

'A system of free societal initiatives': complementing or substituting the work of existing actors?

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1. Introduction

The Dutch Ministry of the Interior talks about a 'system of free societal initiatives' (BZK, 2013: 21), suggesting a 'grassroots sphere' in which citizens develop their own activities and services next to those of the government, commercial firms or NGOs. This paper focuses on the relative position of grassroots initiatives in addressing a wide range of social needs. They operate in a complex field of forces, composed of public institutions, formal NGO's, social entrepreneurs etc.

A key debate in the civil society literature is how civil society organizations (CSOs) relate to other stakeholders with which they engage. The activities and services they employ may 'crowd out' what others offer, but they may also co-produce such services with other stakeholders. This paper contributes to this debate by assessing the role of a specific subset of civil society players: grassroots initiatives. We question how their activities relate to the work of vested NGOs, governments, or of commercial firms.

The paper draws on an ex post analysis of seven qualitative studies of such initiatives in the Netherlands, undertaken over the past six years by researchers of the Netherlands Institute of Social Research (SCP), covering roughly 125 initiatives in different societal domains: social care, alternative housing, sustainable food, management of public space, refugee integration, development aid and upgrading green space. This multi-domain focus is rare in studies of grassroots initiatives. All initiatives studied started informally and remained largely self-governed by the initiator(s) or the community they serve. All are nongovernmental and not-for-profit; they often have revenues, which are generally reinvested. Their operational logic differs from professionalized NGOs.

We start with an exploration of the Dutch context. The Dutch government promotes active citizenship and grassroots initiatives, but policies are not straightforward about the expectations regarding the role of such initiatives. Policy documents and other statements influence the public debate attribute multiple roles, and describe differing expectations about the impact they will have on the stakeholders with which they engage. We continue with a review of articles dealing with questions of substitution, complementarity and co-production and the conceptualization of these quite confusing notions. We pay particular attention to research regarding grassroots organizations, and conclude that these questions receive less attention than in the literature about 'formal' CSOs. In the **fourth** section, we address their role in the field, based on a reflection on the seven mentioned studies.

2. Grassroots initiatives in the Dutch context

Grassroots organizations are often referred to as 'citizens' initiatives' in the Dutch context. Our focus is somewhat broader. Some of the organizations we present below do not self-identify as initiatives, but regard themselves as social entrepreneurs (particularly in the environmental sustainability domain). Given the broad description of grassroots organizations that we provided in the introduction, these also fit within our focus. In spite of this, it is important to understand the debate on 'citizens' initiatives' in order to grasp the Dutch context:

Currently in Dutch national and local government CIs [citizens' initiatives] are very much 'en vogue'. First, it is expected that they provide a cheap alternative to costly governmental urban development programs that can effectively contribute to the safety and livability of neighbourhoods and communities. Moreover, CIs are believed to empower and educate citizens and reduce the reliance of individuals and social organisations on state bureaucracies (Bakker, Denters, Oude Vrielink, & Klok, 2012: 396)

Such initiatives have a history, which we sketch briefly on the basis of literature and general impressions from our interviews. Grassroots support for refugees, for instance, goes back a long way in the Netherlands. Quite a few studies report on informal organizing from WWI onward (e.g. Böcker & Havinga, 2011; Walaardt, 2012). More followed after WWII. Also grassroots initiatives pertaining to development aid are a phenomenon which is rooted in a Dutch tradition of charities and a vested movement of civic engagement with developing countries.

Grassroots activism is very much tied up with public sector provision. The development of the post-WWII welfare state is often associated with declining private initiative. There is little agreement on the crowding-out effects of public sector services. Many studies show that countries with a large public sector also have an active third sector (reference). Scholars like Inglehart (1977) have pointed at the rise of a 'post-material culture', in which citizens re-oriented their activism at new objectives that were less concerned with primary material needs; instead, they focused on new issues such as culture and the environment.

In some of the domains we studied, new grassroots initiatives started in the 1970s and 1980s, whereas other domains were particularly characterized by centralization and professionalization in that era, at the detriment of independent, small-scale local activities. New initiatives were often a reaction to poor or shrinking public sector provision. Some communal gardens on collective ground date from the 1980's or earlier, when dwellers challenged local landowners to allow them to decide on a design and management scheme. Around the same time, government started to dismantle large intramural institutions for disabled people, and to 'return' their inhabitants into society. This led to new initiatives. In the refugee domain, by contrast, these decades were characterized by centralization of small-scale support, with the founding of a number of umbrella organizations: the national Refugee Council (Vluchtelingenwerk) and Refugee Organizations the Netherlands (refugee self-organizations) (Altchouler, Baba Ali, Goudappel, Medema, & Sangin, 2008; Weiler & Wijnkoop, 2011: 106).

