

**Stakeholder Participation in
Community Supported Agriculture
in Groningen – A qualitative
study of the *Eetbare Stad* initiative**

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Abstract

In recent years the demand for locally sourced food has become increasingly important and with it the number of urban residents engaging in Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) has increased. Despite its importance for the individual, Food and Agriculture policies should be recognised in the municipal policy agenda as well. By including CSA into urban policy, cities could profit from its multifunctionality and its effect on the Urban Sustainability Transformation (UST). To ensure its success, it is vital to sufficiently include stakeholders into the process. To do so, it is essential to apply a Multi Stakeholder Process (MSP) through the means of a “bottom-up” or “top-down” approach. This research investigates the *Eetbare Stad*, a CSA initiative in the municipality of Groningen. By applying qualitative research methods, the dynamics among stakeholders is aimed to be studied. The results indicate a misbalance of “bottom-up” and “top-down” and show that currently there is no sufficient MSP being applied. Still, the findings also display a positive impact of the initiative on the UST. Therefore, this paper concludes that the overall positive impact of the initiative has to be recognised, yet the municipality can intensify the initiatives impact by applying a better coordinated MSP.

Keywords: *CSA, Multi Stakeholder Process, Sustainable Transformation, Urban Planning, Policy Making*

Introduction

During the second half of the 20th century the Netherlands, like many other European countries, went through substantial change in the agricultural sector (Meerburg et al., 2009). The increasing specialisation of agricultural production in the rural area and the emerging service economy in cities lead to an ever-increasing gap between consumers and producers. Since then, Food and Agriculture have been merely regarded a rural entity and were excluded from urban policy documents (Morgan, 2019).

In recent years, however, consumers preferences in cities have changed and urban dwellers are demanding more locally sourced food. Next to the increasing awareness, residents started to acknowledge the positive influence agriculture can have on the development of communities (Cretella & Buenger, 2016). The increasing emergency and activism lead to the development of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), a counter movement to the current highly specialised agricultural system. Given the increasing complexity and vital importance of these projects for both the development of European cities and new perspectives on agriculture, many authors stress the importance of integrating Food and Agriculture into municipal policy planning (Morgan & Sonnino, 2013, cited by Hirsch et al. 2016). So far this has only seen little attention (Dubbeling & Merzthal, 2006; Hirsch et al., 2016; Morgan, 2009).

As part of this process, cities and municipalities have to acknowledge communities as vital partners in the development of such policies. By successfully including citizens via a Multi Stakeholder Process (MSP) and recognising the positive social impact of CSA projects, municipalities can make full use of a Food and Agriculture Policy (Dubbeling & Merzthal, 2006).

Groningen, the economic and cultural centre in the Northern Netherlands, recently included CSA projects into their municipal agenda. In 2009, the municipality of Groningen in cooperation with the Natuur en Milieufederatie Groningen (Organisation for Nature and Environment Groningen, translated by the author) launched an initiative called *Eetbare Stad* (Edible City, translated by the author), which aims to unite CSA projects throughout the city (Natuur en Milieufederatie Groningen, 2020). In 2012, the municipality expanded its policy framework in regard to Food and Agriculture and created the *Voedselvisie*, a policy document that fosters the inclusion of food into several sectors of the municipality. The self-announced goals foresee a transition to a more sustainable food system, coordinate and unite food initiatives, increase the awareness for food production, strengthen social contacts, increase biodiversity and strengthen the regional economy (Gemeente Groningen, 2012).

Currently, the *Eetbare Stad* consist of 80 projects (Eetbar Groningen, 2020) including Orchards, semi-professional farms and small neighbourhood gardens. As part of the *Voedselvisie*, it serves as an initiative where citizens can actively engage in both agriculture and community projects. Especially after the financial crisis in 2008, many vacant lots were provided for the development of CSA projects out of which later the *Eetbare Stad* developed. Moreover, the municipality provides a coordinator, who deals with concerns or questions in regard to the initiative.

Since its creation in 2009, the spatial context in which the *Eetbare Stad* is situated has changed considerably. Vacant space is much more contested and the need for housing became the prime issue of the municipality. At the same time, however, the *Eetbare Stad* and

its projects have created an important social setting for citizens. In order to ensure the durability of the *Eetbare Stad*, further institutionalisation of the initiative seems inevitable. In order to achieve that, close communication between municipality and stakeholders is required.

At this point, however, it appears unclear how this communication is being fulfilled. Thus, it is crucial to understand how stakeholders interact, whether there are official discussions organised by the *Eetbare Stad* and whether there exists communication among CSA projects.

Furthermore, it is debatable whether the municipality is recognising the social importance of the *Eetbare Stad*. According to Frantzekaki et al. (2017) the spatial integration of social synergies is crucial for the initiative to contribute to the sustainable development of the city as a whole. Sartison and Artmann (2020), stress the urge for a new Urban Sustainability Transformation (UST), in order to create solutions for the most prominent issues of the urban space. Developing a coherent Food Policy will help to partially achieve this transformation, especially in regard to the economic, social and environmental sphere. In the case of the *Eetbare Stad* it is therefore crucial, that the municipality is recognising the social importance of the initiative and includes all stakeholders into the process.

Thus, it is the aim of this research to identify different stakeholders in the *Eetbare Stad*, evaluate their perception and involvement in the initiative and to determine the extent to which a MSP is being applied. Furthermore, this research aims to assess the contribution of the CSA projects to the UST of Groningen. It is not the aim to provide concrete policy implications, rather it is the aim of this research to encourage a mutual understanding among stakeholders, which potentially enables future discussions.

The central question that is guiding this research is:

How are the needs and aspirations of stakeholders in the *Eetbare Stad* considered and supported by the municipality of Groningen and how does their involvement contribute to the Urban Sustainability Transformation of the city?

