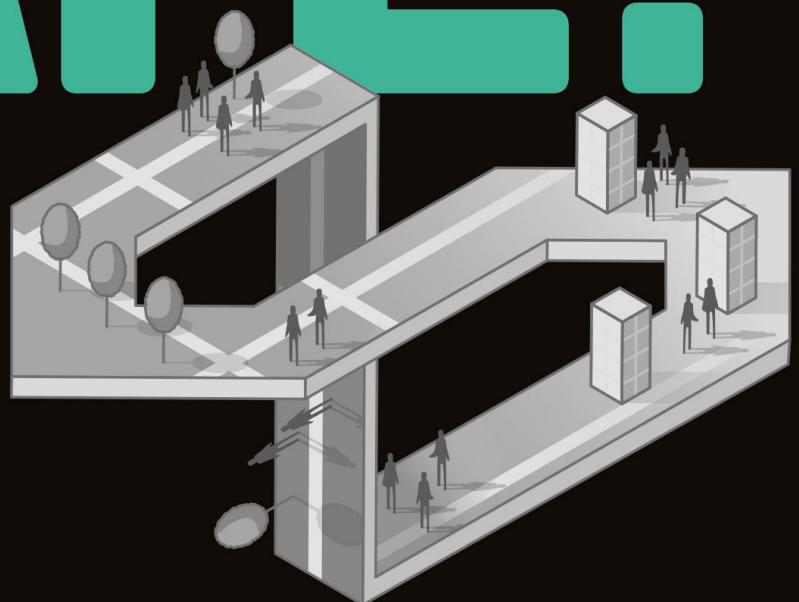


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OF CITIES
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GRONINGEN

By Invitation Only

Citizen Participation in Groningen

Wendy Tan, Melika Levelt, Mustafa Hasanov and Peter Bootsma Having endured benign neglect from the central government and general disdain from the rest of the country, Groningen has developed into a tenacious and self-reliant town where citizens are increasingly engaged with shaping and transforming their city. This chapter illustrates the *eigenlogik* of Groningen and its citizens through two recent yet decidedly different community-led initiatives, set against a historical backdrop of urban planning projects. Citizen participation here has changed drastically since the 1960s as a result of political change and larger societal transitions. More recently, following the 2008 financial crisis Groningen has seen a rash of initiatives with varying levels of citizen participation. In response, the city's local government has adapted its approach to facilitate and 'invite' participation. Critically reflecting on the narratives and power structures behind the initiatives described, this chapter discusses the discrepancies between levels of participation and concludes that although the city is welcoming to initiatives, the boundaries and thresholds to citizen participation remain opaque.

A Jewel with a Golden Edge: Groningen

'*Er gaat niets boven Groningen*' — 'There is nothing above Groningen' — is the motto of the northern-most region of the Netherlands and the location of an eponymous province and city. This highly successful marketing slogan has been used heavily in city branding for the last 30 years, and can be found splashed across buildings, hot air balloons and a wealth of merchandise sold in tourist information kiosks throughout Groningen. As most things in this city, the phrase is open to interpretation and ambiguity. On the one hand, it is part proclamation of excellence: although home to just 200,000 inhabitants, Groningen is the economic motor of the three most northern provinces of the Netherlands, and home to one of the country's oldest universities that counts four Nobel prize winners among its alumni. Simultaneously, it is a derogatory allusion to the fact that once you move northwards from the city, urbanization and settlements are displaced by a sparsely populated, flat and empty rural landscape. It speaks to the character of the city and the region that inhabitants have 'leaned into' the slogan and its implications of identity as a badge of honour. This contrary stance is captured in the sentiments of its inhabitants in how they view themselves as 'other' in relation to the rest of the Netherlands. Even on a regional level, the 'true' locals prefer to be called *Stadjers* — or city folk — as opposed to the more common *Groninger* attributed to inhabitants of the surrounding countryside. Expanding further outwards still, residents also set themselves apart from those that reside in the economic centres of the Randstad in the West. This denigration of being a 'westerner' does not discriminate and includes everyone from policy makers in the Hague to anyone who lives outside of the Netherlands' three northern-most provinces.¹ In the Groningen region, there is a deep-seated and at times justified distrust and aversion to central authority and policies. The inhabitants have been repeatedly subjected to what they consider as unfair policies and depictions by those outside of the North. The 'northerners' are usually portrayed as being slow-witted, boorish, as having an unintelligible local dialect, and contentious in popular media.² The resentment and sense of being left behind is not baseless. In comparison to other parts of the country, the infrastructure development in the region has