The affluent 1990s might be characterized by a first phase of governmental recognition of the societal value of citizens' initiatives. Activism by disability rights movements resulted in the introduction of a personal care budget for people with an impairment, providing them with the ability to make their own arrangements in grassroots projects (Bulmer, 2008; Morris, 2002; Timonen, Convery, & Cahill, 2006). Since then, like-minded parents put these budgets together to realize non-institutional group-housing for their disabled children. Also in the development aid domain, government started using public sector donors to fund grassroots initiatives. This led to a rise in the number of such initiatives, but also to the introduction of quality control measures. In the refugee domain, the 1990s were 'characterised by a tendency to increase the involvement of professionals in work with refugees' (Korac, 2005: 96).

During the first decade of the 21st century, the interest in grassroots initiatives boosted in the Netherlands, in academic circles and among policy makers alike. This was connected to a broader debate on 'active' or 'good' citizenship (Ossewaarde, 2007). Policies of this era, in fields such as social support (TK, 2004/2005) and urban renewal (TK, 2005/2006) highlight their importance within these particular domains. Local governments were assigned the tasks of stimulating their residents to take initiatives and to help them to bring them to bloom.

Some initiatives kept on coming up *in spite of* public support, rather than *because of it*. Excluding undocumented migrants from many public services, for instance, led to the expansion of a 'shadow network' of local grassroots support (Kos, Maussen, & Doomernik, 2015). Also other domains met with restrictions, predominantly in a budgetary sense. The financial crisis of the end of the 2000s resulted in public sector cutbacks. The lack of (re-)building activity left places unmanaged which gave an incentive for dwellers to use the space and for land owners to allow them to do so and thus cheaply manage the area in the years until building was taken up again. This period overlapped with the urban renewal policy aiming at 'strategic enabling' of local audiences.

A bit short of a decade later, domain-based policies were broadened to assemble an all-inclusive new perspective on the state of society, and the imagined relation between citizens and their government(s). Akin to international developments such as the UK's 'Big society'-agenda (Blond, 2010; CabinetOffice, 2010), the Dutch developed notions such as the academia-grounded 'Energetic society' (Hajer, 2011; Hajer et al., 2015) and the policy-driven 'Participation society' (TK, 2013/2014) and 'Do-democracy' (BZK, 2013) agendas. The latter refers to 'making democracy by doing', rather than by holding debates in parliaments. The potential of citizens' initiatives for spurring social innovation is increasingly recognized (AWT, 2014). No longer restricted to specific policy domains – the range of examples is extended to arranging for neighborhood security and local energy production (TK, 2013/2014) – these agendas place great emphasis on the role of initiatives. Obviously, domain-specific developments still remained important, given that 'self-managed community space', the 'sharing economy' and 'sustainable food production' have become 'hot topics' over the past years. Others highlight concrete policy support programs at the national level to enhance citizens' initiatives:

'Even for a topic like nature management, which was until recently entirely claimed by the State and its conservation institutes, a new policy has been issued that intends 'to bring nature back to where it belongs: in the middle of society, with ownership and citizens' responsibility as important building blocks' (Van Dam, Duineveld, & During, 2015: 164).

The sudden rise in the number of newly arriving refugees in 2015 also spurred grassroots initiatives again.

