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Post-Corona Communities in the Provincie of Groningen

The role of regional area coordinators and active citizens to overcome the consequences
of the pandemic and becoming more resilient

**Master Thesis Society, Sustainability and Planning
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University of Groningen**

**Iris Zomerdijk – S3219801
Supervisor: dr. C. Lamker
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Abstract

In the past year, major strengths but also sharp differences were revealed between and within communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Communities will face an uncertain future where social ties become even more important. How communities will look like in the future is uncertain, however, there can already be a focus on how communities are being rebuilt and can become (more) resilient. This raises the question of which role citizens can have and which role planners can have to create those post-corona communities. This study investigates how several approaches of regional area coordinators of different municipalities can help create resilient neighbourhood communities together with citizens initiatives. For this purpose, this study draws on qualitative fieldwork conducted in the province of Groningen in the north of the Netherlands. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 participants. The results indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the work of regional area coordinators. The lack of physical contact with citizens is a direct result of the virus, which made the work of the area coordinators more laborious. As a result of this, the number of citizens' initiatives decreased which made the process of boosting resilience temporarily standstill. For future planning strategies, it is recommended that regional area coordinators will use an combination of the instrumental and personal approach to support citizens initiatives, creating an ongoing dialogue and focus on long-term preparedness. Using a participatory planning strategy will mitigate the COVID-19 impacts to bounce forward to create resilient post-corona communities.

Key words: COVID-19, Active citizenship, Participation, Citizen initiatives, Resilience, Participatory planning, Co-production, Post-corona communities.

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List of abbreviations

WHO	World Health Organization
CRIs	Community resilience initiatives
CBIs	Community-based initiatives

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has shocked the world in ways many people never have experienced before in their lifetime. Although the world has experienced other outbreaks such as the Spanish flu and smallpox, the social and economic effects of the COVID-19 crisis will be felt for a long time to come. Major strengths but also sharp differences were revealed between and within communities during this pandemic. Scott et al. (2020) state that cities will face an uncertain future after the pandemic of corona where social ties within a community become even more important. As these societal changes are already happening it is also important to keep in mind that life goes on. Helping communities, cities or maybe even countries is one of the major challenges in rebounding the effects of the virus (South et al., 2020). Community action is seen as a vital part of recovery in this pandemic (South et al., 2020). It is not only that community members adhere to the national measures, but also look after the most vulnerable people in the neighbourhood (Yardley, 2020). This community mobilisation can lead to the growth of supportive community networks (Laverack and Manoncourt, 2016). Communities are already showing strengths of recovery, but are also uncertain about the future.

In the article by Wittmayer et al. (2017) it is argued that the role of citizens is changing from only receiving services and bearing rights towards more active citizenship in their daily living environment. In this way, local communities will be more empowered, but need the right set of tools to do that. Also, Lamker & Dieckhoff (2020) state that we should all think about how things should go after Corona, so a collective vision is needed to reflect the diversity of a community. Communities cannot fight this pandemic alone and probably need the help of social actors. This change in the roles of citizens also makes you wonder if the roles of planners also change and if so towards which direction. If each individual is going to be more active what could be the best role of experts then?

It is thus crucial that a general understanding is known about how to create this community resilience and the role of social actors in this. The ability of these community networks to cope with and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic is referred to as community resilience (South et al., 2020). The pandemic thus offers planning a chance to look at how to establish this resilience together. Distasio (2020) points out that we should focus more on helping locals rebuild their communities and become resilient. In the past year, one could already see several examples of community resilience where communities showed a sense of belonging and connecting through singing on balconies or clapping for healthcare workers during the corona pandemic (Wilson, 2020). Also, many citizen initiatives have arisen that try to tackle the consequences of the corona pandemic (Fransen et al., 2021; van Meerkerk et al., 2013).

The corona pandemic had thus led to many more voices and questions about what kind of future do people want and how to build back stronger (Hambleton, 2020). Therefore, it is important to consider how these idealistic worlds of individuals can be (re)created after a pandemic. Hambleton (2020) states that the coronavirus demonstrated that local communities are packed with resourceful people, especially during a lockdown. A collaborative approach to rebuilding health and wellbeing can therefore be seen as vital in the recovery approach. Even though little is known about it today, it is fruitful to know how planners can be active in helping these suffered communities and collectively build resilient communities.

1.2 Research objectives and questions

This research wants to get an insight into how regional area coordinators can best help neighbourhood communities to build back stronger from the corona crisis. In this research regional area coordinators are seen as social actors who try to increase the commitment and involvement of residents in their own living environment. This will strengthen resilience and social cohesion which will increase the quality of life, self-reliance and self-management in villages and neighbourhoods. Regional area coordinators work closely with residents whereby networks in the village or neighbourhood is seen as an important collaboration partner. In doing so, three research objectives can be formulated. The first objective is to find out how resilience is created in the province of Groningen. The second objective is to learn how citizens participation and initiatives can help to create this resilience in co-production with local government. And the third objective is to gain more insight into what the role of regional area coordinators can or should be in relation to these citizens initiatives and community resilience. When this will be clear new planning strategies can be discovered on how to emerge stronger out of the pandemic.

To research this issue the following main research question is asked:

‘How can regional area coordinators help to create resilient neighbourhood communities together with citizens initiatives to emerge stronger out of the COVID-19 crisis in the province of Groningen?’

Six sub-questions are studied in order to find answers that can help to resolve the main research question:

1. What kind of impacts of the COVID-19 crisis are perceived in the province of Groningen?
2. What is meant with resilience and what are the conditions for a resilient community?
3. Which and how new initiatives emerged during the pandemic and how were local citizens involved in the process?
4. Do citizen initiatives contribute to resilient neighbourhood communities?
5. Which barriers does local government experience in their planning strategies to help the city recover from the COVID-19 crisis and gain more resilience?
6. Which implications do planners and local government need to take forward from the pandemic for future resilient city planning?

To answer this main research question and the corresponding sub-questions a case study design with a comparative approach is used. By comparing the different approaches and processes of the regional area coordinators of different municipalities in the province of Groningen there can be determined which main obstacles are currently experienced, and how and in what way these existing planning strategies can help to create resilient neighbourhood communities in post-corona times. A more detailed explanation about the case study selection and research design will be given in chapter three.

1.3 Academic relevance

In the paper by Lamker et al. (2020), six viewpoints of the ‘new normal’ are given that may influence post-corona communities. A recommendation is made to do further research into understanding and how to support diverse communities after the pandemic. In this, the skills of planners can be seen as necessary for communities to adapt to uncertainty and the impacts of COVID-19 (Lamker et al., 2020). However, research about which roles of planners can help communities has not been conducted yet, which means that a knowledge gap exists about this subject in scientific research. Mees et al. (2019) add that it is not clear what facilitating and enabling roles for government means in citizens participation. In addition, information lacking to what extent the government is moving towards these roles. Missing this information creates the danger that the government will thwart

citizens' initiatives instead of supporting them (Nederhand et al., 2014). This also works against the process of local government trying to make communities more resilient after the pandemic. Wagenaar and Wilkinson (2013) state that also knowledge is lacking which perspectives and factors are needed for the government to influence community resilience. This research elaborates on ways in which regional area coordinators can support a place and community resilience after extreme events such as the corona crisis. A more structured approach can be developed to use in the future after extreme situations for communities. In the end, when research, planners and citizens collaborate new insights will emerge on how to act at hand.

1.4 Societal relevance

Corona has had a major impact on society for more than two years now and has resurrected the attention on urban vulnerability. It is certain that the social and economic effects will be felt for a long time to come. That is why it is important to focus on effective community recovery. According to Kang et al. (2020), the urban community is the most crucial safety net that society can rely on in the event of a pandemic. An important part of this recovery is to emerge stronger out of this crisis and with the current knowledge being able to prepare for a possible next pandemic in the future. It is therefore crucial to understand how to establish community resilience and the role of planning in this. In modern society, citizens are therefore increasingly given more opportunities and space from the government to also bear responsibility for the performance of public tasks (Den Ouden, Boogaard & Driessen, 2019). Citizens' initiatives can contribute to creating this resilience and thus improving the quality of the living environment. Citizen participation, on the other hand, can also help to solve social problems because signals from society can be picked up more easily by government in this. In this way, the gap between government and citizens can also be narrowed (Boonstra and Boelens, 2011; Tonkens and Verhoeven, 2011; Willems et al., 2020). It is therefore important for municipalities to have a good understanding of what citizens need to be able to organize themselves and flourish and how the municipality can best offer support. At the moment, local policymakers often still put their own interests first towards the citizen and stick to formal procedures and organizations (Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid, 2012). For more successful cooperation between local government and citizens, it is therefore important to provide insight into how municipalities can best provide assistance to citizen initiatives and thus prevent the mismatch in support. The pandemic thus offers planning a chance to re-evaluate what communities need (Grant, 2020) and how to establish that. This thesis will be valuable for society when implementing changes towards better participatory planning practices in such a way that every individual will be heard and included.

1.5 Structure of the thesis

The remainder of this thesis is structured into six chapters. In the second chapter, the theoretical framework will lay the basis for further exploration of the main subject. The third chapter describes the methodology used to carry out the research which includes the case study selection, research design, data analysis and ethical considerations. A further elaboration on the case will be given in chapter four where the main results of the collected data will be presented. In chapter five a critical discussion about the results linked to the discussed academic literature will be outlined followed by the conclusions in chapter six. Finally, chapter seven will give a reflection on the process of the research itself and on the theoretical implications of the results and will discuss further research considerations.

2. Theoretical framework

This chapter addresses the theoretical concepts and theories, evidence, methods and experience from professional practice that are relevant for this research. The discussed literature will lead to a visual representation of the theory underpinning the research. This conceptual model will clarify the relations between the concepts and factors important for this thesis.