¹ W. Joustra, 'Kabinet neemt Noorden eindelijk weer serieus', *De Volkskrant*, 18 April 1998. Online. Available HTTP: <https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/kabinet-neemt-noordeneindelijk-weer-serieus~b0838735/> (Last accessed: 21 Aug 2019)

² Noorderlingen gesloten en terughoudend', *nu.nl*, 2 April 2004. Online. Available HTTP: <https://www.nu.nl/algemeen/301981/noorderlingen-gesloten-en-terughoudend.html> (Last accessed: 21 Aug 2019); van der Galien, M. (2020) Groningers woest over windmolengekte: 'Den Haag ziet ons als dom volk. Een wingewest'. *De Dagelijkse Standaard* (08 October 2020). Available via: <https://www.dagelijksestandaard.nl/2020/10/groningers-woest-over-windmolengekte-den-haag-zietons-als-dom-volk-een-wingewest/> [Last accessed: 21 Nov 2020]

consistently lagged behind. The induced earthquakes from natural gas harvesting in the region has also devastated many historical settlements with almost none of the economic profits returning to the inhabitants.³ As a result, there is a sense of pride among inhabitants in being resilient and self-sufficient, despite being dealt a poor hand in their geographical situation. Simply, they successfully take care of their own in spite of a lack of support from the central government.

Grunnegs Ontzet: Groningen Defiance and Innovation

The city and the region carry the burden of playing second fiddle to the economic powerhouse cities in the west of the country. The city and its people are often portrayed as recalcitrant and slow to conform to national policies.⁴ However, they have also been described as independent freethinkers who are unwilling to bend to the pressures of central authority, and who have succeeded both historically and in current times in forging their own path forward. A controversial infrastructure plan spanning the last three decades reflects this uncomfortable position: the *Zuiderzeelijn* is a high-speed rail extension aimed at improving train speed and frequency in the North and connecting it to the main national airport, Schiphol, and the west of the country. The project has been dangled in front of inhabitants since the late 1980s in return for the exploitation of natural gas reserves. The plan was eventually cancelled citing 'too high' costs. Nevertheless, it occasionally resurfaces in policy documents and in the media (usually around election time) to spark hope that the North will somehow catch up with the West someday.

It is no coincidence that the most prominent celebration in the city is not any of the traditional Dutch holidays one would expect. Rather, it is *Grunnegs Ontzet*: an explosive evening of fireworks and revelry in late August celebrating the 1672 relief of the city by its common citizens resisting the siege led by a bishop known as *Bommen Berend*. The city celebrates its independence proudly, and has always been a little bit ahead of its time in dancing to a different tune than the rest of the country. Politically, the local government was a stronghold of socialist democracy, with the Labour party dominating politics for decades since the 1970s, even when national politics tended towards conservatism.⁵ This has changed in recent years when they were replaced by a social liberal party in 2014, and the Green party in 2018. The same socialist democratic political sentiments are also reflected in the city's urban development evolution. A particular turning point was the 1973 decision to demolish the Harmonie building. A cultural centre built in 1856 with a concert hall famed for its acoustic qualities, years of neglect had left the venue in a state of decline. Going against popular opinion, the city council decided to demolish the building and relocate its cultural activities. Amidst protest over the rigid handling of its demolition, a call for citizen participation arose.⁶ In the 1970s, when a young and progressive Labour party bloc came into power, it pushed a radical but innovative framework to remake the city centre and give voice to citizens as the newly elected city council. Amongst other innovations, the proposed traffic circulation plan introduced unprecedented pedestrianization, prioritized bicycle traffic and kept private cars out of the city. This is now the norm in most European cities, but four decades ago, it raised incredible ire from local business owners and residents. However, looking back, the experimental plans did eventually deliver a vibrant and vital urban centre that has been repeatedly crowned as the top cycling city in the country of cycling culture.⁷