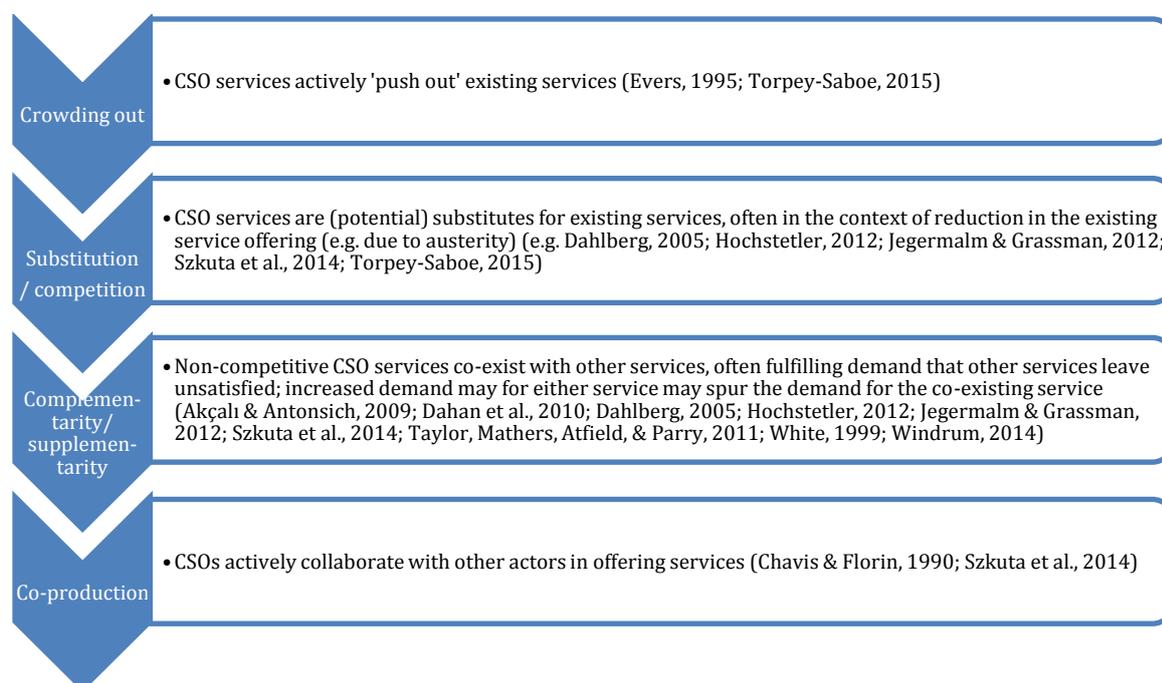
3. Civil society service relations

There are many ways of describing the relations between CSOs and other entities with which they engage. Most research focuses on connections with governments or firms (Akçalı & Antonsich, 2009; Chavis & Florin, 1990; Dahan, Doh, Oetzel, & Yaziji, 2010; Eikenberry & Kluver, 2004; Evers, 1995; Fridolfsson & Elander, 2012; Fyfe, 2005; Hochstetler, 2012; Teasdale, 2012), but also on interaction between informal and formal organizations within civil society (Evers, 1995; Froland, 1980; Greenfield, 2013; Jegermalm & Grassman, 2012), and between CSOs in general (Babcock, 2006).

Much of this research takes a broad civil society perspective, in the sense that it does not focus on a particular domain (Brandson, 2014; Eikenberry & Kluver, 2004; Fyfe, 2005; Hochstetler, 2012; Teasdale, 2012; Torpey-Saboe, 2015; Van Dam, Salverda, & During, 2014). Research into grassroots initiatives is often more domain-specific than research into other CSOs. If we do look into particular service domains, care and social services is often mentioned (Chavis & Florin, 1990; Evers, 1995; Froland, 1980; Greenfield, 2013; Handy & Srinivasan, 2004; Jegermalm & Grassman, 2012). Other examples are environmental sustainability (Akçalı & Antonsich, 2009), online services (Szkuta, Pizzicannella, & Osimo, 2014) and aid for refugees or undocumented migrants refugee, undocumented aid (Fridolfsson & Elander, 2012; Hyndman, Payne, & Jimenez, 2017; Karakayali & Kleist, 2016) and development aid (White, 1999).

3.1 Sliding scale

We can examine CSOs relative position and their interaction with other actors, by asking whether their activities or services can co-exist with the services of other stakeholders. The many articles discussing such phenomena provide a plethora of concepts describing how organizations relate to each other's services (substitution, complementarity, co-production, etc.). They are often defined differently, making them hard to compare. Our intention is not to offer the ultimate set of definitions of these concepts. Still, for the remainder of this paper, we need a stable set of basic descriptions for presenting our rather broad range of initiatives. Based on earlier research, we propose to position several concepts on a scale, as in the figure below. On one end of the scale, we find CSOs that actively push out existing offering, and on the other, those that actively collaborate with other stakeholders in providing a service.



Part of the literature focuses on activities of specific CSOs, while others examine these relations on a sectoral perspective, looking at civil society as a whole. In this article, we are interested in organizational perspective of individual CSOs, and in the perspective of the systems in which they engage.

