from idea to reality

Reflection

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Reflection

This chapter reflects on the experiences of the graduation research. The chapter reflects on four parts: topic & study, the scientific relevance, the research results and the research process.

Topic & study

The topic of the research is about how citizen initiatives for urban development, facilitated by Dutch municipalities, can be stimulated by using online platforms and the impact of certain initiatives on the built environment. The graduation research is conducted for the master Management in the Built Environment (MBE). Where the focus of the master normally is on major stakeholders, often with a lot of influence and money (for instance project developers, housing corporations, contractors etc.), this research focusses on a relatively 'small' and often forgotten stakeholder: the citizen, the regular user of the city and the built environment. Even though the citizens are a major group in quantity, their influence, knowledge, money and power is often expected to be low and are often not part of decisions-making processes.

Rapid urbanization and the rise of the urban century (Kourtit, et all 2017, p.14) gained a lot of attention of governments all over the world and resulted in counteractions that led to sustainable urban development (Yin, et all, 2015, p. 449). 'This urges urban development to not only minimize the use of resources and the spatial displacement of environments, but also improve the efficiency (Yin, et all, 2015, p. 450)'. Improving the efficiency is for instance done with smart governance, where governments engage with stakeholders in order to design more legitimate solutions for a livable and sustainable city. One of these stakeholders is the 'regular' citizen. Besides, in the Netherlands, society is changing from a welfare state (verzorgingsstaat), to a participation society. Citizens are ought to take more responsibilities for their living environment and the government pulls back with a more facilitating role (Kennisland, n.d., p.14). Additionally, the role of citizens is changing, they have multiple channels to show their disagreement and they are increasingly using these channels to show their disagreement. As a result, there's an urge for municipalities to change their communication, but also for the creation of space in the decision-making processes for new forms of input, acknowledging the changing role of citizens. With the creation of platforms for participation, municipalities can enable citizens to take part in the decision making process and structurally involve citizens in these processes. Not only to react on plans, but also to take part in the design of the plans (de Zeeuw & Pieterse, n.d., p. 8).

However, making citizens part of the decision-making process and involving their ideas in policy making and service delivery is something which is often at the beginning stage at municipalities. Municipalities are often in the experimental phase with participation. More insight on citizen participation, co-creation and/ or initiatives is valuable for municipalities. This research provides this valuable information to municipalities. Besides, it fills a gap in the MBE master by focusing on a stakeholder group that is often not (enough) focused upon during the master track.

Scientific relevance and limitations of the research

The relevance of the research was taken into account from the starting point of the research: With the shift from a welfare society to a participation society, Dutch local-governments pull back to have a more facilitating role, putting more responsibilities on citizens for the care-take of their living environment,

resulting in more space for social and bottom-up initiatives for service delivery (Kennisland, n.d., p.14). This changes the traditional ways in which governments and citizens interact with each other. However, the systems used by governments for the collaboration with citizens mismatch the systems that are needed for citizens to pursue their initiative. Online platforms for citizen initiatives, facilitated by local governments, can decrease the mismatch between these systems. Insight in the organizational structure of local governments that is needed for the stimulation of citizen initiatives and insight in the usage online platforms for citizen initiatives is relevant for development of citizen centered livable cities.

