8 CHAPTER 8: REFLECTION

This chapter reflects on the research by critically discussing the results of the adopted methods, design, topics, variables and findings which were measured and applied during the research process. Lastly, a more general reflection upon the topic within its academic field and graduation lab is also discussed.

8.1 RESEARCH TOPIC AND METHODOLOGY

8.1.1 RELEVANCY OF THE TOPIC IN WIDER CONTEXT

Sustainability has been a trending topic and numerous studies have been carried out about it. Because the term is so widely used, it could give the sense of being a washed-up research topic. Therefore, it was of importance to verify the relevance of stimulating sustainable urban development projects in the research through the use of scientific literature and interviews and what it contributes to scientific society. This was done in the initial phases of the research with a combination of literature study and short explorative interviews with experts in practice to verify the need for such a research.

In addition, the definition of the term is interpreted in various ways, so it was important for this research to make clear what is meant with sustainable urban development and that the focus was not on sustainability itself in the sense of its technological aspects of energy and water and such. The focus in this research was focused much more on the process including the key stakeholders and in particular the developer, and how to stimulate this actor to sustainable developments. This also made sense based on the shift to private-led urban developments and growth and impact of urban developments for the environment. By addressing sustainability on an urban scale and from a private developer perspective, a relatively new side of the topic is discussed.

The topic has proved to be difficult to narrow down due to its broadness on different interrelated aspects and it's still much explorative character. The limitations of the generalizability and validation of the research topic and methodology have been discussed in chapter two.

8.1.2 RESEARCH DESIGN

A qualitative research design approach has been selected for this research based on its explorative nature. The purpose of the research was to seek how to stimulate developers to develop sustainable urban developments. To be able to reach a conclusion, the study investigated the stakeholders' collaboration between the key actors, and the drivers, barriers and incentives during the process based on the experience of three case-studies. This chosen style still remains suitable for this research as it is much more focused on the process, contextual understanding, point of view of participants and collecting rich data to gain better understanding (Bryman, 2012). On the other hand, a study which would have been more focused on only one aspect had the risk of leaving out other related aspects.

This chosen approach has also been selected by other student theses and academic papers based within the context of sustainable urban development. However, the gathering of hard and reliable data is much more difficult with this approach (Bryman, 2012).

In particular when generating a categorization of drivers, barriers and incentives to be able to compare the case findings, the lack of quantitative findings became apparent. The studies on which the categorizations are made did often use a quantitative approach, however these were not always in line with each other. Perhaps a combination of quantitative data collection to establish which barriers, drivers and incentives are most relevant would have led to a stronger and more reliable categorization to compare the findings of the qualitative case-studies.

8.1.3 ADOPTED RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A combination of data collection and semi-structured interviews were applied in order to research the stakeholders' partnerships, drivers, barriers and incentives. In the initial phase of the research explorative interviews were also done to confirm the relevancy of the research and to help narrow it down.

Based on data of literature findings, classification of the stakeholders, drivers, barriers and incentives were also made in order to make the findings of the case-studies later on comparable. As most studies on these domains tended to be either too broad or too specific for this research topic, a combination of different findings of different studies were used to adapt models of different types of stakeholders, drivers, barriers and incentives to fit the interest of this research. Furthermore, the findings are based on studies done in various countries, so it is also unlikely that the selected categorization represent each case-study context best.

The categorizations of the main domains were done using various literatures in order to still be critical and to recognize similarities between the findings. However, ultimately though, the narrowed down selection could present a bias based on expected results or be too broad to lead to detailed findings.

The coding of the variables for the empirical findings proved to be challenging as it is hard to objectify. Different interpretations and overlaps caused for lots of reviews of the findings. For the next time, it would be good to put more effort into studying how to analyze cross-case comparisons and to find good examples for coding and interpreting the data, and to address this in an early stage of the research.

8.1.4 CASE-STUDY SELECTION

In line with the exploratory and qualitative nature of this research, a comparative case-studies approach has been selected to gain better understandings of how to stimulate developers through incentives. The choice for case-studies is also supported in the sense that it is seen as a form a qualitative research which enables the understanding of a complex issue- which applies as well to this research. Moreover, it fits well with exploring relatively new areas within the field based on practice, as Yin (2003) explains: a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.

And even though this approach has led to a rich collection of data to answer the research questions, it also has numerous criticisms. One is that the logic of comparative case-studies provides too little logical constrain to generate dependable theory (Dorussen, 2001). In addition, the approach also suffers from selection bias as the cases were selected because there was assumption that incentives played a role. Yet, an advantage is that the selected cases pay more attention to the conditions under which incentives were relevant.

The complexity of case-study comparison is also made more complex as the cases are based in The Netherlands, Sweden and UK- thus each representing a different institutional landscape.