2.1 COVID-19

Before diving into the literature, it is important to explain what we mean when talking about COVID-19. That is why it will first be explained what the coronavirus is, the beginning and course of the virus and where we are standing today. The coronavirus, officially called SARS-CoV-2, is a contagious virus that can easily be passed from person to person. It originates in Wuhan, China where the first cases were reported in December 2019 (WHO, 2020a). After that, it did not take long before multiple other countries in the world also had to deal with this virus. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General's announced that the world was facing a crisis, COVID-19 can therefore officially be marked as a pandemic (WHO, 2020b). It was recommended that every country should take urgent and aggressive action to keep the number of cases as low as possible. Two days after it was made clear that the world was dealing with a global pandemic, it was announced that Europe was the epicentre of the pandemic and thus had more reported cases and deaths than the rest of the world combined (WHO, 2020a). From this, one could conclude that the virus could spread at a rapid pace and the consequences could most likely be worse than previously thought.

A solution to put an end to the pandemic as quickly as possible was soon considered. World leaders were therefore advised to start investing in vaccines (WHO, 2020c). According to Subbarao (2021), a vaccine has been developed within 12 to 15 months from the first reports of the virus, this can thus be marked as a rapid development. At the time of writing (January, 2022), more than nine billion vaccines have been administered worldwide and this number is still rising (WHO, 2021). But while this is positive news, overcoming this pandemic and the accompanying vaccination strategies also pose a variety of challenges. Examples of some of these challenges could be concerns about the expiration date of the vaccine (Subbarao, 2021), re-organization of everyday family life (Fegert et al., 2020) and economic impacts (Sharifi and Khavarian-Garmsir, 2020). At the moment of writing (January 2022), a lot of work is still being done to overcome the pandemic itself and the consequences of it as soon as possible. This shows the ongoing urgency of the main topic of this thesis.

2.1.1 The pandemic and measures in the Netherlands

Turning to the Netherlands, the first official case of COVID-19 was reported on February 27th, 2020 (RIVM, 2020). On March 6th the first case was reported to have died from the virus in the Netherlands (Darroch, 2020). Shortly afterwards, it could be seen that the first national measures also came into force. Shaking hands was banned, people had to work from home as much as possible, travel restrictions were introduced, shops, restaurants, schools, and the cultural sector were closed, there was a curfew, wearing a mask in public buildings and transport and keeping a 1.5-meters distance was obligated (Rijksoverheid, 2021a; Rijksoverheid, n.d.). These specific measures were mandatory in the Netherlands at various times. Compared to other countries, in the Netherlands there was an intelligent lockdown instead of a full lockdown. The difference between these two is that with an intelligent lockdown as we knew it in the Netherlands, people were still allowed to go outside when and where people wanted to. Together with the above-mentioned national measures, this had to have the maximum effect to limit the number of infections (Trouw, 2020).

But this intelligent lockdown and all the measures taken together resulted in different reactions in society. For example, there were concerns about the many corona infections in primary and secondary schools that remained open, but at the same time, there were also concerns about the social-emotional development and lagging school performance of the children when the schools were closed (Laszlo, 2020). Another cause of concern is the corona policy itself and the way in which the Dutch government approaches this. Some citizens thought that the measures were too mild (Ramdharie, 2020) and others thought that the 1.5-meter distance rule would resemble a doctrine (Keulemans, 2020). The ever-changing measures and these mixed responses to the corona policy ultimately led to a decline in confidence in the corona approach in the Netherlands, people missed a clear direction (Klaassen, 2021). This dissatisfaction also led to demonstrations in the Netherlands, especially in the mid and last months of 2021. One of the larger demonstrations was Unmute US, a demonstration calling for the reopening of the events and cultural sector (Metro, 2021).

2.1.2 Impacts of the corona crisis

It is no longer big news that the coronavirus has drastically changed our daily lives. But this crisis turned out not just to be a health crisis, the uncertainty of the crisis also had consequences for the economy, well-being, and on a societal level (Klerk et al., 2021, Wilken and Jungmann, 2020). Not only was the government concerned with containing the virus, but now also had to solve the consequences of this crisis on society as a whole in the long run. But those consequences can drastically differ for different groups in society (Klerk et al., 2021). According to SCP (2020), the groups that are affected most and were most vulnerable are low-skilled people, youth, migrants, elderly, and disabled people.

When discussing the general impacts in the Netherlands that are relevant for this thesis one can look at multiple effects. Looking at social contacts and informal participation, one saw that the satisfaction of social contacts has decreased, and that loneliness increased. This can be explained due to the government rules; at a certain point in time during the pandemic it was no longer possible to meet in person. Also, voluntary work had decreased, this can be explained as the same reason described as above, on the other hand, the willingness of people to help others remained high (Klerk et al., 2021; Snel, 2021). When talking about trust and support, one could see that solidarity for healthcare employees was high. The support and trust for the government during the crisis mainly decreased (Klerk et al., 2021; Snel, 2021; Werfhorst, 2021).

When zooming in on the province of Groningen, one could see that the corona crisis also had consequences for many residents in Groningen, just like for many people in the rest of the Netherlands. A study by Sociaal Planbureau Groningen in November 2020 showed that for self-employed people, young people between the ages of 18 and 34 and people with poor health are most affected by the pandemic (Sociaal Planbureau Groningen, 2021). If we look at the social life of the residents of Groningen since the start of the corona crisis in March 2020, it can be concluded that 81% of the residents are affected by the crisis for their social life and contacts. Besides the fact that 20% also see positive sides, the negative consequences predominate strongly. In the negative changes, a decrease in the number of contacts is at the top, followed by proximity to people (e.g. speaking of fewer people and physical contact) and loneliness (Sociaal Planbureau Groningen, n.d.). These results provide important points of attention for administrators and policymakers, but also for urban planners and regional area coordinators. The report of Sociaal Planbureau Groningen (2021) concludes that the society is resilient, but society certainly needs the government on a municipal, provincial, and national level during and certainly after the corona crisis.

2.2 Active citizenship

Earlier in this thesis, the consequences of the corona crisis were discussed, but in addition to all these impacts, one could also see a lot of active citizenship emerged at the same time. As the pressure of this health crisis diminishes, the social consequences will become more apparent (VNG, 2020). The need of vulnerable groups, in particular, will become more visible. Even though the Netherlands already has a high degree of organization and professionalism, the government is still counting on even better cooperation between different stakeholders and support from society (VNG, 2020). Participation emerging from citizens in society plays an important role in this. Public participation is seen as important not only for the individual itself, but also for society as a whole (Klerk et al., 2021). These social practices make that people can form and define the place where they live.

According to Boonstra (2015), active citizenship means that individual citizens participate in and promote civic initiatives through the process of citizen involvement. These initiatives will serve the community interest, even though this interest can also change during the process. In the Netherlands, this active citizenship is increasingly encouraged due to the decline of the welfare state. Because of these normative, practical, and financial boundaries, the concepts of active citizenship and self-organization have become more important and can be found in many Dutch policy documents (van Dam et al., 2015). An example of this is 'De doe-democratie' (The Do-democracy) where the government has faith in the social actions of citizens and is willing to actively help with the transition to this so-called do-democracy (Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, 2013). Another example that advocates citizens' initiatives and less top-down approaches is the 'In actie met burgers' project (Into action with citizens) (Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, Ministry of the Infrastructure, Ministry of & Economic Affairs, 2011). This trend is also described by de Roo (2013), who states that there has been an increased focus on deliberate forms of democracy and citizen participation in government while shifting away from top-down policymaking.

2.2.1 Citizen participation

Citizen participation can be defined as a process of getting people involved in the decision-making process, for example on neighbourhood level through activities such as town meetings or community councils (Checkoway, 1998). Arnstein (1969) adds to this that this process includes a redistribution of power from the 'haves' towards the 'have-not' groups. However, here the initiative lies within the government and is different from self-organisation where the initiative comes from the citizens themselves (Boonstra and Boelens, 2011).

Arnstein (1969) formulated a so-called 'ladder of participation' where each step reflects the power of a member or organized group to influence the decision-making process (Figure 1). The ladder has eight steps and is divided into three categories, namely; non-participation, tokenism and citizen power. The first two steps can be seen as where citizens have no power to influence the process. The next three steps can be considered where citizens will be heard but lack power to ensure that their views and meanings will be implemented. The last three steps can be seen as where citizens are able to take decisions themselves and where there is an equal collaboration between members of a group (Arnstein, 1969). Active citizens can be

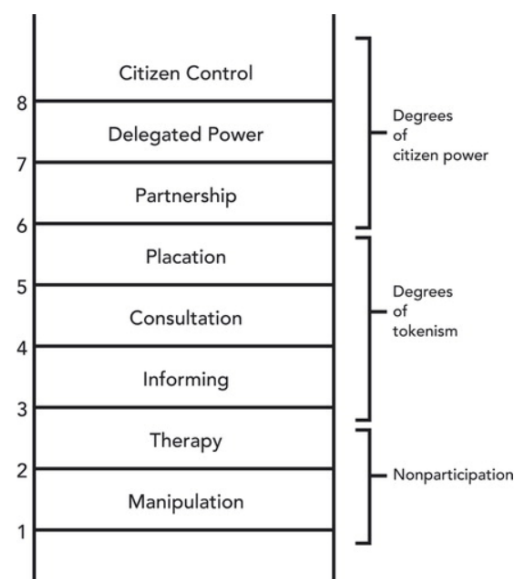


Figure 1. Ladder of participation (Source: Arnstein, 1969)

present at every step on the ladder, only the level of power to influence the decision-making process will differ. However, it will be likely that the less influence citizens have the less active citizens will be.