The Emperors of Zuiderdiep: Engaging the Citizenry

Since the voluminous criticism of the lack of citizen participation in the 1960s, the city has evolved in its approaches to engage the citizenry. In the past decades, the chief civil servant of the planning department has been nicknamed the 'Emperor of the Zuiderdiep' (*de Keizer van het Zuiderdiep*) by local residents, after the street where the department is located. The pejorative typecasts the overbearing planners and politicians who

³ M.M. Bakema, C. Parra, P. McCann, 'Analyzing the Social Lead-Up to a Human-Induced Disaster: The Gas Extraction-Earthquake Nexus in Groningen, The Netherlands', *Sustainability* (2018) 10(10), 3621

⁴ R. van Meurs, 'Hoe een onhandigheidje van een minister tot een booming economie in het noorden leidde', *B&G* (May/June 2003). Online. Available HTTP: https://www.bngbank.nl/BG%20Articles/200306meurs_14-19.pdf (Last accessed: 21 Aug 2019); A-L. van Bruaene, 'Groningen, a city apart. The past to modern times of a stubborn city (1000-1600)', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* (2008) 121(1), 109-110

⁵ S. Tsubohara, *Democracy through Political Parties and Public Participation: The Case of the Planning History of Groningen, The Netherlands* (Groningen: URSI, 2010)

⁶ L.H. Hajema, *De glazenwassers van het bestuur: lokale overheid, massamedia, burgers en communicatie, Groningen in landelijk perspectief 1945-2001*, (Groningen: Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, 2001), 447; B. de Vries, 'Politiek en bestuur in spannende jaren', in: M. Duijvendak and B. de Vries (eds.) *Stad van het Noorden: Groningen in de twintigste eeuw* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2003), 258 – 259

⁷ J.R. Homrighausen and W.G.Z. Tan, 'Institutional Innovations for Sustainable Mobility: Comparing Groningen (NL) and Phoenix (US)', *Transportation Research Procedia* (2016) 19, 151–163

reinvented the city without much oversight from stakeholders, or consultation. Even though improvement efforts were made, the following projects illustrate that despite citizen participation in urban development evolving over time, there was and is still much ground to be won.

The Groninger Museum planned in the mid 1980s resulted in heated debate. Using every means possible, citizens protested its location, design, and choice of architect. The entire process echoed a common refrain: the populace was being ignored, and decisions were being made behind closed doors by a political inner circle and an idiosyncratic museum director.⁸ This continued in to the late 1990s with the Grote Markt: the central market square where the city hall and Martini church is located. It functions as a social and identifiable centre of the medieval part of the city and hosts weekly markets. When plans were mooted to renovate the buildings and introduce an underground parking garage, a farce of a referendum was held with one plan and no alternatives. Despite negative votes for the parking garage, the municipality saw no reason to deviate from their solitary plan.⁹ As a result of the frustrations that ensued, citizen participation started to show teeth. Citizens, shop owners and civil servants managed to torpedo the top-down approved Regiotram project by expressing their negative sentiments via social media “worsened with the rise of Twitter” to oppose the project as an organized collective.¹⁰

Up until the early 2000s, citizen participation in Groningen stagnated at the informing and consultation phases. At best, it showed degrees of tokenism at the lower rungs of Arnstein’s 1969 ladder of citizen participation. Referendums, albeit with restricted choices and only token engagement of citizens seemed par for the course. Despite the socialist democratic tendencies of the local government, the engagement of citizens, particularly in urban planning processes, could be described as paternalistic at best — and patronizing at worst.