1. Which stakeholders are involved in CSA projects in Groningen?
2. How is the interaction facilitated on a day to day bases?
3. How does the MSP impact the development of CSA projects in Groningen?
4. What are the outcomes of CSA projects in regard to the Urban Sustainability Transformation?

This research is set out to explore these questions by an explorative analysis of the aforementioned initiative. Before presenting the exact scope of this research, the following section includes relevant theoretical concepts to the research question, such as CSA, MSP and UST. After that, the applied methodology for this research will be introduced.

Theoretical Framework

CSA

The concept of agriculture within urban boundaries is referred to in many different ways. Various scholars refer to it as “Urban Agriculture”, “Community Based Agriculture” or “Community Gardens” (Firth et al., 2011; Glover, 2004; Irvine et al., 1999; Van Oers et al., 2018). Most of the projects of the *Eetbare Stad*, however, are either led by communities or they serve a community, thus this research will refer to the concept as Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) as introduced by Van Oers et al. (2018). Especially in western Europe and North America, CSA often features community engagement programs that try to unite citizens from different socio-economic backgrounds and that foster social cohesion (Firth et al., 2011). A study by Hirsch et al. (2016), conducted in Germany has shown that CSA projects had a positive educational impact on members of the community, especially in regard to environmental awareness.

CSA in the urban context

Being primarily situated in an urban environment also means to be situated in an institutional context. Food and Agriculture are multifunctional issues that affect environmental pollution, transportation, social quality, public health, education and employment (Wiskerke & Vilijoen, 2016; Morgan, 2009). Thus, including Food and Agriculture into the urban agenda, can provide solutions for the aforementioned issues and can help to lower the current perceived segregation of agricultural and urban areas (Hirsch et al., 2016).

Communication between Stakeholders

As a result of the multifunctional nature of Food Policy it is important to generate communication between the municipality and the community and to “create synergies between different public domains” (Wiskerke & Vilijoen, 2012, p. 28). This will promote the inclusion of Food Policy into the municipal agenda. In addition, this will nurture the actual realisation of these plans. Thus, projects like the *Eetbare Stad* will directly profit from such close links.

In order to achieve this cooperation, Dubbeling and Merzthal (2006) advocate a MSP. This should focus on the inclusion of a wide variety of stakeholders, empowerment of stakeholders and shared rather than centralised responsibilities (Sayer, 2012). Moreover, it is important for stakeholders to organise themselves, in order to gain recognition among other stakeholders (Dubbeling & Merzthal, 2006). Prominent stakeholders in CSA include participants of CSA projects, national- and local governments, municipal departments, private organisations, NGOs and research institutes (Dubbeling & Merzthal, 2006).

Both Eidt et al. (2020) and Sayer et al. (2012) stress the importance for stakeholders to agree to trade-offs, in order to formulate a common perspective. Rejecting a trade-off will lead to an unsuccessful policy.

It is important to further investigate the practise that is being applied to facilitate communication between stakeholders. The literature distinguishes between “bottom up” and “top-down” approaches (Halloran & Magid, 2013; Urwin & Jordan, 2008). A “bottom-up”

approach is characterised by the recognition of inputs from other parties than policy makers. “Top-down” approaches, are defined by policies with clear aims and objectives, that enforce explicit actions (Urwin & Jordan, 2008). In a fundamental piece on “bottom-up” and “top-down” approaches, Sabatier (1986) argues that “top-down” approaches are especially important when legal structures are being implemented through a policy directive, meaning that for a “top-down” approach responsibilities are clearly assigned. “Bottom-up” approaches are especially effective in situations with a large number of stakeholders and in facilitating strategic interaction over a long period (Sabatier, 1986).

Today, the two approaches are perceived as less separated. Urwin and Jordan (2008) argue that in policy implementations regarding climate change adaptation, to which CSA belongs, the two approaches are complementary. According to Gasperi et al. (2016) “bottom-up” approaches help to engage residents into the process of CSA, while “top-down” policy instruments are required to ensure long term needs, such as the access to land.

In a study on “top-down” approaches in CSA, Halloran and Magid (2013) found that especially in European cities “top-down” approaches play an important promoting role. However, only regarding the legitimisation and institutionalisation of such projects, not the formulation of specific rules and restrictions. Thus, in the given context, “top-down” has to be regarded as supportive in development of integrated CSA projects in the urban agenda. At the same time, it is crucial to provide room for “bottom-up” grassroot initiatives to creatively influence the development and to acknowledge concrete desires of local inhabitants, which at a later stage might again be institutionalised by the municipality.

Consequently, the aim should be to find a balance between a “top-down” and a “bottom-up” approach and to successfully combine this with a MSP. It is important to notice, that the two concepts do not contradict each other, rather they are co-dependent.

The Importance of CSA for the Urban Sustainability Transformation

Issues surrounding food sovereignty and decreasing human-nature connections are becoming a severe urban problem (Morgan, 2009; Sartison & Artmann, 2020). Thus, including Food and Agriculture into the urban political agenda, is becoming essential, in order to contribute to the UST. The UST is defined as a dynamic of “radical change” that addresses sustainable solutions for the urban area (Sartison & Artmann, 2020). The contribution of CSA projects to the UST of cities in western Europe, has multifunctional benefits. First, it has been argued that CSA projects increase pro environmental behaviour, urban living quality and community cohesion. It contributes to the urban food system and provides space for participatory learning (Cartella & Buenger, 2015; Frantzeskaki et al., 2017; Hirsch et al., 2016; Sartison & Artmann, 2020). Second, CSA projects can potentially contribute to the solution of global issues, such as the increasing pressure of the food system on natural resources and the environment (Hirsch et al., 2016). Therefore, it can be assumed that CSA projects are likely to have a positive influence on the UST of cities in several ways, including the development of a strong community and the development of a more resilient food system.