2.2.2 Negative results of citizen participation

The idea that there are different levels of power to participation is a fact and the idea that participation has only positive outcomes is not shared by everyone. Citizen participation can also have disappointing results which were not intended in advance. Boonstra and Boelens (2011) talk about disappointing results such as people not being heard and decisions and plans cannot be influenced by the fact that the flow of information from citizens to officials is not there or too slow. An explanation for this could be that citizens are too low on Arnstein's (1969) participation ladder and are thus unable to have an influence. As a result, participation can be perceived as useless and as a waste of time, which can lead to discouragement of citizens (Nienhuis et al., 2011). Others argue that the effectiveness of citizen participation depends on inclusivity (Boonstra & Boelens, 2011; Irvin & Stansbury, 2004). Irvin and Stansbury (2004) argue that citizen participation depends on the policy topic and if government wants to make use of citizens or not. Nienhuis et al. (2011) add that when the government does decide to make use of citizen participation, the problem mainly consists of not being able to establish a dialogue. Citizen participation is then seen as a standard procedure with no real purpose or meaning, but only to be able to say that citizens have been asked to participate. As a result, citizens' initiatives more often have difficulty in finding citizens who want to participate or take the lead in such a project. An additional problem is often that the government cannot be experienced as responsive, because the government does not provide feedback, not quickly enough or in an unpleasant way (Lowndes et al., 2006). According to van Hulst (2012), a community that wants to remain or become vibrant needs a leader who is good at communicating, who can tell what the community can achieve together, can motivate people and see the potentials of the local environment. But if that leader is not there, it often becomes more difficult to activate people to participate. Nienhuis et al. (2011) concluded that more than half of the people in the Netherlands do not want or even do not know if they want to participate. People who do participate are often people who live in their neighbourhood for a longer time and have a greater sense of belonging towards their local community, and thus are not necessarily older people which is often thought (Nienhuis et al., 2011).

2.2.3 Positive results of citizen participation

However, promoting citizens' participation stays important. In the article of Boonstra and Boelens (2011) four arguments are put forward to promote citizens involvement in planning practices. The first argument described is the social effect. With this effect, it is expected that participation of citizens will take care of more social coherence in the Dutch fragmented society. Participation in associations and initiatives is seen as an important indicator of social cohesion (Van der Houwen, 2010). This benefit is especially important in already deprived neighbourhoods with a lack of social cohesion and integration. In these deprived neighbourhoods citizen participation is used to increase the empowerment of the residents to communicate their views, desires and abilities to ultimately gain trust in new (social) settings and increase the sense of responsibility for someone's own living environment (Boonstra and Boelens, 2011).

The first argument is in line with the second argument, namely that citizen participation also ensures better spatial policy plans, which increases the quality of life in living environments. In doing so, they appeal to the feeling of belonging to a certain place, sense of ownership, communal citizenship (Boonstra and Boelens, 2011) and encouragement of self-organizing capacity (Nienhuis et al., 2011) of residents. This ensures that the embeddedness of spatial interventions in local communities and thereby the support and acceptance of these spatial interventions will be increased (van Hulst et al., 2008; Koffijberg and Renooy, 2008). Willems et al. (2020) add that public support for policy plans also means that higher political legitimacy is achieved.

Thirdly, an economic argument is mentioned. Citizen participation would lower the costs of the planning process itself in short-term, but also ensure economic robustness in long-term (Boonstra and Boelens, 2011). Greater public participation and support would mean less complaining and thus reducing the time of the planning process itself and thus the costs. Although, the time and costs always depend on the amount of participation, the initiative and which instruments are needed (Willems et al., 2020). When looking at economic robustness created by citizen participation, this mainly depends on the diversity of the initiatives, self-employment and the willingness to invest in the local community (Boonstra and Boelens, 2011). In this way, more local ties will be created, which will make communities more resilient to be able to absorb and overcome crises (Boonstra and Boelens, 2011).

The fourth and last argument that is brought forward by Boonstra and Boelens (2011) is the political argument. It is argued that there is a gap between the government and citizens, and that this gap can be bridged by letting citizens participate and thereby improving the communication. This will mean that there will be a better match between citizens' priorities and policies, and therefore policies will be more focused. Citizens will better understand how policies are created, leading to more realistic expectations of government actions (Boonstra and Boelens, 2011). With better networks between citizens and government, a more positive perception towards the government can occur by bridging this gap (Boonstra and Boelens, 2011; Willems et al., 2020).

2.3 Citizen initiatives

According to VNG (2020), many great initiatives and partnerships arose during the pandemic, and several examples could be seen where communities showed a sense of belonging (Wilson, 2020). Municipalities and partners that are close to the residents have started to invest more and more and this is yielding results. Even though the willingness to act of all kinds of parties is already high in Dutch society (van Dam et al., 2015), it is still very important to constantly stimulate this behaviour (VNG, 2020). Since recovery is currently a task of the entire society, the national government cannot organize all of it alone. That is why this is seen more as the task of the local government, because local government know the local qualities and can therefore respond better to this. Local government can therefore make an important contribution to the social reconstruction of society (VNG, 2020). Collaboration is not only essential for recovery, but also for social resilience. VNG (2020) therefore argues that citizens and its initiatives should be given more confidence and room for action. A greater degree of flexibility within the legal framework should ensure rapid local customization and the prevention of even more vulnerabilities. Investing and organizing long-term local coalitions and initiatives should make ideas visible and promote knowledge sharing with and between municipalities (VNG, 2020).

Due to the great variety of citizens' initiatives, it is more difficult to describe the concept in an overarching definition (Blonk and Van den Bosch, 2018). It is also important to note that many citizen initiatives go undocumented and can only be noticed when a detailed investigation of the local context takes place (Den Broeder et al., 2021). This phenomenon also contributes to the difficulty of defining the concept. However, it is possible to extract and compare elements from each definition to determine what a citizens' initiative is and means for this thesis. Citizens' initiatives generally start voluntarily by an individual or an organized group, often take place in the public domain and often focus on one of the following three goals: enhancing quality of life, promoting social cohesion or taking care of each other and trying to influence policy (Blonk and Van den Bosch, 2018). Even multiple terms can be used to describe such citizen participation, for example, civic engagement, community or citizens initiatives or participative society (Soares da Silva et al., 2018). In the upcoming sections, this thesis will refer to citizens initiatives. Citizen's initiatives will be defined as a form of self-organization in which citizens take collective actions and determine the form and goals themselves, and can thereby mobilize energy and resources to pursue specific and common needs

and have partial control over these activities and achievements in the public domain (Igalla et al., 2019; Van der Knaap et al., 2019; Soares da Silva et al., 2018).

2.3.1 Rise of citizen initiatives

When writing about citizen participation and citizen initiatives, a distinction can be made between 3 generations (Lenos et al., 2006; van de Wijdeven et al., 2013). These generations of citizen participation are slowly turning into more attention for citizen initiatives. It is important to know that the generations do not succeed each other but can co-exist because the concepts of citizen participation and citizen initiatives are constantly evolving and therefore dynamic (Lenos et al., 2006). The 1st generation, starting in the 70s, can be described as a period where citizens have become more empowered, thus forcing a say in government policy (Lenos et al., 2006; van de Wijdeven et al., 2013). The 2nd generation that started in the 90s can be seen as an interactive form of policymaking (Van Houwelingen et al., 2014). Citizens are given the opportunity to help shape policy in an early phase in consultation with the government. However, the government does determine which subject's citizens will have a say in and which not (Lenos et al., 2006; van de Wijdeven et al., 2013). The 3rd generation that started at the beginning of the 21st century shows the rise of citizens' initiatives. In this generation, citizens take matters into their own hands and implement their own ideas in which the government has a facilitating role (Heijden et al., 2007; Lenos et al., 2006; van de Wijdeven et al., 2013). Here the emphasis is mainly on doing instead of talking or co-deciding (Oude Vrielink and Van de Wijdeven, 2011). However, the citizens' initiatives do not completely take over the public task, but there is cooperation with local government in a form of co-production. The pure variant of self-organization within the public domain and the 3rd generation hardly occurs in practice (Van de Maat and Veldhuysen, 2011).

2.3.2 Supporting citizens' initiatives

Support for citizens' initiatives can also be very different per country, municipality or even per initiative, which is why it is difficult to give a one-sided answer to what support means. However, there is often talked about supporting, stimulating or facilitating citizens' initiatives from the local government (Verhoeven, 2010). But these terms do not give a clear example of the professional actions of the government in citizen initiatives (Tonkens and Verhoeven, 2011). As the rise of citizens' initiatives increases, it will also become easier for governments to define themselves what support, stimulation or facilitation entails. According to Tonkens and Verhoeven (2011), governments often have 3 tasks when it comes to supporting citizens' initiatives, namely: establishing connections between residents or between residents and the municipality, helping with bureaucratic requirements and accountability, and enabling citizens to actually take the initiative.

In the article by Denters et al. (2013) research has been done in the province of Overijssel into how support for citizens' initiatives is designed. The survey showed that almost all municipalities that participated offer financial and material support and advice or information to citizens' initiatives. In addition, government professionals who support citizens' initiatives have adapted internal procedures, working methods and policies to create space for citizens to organize initiatives (Denters et al., 2013). This supports what was said in paragraph 2.2 that the government is shifting away from only using top-down policymaking. So many citizens' initiatives seem to receive general support from the government, yet a shift can be observed where government involvement appears to be changing. Due to the increasingly self-organizing citizens' initiatives, the involvement does not seem to be diminishing, but the support shifts from welfare state professionals only to more stakeholders at once, such as governments, companies and social organizations that are also becoming more active in the neighbourhood (Bovaird, 2006; Edelenbos et al., 2017a). Welfare state professionals mainly have the task of guiding neighbourhood organizations and citizens' initiatives, but specifically focused on the social aspects (Noordegraaf, 2015). Because many more different types of welfare state professionals have now been added, such as neighbourhood officials, participation brokers,

neighbourhood directors, community workers, neighbourhood coordinators and similar government professionals, it is important that more cooperation is created between these different parties, as this makes supporting citizens' initiatives more complex (Van de Maat and Veldhuysen, 2011). This study will focus on the role of regional area coordinators. What is specific about the role of a regional area coordinator is that they have an overall view of a certain area and that they are specifically committed to residents without coming to the fore. They can be seen as a linchpin between residents, local government, social organizations, and entrepreneurs.