According to Viale Pereira, et all (2017, p. 6), there's a growing interest, both in governmental practice as in academic research, in the transformed 'relations between the state and citizens enhanced by ICT, especially in public participation or decision-making with citizens participation', which is also pointed out by Khan, et all, (2017, p. 47), Berntzen & Johannessen (2016, p.302) and de Mello Miranda, et all (2016, p. 316). There is an increased focus from governments on online ways to pursue collaboration with citizens, for instance with online platforms for citizen initiatives. However, governments are rather slow in adapting and utilizing certain platforms. There is a gap between the promising ideas of new technologies and the actual operation of the technologies in governmental organizations (Meijer & Thaens, 2010, p. 114)(Meijer, et all, 2012, p. 59)(Meijer, 2015, p. 198), also due to a lack of usable mechanisms and frameworks that give insight in and promote bottom-up collaboration and participation (Khan, et all, 2017, p. 48) also pointed out by Townsend (2015, p. 210). Besides, according to Falco & Kleinhans (2018, p. 15), many scholars stipulate the fact that 'internet-facilitated co-production has not yet been systematically studied. Also Gooch, et al (2018, p. 2), mention that there are few empirical studies on the process of involving citizens at scale in city development where citizens are seen as collaborators rather than users. This research aims to provide an scientific base on the organizational structure of municipalities for the stimulation of citizen initiatives and participation and the deployment of online platforms for citizen initiatives in the Netherlands. Besides, no research was found on the impact on the built environment of online platforms for citizen initiatives. This report aims to fill this gap in literature and research.

Even though this relevance was taken into account up front, there are some comments that can be made on the research method.

At the extensive case study research, platforms were found by a random google search on 'platform initiatief' (platform initiative), or 'bewoners initiatief' (citizen initiative) sometimes with names of municipalities included to check of certain municipalities have online platforms for citizen initiatives. The main criteria of including the platforms in this list was that there had to be at least an overview of participating initiatives. The list of identified platforms and their analysis is therefor in no way fully comprehensive and it is likely that there are more existing platforms for citizen initiatives in the Netherlands. The aim of this extensive empirical research is to provide a general overview of Dutch online platforms for citizen initiatives and their features. In total, 18 platforms have been identified. After a while, some more platforms were found, but due to limited time of the research, it was decided to stop at 18 platforms. The platforms that did not seem to be relevant and that did not fit in the cross case analysis were left out of the research. This might give a slightly biased result. Besides, 18 platforms are not enough to do a statistical analysis, therefor the results of the extensive case study research are used to give an overview of the types and characteristics of online platforms for citizen initiatives in the Netherlands. The results of the extensive case study research do not aim to provide an statistical analysis.

Interviews were held with four coordinators/ initiators/ owners of four different platforms for citizen initiatives. Not with every platform the corresponding municipality was interviewed. It might have been

interesting to also interview the corresponding municipalities to validate the results of the interview. It was tried to get into contact with some of the corresponding municipalities, but it was difficult to find the right person (that was willing to participate) at the municipalities. The municipalities that were interviewed were all municipalities that were actively focusing on citizen participation, co-creation and/ or citizen initiatives. It might have been interesting to also interview one or two municipalities that do not focus on citizen participation, co-creation and/ or initiatives to take their perspectives into account. With almost all the interviews, only one person from the company/ foundation or municipality was interviewed. Besides, even-though the interview were semi-structured, not every interview focused on the exact same content, since it was chosen to slightly customize the interviews per party. For instance, interviews with the municipalities had a different focus when compared to interviews with the owners of the platforms. To validate the results, it might be interesting to interview more persons per party. However, to increase the validation of the research, results of the interviews were discussed with the interviewees. However, it was expected to get more feedback/ comments from the interviewees in the validation part. Most interviewees agreed to the conclusions and said they were very relevant. Only a few of the respondents gave some extra suggestions to the conclusions.

The case studies that were selected for the interviews were the cases that responded that they were willing to participate with the research. More case studies were contacted but not every case study gave a reaction. After a while, there were enough participants for the interviews. Since the list of online platforms for citizen initiatives was established over a long period of time, some platforms were added in the period that also interviews were conducted (the adding of platforms to the list and the interview conducting periods were parallel to each other). So not every platform was contacted for interviews. All in all this might give a biased result. However, even if every platform was contacted and even if every platform would be willing to participate with the research, it would not have been feasible to interview every platform and corresponding municipality, due to the limited time frame of the research.

The research is limited to the Netherlands. Online platforms for citizen initiatives and municipalities that actively focus on citizen participation, co-creation and/ or citizen initiatives are not includes in other countries are not included in the research and might have given different results.

