moor, 2013). Political discourses on *Big Society* and the *Participation Society* rather seems to be clever political responses to societal developments on the one hand and dealing with budget deficits on the other hand. At the same time, the availability of finance for supporting citizen initiatives is reduced. As we will further elaborate below, although citizen initiatives are based on the principle of self-organization, they are often strongly depended on financial input from other actors such as the state (Healey, 2014; Igalla and Van Meerkerk, forthcoming).

Next to the political opportunity structure, the self-organizing capacity of citizens have increased substantially. In this respect, education levels, socio-economic resources, access to political information, and other 'resources of citizenship' have increased substantially over the past several decades (Dalton, 2008). Citizens nowadays have, generally speaking, more time, money, and access to information and networks to influence public policy; and they demand more direct involvement when their interests are at stake. Furthermore, association and mobilization of citizens have become far easier with the help of current ICT infrastructure (e.g. Bennet and Segerberg, 2012).

Summing up, it is in this context of budget cuts and state retrenchment in the provision of welfare services, increasing citizenship resources and declining trust in political and corporate institutions, that a new wave of citizen initiatives have emerged (cf. Wagenaar and Van der Heijden, 2015). *This overview of underlying causes for the rise of citizen collectives at the macro-level of modern societies, raises the question whether they are as important in the various policy fields mentioned above, or whether different drivers and motives are at work in different fields. In other words: how do these drivers identified in the literature relate to the motives underlying specific citizen initiatives?*

3. Characteristics of citizen self-organization

Citizen self-organization differs from traditional political participatory processes as they are citizen or community driven, and thus reflect communitarian (local, networked, negotiated) rather than governmental processes (public, rules, regulations). Citizen self-organization can be described as *bottom*

up initiatives that are citizen or community driven, aim to deal with a specific set of common issues and have the ambition to set up lasting cooperation among citizens aimed at production and local ownership of services or goods to improve their social and physical environment (De Moor, 2013; Van Meerkerk, 2014). This definition stresses the pragmatic and issue-specific orientation of the emergent citizen collectives. They are focused on solving a specific issue in the local community or at responding to a specific need in the local community: they have what, as Bang (2009) describes as a common project oriented identity. They are less focused on fighting ‘the system’ (e.g. conventional or formal politics and existing power structures) as compared to traditional activists. They may do so, if it suits their projects, but, mostly, they want to be taken seriously as prudent and competent actors or perhaps partners of governments in delivering services to their members or communities (Bang, 2009). This pragmatism does not mean that they are a-political, but politics is rather instrumental, informal and directed to solving particular issues (Verhoeven et al., 2014). Also, as discussed above, it doesn’t mean citizen collectives are not ideologically inspired. There are often driven many aspirations regarding self-organization, local autonomy and associative democracy. This description stresses the hands-on approach of self-organizing citizen collectives: they want to tackle these issues by themselves. Members of these collectives aim for self-management and local ownership of resources in order to realize their goals.

A further important characteristic of citizen collective is their local orientation. Citizen initiatives often emerge at and are focused on the local level: the neighborhood or local community. As Sorensen and Sagaris aptly note (2010: 301): “The neighborhood is important, not as an idealized ‘community’, but as the ‘place’ where one lives and works [...]. By sharing a physical space and by sharing this space, residents often find they also share concerns and must work together to resolve them”. Furthermore, they more easily enable face-to-face encounters: important for building consensus and group identities. This local orientation of many citizen initiatives is in line with their drive to organize services differently: not in large-scale organizations, but in such a way that those involved have direct influence over the production and organization of the service they pay for or invest in (in terms of time and/or money). This touches upon the democratic nature of these citizen collectives and their institutional logic, which is the subject of the next section.

These characteristics of citizen collectives raises the question to what extent citizen collectives differ in their practical ideological and local orientations and to what extent such differences matters for their functioning and democratic implications

4. The functioning of citizen collectives: effectiveness and sustainability

In this section we discuss the challenges citizen collectives meet in living up to expectation. The literature mentions two major challenges: to what extent are citizen collectives effective given the fact that they aim to be self-organizing and build on resources available within the local community. And next, to what extent are they sustainable, given their reliance upon volunteers?