Oude Vrielink & Van de Wijdeven (2011) investigated which roles these professionals can fulfil in contact with initiators and with other stakeholders in the neighbourhood to support citizen initiatives. The research showed that a typology can be made based on support roles (Figure 2). The difference between the instrumental approach and the personal approach is that the first approach facilitates, and the second approach stimulates. The instrumental approach aims to support initiators but within an already established framework. The personal approach shows that ideas of citizens are acknowledged by professionals and shows citizens that they can exert influence on their own living environment (Oude Vrielink & Van de Wijdeven, 2011). This can result in other citizens getting motivated to take action.

The first role concerns complementing citizens' power within the initiative, whereby a professional supplements or adjusts the citizens' initiative, but without taking over the tasks from the citizens. The professional will try to get the initiative off the ground and then try to motivate more citizens. The second role concerns the empowerment of the initiators within the initiative. Attention is not only paid to the activity itself, but attention is also paid to the personal growth of the initiators themselves. Citizens' capacities and personal skills will be explored and to be shown to be an advantage as much as possible. The third role is to connect institutionally outside of the citizens' initiative. With this, the professional actively seeks to establish contacts with relevant other stakeholders and other citizens in order to increase brand awareness of the initiative. The fourth role, and also outside the citizens' initiative, is to vitalize the neighbourhood community. Attention is paid to already existing successful citizens' initiatives and to residents who come up with new ideas (Oude Vrielink & Van de Wijdeven, 2011).

	<i>Instrumental approach</i>	<i>Personal approach</i>
<i>Role in contact with the initiators</i>	Complement citizen power	Empowering initiator(s)
<i>Role in contact with the environment (institutions/neighbourhood)</i>	Connecting institutionally	Vitalizing the neighbourhood community

Figure 2. *Typology of support roles at citizens' initiatives* (Source: Oude Vrielink and van de Wijdeven, 2011)

Here too, the different roles can co-exist, just as with the aforementioned generations of participations. In fact, Oude Vrielink and van de Wijdeven (2011) state that there is always a mix of these four support roles and the mix is different for each initiative. With this mix of roles, citizens can also be prevented from getting stuck with legislation and regulations, and thus remain intrinsically motivated (Oude Vrielink and van de Wijdeven, 2011). This also prevents the aforementioned disappointing results from occurring. It can therefore be said that government professionals play an important role in the perception of the initiators and the initiative itself when it comes to support from the municipality, even though it is difficult to determine exactly what kind of support is needed (Lowndes et al., 2006).

2.4 Resilience

The concept of resilience has risen in popularity and prominence since the beginning of the 21st century (Cretney, 2014). But because resilience has developed across many disciplines it is important to understand what resilience means in general and specific for this thesis. According to Adger (2000), the term resilience has its origins in the natural sciences and can be defined as “the ability of groups, or communities to cope with external stresses and disturbances resulting from social, political and environmental change” (Adger, 2000, p. 16). Resilience can thus be seen as a capacity to tolerate shocks and being able to bounce back, so ride out of the difficulties without the general situation being deteriorated (Pasteur, 2011). However, this view is challenged in articles by McCrea et al. (2016) and Norris et al. (2008). Here it is stated that resilience is not the capacity of bouncing back to previous conditions, but being able to improve the well-being of communities compared to the situation before and thus reducing risks of future difficulties. Resilience thus not only means being able to recover, adapt and continue (Pasteur, 2011), it also means mitigation and adaptation (Barr and Devine-Wright, 2012). The process of becoming resilient is thus also focused on building strength by preventing and protecting against and preparing for external shocks. This view is shared by Elmquist et al. (2019) and Martin and Sunley (2014) who state that there are three forms of urban resilience: resistance, recovery and transform. Resistance means looking at ways how a city can prepare for an external shock, thus how can cities become less vulnerable (Fransen and Edelenbos, 2020). A lower vulnerability level already helps in the recovery process. In the recovery phase, a city tries to climb out of a crisis and this process can be accelerated through things such as flexibility, safety nets and organizational power (Fransen and Edelenbos, 2020). The transform stage implies that during a crisis a reassessment of deeply rooted patterns can emerge. A crisis can create a sense of urgency, which will lead to new collective actions and new transitions, making a city more resilient (Loorbach, 2010).

Barr and Devine-Wright (2012) state that resilience is an active, community-based, internally driven and holistic approach and can not be seen as an end state in a community context. Rather, it can be seen as a dynamic process in which the focus must be shifted from striving for an ultimate goal to a continuous process of enhancing resilience (Barr and Devine-Wright, 2012; Callaghan and Colton, 2008). In this way, different stakeholders, such as planners, managers, council members and residents, can further help the community as a whole by studying interrelationships between different parties and elements in the living environment and seeing how this together can increase the resilience of the community. (Callaghan and Colton, 2008). According to Pasteur (2011), increasing people's resilience means looking at the underlying factors. Being better prepared and having a resilient society, enables residents and governments to cope with a crisis whereby shocks can be significantly reduced (Baxter, 2019; Pasteur, 2011).

2.4.1 Community resilience

Looking more specific at resilience of communities and neighbourhoods the concept of community resilience can be defined. Pfefferbaum et al. (2013, p. 251) define resilient communities as a community that has “the ability of community members to take deliberate, purposeful, and collective action to alleviate the detrimental effects of adverse events”. As resilience is a dynamic process it thus must be sustained over time to be able to create and support healthy communities. According to Patel et al. (2017), this requires local contribution, social investment and resources while causes such as miscommunication, distrust, conflict, discrimination, and trauma will always lurk. A shift to more resilient communities with a bottom-up approach, therefore, requires three stages: initiatives from residents (bonding), cooperation between resident's groups (bridging) and cooperation between local governments and residents groups (linking) (Granovetter, 1981; Esteban, 2020).

Since there are major differences in resilience between and within societies which depends on resilience of people (personal factors), the community (social factors) and the environment (environmental factors), it is important to also determine what level of resilience a community has to be able to offer good assistance as government (Fransen and Peralta, 2020; Province of Noord Brabant, 2018). A study done in Rotterdam about resilience revealed three levels of community resilience based on innovation and self-reliance:

- High level: Groups that show having innovative dynamic resilience and can organize social initiatives. These initiatives can be supported, upscaled or replicated by other communities which can also strengthen organizational resilience as a whole (Fransen and Peralta, 2020)
- Middle level: Groups with lower and more varying resilience than the high level groups. If these groups organize initiatives, it is important to provide help through organizational strength. To generate more resilience local government need to support existing initiatives and be committed to more bonding, bridging and linking within the community (Fransen and Peralta, 2020)
- Low level: Groups with low level of resilience are usually referred to as vulnerable (e.g. elderly, low-education, young people, health problems, poverty etc.) with no self-reliance. These groups need extra help during a crisis and tailored support overall. As these vulnerabilities go hand in hand with low self-esteem it is important to first recognize and address these problems. These groups often lack the capacity, time and link with others to organize local initiatives (Fransen and Peralta, 2020; Patel et al., 2017)

Communities can have different aspects of each level therefore groups can overlap and require different government approaches (Fransen and Peralta, 2020).

Besides that, the degree of resilience per community can be determined, it is also important to look at the conditions or elements that are needed for a community to be resilient. Three academic papers have listed elements and can be seen in Table 1. A downside to these kinds of lists is that the elements are often broad, overlapping and need further clarification when someone wants to make good use of them (Patel et al., 2017). However, when such fundamentals are applied in a good way and in the right context they can provide a path for community development that strengthens resilience (Zautra and Murray, 2009).

Patel et al. (2017)	Zautra and Murray (2009)	Pfefferbaum et al. (2013)
Local knowledge	Trust	Connectedness, commitment and shared values
Community networks and relationships	Interaction	Participation
Communication	Home-ownership and staying for a while	Support and nurturance
Health	Sense of community and cohesion	Structure, roles and responsibilities
Governance/leadership	Working together for the common good and being involved	Resources
Resources	(In)formal civic places for gathering	Critical reflection and Skill building
Economic and social investment		Communication
Preparedness		
Mental outlook		

Table 1. Conditions needed for community resilience

(Source: Author)

Pfefferbaum et al. (2013) developed a process named the 'CART process' (Communities Advancing Resilience Toolkit) to understand, use and build community resilience by using research and analytical tools (i.e. surveys, interviews, data collection, community conversation, maps, stakeholder analysis and SWOT analysis). This process is visualized in Figure 3. The process consists of four stages where citizens use different kinds of activities to create community resilience. The arrows from each stage to the next stage and from the community resilience circle to the different stages stand for data and information flows. While community members themselves actively work with the CART process each stage builds on prior work from the community members. The dotted arrows show the effects of the instruments used in each stage on the resilience flowing back to the community. Stage 1 consists of making a community profile together with all relevant stakeholders based on data collection. Stage 2 consists of the reassessment of the community profile by workgroups from the community itself. Stage 3 consists of making a plan that consists of determining goals, how they can be achieved and an action plan. Stage 2 and 3 may overlap. Stage 4 consists of executing the plan made in stage 3. The last phase will attract new community members while new ideas will arise. This also means that not every community member will be involved in every stage, but this can also provide valuable information. Also, not every process will succeed, therefore every process needs an evaluation round to learn from failed attempts.

The process must ultimately lead to improved disaster management in the long-term whereby social and human capital is created, structures of the community are known, responsibility is created and the possibility to look at issues within the living environment because people communicate with each other. All this together will ensure more community resilience by citizens themselves, whereby strengths and challenges are identified. Because communities do not always have the right individuals and resources at their disposal, collaboration with the local government and parties remains important.