Frantzeskaki et al. (2017), stress the importance of acknowledging the social processes CSA is generating and to integrate the emerging synergies between citizens, the urban environment and the municipality into the policy. Additionally, Sanyé-Mengual et al. (2018) argue that a “bottom-up” approach that includes a wide variety of stakeholders generates a sense of

responsibility among residents. Thus, they become co-responsible for the UST, by taking actions and responsibilities.

When relating the theoretical findings back to the case of the *Eetbare Stad*, it becomes evident that the municipality and the CSA projects should be connected via a MSP. Figure 1 displays that relationship and indicates the most prominent stakeholders (Dubbeling & Merzthal, 2006) and the importance of a balanced “bottom-up” and “top-down” approach. If that connection is provided, CSA can contribute to the UST.

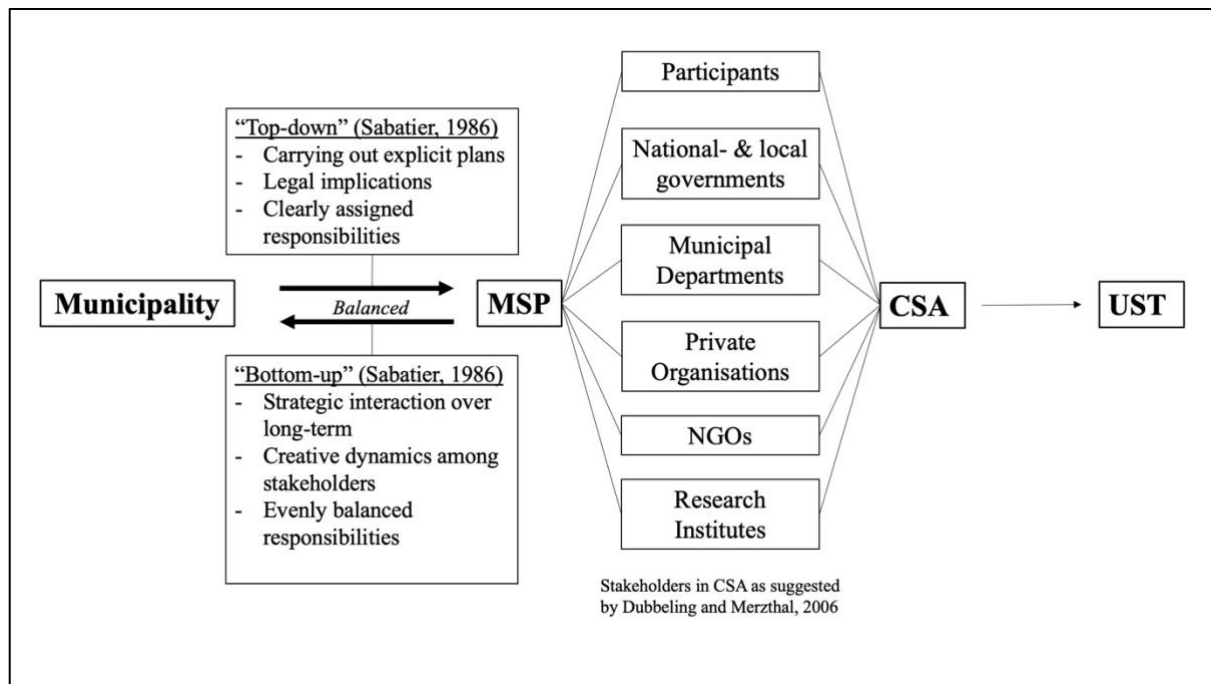


Figure 1 Conceptual Model

Methodology

In order to investigate the needs and aspirations of stakeholders in the *Eetbare Stad* initiative, inductive qualitative research was conducted. This method was chosen due to the nature of the research, and to investigate the perspective of stakeholders in Groningen.

Data Collection

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Dunn (2016) argues that interviews in qualitative research help to understand complex behaviours and interactions among stakeholders, provide more background for diverging opinions and foster creativity among participants.

A purposive sampling strategy has been applied, meaning that participants were deliberately chosen based on their background. It was crucial to include a wide range of participants that were either direct- or indirect stakeholders in the *Eetbare Stad*. According to Dubbeling and Merzthal (2006) the main stakeholders that have to be recognised are: participants of initiatives, private organisations, researchers and several levels of government. Despite private organisations, all stakeholders were interviewed for this research. Furthermore, it was

intended to sample disconfirming cases, to investigate diverging opinions. By providing this broad representation of perspectives and opinions the multi-functionality of Food and Agriculture Policy could be researched.

In response to the research guidelines set out by the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen that emerged as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak, the interviews were conducted via Skype or Google Meet and not face-to-face as initially anticipated. Participants were given an informed consent form prior to the interview, in which they were informed about the research aim and privacy regulations. Based on the participants consent, the interviews were recorded. The interviews took place in the time frame from March 26 until June 12 and lasted in each case for about 45 minutes.

The interviews were semi structured, meaning that a set of core topics were discussed, the questions, however, were adapted to suit the participants background (Longhurst, 2010). The interview guides can be found in the appendix. The researcher's objective was to facilitate a conversation and redirect the conversation to the core research topic, if necessary (Dunn, 2016).

In the end six participants have been interviewed. Among the participants was one woman who maintains an orchard, one woman who maintains a neighbourhood garden and one local farmer, who are all part of the *Eetbare Stad*. The location of their project is indicated in Figure 2. Furthermore, the coordinator of the *Eetbare Stad*, a policy maker from the municipality of Groningen and one researcher from Wageningen University, who investigates the topic of Food Policy in the Netherlands have been interviewed.