To narrow down and define sustainable urban developments, the use of BREEAM urban certification has been applied. This was also one of the results of the explorative interviews during the initial phase. The assessment already includes numerous criteria to assess whether an area can be considered sustainable or not- and as it was not the purpose to assess when and how an urban area is regarded sustainable in this research, areas with BREEAM certification offered an objective way to select cases. This however limited the pool of cases to only 25 cases of which 5 are present in the Netherlands. In addition, four out of five of these cases were single-use and the only mixed-use one; Locatie Valkenburg was too different from the other cases as it varied in being public-led, a much bigger scale than the others and was too much at an initial phase to generate any useful data for this research. The developers of the area are not even known yet. Thus initially, Locatie Valkenburg was included in the selection of cases because it was a Dutch example of mixed-use BREEAM certified area, the numerous differences, have ultimately led to it being excluded from the research. It would have been useful to have made this decision early on and use the time spent on other areas of the research. Yet, Ecomunitypark- single use business park- was kept as even though it was single-use, it matched the other criteria for selection. This highlights the challenges that

were found with having to choose from a limited pool of cases and reduces the equal comparability between the cases. Had there be no criteria on selecting cases with a BREEAM certificate, the options for case-studies would have been greater- also in selecting sustainable Dutch mixed-used urban developments- and possibly the role of BREEAM in regards to drivers, barriers and incentives would have been less highlighted.

Various interviewees reasoned that one should keep in mind that the BREEAM certification does not exist too long and that the economic crisis has put a damp on urban developments the last years- especially mixed-use ones. Hence perhaps more time is needed to carry out further research on certified urban developments.

At last, the cases selected are all considered early adopters- or front-runners. This also tends to make the results to be more biased as these are regarded successful because they stood out. Some additional interviews were conducted with professionals from development projects in the Netherlands where they did not succeed to receive a certification or the certification did not turn out to be valuable for them. This group represented more traditional developers and their way of thinking. Initially, the findings of these interviews were meant to offer a reflection based on the drivers, barriers and incentives in comparison with the other three case-studies, but due to too much variance between the projects, the findings have also been left out. In total five interviews were conducted for this and also here the time could have been used elsewhere instead. However, even though not included in the findings, the interview results gave the researcher more knowledge about the topic, it highlighted the importance of perceptions and factors affecting the decision-making of developers and to be critical about this, and the findings could be used in the recommendation section.

8.1.5   DATA COLLECTION AND FINDINGS

A constant loop of use of literature findings caused the research to go back and forth sometimes to keep making the research more specific, but at the same time not too focused to eliminate useful connections. The findings of the interviews and documents on the case-studies also helped to shift the focus to be more relevant and focused. A combination of academic papers, student theses, reports and newspaper or online articles had to be used to gather literary data. The newness of the research topic also became apparent during the literature study as there was limited literature to be found on the subject. This made it difficult at times to back-up statements done by interviewees and/or professionals with the necessary literature. If done again, perhaps it could be good to ask interviewees to what they base their statements on.

The findings of literature have to be critically observed. Various literature highlight criticism which applies for this particular research subject too. The first is that one may ask why the interests of the private parties have to be met when in fact the ultimate objective is to maximize environmental and social benefits (Enters, Durst, Brown, Carle, & McKenzie, 2004; Reddy, 2013). An explanation for this is given though by stating that if developers invest in sustainability this will also benefit the environment, and secondly when private investment is involved, the process of commercialization can become faster and thus increase the environmental benefits over a shorter time period. At last it will also reduce the dependence on public budgets- which is in line with the shift to facilitating municipalities.

Furthermore, the use of incentives for private parties can be justified if they occur in the following conditions (Enters et al., 2004):

- Social benefits are greater than private benefits
- Social costs are less than private costs

Moreover, there is also a degree of unpredictability as not all private developers act the same. Not being a homogenous group, developers can have different goals, different perceptions and different decision-making criteria to invest in sustainable urban development projects (Reddy, 2013). So even when two developers are faced with the same scenarios- barriers and drivers- there is no guarantee that they will have the same outcome.

Subsequently, there are also internal and external factors embedded in the context of the development and affecting the situation.

Reddy (2013) mentions that one could argue whether incentives should be introduced first in order to increase private investments, or whether private investments should increase first in order for more incentives to be applied. Also, the durability of incentives themselves should also be kept in mind so that their impact goes beyond the specific development and also to future ones.

With regards to the classification made for drivers, barriers and incentives, it is perfectly possible those certain categories are missing or that the types are too general. The generalization is good on one hand because it leaves room for interpretation and does not leave out any elements, but on the other hand its broad generic also easily causes overlap between the different variables.