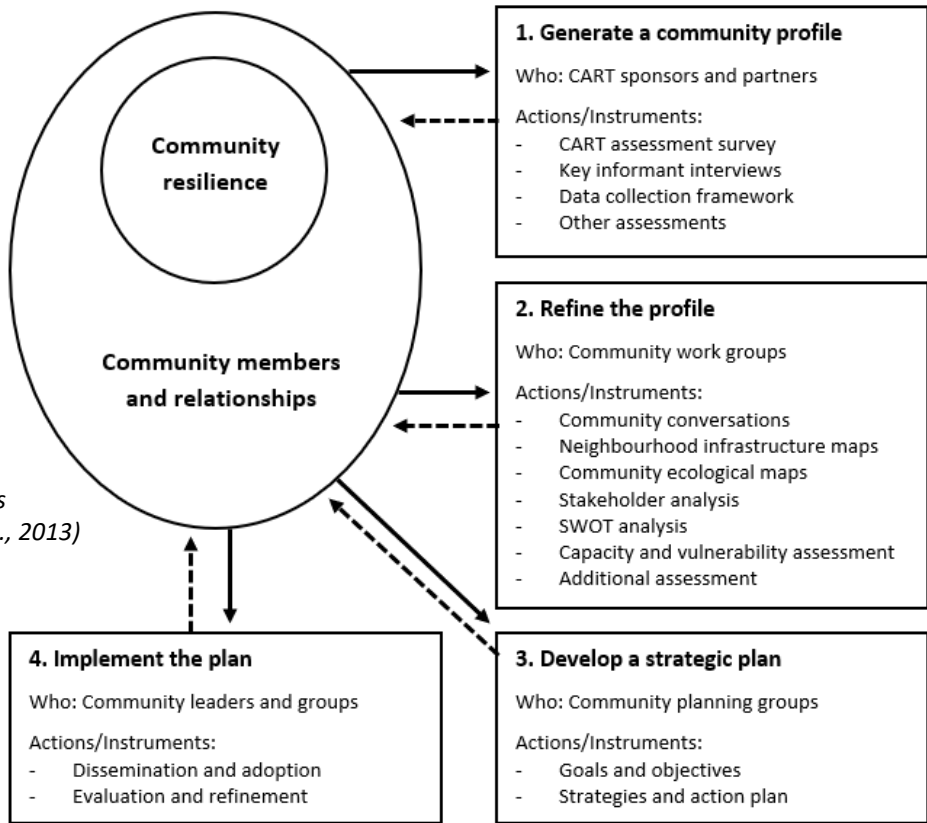


Figure 3. The CART process (Source: Pfefferbaum et al., 2013)

2.4.2 Resilience, COVID-19 and recovery

A good example where resilience, residents and vulnerabilities come together and which emerged more during the COVID-19 pandemic are community resilience initiatives (CRIs) or community-based initiatives (CBIs). Here local actors respond and act on their own and address temporary vulnerabilities arising due to a shock (Fransen et al., 2021; van Meerkerk et al., 2013). This also means that CRI's are more likely to be spontaneous. CRIs are said to be effective in dealing with such uncertainties and social issues since the local communities have the most knowledge and experience in dealing with their own challenges (Edelenbos et al., 2017b). CRIs help communities to sustain itself and transform its trajectories (Magis, 2010). This means that on Arnstein's (1969) ladder CRIs are located at the highest level, so at the degrees of citizen power. When a shock occurs, it is likely that it acts as a catalyst for CRIs (Fransen et al., 2021). In the early stages of CRIs the initiative is small, there are few members and there are few rules and procedures. When the shock is over most CRIs are likely to disappear, but a few CRIs may mature to permanent and public initiatives or institutions that may develop even further creating a new set of rules and procedures (de Moor, 2013). CRIs are most likely to focus on a specific group or area, but often need to align with government policy and regulations (Fransen et al., 2021). This means co-production is needed and it demands strong bonding ties, transformational leadership, organizational capacity and recognition within the community (Duijn et al., 2020). However, it is still a challenge for these CRIs to succeed during a crisis or pandemic. Jaspers and Steen (2020) question whether such temporary initiatives and co-production also lead to sustainable and lasting outcomes in post-COVID times if such CRIs are only temporary. According to Steen and Brandsen (2020), it is likely that communities will easily slip back into the situation before the coronavirus was there, as a result of which many community initiatives will evaporate. This is because the conditions that created these CRIs and co-production have disappeared, the sense of urgency disappears to maintain such initiatives. Although, there may be a longer-lasting effect of these CRIs in areas where the basic conditions for community initiatives were already there and so only needed a little help for production to take off (Steen and Brandsen, 2020).

2.5 Participatory planning in creating resilience

Participation in society has been identified as a core human need and is seen as important for upholding the idea of participatory democracy, the effectiveness and quality of the planning process and its outcomes and improving the quality of decision making (Boonstra, 2015; Cilliers and Timmermans, 2014). However, Albrechts et al. (2019) stress the transition towards co-production instead of participation. With participation it seems that there is not always an equal and reciprocal relationship between different citizens and between citizens and the state. Co-production focuses more on democracy where people are central and where initiatives are always bottom-up (Albrechts et al., 2019). Here the importance of inclusivity is more stressed than within citizens participation. Therefore, participation should not be a concession by the state to involve the public but should be an ongoing and dynamic process (Thorpe, 2017).

So, the concept of participatory planning has experienced a growing reassessment in city planning and literature. The goal of participatory planning is therefore to get public perspectives into different planning processes to design a public space while focusing on user input and support and end-product success (Cilliers and Timmermans, 2014). Joint openness and two-way communication play an important part in achieving a shared vision that creates the ideal situation for both citizens and government. An equal contribution is expected from both parties (Cilliers and Timmermans, 2014). Such a participatory process boosts social cohesion resulting in more enhanced local ownership and public awareness. However, this imposes more demands on citizens and local government forcing them to think about how participation and responsibility can be optimized and shared (Overbeek et al., 2009). According to Cilliers and Timmermans (2014), the difference between participatory planning and good participatory planning is the process itself, looking at how it is carried out and the outcomes itself. Evaluation should therefore also become a permanent part of participation

processes to determine whether it was a success or to determine which things could be done differently to make sure that everyone benefits from a participation process (Boonstra, 2015; Cilliers and Timmermans, 2014).

The biggest stumbling block of participatory planning lies in the diversity and number of stakeholders. The larger, more diverse and amount of input from the group, the more complex the process will be (Breman et al., 2008). Due to the presence of such diversity and differences, participatory planning has to deal with greater complexities (Cilliers and Timmermans, 2014; Hou and Kinoshita, 2007). Breman et al. (2008) state that the main strategy and goals of a project or initiative should be determined by the most relevant and crucial stakeholders in the process. It should be noted that participation in such a process should always be voluntary and never be forced. The participatory process must rely on the willingness to participate besides the fact that it is important to allow every stakeholder to participate in the process in order to create a comprehensive view of the social needs and perspectives (Cilliers and Timmermans, 2014).

2.5.1 Digital collaborative approach

During the corona period, especially these 'do' initiatives arose and the involvement of citizens was strongly stimulated by the pandemic (Steen and Brandsen, 2020). The pressure on public services increased so much that not only the government, but also citizens took the initiative to help others in this crisis. Steen and Brandsen (2020) state that co-production and participatory planning is more evident and important than ever and is only working out because citizens have cooperated in big numbers and voluntarily. A study by Engbersen et al. (2021) showed that the willingness to help each other did not decrease in the Netherlands, this was contrary to the expectations. This willingness of this 'do' generation especially increased digitally, since the rules often did not allow to meet or offer help physically. According to VNG (2020), much more was possible digitally than previously thought. Governments have therefore invested heavily in using information and communication technologies for different approaches and purposes (Criado et al., 2020). However, not everyone was able to switch at such a fast speed to online meetings. People with a low education level and the elderly have trouble with digital engagement. But also the costs of connection to the digital world can be seen as a problem in the current digital society where physical meetings are not always possible (Den Broeder et al., 2021). South et al. (2020) argue for a collaborative approach to maintain community health, wealth, and well-being. A participatory approach will also allow the digital gap to be narrowed instead of enlarged. Many countries and municipalities have already proven that partnership arrangements with citizens have helped to respond quickly to community needs during this pandemic (South et al., 2020). However, the question always remains what role local government should have in such participatory planning processes.

2.5.2 The role of local government

Previous crises provide governments with information on how to deal with the COVID-19 crisis at the moment. These crises showed that a paradigm shift towards more adaptive governance with the involvement of multiple actors in decision-making processes is needed to deal with uncertainties (Adger et al., 2009; Folke, 2006; Huitema et al, 2009; Rijke et al, 2012). Next to that embracing self-organization and thereby enabling continuous learning and flexibility for communities is needed in that shift (Lebel et al., 2006). In this adaptive governance, it means that citizens' initiatives will not be controlled by one unity but by several, which will make the system less vulnerable when there is a crisis (Huitema et al., 2009). Multiple actors and diverse approaches of initiatives on different levels (individual, community, street, neighbourhood, city) can ensure that experiments can take place and ultimately yield more local knowledge, innovation and mutual learning which can be exchanged (Duijn et al., 2020). Such experiments can be the CRIs or CBIs discussed in paragraphs 2.4.2.

Local government can have multiple reasons to support initiatives such as increasing social cohesion, co-creation, citizen engagement or things such as budget cutbacks or maintaining delivery of specific services during a crisis (Duijn et al., 2020; Torfing et al., 2016). Duijn et al. (2020) made a list of ways local government can support citizens' initiatives based on multiple academic papers:

- *Recognize and legitimize* initiatives as additional executive power. In this way, citizens are encouraged to execute initiatives that are helpful for the community or society. A force that things get done.
- *Appreciate* the nature and capacities of citizens' initiatives
- *Identify services and support functions* for initiatives to take off. This includes funds, networks, marketing, training, professional knowledge etcetera.
- *Assist in obtaining resources* (e.g. network, knowledge, funds, available piece of land)
- *One-stop-shop*: local government should function as a professional internal coordinator to align work processes, political legitimacy and resources for initiatives
- *Network*: local government should perform as a brokering-function to inform and tune in with other community initiatives, active citizens, professionals, or governments
- *Reliable*: local government and the system must be stable enough to handle all active citizens who apply for support, funding, legitimization, etc. Citizens should not be hindered by the bureaucratic system.