Analysis

All interviews have been immediately transcribed with the help of a transcribing software (*otter.ai*). The transcripts have been coded with the help of *Atlas.ti*. First, analytic codes, based on the literature have been created (Cope, 2016). The analytic codes were: *Food Policy*, *Eetbare Stad*, *Multi Stakeholder Process*, *Bottom Up and Top Down* and *Urban Sustainability Transformation*. Throughout the coding process, interpretative codes, based on the participants answers have been established (Cope, 2016). Those included a subdivision of the analytic codes into refined categories. The following analysis was based on the emerging coding scheme (see Appendix) which included both analytic and interpretive codes.

Ethics

The outbreak of COVID-19 led to a situation in which ethical considerations in regard to interview techniques had to be reevaluated. Several participants were apprehensive about online interviews and preferred face-to-face interviews, which were strictly forbidden by the University. Some participants changed their opinion and accepted an online interview, others entirely denied.

The collected data has been anonymised and pseudonyms have been allocated to each participant. These pseudonyms provide information about the participants background. They do not provide any names or initials, to assure that participants responses cannot be traced back. The transcripts and recordings of the interviews will be deleted after the research process is finalised.

Reflection

Overall the data collection process was successful, even though the COVID-19 outbreak required considerable changes to the research design. Reaching out to participants, especially individuals engaged in CSA projects has been difficult. Consequently, a broader research perspective has been chosen to be able to include a variety of stakeholders from different backgrounds.

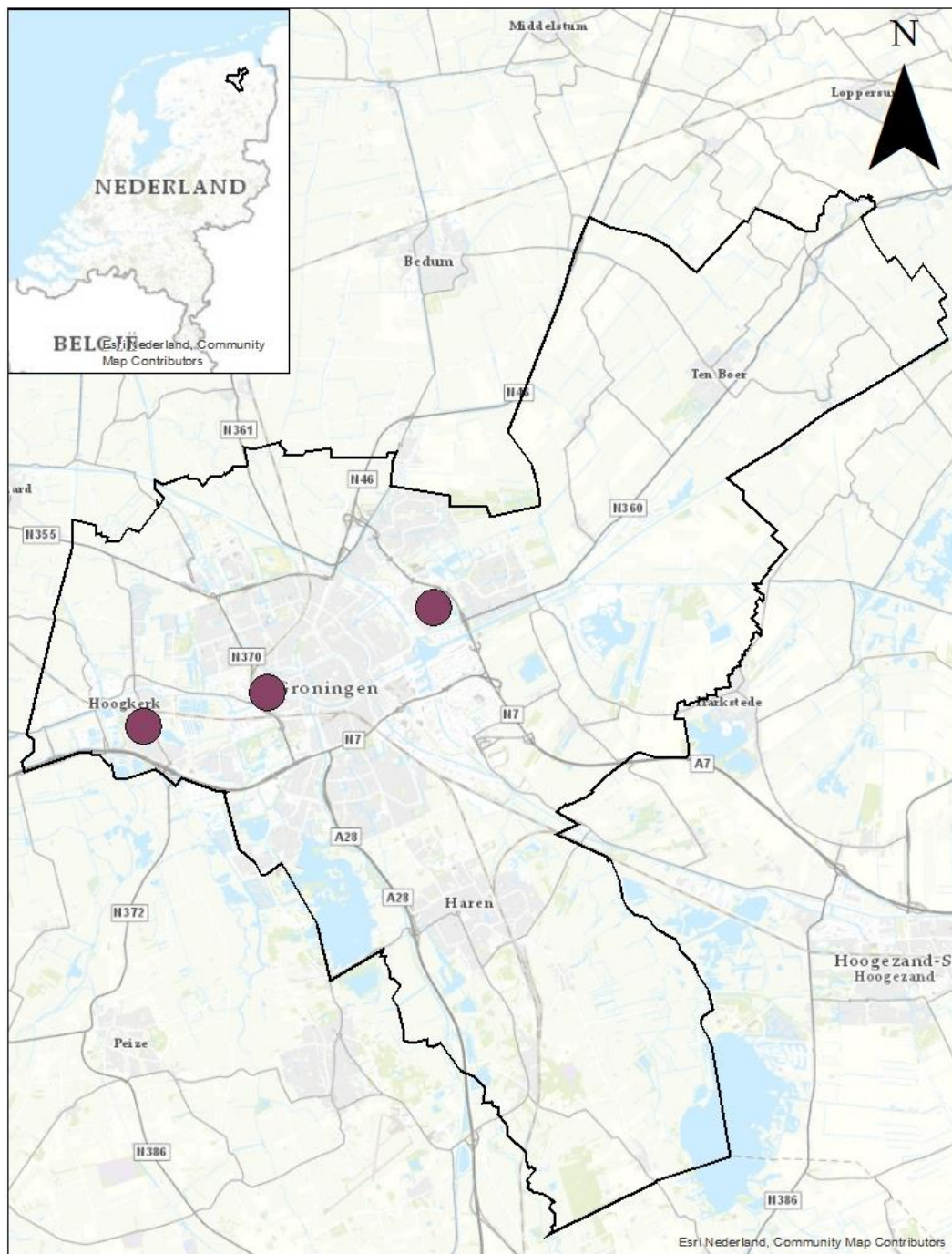


Figure 2 Location Fieldwork Area

Results

In the following section the research results will be provided. First, results in regard to the Food Policy will be presented, followed by results regarding the *Eetbare Stad* and communication between stakeholders. The final section focuses on the Urban Sustainability Transformation.

Food Policy

In order to understand the central aim of the *Eetbare Stad* it is crucial to perceive the initiative in its broader institutional context. The initiative is part of the *Voedselvisie*, which was established in 2012 and aims to make Food and Agriculture a topic of the municipal agenda. Most respondents, especially those who maintain a CSA project, have heard of the document, however, did not feel directly influenced by it.