3.2 The role of the grassroots

In the introduction, we described grassroots as fairly informal entities that remain largely self-governed by the initiator(s) or the community they serve. This distinguishes them from more formalized and professionalized NGOs. They are cherished for the close proximity to local, often vulnerable communities, and for the new solutions they often put forward. Grassroots initiatives are often associated with social innovation (see e.g. Seyfang & Haxeltine, 2012; Seyfang & Smith, 2007). Even if they do not have actual relations to other stakeholders in their domains, the new activities, services or approaches that they develop might set examples nevertheless. Formal organizations may decide to develop more informal, small-scaled services, taking cue from grassroots organizations having done this before.

The discussion that we sketched in 3.1 does not appear to resonate strongly in the literature on grassroots groups and organizations. Nevertheless, we find studies on initiatives that have

established the whole range of external relations that we described on the scale that we presented earlier, as the following quotation illustrate:

Grassroots collective action for the management of a common environmental resource is a well-known substitute for government provision of public goods (Becchetti, Castriota, & Conzo, 2016: 512).

Volunteer community organizations often strengthen, facilitate, or substitute for social services needed by local residents (Chavis & Florin, 1990: 560).

Programs within areas that are already rich with services for older adults and that aim to directly serve older adults over a long period of time might find themselves in greater competition with existing service entities, such as senior centers and area agencies on aging, which have relatively longer histories of providing services to older adults (O'Shaughnessy, 2008; Turner, 2004). Programs that emphasize individual and community capacity building over a relatively shorter period of time might be viewed as more complementary to existing service entities (Greenfield, 2013: 140)

Co-production is used increasingly by grassroots organizations and federations as part of an explicit political strategy (Mitlin, 2008: 339).

This relative lack of attention to this issue in the literature is curious, given that it does receive attention in policy circles, as the overview in section 2 showed. While some roles are mentioned in relation to grassroots initiatives, it seems much more incidental and less theorized than in the literature regarding NGOs and the broader civil society domain.

3.3 The policy angle

Where could we position the earlier-presented policies and agendas (section 2) on this scale from 'crowding-out' to 'co-production'? On the one hand, the various policy documents suggest a 'complementary view'. The do-democracy-agenda suggests the 'co-existence of a regulated governmental offering and a system of free societal initiatives' (BZK, 2013: 21), as we highlighted in the introduction already. Governments are told to 'give space to', 'connect to', 'stimulate' and 'trust' initiatives (e.g. BZK, 2013). Co-production is mentioned as well, but not explicitly with respect to grassroots initiatives.

On the other hand, these agenda's suggest a 'substitution' or a 'crowding-out'-view. In many cases, they work off the premise that initiatives offer many of the same services that governments offer (i.e. they are non-complementary). Self-organization and subsidiarity are presented as normative, organizing principles: governments and professional organizations should only take over if citizens are unable to keep matters in their own hands. 'It is lethal for an initiative when an institution takes control again' (TK, 2005/2006: 3). This reassessment of government's role comes in a time when politicians are busy 'retreating from the provision of services and support in the public domain' (van der Pennen & van Bortel, 2016: 1325). It is feared that governments will, or have already crowded out the grassroots. Commentators argue that 'although the origins of self-organization projects lie outside the state, they are being steered into of governance that are determined by state parameters' (Koster, 2014: 55). This is remedied by creating 'semi-regulated zones', in which grassroots initiatives can operate freely. Part and parcel of this state apparatus involves the expectation that citizens will propose 'better alternatives' to publicly offered services (BZK, 2013). This implies that they are supposed to actively 'crowd out' the public sector. The responsible minister acknowledges that initiatives may not be sustainable, and could disappear, but this is only considered problematic in cases in which they offer solutions for 'serious problems'.

We may conclude that the Dutch policy context gives spaces for multiple views regarding the relation between grassroots initiatives and the work of other players, predominantly governments and professional institutions. While multiplicity of views may be welcomed for an

open discussion on the role of the grassroots, we might also point out that a lack of clarity can create confusion. Other institutions and commercial entities are not referred to much. The 'substitution' and 'crowding out' dimensions are stressed, in connection to a broader discourse of a retreating government. The financial crisis of the past decade provided a stronger argument for this: 'Honesty obliges us to acknowledge that budgetary deficits form an important motivation for government to let go of certain activities and to create space for societal initiative' (BZK, 2013: 18).