For the platform data analysis, it was first thought that more platforms would be suitable for the analysis. However, it appeared that many platforms did not have a voting or reaction option, or for instance no phasing option. In the end, 7 platforms were analyzed, with 429 initiatives, which was enough to do a proper analysis. However, one platform had much more initiatives listed than the other, which might have an effect on the results.

The real effect on the built environment of the platforms was difficult to measure, since first of all, by far, most of the initiatives stay in the idea phase. Besides, the effect on the built environment was difficult to measure due to lack of data from municipalities. There was some general data available about amount of citizens and average household income, et cetera. But information about the level of participation in an area, or grades about livability, or amount of citizen initiatives projects, ranging from different years, was most often not available. Therefore, it was not really possible to measure if, in the years that platforms were available in an area, the numbers of certain datasets changed. This resulted in the fact that the effect of the platforms in certain city areas became impossible to measure. However, the research did result in valuable information about the things that have an influence on the fact if an initiative gets realized or not.

Research results

Recommendations for practice (municipalities)

Recommendation 1: *Do not see online platforms for citizen initiatives as the (main) key to success for the facilitation of citizen participation, co-creation and/ or citizen initiatives.*

Citizens are often actively participating, co-creating or making initiatives on multiple channels, both online as offline. Forcing citizens to solely use online platforms for citizen initiatives can have a detrimental effect on the level of participation, co-creation and citizen initiatives in a city. Besides, the research shows that many platforms have difficulties generating traffic and content to the platforms. From the platforms that are able to generate content on the platform, many ideas stay in the initiative phase. More is needed than only the usage/ deployment or availability of online platforms for citizen initiatives to stimulate citizen participation, co-creation and/ or citizen initiatives.

That does not mean that online platforms for citizen initiatives have no use. Some of the analyzed platform work really well, generate a lot of content and are able to generate initiatives that are realized, with a lot of interaction from citizens in the form of votes, reactions and offering help. The online platforms for citizen initiatives can provide the online tools necessary for engagement and collaboration and boost the interaction between governments and the public. Online platforms for citizen initiatives have the ability to provide the space, frameworks and the guiding and assessing of the processes and outcomes, which are necessary to facilitate citizen initiatives, co-creations and/ or participation. Actively showing the possibilities for participation, co-creation and citizen initiatives to citizens is seen as a strength.

Besides, citizen participation, co-creation and initiatives work best if the municipality has this as a fixed item in the municipal organization, enforced by the higher levels of the municipal organization. Additionally, the right mind-set of civil servants is crucial: they need to be willing to use participation co-creation and/ or initiatives in their ways of working. Likewise, it is crucial to realize that citizen participation, co-creation and/ or citizen initiatives do not only require a certain mind-set from civil-servants, but also from the citizens themselves. Not every citizens want to participate/ be active in their city or wants to have the responsibility of co-designing policies and decision-making processes.

Recommendation 2: *Be actively involved with citizen participation, co-creation and/ or citizen initiatives and keep a continuous stimulation of citizen participation, co-creation and/ or citizen initiatives and the online platforms.*

The research shows that the online platforms need continuous stimulation and promotion of the platform and its possibilities, otherwise the content and the traffic on stagnates or decreases. Additionally, the research shows that the only variable that is of influence on the phase of the initiative (if an initiative gets realized or not), is the involvement of the municipality. So when the municipality is involved in an initiative, there is a higher change that the initiative gets into the process of realization and/ or gets realized. Besides, the amount of votes and the average household income in an area influence the involvement of the municipality. The higher the amount of votes on an initiative, the higher the likelihood

that the municipality is involved with an initiative. Also, the higher the average household income in an area, the higher the amount of initiatives where the municipality is involved. It also shows that the higher the average amount of household income in an area, the higher the amount of votes on an initiative. Besides, the research shows that if there is a high percentage of children in an area, the amount of votes decreases, and the higher the percentage of adults in an area, the higher the amount of votes. So, if municipalities want active participation, co-creation and or citizen initiatives, they need to be actively involved with these participation processes, co-creation processes and initiative processes. Likewise, the research shows that actively showing the possibilities for participation, co-creation and citizen initiatives to citizens is seen as a strength.