What all stakeholders, who are directly engaged in the *Eetbare Stad* mentioned in regard to the Food Policy is that the allocation of suitable land is the most salient issue. The local farmer stressed that not enough appropriate land for small scale agricultural is being provided, thus making it difficult for new projects to develop (Interview 2: Local Farmer, 02.04.2020, Groningen). The neighbourhood gardener mentioned something similar, pointing at the importance of long-term planning, especially in regard to agriculture.

Neighbourhood Gardener: “(...) so people can basically garden there for two years, and then the maintainer takes up the place again, and all is gone. (...) So there has to be a vision, which is for the future that people can rely on it and stay there and invest in it and that it isn't broken down.

What is being reiterated is the changing importance of space over the past years. Compared to 2009, when the *Eetbare Stad* started, today vacant lots are highly contested and it is more important for the municipality to build apartments than providing land for CSA (Interview 5: Policy Maker, 23.04.2020). This directly influences the interaction of participants and the municipality, as the importance of CSA seems to shift.

Eetbare Stad

It is important to acknowledge that the *Eetbare Stad* was established before the municipality introduced the *Voedselvisie*. The coordinator of the *Eetbare Stad*, who is communicating between the municipality and CSA projects, explained that the initiative developed as a result of the financial crisis in 2008. People started small CSA projects on vacant pieces of land, which later developed into the *Eetbare Stad*. Simultaneously, the aim is to do this as part of a community, either consisting of a few individuals, residents of a street or an entire neighbourhood (Interview 4: Coordinator Eetbare Stad, 14.04.2020, Groningen).

In order to understand how stakeholders communicate, it is important to understand what motivates them to participate in CSA. A core strength that has been emphasized is the educational benefit. Both the coordinator and a Policy Maker from the Reframe project, a European Interreg project, who is also engaged in the Food Policy of Groningen, mentioned its positive impact on people's awareness for local food production (Interview 4: Coordinator Eetbare Stad, 14.04.2020, Groningen). The policy maker stressed the importance of the *Eetbare Stad* for further engagement in local agriculture and CSA (Interview 5: Policy

Maker, 23.04.2020, Groningen). Moreover, the neighbourhood gardener said that the garden helped her to get in closer contact with neighbours (Interview 6: Neighbourhood Gardner, 12.06.2020, Groningen).

When asked about how she perceives the communication with the municipality, the woman from the Orchard said, to her the coordinator of the *Eetbare Stad* is someone she can contact in case she needs help or advice (Interview 1: Orchard woman, 26.03.2020, Groningen). The local farmer described their relation as: “we don’t bother the municipality; the municipality doesn’t bother us.” Furthermore, he describes the *Eetbare Stad* as “very nice words” and nothing apart these words (Interview 2: Local Farmer, 02.04.2020, Groningen).

It seems to appear that the municipalities presence in the *Eetbare Stad* is intentionally minimal. The coordinator added, that people can call him at any time and that he is willing to help. The incentive, however, has to come from the participants (Interview 4: Coordinator Eetbare Stad, 14.04.2020, Groningen). To the question, whether there are any formal meetings in which all projects of the *Eetbare Stad* (currently 80 projects, Eetbar Groningen, 2020), the coordinator and members of the municipality come together exist, he answered that in the beginning two of those meetings took place. After that, however, the demand for such meetings disappeared (Interview 4: Coordinator Eetbare Stad, 14.04.2020, Groningen). The woman from the Orchard, however, criticised that the projects are too independent and that she would wish more cooperation among residents to share experiences (Interview 1: Orchard woman, 26.03.2020, Groningen).

This leads to a situation in which on the one hand the coordinator of the *Eetbare Stad* is expecting participants to share concerns, while on the other hand participants would want a more active inclusion and communication among the projects of the *Eetbare Stad*. This can lead to the assumption that there exists a misinterpretation of the role of the municipality in the *Eetbare Stad*, meaning that participants allocate responsibilities to the municipality that were not initially anticipated.

In order to further understand these dynamics, the following section will display and analyse the results regarding MSP and “bottom-up” and “top-down” approaches that are being applied.

Bottom Up and Top Down

As mentioned before, the *Eetbare Stad* emerged out of the 2008 financial crisis. In 2012, four years after the first projects started the municipality introduced its *Voedselvisie*. It is difficult to determine the influence the *Eetbare Stad* had on the development of the *Voedselvisie*. Still, the WU Researcher mentioned the importance of the close link between “grassroot initiatives” and municipal policy makers (Interview 3: WU-Researcher, 06.04.2020, Groningen). Consequently, one could potentially argue that the bottom up nature of the *Eetbare Stad* in the period from 2009 to 2012 had a positive influence on the development of the *Voedselvisie*. That reemphasizes an argument, made by the Policy Maker, that “(...) the effects of the *Eetbare Stad* are maybe much greater than other bigger initiatives.” (Interview 5: Policy Maker, 23.04.2020, Groningen).

Another “bottom-up” characteristic of the *Eetbare Stad*, is its interaction with participants. The coordinator indicated his availability in case of any problems, and he provides opportunities to keep in contact (Interview 4: Coordinator Eetbare Stad, 14.04.2020,

Groningen). The women from the Orchard, the neighbourhood gardener and the local farmer said they are aware of that, yet they rarely make use of it.

Lastly, the procedure of receiving the land for a CSA project can partially be regarded as “bottom-up”. As the coordinator explained, if citizens are interested in developing a CSA project, they contact him, and he will try to find a suitable plot. (Interview 4: Coordinator Eetbare Stad, 14.04.2020, Groningen). The local farmer shared his concerns, saying that the municipality would make it very difficult for farmers to find land (Interview 2: Local Farmer, 02.04.2020, Groningen). In any case, the land will be owned by the municipality. Thus, participants will always have the uncertainty of how long they can stay on the plot, since there exist no legally binding contracts. The woman from the Orchard expressed her unrest about that, since it is difficult for her to plan ahead. According to her, the *Eetbare Stad* needs more institutional power, to ensure the long-term development of CSA projects. Especially the long-lasting allocation of suitable land is crucial to her (Interview 1: Orchard woman, 26.03.2020, Groningen).