As far as effectiveness is concerned, a gap may evolve between the skills and resources required to deal with the issues at hand and the availability of these capacities and resources among the participating citizens. Although considerable skills and resources may be available within communities, once activities reach a certain scale or magnitude, this may no longer be enough. The lack of social, intellectual or financial capital is mentioned in the literature as an important constraint for the success of citizen initiatives or community-based development (e.g. Matarrita-Cascante and Brennan, 2012; Nederhand et al., 2014). As a result at a certain point they will seek collaboration with either public, private or non-

profit organizations in order to access these resources. For instance care cooperatives in the Netherlands seek collaboration with professionals in order to be able to provide reliable care, while energy cooperatives seek contracts with for profit energy distributors to supply energy to the existing electricity grid.

Citizen collectives are often also dependent on governmental support. They often require some kind of political, financial or technical support from governmental institutions, or, more likely, some combination of these three, in order to gain the necessary legitimacy and resources. Governmental support can take different forms, such as subsidies as a form of start-up resource, the transfer of physical assets at little or no cost or advice about the technical and legal aspects of a project or activity (Healey, 2014). “However, since the 2007 financial crisis, public funding has been substantially reduced [and citizen] initiatives are aware that they need to develop their own asset-base to generate income to pay for their own running costs. This could be from rents on properties, or for the use of community facilities and services, or the returns from an energy facility, such as a community wind turbine. In addition, some initiatives have experimented with innovative ways of raising funds such as community bonds and crowd-funding” (Healey, 2014: 7).

Hence, an important question for further research is to what extent citizen collective experience the limitations in skills and resources as suggested in the literature and how they deal with these limitations. As far as they engage in collaborations with others, another set of questions arise, like how do they shape these relationships and what implications do they have for the functioning of the collectives as such.

When citizen collectives aim to realize durable/enduring cooperation among citizens, an important question is to what extent they succeed in realizing such a durable collaboration. The start-up of citizen initiatives is often strongly dependent on the commitment and enthusiasm of a few individuals. This alone is not enough to ensure sustainability of a citizen initiative. As Healey rightly points out (2014: 7): “In the early stages, committed volunteers provide substantial resources of time, and volunteer input may continue as a key part of an initiative. Volunteers bring all kinds of skills to such endeavours, from good local knowledge, to specific skills in various fields and typically a determination to turn an idea into reality. But volunteers can suffer from burn out, or move away.” This makes citizen initiatives, especially in these early stages, vulnerable and there will be many which do not survive beyond early enthusiasm.

After a while the informal way citizen collectives are organized therefore may become problematic. It may be difficult for volunteers to keep on investing time. Furthermore, the scale of activities may require a more robust and professional way of organizing. As a result informal relationships may grow into more structural arrangements in the form of cooperatives, foundations, trust or associations. Also citizen collectives may engage in covenants, contracts or partnerships with for example, governmental organizations, private businesses or non-profit organizations. Energy collectives may engage in commercial activities and may even take the form of for profit organizations. Cooperation with private businesses and governmental actors can enhance the sustainability of citizen initiatives. In this respect, they often build networks of negotiation and cooperation with politicians, administrators, interest groups, media and private companies across conventional boundaries (Bang, 2009).

Of course, citizen collectives differ in the extent to which they succeed in building this bridging capital, with some highly adroit and therefore successful and others, with less capacity often struggling to gain purchase. It requires the ability to navigate within and across the networks and build coalitions of effort, as well as manage diverse goals and expectations, which requires specific competences and leadership

skills. In this respect, the literature stresses community leadership and trust building as (potential) key factors. For example comparative case study research in The UK and The Netherlands on self-organization in urban development showed found that the boundary-spanning activities of community leaders were of crucial importance for citizen self-organization to build partnerships with private developers and local government and to become anchored within local governmental institutions (Edelenbos and Van Meerkerk, 2011; Van Meerkerk et al., 2013). These community leaders “invested in inter-organizational and interpersonal relationships between key individuals across the domains of administrative, political, and local community boundaries. Furthermore, they took a leading role in coordinating the activities of the self-organizing citizens and connecting the ideas and plans of these more or less informal citizen groups with related local government policies and decision-making procedures. The community leaders were able to perform these high level boundary-spanning activities because of their well-connectedness (existing network and network position), their ‘institutional experience’, and their relational capacities” (Van Meerkerk, 2014: 193). In the first stages of citizen initiatives, convincing vital others to support or to join the initiative is of crucial importance. Community leaders can play a key role here. Next to their boundary spanning activities, visions building and entrepreneurial activities are likely to be important for citizen collectives to mobilize other residents and to access resources for example.