4. Methods and set of initiatives

4.1 Loose methodological commonalities

In these studies, we have held interviews with roughly 125 initiatives, even though the number of interviews that we performed is much higher. For a number of studies, we not only spoke to representatives of the initiatives, but also with local policy makers, general experts or professionals working with the initiatives. Given that our focus in this meta-study is on fairly general impressions, we do not believe a meticulous overview of all types of respondents is beneficial.

Given that this is a meta-study, we did not use an identical methodology, or identical topic lists in our interviews. Nevertheless, we believe that there is sufficient overlap between the approaches of each study we cover, in order to make comparisons. We always inquired about motivations to start an initiative, asked to provide a rough timeline, an overview of external relations, etc. This allows us to have a general conception of the connection between the services and activities that these initiatives develop and the services and activities of other players in their domains. Moreover, all studies sketch the societal and political context in which these initiatives developed.

For all of the initial studies, recordings of all semi-structured interviews are available. All recordings were literally transcribed and analyzed, using Atlas.ti as a coding software. Given the specific focus of each study, different code lists were used. As with the aforementioned topic lists, however, we were able to digest a number of codes in each study that allows for comparison at the general level we aim for in this paper.

4.2 Introducing the initiatives

In table 1, we provide an overview of a number of characteristics. In certain domains, we are able to make estimations of the total numbers, often based on the work of others. As of 2016, for instance, about 750 communal green spaces were voluntarily registered on a website 'Green Nearby' whereas the content manager estimated this number should be multiplied by four to have an estimate of the national number. Keeping track is hindered by the possibility that places close down as a result of new building efforts without quitting the list. Out of all of these, just about a dozen of community gardens were investigated over the last five years. The same applies to alternative housing forms, for which about 20 out of a total of about 200 were studied.

Table 1

	Social support initiatives	Alternative housing for children with disabilities	Sustainable food	Self-managed public space	Refugees	Development aid	Upgrading green space
Number of initiatives	23	+/- 20 (project still ongoing)	4	45	8	18	12
Activities / services	Companionship and recreational activities, neighborly help, communal dining; barter exchange; living arrangements transport services; debt control services	Housing and support for people with a disability (usually youth with a mental disability, sometimes multiple, or physical)	Restaurant, education, wareness raising among consumers, deliver good, stop waste, improve social cohesion	Very diverse, ranging for maintaining green space, to cleaning the beach, and a place for borrowing toys	Training, recreatie, lobby en pleitbezorging, buddies, bemiddelend vraag en aanbod, individuele hulp	Development projects in the 'global south'. For migrants in the Netherlands: both individual and collective services and help.	Creating nice urban common green
Organizational form	Cooperative, association	Mostly foundations (frequently combined with an association, and required membership of all participants), cooperative (shared ownership and responsibility very important for parents)	Ltd/Inc., general partnership, foundation	Associations, foundations, informal groups, platforms with a public functions	Most are foundations	Foundation	Association or informal group
Target audience	Differs according to specific tasks and activities. Range: 15-300	Young adults with disabilities and a need for care and support. (87.650 persons with disabilities live in	consumers who support the idea of sustainable/local food, sharing food in the	Residents	Asylum seekers, status holders and refused asylum seekers. Numbers range from about 20	No recent estimation (older estimations do vary a lot)	Per greens space the audience may vary from 4 to 25 active participants and a larger passing

		an institution)	neighbourhood (no estimate available)		to several hundred.		audience by and enjoying the view
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These initiatives do all sorts of things. Many offer services, sometimes to target groups with specific needs – refugees, people in developing countries, children and adults with disabilities, etc. –, sometimes to a general audience in the vicinity of the initiatives – green space, self-managed space, sustainable food, etc. Apart from offering services and activities, some are involved in advocacy – refugee rights e.g. –, awareness raising – informing consumers about sustainable food. Yet others help to co-ordinate the supply and demand for volunteer services.

It is rather common for Dutch grassroots initiatives to formalize to a degree, often by adopting some form of legal entity. This is often a prerequisite for receiving funding or other forms of support. The foundation is the most common form, but we also came across associations, trading companies and co-operatives. The latter form has had a bit of an upsurge over the past decade, not only in the Netherlands: 2012 was designated as the International Year of Cooperatives by the United Nations. As said, in the sustainable food domain, the initiatives we studied often developed commercial services. Because of this, some of them adopted the Ltd. Form.