Yardley et al. (2020) add that also communication is an important factor in enhancing community engagement and cooperation during the COVID-19 crisis. Therefore, the following communication strategies are recommended: 1) communicate openly and honestly about the crisis and provide regular updates, 2) increase motivation, skills, and confidence of citizens and 3) show understanding and respect for the communities' needs (Yardley et al., 2020). Communicating effectively is a difficult task for the government when the normal course of business has been disrupted and is now complex, uncertain and can change quickly. But to ensure community involvement and participatory planning, it is of great importance as a local government to be able to demonstrate that the diverse needs of citizens in these difficult times is being listened to, understood and addressed as long as the measures allow it (Yardley et al., 2015).

However, local government can also easily harm citizens' initiatives unintentionally which can lead to fatigue in the participation process. Duijn et al. (2020) also made a list of what local government better not can do (also based on multiple academic papers):

- *Being a steering committee* in citizens' initiatives
- *Being overactive*: this can result in local government pushing through their own program or opinions in such a way that the initiative can no longer be seen as self-organizing or as co-production
- *Taking over leadership*: avoid tacking over the whole initiative initiated by citizens
- *Bureaucratic red tape*: funding can negatively influence citizens' initiatives as it can lead to local competition and less active citizens
- *Political interference*: providing support to citizens' initiatives should not be influenced by political changes.

2.6 Conceptual framework

Following the discussed theory, a conceptual framework was made. The conceptual model is centred around the main themes of this thesis and is showing the links between the different concepts (Figure 4).

The model shows the two main types of stakeholders (pink) in this research: the regional area coordinators and citizens. Following the pathway of these two actors, the model shows that the resources and networks (yellow) of both actors individually can create a development process towards more participatory planning to create initiatives initiated by citizens. However, the regional area coordinators can use two approaches, the instrumental and personal approach (blue), to support citizens' initiatives as visualized and described in section 2.3.2. It is expected that these professionals mainly will make use of the instrumental approach. Citizens use their personal social and human capital, as explained in the CART process, to set up citizen's initiatives and create community resilience. The created arena for co-production (blue) for the two main actors should ensure more resilient neighbourhood communities (green) to emerge stronger out of the COVID-19 crisis. COVID-19 is surrounding the whole model (red) as it is expected that the COVID-19 crisis and its measures have an overall effect on the process to create resilient neighbourhood communities.

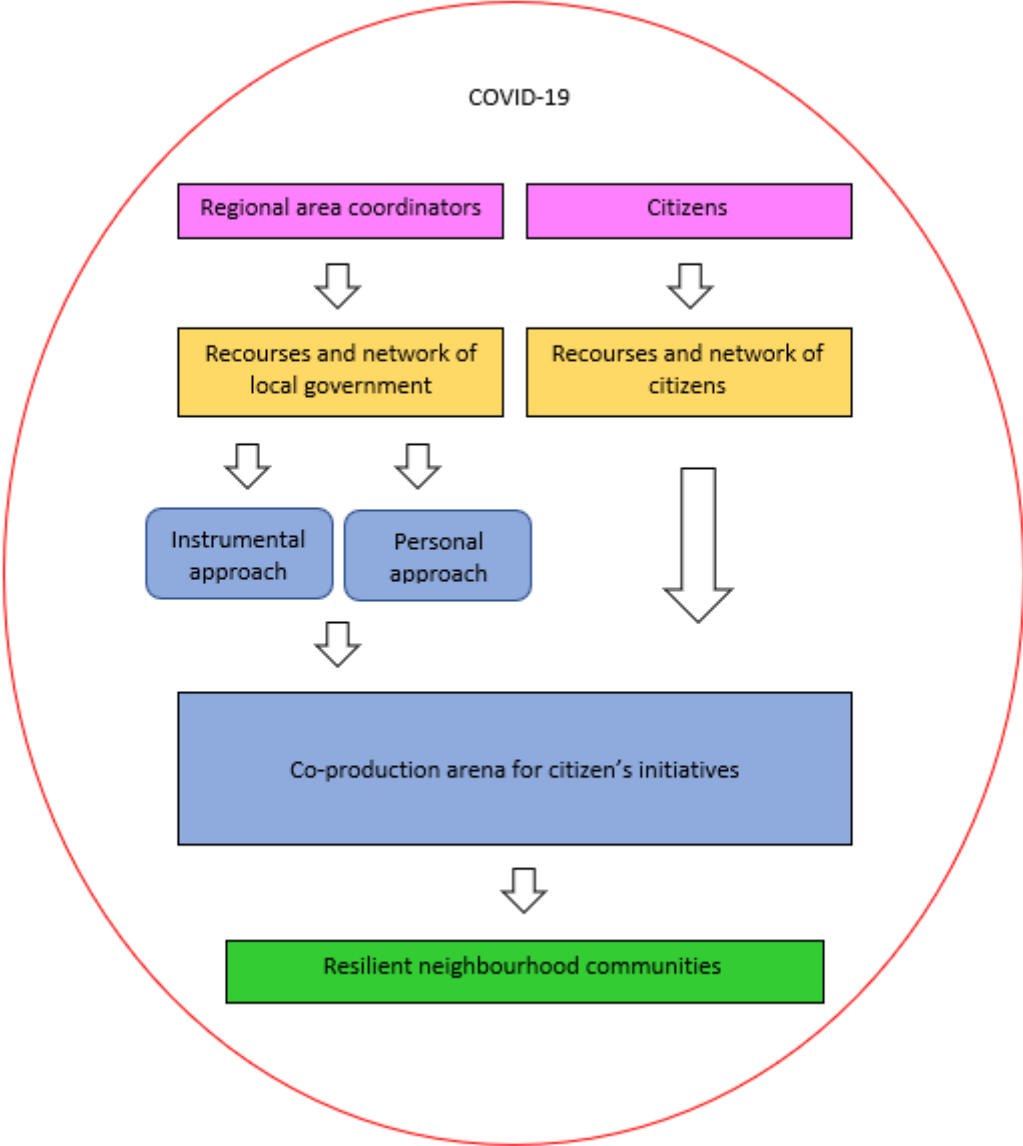


Figure 4. Conceptual model

(Source: Author)

3. Methodology

This chapter will describe the choice of research method and will further elaborate on the case study design, data collection and sample strategy, data analysis and research ethics. Not only will the methods itself be explained, but also the reason why and how these methods can help to answer the research questions. A brief introduction of the case will be explained here, however, a more detailed story and insight information will be given in chapter four.

3.1 Case study design

To gain more insight into how regional area coordinators can help to create resilient neighbourhood communities to emerge stronger out of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was decided to use a case study design. Case studies focus on one specific situation where the researcher can investigate ‘everything’ in great detail from people and activities to specific phenomena of the case itself (Cronin, 2014). One element of this is that the number of cases is therefore small (Bleijenbergh, 2010). Moreover, to obtain a more comprehensive picture of different municipalities in the province of Groningen as individual cases it is important to understand the underlying mechanisms, stories, and processes of regional area coordinators. Therefore, the goal is to gain a holistic understanding of the overlapping cases and thus use a comparative approach (Yin, 2003). In this way, detailed information can be collected.

According to Putney (2010), a case study can have different purposes; a distinction is made between descriptive, explanatory, and explorative purposes. Looking at the case studies in this research, the chosen case has an explorative and explanatory purpose. A look was given into what can be learned from the different municipalities and understanding how and why certain processes happened. Therefore, it was desired to get close to the participants and understand the local context to become aware of the complexity (Putney, 2010).

3.1.1 Case boundaries

According to Yin (2003), one can define the case by three boundaries, namely, the spatial boundary, the theoretical boundary or scope and the timeframe of a research. Clear boundaries help researchers to remain having a clear focus about what is studied (Yin, 2003). The spatial boundary of this research was within the borders of the Netherlands. By focusing on a specific country the focus of the research will be more clear and specific. To further narrow this down the research area was focused on the province of Groningen, which is located in the North of the Netherlands. A more detailed explanation of the selected case is in the next paragraph. The theoretical boundary of this research is defined by the following main concepts: COVID-19, active citizenship, citizen initiatives, resilience, and participatory planning. These concepts helped to effectively construct the thesis and make the research goal and questions into a coherent whole. The conceptual model, explained in chapter 2, underpinned the concepts and clarified the relationship between them. The timeframe of the thinking and writing process of this research took place from August, 2021 until January, 2022. The timeframe of collecting data occurred from October 11th, 2021 until the last week of November, 2021.

3.1.2 Case context

As this research is using an in-depth analysis it is of importance to consider the number of cases that will be chosen. For this reason, this research has only looked at the municipalities in the province of Groningen, and not at municipalities of multiple provinces. This has the advantage that you only have to deal with policies and rules from only one province, so municipalities will have overlapping components. In addition, these municipalities had unique characteristics, such as different scales, goals, and processes. This made it interesting to explore the depth and breadth of the differences

and similarities between the different municipalities. The cases were compared using two variables: 1) which role the regional area coordinator had, how they experienced this and which barriers they encountered, and 2) which and how stakeholders were involved and what influence their participation had. These two variables were chosen to provide insights into the processes and stakeholders involved, and which implications can be taken forward to future planning.

The province of Groningen is located in the North of the Netherlands, as can be seen in Figure 5. On January 1, 2020, the province of Groningen had 583.990 inhabitants (Eurostat, 2020). The province has a land surface of 2.325 km², which is approximately 6,9% of the total Dutch territory (Waar staat je provincie, 2020). The capital and the largest city of the province is Groningen and had 232,917 inhabitants on January 1, 2020, making it the 6th largest municipality in the Netherlands (OIS Groningen, n.d.).