The involvement of the municipality with citizen initiatives goes further than only generating votes in order to get realized. The research shows that many initiatives experience difficulties with getting their initiatives realized, which explains the high percentage of initiatives that stay in the idea phase. Initiatives often require extra help from municipalities or other parties in the form of advice, networks or money. Actively offering this help has a positive effect on citizen participation, co-creation and/ or initiatives. Municipalities can set up focus and network groups that help citizens with the realization of their initiative. Initiators benefit from clear contact with municipalities. This can be in the form of 'one entrance' for initiators, where all the information about (the process) of citizen participation, co-creation and/ or initiatives is provided and where the initiatives are helped. Also, the expectations of citizens for citizen participation, co-creation and/ or initiatives need to be managed, and the frameworks in which this happens need to be clear.

Recommendation 3: *Keep track of the online data generated by the platforms, the data provided by the municipality itself and keep the data up-to-date.*

The research shows that municipalities and platforms often have difficulties in checking if initiatives are realized or not and keeping this information up-to-date. However, municipalities do not need to develop online platforms for citizen initiatives on their own. Involving web developers in the development and maintenance of the platforms can be of great benefit. Most of the initiatives that are posted on the platforms stay in the 'idea phase', meaning that they are put online on the platforms, after which nothing is done with the initiatives (yet). People seem to forget about their idea after they post it online, or do not feel the need to actually do something with their idea, or have difficulties with getting their initiative realized. However, it can also be the case that the information about the initiative is not updated. This does not necessarily mean that nothing is done with the initiative, stuff can happen outside the platform (offline).

Analyzing the content that is generated on the platforms provides insight to the municipalities and helps municipalities to better facilitate their citizens with participation, co-creation and/ or citizen initiatives. Besides, initiators that are active on online platforms and active in getting their initiatives realized create a lot of knowledge, valuable for other initiators and for municipalities. Keeping the information on the platforms up-to-date, an keeping track of the information that is generated on the platform/ analyzing this information, increases the amount of knowledge that is generated by the platforms and by the processes of citizen participation, co-creation and/ or initiatives. Hence, resulting in a positive influence on and an added value to the citizen participation, co-creation and/ or citizen initiatives.

Additionally, linking the information that is generated by the online platforms to general information provided by the municipality can result in valuable information about how online platforms for citizen initiatives are used and the effects of the platforms on the built environment and vice versa. For instance, this research shows that the higher the average income in an area, the higher the involvement of the municipality in an area, which has a positive influence on the realization of the initiatives. Also, the higher the percentage of adults in an area, the higher the amount of votes on initiatives, which has a positive effect on the involvement of the municipality, resulting in a positive effect on the realization of an initiative. Certain information provides valuable information to municipalities and in which areas they for instance need to be more involved, or which areas require more stimulation for citizen participation, co-creation and/ or citizen initiatives. The more information is available, the more information municipalities have for the stimulation and facilitation of their citizen participation, co-creation and/ or initiative processes.

Recommendations for further research

- First of all, the list of online platforms (extensive empirical research), can be expanded with more platforms that are available, to create a strong data base of platforms and their characteristics.
- The research is now focused on the Netherlands, but it might be interesting to compare it with other countries, in order to learn from other ways of working.
- For this research, interviews are conducted with platform owners/ coordinators and municipalities. It can be interesting to also conduct interviews with initiators.
- For this research, interviews are conducted often with 1 person per municipality. It can be interesting to conduct interviews with more persons per municipality, ranging from higher levels of the municipal organization to lower levels of the organization.
- It can be interesting to conduct interviews with project developers, on their ways of working with participation, co-creation and/ or citizen initiatives, especially since the new environment and planning act will be legally enforced from 2021.
- The platform data analysis can be expanded with data from more platforms if available, with more linked data from municipalities, ranging from different years to check the 'before and after state' and thus the impact of the platforms, and with a more in-depth analysis on the types of users of the platforms. This was in this case not possible, since most of the platforms did not allow the usage of personal data.