5. Initiatives on a scale?

5.1 Policy support

Before delving into the experience of concrete initiatives and their relations to other stakeholders, we examine the differing impact of policy support. A first conclusion we may draw is that support for initiatives varies quite strongly between domains. Social support is clearly the domain in which policy support is most explicitly articulated. As said, municipalities are given the explicit task of promoting and furthering the initiatives of citizens. Also grassroots development aid initiatives could count on support at the national level, but only in the 1990s, before austerity measures led to reduced funding.

The refugee domain is at the other end of the support spectrum: even though national politicians generally talk about citizen initiatives favorably, there is no active support structure. This is particularly the case with regards to aid for undocumented migrants. With the 'Linkage Act' of 1998 and the 2001 Asylum Act, refused asylum seekers were officially excluded from many public services (Kos et al., 2015). Some political parties favor a system in which supporting undocumented people outside of the public sector is a criminal offense. Also for sustainable food initiatives there is no dedicated support at the national level.

Most domains fall in between these extremes. Since the 1990s, initiatives offering alternative housing for people with a disability can use the personal care budget, even though it was not officially set up for this purpose. The urban renewal policy gives cities space and arguments for supporting self-managed public space and upgraded green space. With regards to the latter, also the earlier-mentioned political intention to support self-management of nature points in this direction. Broader agendas, such as the participation society, do-democracy and the energetic society provide a generally supportive, yet unspecific frame.

Examining policy support at the local level offers another perspective. Development aid does not seem to be an explicit topic in the local civil society, probably because its focus is often on public overseas. An exception might be those initiatives that also support immigrants from their target countries. In other domains, initiatives can usually count on local support, often in the form of subsidies, networking or knowledge aid, or contributions in-kind – such as an option to use free, or cheap space in a community center. Some municipal governments are known to cover the costs of utilities for initiatives offering alternative housing for children with a disability, or to support the upgrading of green space as a means of stimulating social cohesion.

Just as important, however, is the signal that municipalities are often reluctant to give support. In the self-managed public space and social support domains, some interviewees voiced the

opinion that it is better for local policy makers to refrain from offering support, in order to retain the bottom-up spirit. In the alternative housing for children with a disability domain, some initiatives were faced with local governments actively withdrawing support by restricting access to personal care budgets. Another reason for governmental reluctance is the fear that initiatives will prove to be unsustainable, which was voiced by informants dealing with upgrading green space, as well as in the social support domain. Obviously, this is more of an issue for initiatives that offer service that substitute public sector services. Once local residents depend on the services offered, municipal governments will often want to be assured that they will not cease to exist unexpectedly.

5.2 The scale

'Fitting' initiatives on the scale that we proposed is not a simple matter. The concepts that we derived from the literature are hardly, if ever, applicable in a straightforward fashion.

What relation?

A first question is to which types of stakeholders these initiatives relate. Should we regard their services or activities as 'crowding out' or as 'co-productive' compared to the offerings of the state, professional organizations, other third sector entities or commercial firms. It turns out that all these types of 'service relations' occur in the set of initiatives we studied. Grassroots services for refused asylum seekers are related to the basic services (bed, bath and bread) offered by municipal governments and sustainable food initiatives often collaborate with municipalities. Alternative housing for children with a disability and social support initiatives often relate their offerings to those of professional care organizations. Small-scale development aid projects are typically oriented to the work of vested third sector organizations, such as Oxfam. Sustainable food initiatives, by contrast, find themselves at the edges of the commercial food market, and interact with mainstream supermarkets. This adds up to the image of grassroots initiatives as part of the civil society, with its links to all other societal domains.

Complementarity as the dominant paradigm?

A primary reaction within the research team was that the services of most initiatives we studied are complementary to those of the stakeholders with which we engage. We highlight two domains as examples. With regards to initiatives for refugees, we may conclude that all are their services complement basic state-provided services, in the sense that they contribute to wellbeing in ways that large-scale public institutions don't or won't. They strive to strengthen ties between refugees, and between refugees and Dutch nationals, thereby enhancing capabilities, participation in society and helping them to become self-reliant. Many refugees have traumatizing, or otherwise negative experiences, both from their flight and from their stay in Dutch shelters. Grassroots initiatives often strive to offer a 'safe space'. This allows for regaining a sense of self-mastery.