An important question related to the effectiveness of citizen collectives therefore is how they deal with issues of sustainability, what important (configuration of) factors and contingencies are in this respect, and as far as they succeed in realizing a sustainable performance whether they succeed in keeping up their original ambitions and identity.

5. Citizen collectives and their democratic potential

According to many enthusiasts, citizen collectives have much to offer when it concerns their democratic potential, which is also stressed in the Big Society discourse. And there are certainly reasons to be enthusiastic, as democratic virtues of citizen control, reciprocity and citizen cooperation in producing and shaping community services seem to be key characteristics of these new citizen collectives. Citizen collectives provide room for direct engagement of citizens, for learning democratic virtues and habits of cooperation between citizens. Furthermore, they offer arrangements that have high potential for deliberation and dialogue between citizens and public professionals. To explore more fully and reflect on the democratic potential of new citizen collectives, we can learn much of the literature on associative democracy (Hirst, 1994; Fung, 2003) in this respect.

More skeptical and critical attitudes concerning the democratic legitimacy of citizen collectives arise when considering the dependency of citizen collectives on public funding. And as became clear from the previous section: this dependency is often the case. Then issues concerning public accountability and equality easily arise. Citizen collectives challenge liberal notions of constitutionalism and equality, and electoral notions of authorization and accountability. The question is whether citizen collectives should be judged on the basis of the conceptual understanding built in liberal democratic theory, which is the normative basis for representative government (cf. Dryzek, 2007). At the same time, “part of the very definition of liberal democracies is that they create the space for a plurality of civic and political associations”, as Fung (2003: 518) – building on Dahl (1989) – aptly put it. In this section, we further discuss to what extent citizen collectives meet their ambitions regarding self-organization and associate democracy. Next, we will discuss their ambiguous and sometimes difficult relationship with representative democracy.

Practices of new citizen collectives are characterized by reciprocity and cooperation. This resembles the key principles of associative democracy as formulated by Hirst (1994: 15): “principles of cooperation and mutuality”. In his theory of associative democracy, Hirst has argued for an alternative pattern for the governance of welfare as compared to the provision of welfare and social services by large-scale hierarchical bureaucracies, quasi-public agencies or business corporations in which there is little room for citizens to shape the services they receive. Instead, a plurality of self-governing associations should be the key players in welfare provision. Drawing explicitly on the work of Albert Hirschmann (1970), “Hirst argues that welfare provision from a plurality of democratically organized associations would provide members with both the power of voice and, significantly, exit. Voice would be enabled through the democratic structures of associations; the power of exit through the right to patronize a different associational provider” (Smith and Teasdale, 2012: 153). Although one might raise objections against the desirability or the organizational feasibility of such a ‘grand associative proposal’, “Hirst’s program nevertheless expands our political imagination regarding the potential contributions of associations to democratic governance” (Fung, 2003: 527).

However, in its current form and presence, such a dominant role of citizen collectives or similar associations seems unrealistic. But next to this somewhat radical extrapolation of citizen collectives as a vehicle for democratic renewal on a macro-level, citizen collectives have also democratic potential other, more direct, ways. First of all, they can have developmental effects on individuals participating in citizen collectives, such as increasing their sense of efficacy, providing them with political information, imbuing them with political skills, and teaching them to be critical (Warren, 2001). In this sense, citizen collectives may “inculcate civic virtues in their members. Such virtues include attention to the public good, habits of cooperation, toleration, respect for others, respect for the rule of law, willingness to participate in public life [...]. To the extent that individuals possess these values, democracy itself becomes more robust, fair, and effective” (Fung, 2003: 519-520). Next to these civic virtues, Fung (2003) points at the civic skills that associations, such as citizen collectives, may enhance. Citizen collectives may teach members skills such as how to organize themselves, run meetings, argue issues and write letters, useful for all manner of political action.