Figure 5. Province of Groningen
(Source: Wikipedia, 2011)

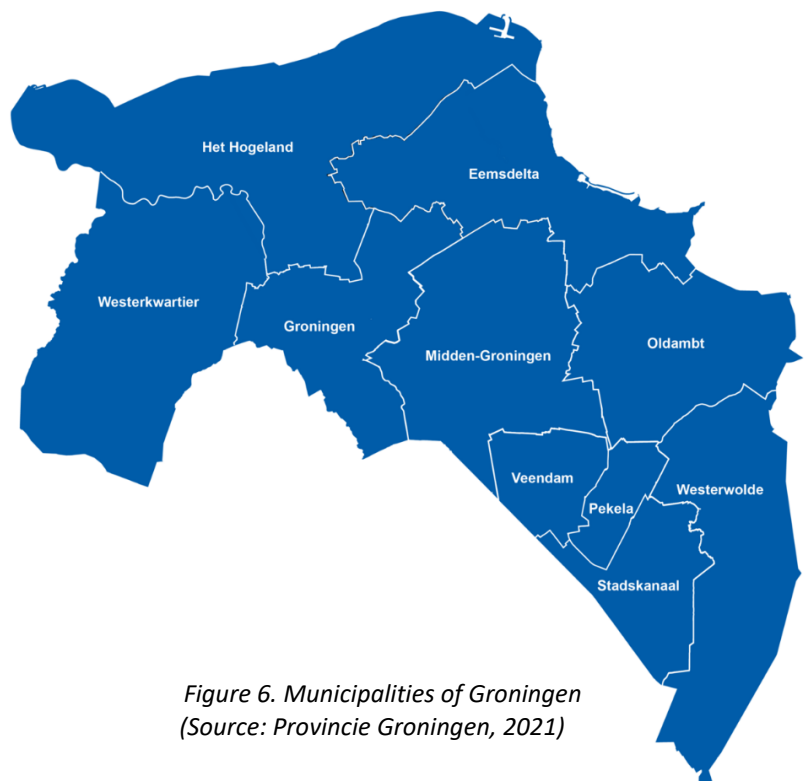


Figure 6. Municipalities of Groningen
(Source: Provincie Groningen, 2021)

The province of Groningen is divided into ten municipalities each with its own local government. However, the province of Groningen not always counted ten municipalities. Since 2005, the province has been discussing administrative organizations and scaling up together with the municipalities (Provincie Groningen, 2021). At the beginning of 2013, the province started the procedure to ensure that 23 municipalities would merge into five or six new municipalities (RTV Noord, n.d.). According to Provincie Groningen (2021), the province and municipalities see the usefulness and necessity of larger municipalities to be able to properly perform municipal administration and the associated tasks in the future. The province mainly plays a supporting role within this redivision process, in the first instance the initiative and the willingness to merge must come from the municipalities themselves (Provincie Groningen, 2021). Although, this does not always happen and even if the initiative is already there, it can come to nothing. The following municipalities have arisen from mergers: Eemsdelta, het Hogeland, Westerkwartier, Groningen, Midden-Groningen and Westerwolde. The municipalities of Veendam, Stadskanaal and Pekela had the possibility of merging, but Veendam turned out to be against it (RTV Noord, n.d.; RTV Noord, 2019). The current division of the municipalities in the province of Groningen can therefore be seen in Figure 6. The statistics from each municipality is displayed in Table 2, showing the total population, population density and total area.

Municipality	Total population	Population density	Total area	Big cities
Eemsdelta	45.587	170/km ²	364 km ²	Appingedam, Delfzijl, Loppersum
Groningen	233.273	1257/km ²	198 km ²	Groningen, Haren, Hoogkerk
Het Hogeland	47.834	99/km ²	907,6 km ²	Bedum, Uithuizen, Winsum
Midden-Groningen	60.726	217/km ²	295,77 km ²	Hoogezand, Sappemeer, Zuidbroek
Oldambt	38.277	169/km ²	296 km ²	Midwolda, Scheemda, Winschoten
Pekela	12.176	248/km ²	50,2 km ²	Oude Pekela, Nieuwe Pekela
Stadskanaal	31.754	270/km ²	119,9 km ²	Stadskanaal, Musselkanaal, Ontswedde
Veendam	27.417	361/km ²	78,7 km ²	Veendam, Wildervank
Westerkwartier	63.678	176/km ²	368,9 km ²	Grootegast, Leek, Zuidhorn
Westerwolde	26.215	95/km ²	267 km ²	Ter Apel, Bellingwolde, Vlagtwedde

Table 2. Statistics on the municipality in the province of Groningen

(Source: CBS, 2020; CBS, 2021)

3.2 Data collection

3.2.1 In-depth interviews

Based on the above-mentioned research questions, theoretical framework and reasons to do a case study this research used a qualitative research method. In qualitative research, non-numeric empirical evidence can be collected by the researcher itself through observations, interviews, and focus groups (Staller, 2010). In this research, a choice was made to collect data through the means of interviews. This was done by looking at the work and experiences of regional area coordinators in multiple municipalities in the province of Groningen. This qualitative approach helped to explore the interpretations, perspectives, and meanings of the participants regarding the main research question, as these personal experiences could not be found online.

In addition, the choice was made to go for semi-structured interviews. According to Punch (2014), semi-structured interviews are the most powerful and effective way to gain an understanding of the meaning and perceptions of others. Also, open-ended questions contribute to this, in this way the participants are free to answer the question as completely as possible (Staller, 2010). Due to the semi-structured and open-ended form, the main subject was discussed without imposing a prior categorization and there was space left open to talk freely about related subjects (Punch, 2014). Not only the participant could expand on certain questions where he or she wanted to contribute more, but also the researcher could expand on specific questions. In this way, particular points could be clarified or the researcher could further go into depth. In this way, insights into the potential of regional area coordinators helping to create resilient neighbourhoods in the post-Corona period was discovered with a great amount of detail.

3.2.2 Interview guide

With the use of semi-structured interviews, it is important that the interview questions were based on already known academic knowledge (Kallio et al., 2016). Using the theoretical framework and conceptual model, the interview questions were determined in advance and formulated in an interview guide.

Predetermining the questions helped to keep a focused structure during the interviews themselves, but does not have to be followed strictly. It must provide guidance on which main themes will be discussed in the interview (Kallio et al., 2016). By maintaining the same structure and always asking the same questions to each participant, the circumstances in which the interviews were conducted remained the same as much as possible. This minimized the influence of other factors on the results and increased the validity of the interviews (Punch, 2014).

The interview guide covered the main themes of the research (Appendix B). The answers to the interview questions helped to gain insight into how regional area coordinators can help to make neighbourhoods more resilient to emerge stronger from the COVID-19 crisis. Thereby, creating opportunities together with communities and citizen initiatives to move forward. The interview guide covered the three main themes of the research, therefore, the interview guide consisted of three parts. After a general introduction with the first acquaintance, explaining the purpose of the research, and completing the consent form a few introductory questions were asked. The purpose of this was to get a clear image of how the participants would describe their function themselves. This was necessary to put the next answers in the right context. The first part of the interview guide was focused on questions related to COVID-19. With these questions, more insights were obtained into how the crisis had impacted the work of the participants, the neighbourhood communities in their municipality and their vision to tackle these consequences. The second part asked questions that were related to the concept of resilience. These questions focused on getting an insight into how resilience can be created, if this resilience differs per neighbourhood and the role of the regional area coordinators in this. The third part of the interview guide focused on questions related to citizens'

initiatives and public participation. These questions gained insights into examples of citizens initiatives, how such initiatives contribute to the resilience of the neighbourhood and how different actors are involved.

3.2.3 Sample strategy

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select regional area coordinators for this research, considering that these stakeholders are specific to the research (Burt et al., 2019). Sampling in a purposive way helped to find this prime target group that was considered information-rich. Regional area coordinators were selected based on their local knowledge about the main subject of this research and were therefore seen as highly relevant. Regional area coordinators were chosen in order to explore the complete story about the process that regional area coordinators face when creating resilient neighbourhood communities, so understanding meanings and stories rather than facts.

This primary target group was supplemented by a secondary target group through a snowball sampling strategy (Burt et al., 2019). This snowball sampling strategy appeared to be helpful to select other stakeholders who turned out also to be useful. This snowball effect especially helped to select participants who work as welfare state professionals. These people work in close connection with residents and regional area coordinators and provide services to neighbourhood communities, such as community work, helping elderly and youth, informal care support or general social work. These people fulfil a public task in the social domain, which appeared to be extra important during the current corona crisis. In this way, more in-depth knowledge was gained about how to create resilient neighbourhood communities.

Table 3 shows an overview of the interviewees and their working area. Extra information added to the table is how the work function of the regional area coordinator is called in the concerned municipality, how many interviewees participated in the interview, the date on which the interview took place, how long the interviews lasted in minutes, where the interview took place and an interview code to be used in the results section. The name of the work function is added to the table because this name can differ per municipality, even though the description of the function is in general similar.

Recruiting the participants took place by directly sending an email to or calling the person concerned or to the municipality itself. A total of 9 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 participants. Unfortunately, an interview with the municipality of Midden-Groningen was not able to take place. The interviews with the municipality of Oldambt, Stadskanaal, Veendam, Westerkwartier and Westerwolde took place with two participants. With the municipality of Oldambt, the interview took place with a regional area coordinator and welfare state professional (Dutch translation: opbouwwerker) of 'Sociaal werk Oldambt'. With the municipality of Stadskanaal, the interview took place with two municipal employees, one of whom mainly focuses on the coordination of the neighbourhoods and the other on the coordination of the villages. With the municipality of Veendam, the interview took place with an advisor social domain of the municipality and a community development advisor (Dutch translation: adviseur samenlevingsopbouw) of the welfare institution 'de Compaen'. With the municipality of Westerkwartier, the interview took place with two liveability advisors from the municipality. With the municipality of Westerwolde, the interview took place with two regional area coordinators from the municipality.

The spoken language was Dutch as the participants were all Dutch and all preferred their native language. Due to the still in place governmental measures to stop spreading the COVID-19 virus, most interviews took place online. One interview was face-to-face and took place at the location preferred by the participants, this was at the participant's office at the local town hall. Hereby the COVID-19 measures were taken into account at all times, such as disinfecting hands at arrival, not shaking hands and keeping 1,5 meters distance.