By Invitation Only: Urban Planning and Citizen Participation

The last decade has signalled a shift in the engagement of citizenry to participate in urban development processes in Groningen. Under the auspices of the Recovery Act (*Crisis-en herstelwet*) introduced in 2010, the principles of planning by invitation (or ‘*uitnodigingsplanologie*’) became a mainstay narrative in urban planning in many Dutch cities. Groningen was no exception. The neighbourhood participatory budgets proposed in the mid 2000s demonstrated how the local government wanted to engage citizens at a much earlier stage in the development process. With an aim of instilling self-organization and governance at a neighbourhood level, the New Local Accords policy (*Nieuwe Lokaal Akkoord*) was to allocate €20 million over four years to 14 neighbourhoods. A selected and nominated group of residents worked together with professionals to form a neighbourhood team (*wijkteam*) and make plans together with local government representatives on how best to spend their neighbourhood budgets on social and physical infrastructures. The teams were accountable only to the city council (Gemeente Groningen, 2008).¹¹ This marked a big step in putting both resources and decision-making powers in the hands of local inhabitants. However, preliminary evaluations reveal that it was mostly professional representatives leading decision-making due to a lack of capacity of the residents.¹² A key turning point was in 2015, when a group of citizens got financial and organizational support from the city to launch a G1000 dialogue — a citizen initiative for a deliberative collective of 1,000 citizens developed in Belgium by cultural historian, archaeologist and writer, David van Reybrouck. The citizens, chosen via lottery, were to gather to discuss the issues that they see as most important for their city. After a day’s deliberation, they then decide on ten projects to make the city better. In Groningen the G1000 was run by volunteers who wore multiple hats as community organizers and civil servants. Ideas spanning universal basic income to a map of community-led initiatives were discussed, although the forum did not have any formal effect on policies. The event is seen by most as an opening-up of local government towards more involvement of citizen participation processes in the form of community-led initiatives.¹³ These initiatives are led or initiated by self-organized groups of citizens and stakeholders within a defined community. More recently, with the introduction of district teams (*gebiedsteams*); social welfare and communication teams at district levels (*WIJ-teams*); plus a how-to guide for citizen participation, the city is gaining traction in becoming more inclusive and transparent about their processes. Prior to 2010, and despite good intentions, citizenry engagement in Groningen was

⁸ Hajema, *De glazenwassers van het bestuur*, op. cit. (note 6)

⁹ de Vries, ‘Politiek en bestuur in spannende jaren’, op. cit. (note 6), 437

¹⁰ R. van der Bijl, K. Utsunomiya and N. van Oort, ‘Failed Projects Offer Valuable Lessons for Future Schemes’, *International Railway Journal* (2020) 60(2), 34–37

¹¹ Gemeente Groningen, *Rapportage Nieuw Lokaal Akkoord*, 2008

¹² A. Michels, ‘Citizen participation and democracy in the Netherlands’, *Democratization* (2006) 13(2), 323–339

¹³ A. Michels and H. Binnema, ‘Hoe divers, invloedrijk en deliberatief is een G1000?: Het ontwerp van een burgertop en de verwezenlijking van democratische waarden’, *Bestuurswetenschappen* (2016) 70(1)

characterized by its almost ‘paternal’ concern. That is to say, one party had a care-taking role; the other needed caring for. The imbalance of these roles was a clear signal of unequal footing. After a move towards more community-led initiatives, kickstarted by the 2015 G1000, citizen engagement in the city fell more in line with the contemporary narratives of deliberative democratic policies accompanying governmental devolution at both national and EU levels. There is an implicit acknowledgement that there is capacity within the citizenry to contribute more to correct market (and perhaps policy) failures. Here, a more collaborative stance is taken as opposed to that of the previous decade. This can be considered as moving up Arnstein’s ladder of participation towards the beginnings of citizen control beyond tokenism. However, the term ‘invitation’ implies citizens and their initiatives are guests bound by the necessary etiquette and societal norms of decency within a host’s domain. The two stances beg the question: just how welcome is citizen participation in Groningen? And what are its boundaries and thresholds beyond formalistic referendums which may get ignored; or experimental budgets dominated by professionals instead of local citizens? Within this context, we discuss two vastly different community-led initiatives that show the range of justifications given in support of — and that go against — certain initiatives, and the resulting limits for participation.