Research process

The first period of the research process mostly focused on the definition and demarcation of the subject and research method. A first focus of the subject was decided rather quickly. The research formerly focused on the government/ municipalities and how the government has to deal with big data and ICT in their governance. This focus was chosen because of my own interest, but also because many scientific papers and governments themselves showed that (local) governments have difficulties in coping with the new trends of online government and the usage of big data. However, this focus was rather broad and a demarcation was mandatory. When researching this subject through scientific literature a trend came up: engagement and collaboration with citizens. Researchers stressed the necessity for governments to engage and collaborate with citizens for better and more citizen focused service delivery. Besides, also governments acknowledged the benefits of citizen engagement. Big data and ICT is used as a tool to facilitate this engagement and to improve the efficiency. After the demarcation of citizen collaboration was chosen it was time to make the research more practical. My professors suggested one case study that might be relevant and I decided to contact them. The case study was about safety on the street and in the

neighborhood and using whats-app groups to report troubles and to communicate with the police department. Since this was about citizen engagement and using ICT's I decided to go for it. However, I needed to find other case studies to compare and to make my research scientifically relevant since from one case study it is difficult to generalize. This turned out to be rather difficult, and I had the feeling that the connection with the built environment got lost if I kept continuing with this case study. Besides, the time planning of the case study was pushed to a later period and it seemed that it would difficult to get the data that I needed in time. All in all I decided that it would not be smart and feasible to continue with this case study and that it would be better to find other cases. I started looking for other cases and that's when I stumbled upon the online platforms for citizen initiatives. The platforms were all about engaging and collaborating with citizens, facilitated by online tools, thus aligning with the focus that my research already has. I contacted the coordinators of the platforms and asked if they were interested to participate in my research. After I had enough participants I formally decided to go for it. This process however was difficult and stress-full and had cost me a lot of time. Looking back on it I could have had more meetings with my supervisors and ask them more questions. It also might have been better/easier to go to municipalities upfront to ask them if they had any specific research questions.

Once the case-studies and the type of research were clear, the process went quite smooth. This was all done and fixed before the research proposal was accepted, so that after the research proposal I would be able to start right away with analyzing the case studies. During the first analysis on the case studies I found many more interesting platforms for citizen initiatives and decided to expand my research method. I divided the case study research in two parts: the first part broadly analyzing all the online platforms for citizen initiatives that I was able to find and that were relevant for my research on the characteristics of the platforms, to give an overview of the type of platforms that are used in the Netherlands. The second part of the case study research focusses on the already contacted case studies and uses semi-structured interviews to get in-depth insight on the STOPES-factors (see research methods) of the platforms.

Since this process went rather smooth and the interviews were conducted rather quickly, there was quite some time left, which opened up the possibility to add another part to my research. The case study research so far focused a lot on organizational factors. Since my master focusses on the built environment, it would be interesting to also research the impact on the built environment of the online platforms for citizen initiatives. Besides, no research was yet found that investigated the impact on the built environment of the online platforms for citizen initiatives. Adding this part to my research would be scientifically relevant and provide a lot of insight.

It is noticed that the research method originated in a rather organic way. The research method was shifted multiple times and parts were added during the research quite often. This was possible due to the clear focus and framework I designed at the research proposal, which made adding and shifting parts, as long as it fitted the framework and focus, possible. However, it might have been better to have done some investigating interviews or research on the platforms in an early stage of the research, so the shifting and adding would not have been necessary, since there would be a more comprehensive research proposal upfront.

The final stage of the research, the platform data analysis went quite all-right. The list of available platforms and their functionalities was already made at the extensive empirical research part. For the platform data analysis it was only necessary to check which one of those platforms were suitable for the analysis. After selection, the data of the platforms was put into SPSS, after which it was easy to do an analysis.

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