Furthermore, citizen collectives may enhance reciprocity and trust between citizens (Putnam, 2000). This reciprocity may take different forms. For example, in (renewable) energy cooperatives, members jointly invest in renewable energy sources, take a share in the initiative and pay for their service. But many citizen initiatives go beyond such direct reciprocity or exchange relationships. For example, within some care initiatives, elderly people who are still able to help others, volunteer in producing services in the hope that they also receive these services themselves later on (VNG, 2013). This is what Putnam (2000) called ‘generalized reciprocity’. Such generalized reciprocity may help to overcome free-rider problems and can contribute to more democratic governance.

However, for such democratic potential to become manifest, citizen collectives should operate according to democratic principles such as inclusiveness, due deliberation, voice and horizontal way of operation. In practice, a considerable gap may exist between these democratic principles fostering the developmental effects of citizen collectives and the internal governance practices that develop in reality. Informal organizations and lack of procedures may result in informal forms of leadership and group processes that are not necessarily egalitarian and democratic. Rhetoric and strategic skill among participants may be unequally divided, and problems of exclusions, and representativeness of participants compared to the community as a whole may be biased. What is more, once citizen collectives engage in activities that require a more professional approach and a businesslike operation, often a need for professionalization is felt, and it is no longer self-evident that everybody is allowed to

have a voice in all matters. As citizen collective go through their life cycle and mature, the tension between the ambition of grass-root democratic practices and the need to operate in a more organized way increases.

From the perspective of representative democracy citizen initiatives give shape to new divides between those citizens who are capable to organize themselves on the basis of reciprocity. A growth of citizen self-organization implies that people become more dependent on the strength of their social networks (its bridging and bonding capital). Self-organizing capacity is likely to be unequally dispersed among citizens, leading to issues of inequality (e.g. Uitermark, 2014). Furthermore, power can be concentrated in the hands of a few well organized citizens: or the squeaky wheels. And just because self-organizing citizen groups are connected around a particular kind of identity, they can be exclusive leading to problems of transparency and representation (Taylor and Hodgett, 1994) . In this respect, government may feel the need to guarantee the accessibility to public services, or the need to set rule for the functioning of citizen collectives. Meta-governance activities by politicians and public managers could control for these potential dangers (see next section).

So as far as the democratic potential of citizen collectives is concerned questions may be asked about the effects of membership and participating in citizen collectives on the civic virtues and skills of citizens, the extent to which citizen collectives succeed in living up to their democratic ambitions as far as their internal functioning is concerned, to what extent they succeed in persisting in these internal democratic practices throughout the various phases of their life cycle, and fourthly to what extent they succeed in gaining external democratic legitimacy by gaining support from governments and more specifically from politicians and the formal institutions of representative democracy.

6. Government and citizen self-organization (to be further elaborated)

How do governments and citizen initiative relate? First of all, we can observe that governments have an ambiguous attitude towards citizen initiatives. On the one hand we see enthusiastic governments, claiming to promote these initiatives both from democratic and pragmatic points of view. They actively support ideas of citizen feeling responsible for their communities and taking initiatives for the common good. They also see opportunities to use social capital of community groups to accomplish their policies and realize services, thus being able to cut back on government expenditures. This enthusiasm may results in government stimulating or subsidizing citizen initiatives. Often this support comes at a price: government putting forwards conditions citizens have to meet.