Community-Led Initiatives in Groningen

The city and region of Groningen is drowning in community-led initiatives and projects due to the independence of its citizens and the regulatory permissiveness of the local government, particularly for achieving energy transition.¹⁴ Initiatives vary from urban farms (such as Tuin in de Stad and Toentje) and energy co-ops (Grunneger Power); to social cooperatives (like Helpman-de Wijert, which sees students, residents, entrepreneurs and the municipality work together on neighbourhood projects) and large-scale urban transformation sites (such as mixed-use developments, Ebbingekwartier and Suikerfabriekterrein). They are found in every neighbourhood and range in size from a block-sized garden to a 40-hectare urban district.

One of the largest examples of this is the Ebbingekwartier, an urban redevelopment project on a former industrial site with a wealth of turn-of-the-century industrial heritage buildings, right in the heart of the city centre. Ebbingekwartier was revitalized by a group of local artists and entrepreneurs to discourage criminal and antisocial behaviour from taking place there. After years of clean-up and organizing cultural events staged in temporary shipping containers, the district was revived as a new hip spot of the city. The original initiative group was replaced by a more efficient managerial team appointed by the city. As the developers returned, all social and cultural value was eventually replaced by a highly desirable — but expensive — residential district.¹⁵ The growth of initiatives resulted from the urban development vacuum in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008. The halting and disappearance of development projects, coupled with a general financial downturn led to an increase in derelict locations and empty storefronts in and around the city of Groningen. On a positive note, citizens and their initiatives gained access to spaces and locations at peppercorn rates. However, as the real estate market started to bounce back after 2012, these sites also experienced extreme pressures to return to the status quo. Of course, not all initiatives are equally successful or resilient. Here, through the stories of two community-led initiatives that have transformed the spatial fabric or the existing processes within the city, we paint a picture of the spectrum of the city’s recent culture of citizen participation. The first is a highly favoured initiative of an urban farm in the east quarter of the city; the latter is a less-favoured initiative seeking to improve older adult mobility in the northwest quarter of the city. Their narratives show the breadth of how cooperation between citizens and local government can manifest or deteriorate in planning processes.

Toentje

‘Toentje’ — or ‘the little garden’ in the local dialect — is an initiative in the Oosterpark neighbourhood, located east of Groningen’s centre. The neighbourhood is a mix of 1930s labourer villages, bordered by post-war residential blocks and separated by green boulevards in the style of Berlage.¹⁶ These are flanked by urban redevelopment projects from the late 2000s, left uncompleted due to the financial crisis. The area was notorious for the since-demolished local football stadium and its associations of overly fervent supporters, riots

¹⁴ M. Hasanov and C. Zuidema, ‘The transformative power of self-organization: Towards a conceptual framework for understanding local energy initiatives in The Netherlands’, *Energy Research & Social Science* (2018) 37, 85–93

¹⁵ K.C. von Schönfeld, W.G.Z. Tan, C. Wiekens, W. Salet and L. Janssen-Jansen, ‘Social learning as an analytical lens for co-creative planning’, *European Planning Studies* (2019) 27(7), 1291–1313

¹⁶ The father of modern architecture movement in the Netherlands, active in the early twentieth century. He famously used large green open spaces as structural key elements and axes in his plans to separate work and residential functions.

and extravagant firework displays come New Year's Eve. The neighbourhood is well-loved for its proximity to the city centre and two large parks, capped off by an Amsterdam-style building housing the local school. Now, it is home to a comfortable mix of lower socio-economic status families in a multitude of terraced social housing on the western edges of the Pioenpark; clusters of students in the rented post-war apartment blocks in the middle; and an influx of yuppies and their young families on the eastern edges in townhouses and luxury apartments.

Toentje developed in 2012 from a partial parcel of residential development (just under one hectare) left undeveloped due to the pressures of the financial crisis. It was not initiated by a local resident, but by a social entrepreneur with a professional background in event organization and music who was frustrated at the lack of fresh produce available to those in need. He approached the local municipality seeking a piece of ground to cultivate produce, specifically for the local food bank in the same neighbourhood. The initiative's clearly outlined plans (comprising mind maps and vision boards) of only producing for the food bank with a group of voluntary urban agricultural enthusiasts and a persuasive pitch caught the attention of several senior civil servants in the municipality. Together, a suitable location was found and the local residents consulted. The residents reacted positively as no one enjoyed looking at a piece of disheveled and bare ground awaiting construction that might never come to be. After a usage and lease agreement signed with the housing development corporation that owned the site in 2013, agricultural production went into full swing after a year of site preparation.