The top down nature of the *Eetbare Stad* is twofold. The municipality tries to act as unrestrictive as possible. As the coordinator of the *Eetbare Stad* pointed out, they are not trying to enforce any strict measures in how projects have to develop, since otherwise people would not engage (Interview 4: Coordinator Eetbare Stad, 14.04.2020, Groningen). Additionally, it would interrupt the dynamics of each individual community, which again would harm the motivation to participate.

Still, the municipality is providing the land and basic resources such as soil and materials, which are crucial for the development of any CSA project. The land, however, is connected to regulations that participants have to adhere to. According to the farmer these regulations are too strict and discourage people from starting their own farm. He said that if the municipality would lift restrictions, more farms could develop. According to him, however, this is not the vision of the municipality. Their vision prioritises the development of real estate. In his case, after he received land, he tried to reduce the interaction as much as possible, since it costs a lot of time (Interview 2: Local Farmer, 02.04.2020, Groningen).

Nevertheless, as both the Policy Maker and the Researcher from the WU addressed, the municipality can also play a very vital role in steering the *Eetbare Stad*, by still reserving its “bottom-up” core (Interview 5: Policy Maker, 23.04.2020, Groningen and Interview 3: WU-Researcher, 06.04.2020, Groningen).

MSP

As the analysis above suggests, there seems to appear an issue in regard to communication and allocation of responsibilities among CSA projects and the municipality. A MSP could potentially solve these issues. For a successful MSP, however, stakeholders have to be identified and directly targeted. As the woman from the Orchard pointed out, currently a connection among all CSA projects as part of the *Eetbare Stad* is missing (Interview 1: Orchard woman, 26.03.2020, Groningen). At the same time, however, the neighbourhood gardener stressed that she currently has no time to engage in community work for the *Eetbare Stad*, yet, she would welcome a person who takes a leading role in uniting the projects (Interview 6: Neighbourhood Gardner, 12.06.2020, Groningen). Furthermore, it seems that many projects value the independency from any kind of restrictions and guidelines. Asked about whether more connection among projects of the *Eetbare Stad* would lead to higher

overall achievements, the coordinator answered that you would need “a very neat, very special person or social worker and an agreement to combine the two” (Interview 4: Coordinator Eetbare Stad, 14.04.2020, Groningen). If projects would be united and participants would have the chance to share their knowledge and experiences, a representative person could potentially be found. Nevertheless, as stated above, the municipality provided the opportunity for participants to come together and discuss their concerns and unite, which after the first two meetings was not demanded again. The decrease of such events is also reflected in a story shared by the neighbourhood gardener. When the garden was first opened in 2015, the municipality was willing to pay for a water pump for the area. Additionally, they were holding an opening ceremony and the garden was in the local newspaper. Today, five years later the water pump broke and had to be replaced. It appeared to be more challenging then before (Interview 6: Neighbourhood Gardner, 12.06.2020, Groningen). Seemingly, the engagement of the municipality is decreasing or at least stagnating.

Urban Sustainability Transformation

It seems to appear that the *Eetbare Stad* can contribute to the UST of the city. Notwithstanding, the controversies discussed earlier all participants agreed that the educational benefits of the initiative outstand its weak spots. Thus, the initiative contributes to the UST in very basic, yet vital principles. As the coordinator mentioned, “it shows people how potatoes and onions grow” (Interview 4: Coordinator Eetbare Stad, 14.04.2020, Groningen).

Moreover, the women from the Orchard pointed out, that to her it is most important to contribute to more biodiversity in the city, while simultaneously play an active role in the municipality. It is important to her that citizens make themselves heard through initiatives like the *Eetbare Stad*. The neighbourhood gardener on the other hand said that she does not feel like she is contributing to any higher level by engaging in CSA. Still, she pointed out that as a result of the garden she started engaging more with her neighbours, thus reiterating the effect of CSA on social cohesion.

Another fundamental contribution of the *Eetbare Stad* to the UST is the positive impact of small bottom up neighbourhood initiatives on the development of more impactful policy documents, such as the *Voedselvisie*. It was mentioned throughout several interviews that the feasibility and achievability of the projects is a core strength (Interview 5: Policy Maker, 23.04.2020, Groningen).

Policy Maker: “You can do it on 10 square meters and involve people and make them enthusiastic. I think the effects of the *Eetbare Stad* are maybe much greater than other bigger initiatives.”

All of the responses in regard to the UST were connected to the “bottom-up” nature of the *Eetbare Stad*, reiterating the importance of communities in the UST.

Discussion

In the following section the results will be discussed in regard to the central research question and the theoretical framework. The central research question focuses on how needs and aspirations of stakeholders in the *Eetbare Stad* are considered by the municipality and how their involvement contributes to the Urban Sustainability Transformation of Groningen.

First and foremost, all participants, either direct- or indirect stakeholder of the *Eetbare Stad*, emphasised the importance of the *Eetbare Stad* for the educational purposes and social- and communal cohesion, as suggested by the literature (Dubbeling & Merzthal, 2006; Hirsch et al., 2016; Sartison & Artmann, 2020).

Despite the apparent importance of the initiative for participants, the involvement of the municipality in the day to day business, is minimal. There seems to be no regular contact between CSA projects and the municipality. One can observe a certain degree of intentionality by the municipality. This reiterates the claims made by Sabatier (1986), that in case of concrete legal implementations the municipality takes a leading role (e.g. “top-down”). Since this is not the case for the *Eetbare Stad*, the municipality solely acts as facilitator among stakeholders with shared responsibilities.