On the other hand, the findings of the interviews vary in the way that semi-structured interviews do not always have the same logical order. Sometimes there would also be an issue of time; some interviewees could take for one hour while others only had 30-45 minutes time. Based on the answers of interviewees, sometimes other and new topics also were introduced. So the semi-structure nature of the interviews did allow for some variance in the results. Moreover, some interviews were conducted in English and others in Dutch and faults with translation should also be considered. In addition, for the larger processes of Masthusen and MediaCityUK it was hard to pinpoint which person to interview as many people within the organizations-both public and private- were involved and the findings of the interviewees in this research may not be similar to if someone else within the organization were to be interviewed. So the findings are very much specified on the interviewee, time, and language and in addition their contextual landscape. This makes it hard to make the conclusions generalized and hard.

8.2 THE RESEARCH IN ITS ACADEMIC FIELD OF SUSTAINABLE URBAN DEVELOPMENT

This research is part of the graduation lab Sustainable Private Sector-led Urban Development. The focus lies here in particular on the connection between private actors and sustainability within the urban context.

Thus even though the relationship between private actors and sustainability have been researched in this domain, a research with incorporation of BREEAM for urban areas and to stimulate developers through incentives appeared to be relatively new within this academic field. In the dissertation of Heurkens (2012) policy instruments like stimulating and capacity-building tools have been discussed to stimulate private actors, however these were not specified to incentivizing developers.

8.2.1 NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON

Again, similar to the dissertation of Heurkens (2012), multiple studies compare Dutch cases with English. Often due to their similarities or because of the shift towards private-led developments in the Netherlands. These studies have helped to gain more understanding about the similarities and differences between the Dutch and English context. This was a bit more difficult to do with the Swedish case.

Due to the international variances between the cases, the findings cannot be generalized. However, they could lead to other studies focusing on the transferability of lessons between countries and/or generalizing variables to improve international case comparisons.

8.2.2 ACADEMIC AND PRACTICE

Using empirical findings of case-studies, interviewing professionals and conducting the research within Royal HaskoningDHV has allowed for many practice-based feedback and results. Gaps between academic and practice field are often addressed within the field of real estate. Also in this research the opinions and perspectives between the two could vary or offer different insights. A stronger focus on bringing these two fields together could deliver useful insights for both academic and professional field. Furthermore, like previously mentioned it can be beneficial for academics to understand on what professionals base their statements and/or challenge professionals to critically take a look at their own analyses. By doing so, both parties can benefit from each other.

This gap became especially apparent during interviews and the internship when the statements done by professionals could not always be supported by literature or the other way around.

8.2.3 GRADUATION LAB SUSTAINABLE PRIVATE SECTOR-LED URBAN DEVELOPMENT

This section will reflect upon the graduation lab Sustainable Private Sector-led Urban Development based on how well the research fits into this field, the contribution of the research to this lab, the comparisons with other student theses and what can be improved for next time.

The theme of the graduation lab is broad and offers room for various interpretations. The research of stimulating developers to sustainable mixed-use urban development projects fits into this to a large extent since it covers the sustainability side, the private-led development side and urban development itself. However, it does so by focusing specifically on sustainability being certified by BREEAM, the key actors private developers and local planning authorities and mixed-use urban development projects. Naturally, there are other ways to assess sustainability than BREEAM certification, there are other important stakeholders to consider and other types of urban developments also exist. Within the time frame of this research these other parts could not be covered, but this research does offer a starting point and recommendations for further research topics which also fit in this lab.

This research has started off by looking at the status quo of sustainable private sector-led urban development and because this was happening at a rate considered too slow to reach sustainability ambitions, the research focused on how to incentive the private developer to invest in sustainable urban development. By taking the private developer as the key actor in this research, insights have been gathered into the drivers and barriers addressed by this actor and how incentives can either empower these or reduce them. Thus the findings of this research make a contribution to understanding the drivers and barriers of developers and to which incentives can be applied in order to increase the rate of sustainable private sector-led urban development. The dissertation of Heurkens (2016) could be used as a good base to gather knowledge about the lab topic and to which areas more attention could be given. For future graduation labs, a personal recommendation would be to make a short list of key literature/documentaries representing the field and have students discuss their interpretations of these with each other. In addition, to reduce the gap between academic and practice, it can also be interesting for students to attend a seminar with both academics as well as professionals discussing the topic of the lab at the beginning of their research.

Other student theses from the same lab included topics like innovative developers, corporate social responsibility and policy implementation gaps. These studies in combination with this research can all be related to one another sooner or later. And even though the focuses are all unique, they fall under the same lab- thus indicating the broadness of the graduation lab and the different ways it can be understood.
It could have been interesting for the lab to focus on the main findings of the abovementioned studies and to make a real effort into connecting their relations with each other as this could lead to highlighting certain problems in this field and/or offer interesting new leads for future graduation research themes. One personal suggestion for future research topics is to replace the word sustainability with health and well-being and to focus on these softer values within urban development. This appears to be a topic which is becoming increasingly addressed by professionals in the field and can therefore be interesting for future studies as well.

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