The initiative formalized itself as a non-profit organization foundation in 2014, partially subsidized by the poverty prevention policies and budgets from the municipality. It went from strength to strength, attracting volunteers by the dozen who were seeking solace from work life stress, or an outlet for their green fingers. At one point, they had a rotation of more than 35 volunteers at any given time from all walks of life. Most, however, were young urban professionals from outside of the neighbourhood. Despite its successes, Toentje nevertheless faced hurdles: a first was when the foundation sought to branch into animal husbandry (pigs, chickens and so on) to increase the variety of produce and introduce circularity into its urban agriculture activities. This was met with protest from the residents due to potential smells, as well as those who were not looking forward to their children being confronted with an animal that they might consume.

As the real estate market recovered, Toentje was faced with its first crisis in 2015. With the lease agreement coming to an end, the development corporation wanted to regain the parcel of land to answer the rising demand for housing development. As the initiative sought potential new locations, they painstakingly tore down and packed up the garden they had cultivated for years. After a few months of searching, the initiative was eventually offered one of the green boulevards of the neighbourhood as a replacement site. The site had the appropriate zoning permissions and was only 100 metres away from the previous location. In its new location, which was cleared and prepared by the municipality, the garden once again flourished as part of the green structure of the neighbourhood. Without the fences of the old location, it also became more accessible. However, support from local residents did not come naturally. This pushed Toentje and the municipality to make considerable efforts to connect with the immediate neighbourhood. One reason for residents' initial dissatisfaction was that the neighbourhood desired a playground where Toentje now stood, as had been promised by the municipality long before the urban farm came into play. Starting with establishing links with the local school and municipal social workers, little by little, Toentje increased its connection with the local neighbourhood.

What then, if not a local connection, justified the municipal support of Toentje from the start? When interviewed, some civil servants praised the professionalism of the initiator, while others stated that Toentje fitted perfectly with multiple municipal policy goals. Certain policy makers saw Toentje's dependence on subsidies as problematic in the long run, as it should ultimately be able to operate commercially. Others disagreed, stating that the main idea of a citizen initiative is that it does not fit into any current framework for justification; rather it should achieve something new, and not yet thought of by the municipality. Thus, despite diverse views, a large variety of supportive justifications were given to the positive benefit of Toentje's continuation. However, as our next case study illustrates, such variety and variability of justifications can also work in opposition as boundaries and thresholds to citizen participation.

Vinkmobiel

Vinkmobiel is named after the neighbourhood in which it is based: Vinkhuizen, in the north-western edge of the city. A community initiative, it aims to provide alternative mobility solutions to the district's older adults in the form of a fleet of used electric golf vehicles (now replaced by cars due to weather conditions) that users can call up on demand for a small fee. The service was to be run by volunteers who are trained to be chauffeurs as part of a return to workforce training programme. The neighbourhood consists of apartment blocks dating from the 1970s and 1980s, and has all the typical ugliness of modern housing expansion schemes. This is seen in the unnecessarily wide roads that reduce walkability, lack of human scale, and abundance of high-rise flats of social housing in various states of disrepair. There is a local shopping centre with limited shops and facilities located near the only historical building, a barn that hosts the local community centre. The neighbourhood underwent transformation in the early 2000s, with the introduction of better housing quality. The aim of this was to attract a younger demographic of young professionals with families in order to balance out the increasingly ageing original residents belonging to lower socio-economic groups. Surprisingly, the neighbourhood is also very attractive to students due to its proximity to the local university.