The municipalities standpoint can be described as disconnected from the initiative, which can potentially be explained by the initial “bottom-up” nature of the *Eetbare Stad*. As a result of the economic crisis in 2008, it was the citizens demand to create CSA projects in Groningen. The municipalities position was solely supportive. By providing the necessary land and basic resources, it was the citizens task to develop the plots. Today, however, where space is more contested and the *Eetbare Stad* gained a certain status within the *Voedselvisie*, the municipality is still keeping their involvement at a minimum, neglecting its supporting role for a space dependent “bottom-up” initiative. As Halloran and Magid (2013) indicate, a certain degree of “top-down” is important, in order to guide CSA projects. In addition, Gasperi et al. (2016) emphasise the provision of an institutional setting (e.g. access to land, provision of resources) by the municipality, while still providing room for its “bottom-up” nature. In the case of Groningen both approaches apply to a certain extent. The municipality is providing few financial resources and the necessary space. Thus, the municipalities position is vital for the existence of the *Eetbare Stad*. Still, the municipality could improve its role by taking a more supportive role within initiative. By minimalizing their involvement, they provide the freedom participants seem to demand, but they also leave the impression that they have restricted interests in further pursuing the development of the initiative itself. By doing so, they disregard the sense of responsibility participants acquire for their actions, that according to Sanyé-Mengual et al. (2018) and Frantzeskaki et al. (2017) has to be acknowledged by the municipality.

In order to potentially solve that detachment, it is important to look at how stakeholders of the *Eetbare Stad* interact on a day to day basis. As Dubbeling and Merzthal (2006) pointed out, prominent stakeholders in CSA are participants, national- and local governments, municipal departments, private organisations, NGOs and research institutes. In the case of the *Eetbare Stad* this seems to differentiate. Here, it is mainly the municipality and the participants of the projects. There is no representative of all projects and no other stakeholders involved. Consequently, the apparent importance of recognising stakeholder groups, as discussed by Dubbeling and Merzthal (2006), is missing. At the same time, however, it has been reported that the coordinator of the initiative is very cooperative and

open to engage in negotiations. Thus, the acceptance of trade-offs as discussed by Eidt et al. (2020) and Sayer et al. (2012) seems to hold for the case of the *Eetbare Stad*.

Finding the appropriate balance between “bottom-up” and “top-down” approaches in a MSP setting is crucially important for the successful development of CSA projects (Halloran & Magid, 2013). In the case of the *Eetbare Stad* it would be helpful to introduce a certain degree of a “top-down” approach, in order to steer the projects, indicate a common goal and provide room for participants to unite (Halloran & Magid, 2013). Nevertheless, the current approach of the municipality also entails many positive aspects. Overcomplicating the process of setting up a CSA project as part of the *Eetbare Stad* could potentially slow down the creative dynamics of “bottom-up” initiatives (Halloran & Magid, 2013). Therefore, it is important to notice the connection of a MSP and good balance between “bottom-up” and “top-down”, as suggested by Urwin and Jordan (2008). Since responsibilities cannot be clearly divided and there exists no legal structure, as suggested by Sabatier (1986), applying the two approaches simultaneously is of more impact (Urwin & Jordan, 2008). Nonetheless, at this point the initiative has no negative implications for either the participants or the municipality. Applying a MSP, however, could intensify its positive impact.

Compared to cases described in the literature the *Eetbare Stad* is missing common stakeholder such as NGO’s, private organisations and research institutes. This might be related to the broader policy context in which the *Eetbare Stad* is positioned. While being an independent initiative, it is still embedded in the *Voedselvisie*, thus one particular tool which helps to achieve the common goals of the policy. Perceiving the *Eetbare Stad* in that given context, one could argue that by providing this “bottom-up” initiative in which the municipality includes citizens as much as possible gives them the possibility to contribute to a broader institutional change.

Especially in regard to the UST, this can be very important. As Frantzeskaki et al. (2017) point out, the social aspects of CSA have to be acknowledged by the municipality. As indicated in the beginning of this discussion, the social aspects are what represent the core values of the *Eetbare Stad*. Thus, by further acknowledging the social and communal importance of CSA projects that are part of the *Eetbare Stad* and by further facilitating and strengthening communication among projects and thus enabling a more impactful MSP, the *Eetbare Stad* has high potential to indeed positively contribute to the UST of Groningen.

Limitations

It has to be acknowledged that this research is highly context specific. Consequently, the results and conclusions have to be regarded in the context of the municipality of Groningen and the *Eetbare Stad* initiative. Further research has to be done into how the municipality includes stakeholders in the *Voedselvisie* and to what extent a MSP is being applied in that given context.

Furthermore, given the challenging circumstances of the data collection process, this research aimed to understand the needs and aspiration from both direct and indirect stakeholders of the *Eetbare Stad*. In order to further understand stakeholders needs, more in-depth interviews with direct stakeholders are required.

Conclusion

This research has investigated the *Eetbare Stad* initiative in the municipality of Groningen and has examined the inclusion of needs and aspirations of stakeholders and their contribution to the UST. The literature advocates a MSP for a successful implementation of Food Policy in western European cities (Dubbeling & Merzthal, 2006). In regard to CSA, this is preferably installed through a set of “top-down” and “bottom-up” measures, in order to ensure both long-term and creative developments (Urwin & Jordan, 2008; Sanyé-Mengual et al., 2018). After all, in the European context, the educational benefits of CSA are its core strength and main contributor to the UST. After analysing the interviews and relating these findings back to the theoretical framework the research questions can be answered as follows.