We may also argue that the engagement and activities of grassroots development initiatives are complementary to the development-projects and consciousness raising of vested development organisations and (inter-)governmental aid. Research by development experts show that there is more to say about the relationship between the services of PDIs and those of large development organisations or (inter-)governmental organisations. We distinguish between their contribution to development and their attractiveness as a charity for donors. As to their activities in developing countries: PDIs do often provide basic services in a single country, while vested development organisations engage in projects touching a broader social context in more countries. Both types of interventions differ and are thus complementary. As to their role as a charity and the attractiveness for donors, Kinsbergen & Tolsma (2013) investigated whether

people in fact prefer donating to PDIs or to vested organisations. They could not conclude on a simple preference of potential donors for one or the other. PDIs are diverse and have many different characteristics which add or detract from their attractiveness as a charity. The voluntary character, lower overhead ratio and direct results of PDIs are considered to be an asset in fundraising, but the experience, competence and broad radius of action (working in more than one country) is also seen as an asset of vested organisations in the struggle to raise funds. Some respondents in our own qualitative investigation expressed that they both support PDIs and vested organisations, which adds to the impression that also in their role as fundraisers, PDIs are complementary to vested development organisations.

The entire scale represented in each domain

On closer examination, in all domains, we could find examples of initiatives at several positions of the scale. With regards to refugees, we may also argue that they range from 'crowding out' to 'co-production'. A small-scale language coaching organization could be regarded as an example of substitution: they jumped into the gap that was left when the national Refugee Council was unable to provide the amount of tutoring needed for the large group of newly arrived refugees. As a small NGO, they may 'complement' state-sponsored offerings, but their relation to the Refugee Council, a larger NGO, is one of substitution. It is not an example of crowding-out, considering that the grassroots volunteers prefer the Refugee Council to take over again at some point. The so-called 'Get down to work'-project is a clear example of co-production: they work together with state-organized asylum reception centers to create volunteering opportunities to (recognized) asylum seekers.

Management of public space initiatives can be found at every step of the scale. Some clearly substitute for, especially, government services i.c. citizens who take over a public pool, game store or open air theatre. At the other end of the scale are citizens who clear the snowfall and are compensated by the government, restore a church with government subsidies, operate a music club or are provided with salt to sprinkle the roads: examples of co-production. Similarly, while local government still is responsible for planting new trees citizens are asked to take care of (i.c. clean up) local parks themselves, a responsibility previously executed by the local government. Other services, such as a local currency exchange system are in competition with services provided by, in this case, the market can be viewed as providing complementary for those who do not have access to enough (conventional) money to satisfy their needs or certain tasks and some tasks, such as cleaning a local cemetery, simply would not be done without the effort of citizens' initiatives. Finally, co-production with the local government is often established in those Dutch municipalities where citizens are allowed to dispense of a part of the local government budget themselves (participatory budgeting) or work together on projects. Neighborhood organizations for example can report problems in their neighborhood - holes in the street for example - to the local government which will come and fix it, another example of co-production.

In the sustainable food domain, since most initiatives produce or provide food or food services, they can in general be seen as complementary services, that co-exist with, for example, regular supermarkets or restaurants, but in other occasions they could be more accurately described as substitution. To give an example: when consumers buy fruit and vegetables from the local food cooperative, they may substitute the food usually bought in regular supermarkets with the new purchases. One initiative had a 'light' co-productive relationship with several partners (local government, housing corporation, welfare institutions) in terms of working together to make food a binding factor in the neighborhood.

Development aid initiatives are probably the clearest examples of complementary services. Nevertheless, some initiatives received funding and advice from vested development organisations, which added to professionalization. This interconnectedness can be considered as a type of co-production.

Alternative housing initiatives can be seen as complementary to facilities that are lacking in the current range. They can also inspire existing healthcare providers to innovation. Some health care providers encourage and help parents to set up alternative housing for their disabled children. In this way they create their own supply. Also new healthcare providers arise that are specialized in providing care in the alternative housing initiatives. In this way we see co-production.

In the social support domain, a few initiatives (for instance care cooperative Hoogeloon) really started as an alternative to existing professional provisions, out of disappointment with the level and form of care that could be provided. In more densely populated regions, such as the Northern part of the country, care initiatives can also directly compete with the provisions provided by the professional care organization that also want to have their homes filled. Most projects in our sample are complementary, in the meaning of additional or an 'extra' to existing provisions provided by another (professional) organization. Some initiatives work together with professional organizations hiring care workers and work together in the provision of care. The new living arrangements initiatives also have to work together with housing organizations and the local government to get permission for the building of new houses.