In recent years, Vinkhuizen has suffered from governmental budget reductions in the aftermath of the financial crisis. These cuts are most visible in the reduction of bus services and stops within the neighbourhood. Here, the percentage of older adults exceeds the average for the municipality. 20 per cent of residents are aged 65 years and over, compared to the average of 12 per cent.¹⁷ As such, this group of residents was disproportionately disadvantaged when bus lines were reduced and bus stops removed. Social workers and local community health care workers reported increasing cases of social isolation, exacerbating physical and mental health decline in the older adult population. Many were no longer able to visit friends, the hairdressers, or weekly markets in the city centre as bus lines were cancelled. In reaction, in 2014 the local community centre and healthcare provider proposed an initiative to facilitate short-distance trips for this vulnerable group. Limited to journeys of up to six kilometres — so as not to rival taxi companies — the project was inspired by similar schemes running in the south and east of the country. The initiative was initially met by warm responses from the local municipality, even securing praise and political support from multiple politicians. However, in seeking to secure subsidy during a city council meeting, the initiators discovered that favour from multiple fronts led to their proposal being considered unfeasible, politically sensitive and eventually denied. Dejected, the group behind the initiative disbanded, only to reunite the following year thanks to a local nonprofit organization promoting sustainability through democratic processes, and mobility researchers from the local university. The initiative was subsequently involved in several EU and national funding proposals. Burned by prior rejections at a municipality level, they sought out alternative funding sources from the national lottery funds as well as other charity organizations. The group began formalizing their processes, specifically by laying down tasks and goals in a covenant as opposed to verbal agreements. Meetings were held more frequently as opposed to ad hoc and informal meet-ups between initiative members. Just as they gained traction by winning small subsidies from charities, they were tipped-off about a similar project also offering volunteer-run transportation in an adjacent neighbourhood. The group was devastated to see the very same organization that had rejected them — that is, the local municipality — implement their exact idea in a different location. This led to increased unpleasantness between the two parties. Eventually, in a reconciliation attempt, the group was offered a potential subsidy to implement their proposal on the condition that they further professionalized, and produced a viable business case. In the meantime, the group lost their transport operator who over the course of three frustrating years had grown impatient at the lack of progress, and resistance from local government.

The very next year, a social entrepreneur and regional car-leasing company stepped in to help fill that role. Their approach of commercialization, broadening the initiative's reach to multiple neighbourhoods, all the while retaining low fees was initially met with positive reactions from the municipality. However, on presentation of the business case questions were raised by the same civil servants as to how embedded it was in the local community. Promises of subsidies dissipated; the initiative was deemed too professional and therefore illegitimate. Having had enough, the initiative stopped requesting subsidies from local government and the transport operator established itself as a foundation, turning to grants secured from local banks and charities to start the project by purchasing vehicles. In 2019, Vinkmobiel launched with a fleet of six vehicles,

¹⁷ Centraal bureau voor de statistiek, 'Kerncijfers wijken en buurten 2019', *StatLine*. Available HTTP: <http://data.overheid.nl/dataset/09f5479a-50f9-45ed-b727-91bf141d14f4> (accessed 21 August 2019)

with three more added in 2020. After overcoming early hiccups with its planning and booking processes, reactions from local (older adult) residents have been overwhelmingly positive.

Discussion and Conclusion

Looking back at the history of Groningen, one can see projects being shaped by various degrees of citizen participation. Across tools spanning formalistic consultations (*inspraak*) to referendums, the extent to which citizens have a say in their city continues to evolve. In the last decade, we see that the *Stadler* have become increasingly vocal and more responsive in determining how the city should and could be. The city has also grown in giving space for alternative voices and processes by way of community dialogues and participatory budgets. However, as these case studies show, there are still implicit barriers for participation in Groningen that lead to an uneven playing field.

From Strength to Strength

The number of community-led initiatives popping up in Groningen has recently resulted in the creation of a democratic co-operative (*Burgerinitiatieven Gemeente Groningen* or BIG) where initiatives can organize, seek resources and support each other. The self-reported index stood at 180 initiatives at last count.¹⁸ The city is home to a growing number of citizen participation in the form of community-led initiatives and projects. Judging by the number of initiatives reported, proactive citizen participation is definitely on the agenda. The local government has even recently produced a handbook on a Groningen style of citizen participation.¹⁹ Thanks to efforts to introduce participatory budgets and local district officers' willingness to facilitate citizen participation, Groningen is one of the more advanced cities in the Netherlands. The political favour and support that Toentje experienced shows that the local governance structures are flexible and welcoming to the right kind of initiative. Vinkmobiel, although not as well-favoured, was not further obstructed: the initiative could proceed with its plans by piecing together the necessary financial resources independently.