The stakeholders involved in the *Eetbare Stad* comprise of participants of the initiative and a coordinator that represents the municipalities position. Furthermore, it has been recognised that communication between the two parties only occurs occasionally and has to be initiated by the participants. Currently, there is no sufficient MSP being applied by the municipality, partially because of the small size of the initiative itself but more importantly as a result of lacking efforts by the municipality to unite the projects. Consequently, needs and aspirations of stakeholders are acknowledged by the municipality, however more opportunities to share those have to be provided. In order to tackle this problem a certain degree of “top-down” approach is required to ensure the provision of a common development of the initiative. Despite the problems the *Eetbare Stad* is currently facing, it is inevitable that initiatives like the *Eetbare Stad* are vitally important for the UST of the municipality of Groningen. Hereby, the educational benefits and its importance for neighbourhood cohesion are core strengths.

The aforementioned research results aim to facilitate further communication among the present stakeholders. Especially in regard to the development of a new *Voedselvisie* it is important to acknowledge, that institutionalising vital aspects of the initiative, such as a strengthened MSP, would provide new opportunities for the *Eetbare Stad* to develop. Stakeholders have to become aware of their personal motivation to engage in CSA and have to share their views with the wider group. Additionally, future research can help to assist this process by providing insights into the underlying dynamics regarding MSP in CSA and its contribution to the UST. Effective cooperation of the public sector and academia can thus contribute to the multifunctionality of Food and Agriculture Policy, intensifying its overall impact.

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Appendix

Interview Guides

Interview 1: Orchard Woman, 26.03.2020, Groningen

- 1) How are you involved in Community Supported Agriculture Projects in Groningen?
- 2) Have you ever heard of the *Eetbare Stad* initiative by the municipality of Groningen? If yes, what do you know about it?
- 3) What do you think is the role of the community in that initiative?
- 4) Do you think the municipality is interested in an active involvement of the community?

- 5) Have you ever participated in a planning meeting that was initiated by the municipality?
- 6) Do you think more could be achieved if people would work together more efficiently?
- 7) What do you think is the impact of CSA on the development of Groningen?
- 8) If you could change one aspect about the representation of communities in CSA projects in Groningen, what would it be?

Interview 2: Local Farmer, 02.04.2020, Groningen

- 1) How are you involved in Community Supported Agriculture Projects in Groningen?
- 2) Have you ever heard of the *Eetbare Stad* initiative by the municipality of Groningen? If yes, what do you know about it?
- 3) What do you think is the role of the community in that initiative?
- 4) Do you think the municipality is interested in an active involvement of the community?
- 5) Have you ever participated in a planning meeting that was initiated by the municipality?
- 6) Do you think more could be achieved if people would work together more efficiently?
- 7) What do you think is the impact of CSA on the development of Groningen?
- 8) If you could change one aspect about the representation of communities in CSA projects in Groningen, what would it be?

Interview 3: WU-Researcher, 06.04.2020, Groningen

- 1) Based on the research field you are working in; how would you describe the relationship between municipalities and citizens?
- 2) How do you think do all stakeholder depend on each other/how are they related?
- 3) Is power hierarchy among different stakeholders an issue? If yes, who is imposing them? How can they be resolved?
- 4) Do you think more could be achieved if people would work together more efficiently?
- 5) How should municipalities use both bottom up and top down approaches in CSA?
- 6) What do you think is the impact of CSA on the development of Groningen?

- 7) What will be the impact of fair stakeholder representation in CSA on the sustainable development of cities?

Interview 4: Coordinator *Eetbare Stad*, 14.04.2020, Groningen

- 1) What is the aim of the *Eetbare Stad* initiative?
- 2) How did it change in the past years?
- 3) Why is it so difficult to find information from 2016 onwards?
- 4) What are the stakeholders that are involved in the *Eetbare Stad*?
- 5) What are the most important stakeholders?
- 6) How do you bring all stakeholders together?
- 7) How do you interact with the projects that are part of the *Eetbare Stad*?
- 8) What is the process if someone is interested in doing a project?
- 9) Are there some sort of contracts between the municipality and the projects?
- 10) How does the contact between *Eetbare Stad* and projects continues?
- 11) How important are the projects in the *Eetbare Stad* for the UST of the city?

Interview 5: Policy Maker, 23.04.2020, Groningen

- 1) What do you know about the Food Policy of the municipality of Groningen?
- 2) Have you ever heard of the *Eetbare Stad* initiative by the municipality of Groningen? If yes, what do you know about it?
- 3) Which stakeholders are involved in the *Eetbare Stad*?
- 4) How are these stakeholders involved?
- 5) How important do you think is the inclusion of communities into the planning process of both the *Eetbare Stad* and the Food Policy of the municipality?
- 6) Do you think more could be achieved if people would work together more efficiently?
- 7) What do you think is the impact of CSA on the development of Groningen?
- 8) What will be the impact of fair stakeholder representation in CSA on the sustainable development of cities?

- 9) If you could change one aspect about the representation of communities in CSA projects in Groningen, what would it be?

Interview 6: Neighbourhood Gardner, 12.06.2020, Groningen

- 1) How are you involved in Community Supported Agriculture in Groningen?
- 2) How would you describe the role of the *Eetbare Stad*?
- 3) Do you interact with other projects, that are also part of the *Eetbare Stad*?
- 4) Could you imagine that there is a misconception by residents of what the *Eetbare Stad* is actually doing?
- 5) Do you think the municipality could do more for the projects that are part of the *Eetbare Stad*?
- 6) Would you like to have more guidelines and concepts provided by the municipality or do you prefer to be left alone?
- 7) In which direction do you see the *Eetbare Stad* developing?
- 8) Do you want to achieve more with your garden and the *Eetbare Stad*?
- 9) How important are projects like yours for the UST of Groningen?

Coding Scheme