Civic engagement in upgrading public green space can take various forms in terms of substitution versus co-production. In case of guerilla gardening citizens upgrade an -in their view- uninteresting part of public green by planting seeds or growing foods without consent of the land owner. This may go unnoticed by other citizens less into greens, as well as by authorities who do not closely inspect what the situation is. Alternatively, the change will be appreciated and for that reason respected. More numerous are initiatives at the co-production side of the ladder, as agreement with the owner of the land is often sought before efforts are made for more visible and more targeted changes in the greens. Changes are in a number of cases even made on invitation of the land owner. Competition may be at stake with dwellers not involved in the green upgrading, although reports on actual conflicts are modest. At stake can be the missing of ordinary space to walk the dog or have children run through, or the experience of perceived modest openness of the new space for people out of the inner circle.

One organization, multiple roles

So far, we examined whether the set of initiatives in each domain covered the entire scale that we proposed. Another way of approaching the 'scale issue' is to examine whether the position of specific initiatives on the scale is self-evident. Some could arguably be positioned on either end of the scale. This is often because they relate to multiple stakeholders, to which they have different relations. We just present one example to illustrate this. The Welcome to Utrecht initiative, in the refugee domain, which co-ordinates the supply and demand for grassroots projects, may be described as both 'crowding out' and as 'co-production', but in relation to different stakeholders. Their volunteers competed with the voluntary services organized by the formal (state) reception center, but actively collaborated with the municipality in a locally organized residence for refugees.

6. Discussion and conclusions

Even though Dutch policy documents do not propose that initiatives are categorically complementary, substitutive or otherwise, they do talk about bottom-up projects of citizens as a singular societal sphere. This is illustrated by the Ministry of Internal Affairs vocabulary, involving notions like 'a system of free societal initiatives' (BZK, 2013: 21). Also the creation of 'semi-regulated zones' (Koster, 2014) in which the grassroots could come to bloom add to this idea of an autonomous sphere. The fact that recent policy agendas cut across policy domains

also suggests that initiatives are considered as entities in their own right, rather than as something pertaining to a particular target group.

On the basis of the above, we may conclude that it would be overly simplified to draw a single, unified conclusion about the role and relative position of the services and activities that grassroots initiatives offer. This is fundamental reservation with regards to the way they are discussed in certain policy papers. Grassroots initiatives operate in many playing fields, which differ per domain. Some relate to local governments, while others develop services that are somehow related to other NGOs, professional organizations or commercial firms. At first sight, the services of many initiatives – or of the ‘grassroots sphere’ – may seem to be purely complementary. On a closer inspection, however, some have services that are co-produced with other entities, others have stand-alone complementary activities, and yet others substitute or actively crowd out public or private sector offerings. All of this can happen within a single domain, or even within a single organization: one initiative may substitute the work of a state institution, while co-producing services with a municipality.

The above might offer an argument to not look at initiatives exclusively from the perspective of the services or activities they offer. This is in line with earlier comments by Robert Putnam (2004), which stress that the things that people do together are so much more than a means to an end (a service). The notion that they get together could be an end in itself, adding to social cohesion. There are many other contributions of citizen initiatives that are worth investigating. Some mention the role of ‘grassroots innovation’ (Seyfang & Haxeltine, 2012; Seyfang & Longhurst, 2013; Seyfang & Smith, 2007), which also appeared in our set of initiatives. The new approaches that bottom-up groups take are often interesting in their own right, but also prove to be a catalyst for change in other organizations. This, however, takes a service perspective again. We may also argue that initiatives often examine and re-establish the boundaries within a domain. Many interesting questions appear: can non-professionals employ care professionals? Can groups of citizens ‘open up’ relatively closed refugee reception centers? Can guerilla gardeners change the public view on vacant space and the aesthetics of a neighborhood? Can local food producers compete with mainstream supermarkets? Etc.

In spite of our reservations to assume that there is such a thing as a ‘grassroots sphere’, it does remain intriguing to consider whether there are features that the types of initiatives we have studied share. Even if we have only studies about 125, they represent hundreds, if not thousands. Certainly, the total of all these grassy efforts have an impact on the larger scale of things. This warrants further study.

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