But we also see governments taking a reluctant and distance stand towards citizen initiatives. It may be because they see organizational complications, because they do not want to transfer control and power, or because they think citizen are not able to come up with good and lasting solutions or contributions. Governments can have good reasons for being reluctant in supporting all kinds of citizen initiatives. First of all, not all citizen initiatives serve the common good or function according to democratic principles. Secondly, it is not always clear that citizen initiatives are feasible and will last. Supporting them may result in a waste of energy and tax payers' money. Thirdly citizen initiatives may encompass activities that do not simply complement public services, delivered by existing service providers, but it may be that they compete with them. By providing a comparative supply they can jeopardize the critical mass needed for a public service provided by government. Competition also occurs from a democratic point of view. Citizens may get around democratic institutions and rules in dealing with societal issues. Also their internal functioning may be far from democratic and accountable. Citizen collectives may also enter markets and disturb market conditions, certainly if they are allowed to provide product and

services under different conditions than private parties. Currently this is happening with many pop-up cafés and alternatives to public transportation services like Uber. If citizen collectives indeed take over some governmental tasks of in welfare provision, governments has the capacity of acting as the guardian of the public in matters touching on accountability, service quality and financial competence (Hirst, 1994; Sorensen, 2006).

From the viewpoint of citizen collectives the support of governments and politicians may be crucial in order to ensure the success and continuity of their activities. Activities may require permits to be given by governments. Sometimes they need governmental support in terms of the availability of space, information, expertise of money. Depending on the nature of their initiative collaboration or consent may be needed, for instance if the initiative is aimed on the realization or adaptation of policies or public services. On the other hand collaboration and gaining governmental support is not without risks. First of all it seems to be at odds with the ideas of self-organization, autonomy and self-determination that underlie many citizen initiatives. Accepting governmental support may reduce the vitality of the initiative and the determination to solve local community problems. Citizen collectives are faced with the question whether they should seek governmental support or partnerships, or rather prefer a go it alone strategy, or perhaps seek alliances with market parties.

Based on the considerations above government may decide on how to relate to citizen initiatives. Within the literature-as a response to the participation ladder of Arnstein, referring to how citizens may be involved in governmental policies, authors have suggested a governmental participation ladder: specifying how governments will be able to relate to citizen initiatives. This ladder suggests the following steps: 1) non-interference; 2) facilitating 3) stimulating 4) governing and 5) regulating these initiatives (Raad voor het openbaar bestuur, 2012). Remarkably enough engaging in a partnership with citizen initiatives is not mentioned (Binnema, 2014). Dealing with citizen initiatives is not about a bit or less governmental intervention, but about a fundamental redefinition of roles among various parties involved (cf. Hirst, 1994; Sorensen, 2006).

From a public management point of view an important question is how governments can relate to citizen collectives, what possible governance strategies are open to them, what effects these strategies resort with regard to the evolution and vitality of citizen initiatives and under what conditions and motivations these strategic options are appropriate.

7. Preliminary conclusions and a research agenda

Based on the exploration of the phenomenon of citizen collectives in this paper, we arrive of the following overview of issues that these initiatives face in practice, and that also provides challenges for governments that need to position themselves vis-à-vis these initiatives. These issues therefore may be the focus of further research and debate. Below we summarize them, thus suggesting a preliminary agenda for our panel session.

- To what extent are the causes underlying the rise of citizen collectives as presented in this paper drivers behind the concrete initiatives emerging in various policy fields. In other words: how do these drivers identified in the literature relate to the motives underlying specific citizen initiatives?
- To what extent do citizen collective experience the limitations in skills and resources as suggested in the literature and how they deal with these limitations? As far as they engage in collaborations with others, how do they shape these relationships and what implications do they have for the functioning of the collectives as such?

- How do citizen collectives deal with issues of sustainability, to what extent are they survivors having an impact on the system as a whole or are they merely mayflies? As far as they succeed in realizing a sustainable performance, to what extent do they succeed in keeping up their original ambitions and identity?
- To what extent do citizen collectives succeed in living up to their democratic ambitions as far as their internal functioning is concerned? Do they succeed in persisting in these internal democratic practices throughout the various phases of their life cycle? To what extent they succeed in gaining external democratic legitimacy by gaining support from governments and more specifically from politicians and the formal institutions of representative democracy.
- How can governments relate to citizen collectives? What possible governance strategies are open to them and under what conditions and motivations are these strategic options appropriate?

These are just some of the big questions that demand focused debate and deeper understanding if the growth of citizen collectives is to continue. They certainly have democratic potential, but also need careful examination and rethinking of the role of governments vis-à-vis these collectives if governments are going to more fully support and embrace their role as service providers.

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