Variety of Justification

Comparing the cases, the boundaries and thresholds for 'welcome' citizen participation through community-led initiatives remains opaque. It is not necessarily an issue of being place-based, being legitimized by the community, nor a matter of societal relevance or urgency. As an initiative from outside the neighbourhood, Toentje was well-loved and well-supported within the bureaucratic arenas of the local municipality. Vinkmobiel, on the other hand, an initiative of local stakeholders, was unsuccessful in gaining municipal appreciation. Both are still growing and how they will further develop is unclear. Perhaps like Ebbingekwartier, they might receive support up to the point when the initiatives are mature enough to be further exploited by market forces. Whilst the initiator of Toentje was praised for their professionalism, that same quality was first demanded and then mistrusted in the case of Vinkmobiel. That the municipality is highly supportive of local initiatives is clear, and evidenced by the cross-disciplinary team of civil servants that takes care of a first examination of any initiative that demands support. However, the city's various means of justification seem intangible and oftentimes like a moving target. This creates a risk of arbitrariness influencing later decisions regarding support. As a favoured initiative, Toentje was afforded many conveniences and help such as entrance to subsidy budgets and preparation of the site. This is in stark contrast to another similar urban agricultural initiative in the city, Tuin in de Stad, which was required to demonstrate its economic and social value,²⁰ and of course Vinkmobiel that had to find other sources of funding to get started.

An Open Invitation?

Although the inability of the Vinkmobiel initiative to gain full support from all stakeholders might be construed as a failure, it can also be argued that the initiative overcame opposition to eventually realize its goals. A key

¹⁸ Burgerinitiatieven Groningen (BIG) (2020) Online. Available HTTP: <https://burgerinitiatievementgroningen.nl/inventarisatie-burgerinitiatieven-2019/> (accessed 15 Apr 2021)

¹⁹ Gemeente Groningen, *Groninger Participatiewerkboek*, Gemeente Groningen: Groningen, 2019). Online. Available HTTP: <https://gemeente.groningen.nl/sites/default/files/Groninger-Participatiewerkboek.pdf> (accessed 21 Nov 2020)

²⁰ *Dagblad van het Noorden*, 'Tuin in de Stad moet verkassen', 9 September 2015. Online. Available HTTP: <https://www.dvhn.nl/groningen/Tuin-in-de-Stad-moet-verkassen-21027156.html>

difference here seems to be how 'inviting' an initiative was perceived to be. It might seem serendipitous for an initiative such as Toentje to receive support and facilitation. One could also argue that the initiators were more politically astute and knew how to present their ideas more efficiently to those in power, compared to the team behind Vinkmobiel. In this form of citizen participation, it is crucial to have and utilize community-organizing skill sets to achieve and sustain collective action for change. Considering the tenacity and self-reliance of the city and its citizens, it is hardly surprising that there is capacity within the citizenry to challenge traditional norm of hierarchical and top-down planning decisions. The can-do attitude of inhabitants and willingness of the local government to experiment with varying degrees of citizen participation fits the identity of a city seeking self-sufficiency and excellence in retaliation. The trick, however, is that once the spotlight is turned onto the internal power structures within the city, a hierarchical pattern appears. The municipality is shedding its paternalistic ways of managing citizen participation — but is it enough to just be welcoming? The evidence points to intangible and changeable rules and norms about what is or is not welcomed by the hosts — the local government — that contrasts sharply with the city's history of non-conformity. Is it then that the guests — that is, the citizens and their community initiatives — are not able to behave as the hosts expect? This puts the onus of observing etiquette on citizens as new entrants into the developmental processes. One could question if such deference is societally desirable, given that the government should be a representation of its citizens. The very citizens that are in fact, correcting policy and market failures, and contributing time and resources to build societal value. After all, is it not the duty of the host to make their guests feel welcome by either expressing the rules beforehand or by graciously accepting all actions of their guests?

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