Municipality	Number of participants	Function	Date	Time (minutes)	Interview venue	Interview Code
Eemsdelta	1	Regional area coordinator	29-10-2021	58	Online (google.meet)	ED
Groningen	1	Area manager	25-11-2021	60	Online (google.meet)	GR
Hogeland	1	Village coordinator	02-11-2021	79	Online (google.meet)	HL
Oldambt	2	Regional area coordinators and welfare state professional	30-11-2021	60	Online (teams)	OL
Pekela	1	Policy advisor social domain	04-11-2021	52	Phone	PE
Stadskanaal	2	Village coordinator and neighbourhood coordinator	09-11-2021	59	Online (teams)	SK
Veendam	2	Advisor social domain and community development advisor	10-11-2021	76	Online (teams)	VD
Westerkwartier	2	Liveability advisors	02-11-2021	75	In person	WK
Westerwolde	2	Regional area coordinators	23-11-2021	75	Online (teams)	WW

Table 3. List of interviews

(Source: Author)

3.3 Data analysis

After conducting the interviews, the recordings were transcribed verbatim in the software program Word. Transcribing verbatim means that the interviews were transcribed word-for-word. According to Hennink et al. (2011), this way of transcribing has a positive influence on the quality of the data. In this way, the main message of the participants, described in their own phrases and expressions, can be captured more easily. This is especially important for qualitative research and the subsequent coding process (Punch, 2014). Next to transcribing word-for-word, the researcher also made notes in addition to the recordings (if permission was given). Making notes while the interview is also being recorded has the benefit that you can already highlight the most important points.

The researcher transcribed the interviews as soon as possible. The advantage of transcribing immediately after the interview was that the conversation is still fresh in the memory of the researcher. In this way, the notes made can also be better understood and more easily linked to the transcript (Baarda et al., 2005). The main benefit of conducting and analysing the interviews in such detail was that the researcher is getting more familiar with the data (Hay, 2016).

After the interviews were transcribed and completed, the documents were scanned and checked and thus ready for analysis (Appendix C). For unravelling the participants' perspectives, a narrative analysis was performed. This method helped to interpret the experiences and stories told by the participants, but also unpacking the ways how these participants deal with and make sense of reality and the world (Allen, 2017). The whole process of data analysis, so the conceptualization and examination of the results, was done with the help of the qualitative data processing program Atlas.ti. In this program, codes can be assigned to the answers of the participants. Coding is a systematic process where specific names, labels or tags were assigned to certain parts of the data (Punch, 2014). This process structured the data and helped with giving meaning to the data.

In the first phase of the analysis, relevant themes were grouped making it deductive codes. Deductive codes are codes that are predefined based on the existing academic literature, research questions, conceptual model, and the expectations of the researcher. These codes reflect the most evident patterns of the data (Hay, 2016). The second phase consisted of open coding. This means that extra codes were made based on information gained from the interviews making it inductive codes. According to Baarda et al. (2005), it is useful to define, group and categorize codes before transcribing and refine them after transcribing. In this way, the researcher gains insight into the whole of interviews and the main themes of the research. Next to that, it also becomes easier to make theoretical comparisons. The transcripts were thus being analysed based on both deductive and indicative codes, so combining theory and stories from the participants. To give a clear overview, the final codes are being visualized into a code tree (Appendix D).

To report the most important findings of the analysis, quotes in the results section were used. It is important to mention that the quotes have been translated into English since the spoken language during the interviews was Dutch.

3.4 Research ethics

Ethics is the study of what can be perceived as right or wrong and arises in all stages of a project (Punch, 2014). To be ethical as a researcher requires to behave morally, and act thoughtful, informed and reflexive because that it is the 'right' thing to do (Clifford et al., 2016). Therefore, decisions about ethical research practices need to be made with great caution. Clifford et al. (2016) distinguished three main reasons why one should act ethically; 1) ethical behaviour can protect the right of individuals, communities and environments involved, 2) ethical behaviour in each research helps to continue to conduct scientific and valuable inquiry, and 3) ethical behaviour helps to counteract unethical or immoral actions of scientists.

Hammersley & Traianou (2012) have identified three main ethical considerations in doing qualitative research, namely, autonomy, anonymity, and confidentiality. To take these ethical considerations into account the following actions were taken in the research:

Before conducting the interviews, the participants received an informed consent that contained information about the interview (Appendix A). The informed consent contained information about the purpose of the research, methods, how the data will be used (i.e. educational purposes) and that data will never be shared or published. In this way, the participants had some time for consideration of the study and participating and could ask additional questions about the research and their partaking. Also, an additional question was asked to record the audio of the interview. By giving consent (putting a signature), the researcher knew that the participant wanted to participate and thus agreed to the given conditions. However, also after giving consent participants could stop the interview or not answer a particular question, without giving an explanation, when unexpected emotions came up or sensitive topics were discussed. By signing the informed consent before starting the interview ensured confidentiality and trust during the interview.

Participation was always voluntary. Disclosure of participants' identities during the study or release of results will never happen. To guarantee the privacy and anonymity of the participants in the results section when using quotes, interview codes were used throughout the whole study. Another important factor regarding anonymity to consider was, when working with private and confidential information, data storage (Clifford et al., 2016). The participants were assured that all the collected data will remain locked during the whole research process and that the audio will be deleted after the research is finished.

To ensure reliability in the research, all interviews followed the same procedure (Punch, 2014). One important element of that was that the interviews were conducted objectively. This means that it is the researcher's task to uncover the reality without contaminating results in any way. Results should not be influenced by personal perspectives, judgments or interests. The researcher was considered an outsider of the participant's story during the whole interview. Researchers must be aware of their position since their positionality during interactions can have an impact on the data. Therefore, it is important to always be self-critical and self-conscious as a researcher during the data collection (Flowerdew & Martin, 2005). Another important element of the research being reliable was that participants were free to speak out their preferences regarding the date, location and manner of conducting the interview (i.e. face-to-face, online or phone). The researcher has always tried to facilitate the preferences of the participants. In this way, the current situation regarding the corona pandemic was taken into account such that the health and autonomy of both the researcher and participant were not harmed. In the end, all preferences could be met.

4. Results

In this chapter, the main results gathered during the interviews will be laid down structured in the three main themes of the interview guide. The findings will present a brief observation in relation to each sub-question and key themes. These observations will be clarified with direct quotations from the participants.

4.1 COVID-19

4.1.1 Work challenges

Both negative and positive influences for the work of regional area coordinators in the province of Groningen emerged from the pandemic. In general, the biggest challenge for any regional area coordinator in each municipality was the lack of physical contact with residents. Not only the physical contact between the regional area coordinators and residents themselves, also the ongoing dialogue between residents. GR emphasized that the reactions of residents to each other is also important during neighbourhood meetings. It is not only faster, but you also create an equal opportunity for everyone to participate, an inclusive society and the opportunity to build relationships. Residents had less interaction with each other and it is more difficult for regional area coordinators themselves to maintain contact with residents (HL). OL adds that residents were mainly concerned with themselves and other things such as work and therefore did not always mind, especially in the beginning, that there was less communication with others.

Especially in the beginning it was difficult to quickly switch to a digital environment or to find creative ways to keep in touch when the corona measures came into effect (ED). The work of regional area coordinators has often been stopped in the beginning due to the uncertainty about the coronavirus. WW describes it as follows: *“Many municipalities had pressed the pause button” (23-11-2021)*. In addition, many specific target groups, specifically older people who are more likely to volunteer in village centres, were not reachable at the moment when everything changes to an online work environment. The quantity of the meetings and the participating number of people was lower, so the quality of meetings can never be as high as when people are allowed to physically meet. This often creates a situation in which residents only ask questions to the municipality and hope that municipality will solve the problems instead of creating a dialogue, solving problems together and stimulating self-reliance (GR). Another major disadvantage that was often mentioned with regard to digital meetings was the inability to pick up on non-verbal signals and being able to read emotions. Not only did the regional area coordinators found this annoying, this was also often indicated by residents themselves in the municipality of Westerkwartier. Residents indicated that they think it is important that municipal employees really know their own municipality and residents well. The general idea was that people get to know each other less well during a digital meeting compared to a physical meeting.

Also, the meetings between municipal colleagues could no longer take place easily and quickly due to the working from home advice imposed by the national government. The regional area coordinators of Westerkwartier said the following about this: *“The glow you want to give in your answers both to residents and colleagues in order to provide the best possible help is difficult to convey in emails and short messages” (02-11-2021)*. There is no sparring about answers and often people think more critically about online messages compared to answers that you give face-to-face. In some municipalities, digital meetings were hard to establish. OL even indicated that if everything was online forever she might have resigned. Too many digital meeting are therefore not always appreciated. The social aspect of the work of regional area coordinators is therefore highly valued.

However, as the corona crisis progressed, a turnaround was noticed both among municipalities and residents. When the ignorance about the virus was diminished, residents were a bit more open to doing more digital meetings (WW). However, this still depends on how digitally skilled people are despite the fact that people want to keep in touch.

4.1.2 Community challenges

There was also thought about ways to minimize the consequences of the coronavirus. Even though many regional area coordinators indicated that they have no insight into the problems inside homes, they still did notice that the pandemic had a lot of impact on people and the communities themselves. ED said: *“There are a lot of activities that make life so worthwhile for people, but couldn't be performed due to the corona regulations and that did something to people I think. So, I think that the virus had a lot of negative impact on people's physical and maybe also on the mental state of people”* (29-10-2021). On the other hand, welfare state professionals do have more insight into what goes on behind the front door and mental problems. The welfare state professional from Oldambt, therefore, said that they say that young people, in particular, caused problems because they were bored, elderly who were lonely, more reports of domestic violence and divorce problems. Despite the fact that it is nowadays easier to reach out to people on social media, you often only reach the young people that do not cause problems or elderly that are not only. The young and elderly you would like to reach are often even more difficult to reach in these kinds of crises situations. And if you could reach those people, elderly are often too afraid to meet, which increases the risk of social isolation and degeneration even more (PE).

In addition to the social challenges, there have also been some logistical problems as a result of the coronavirus. Because meeting physically was no longer allowed, many initiatives have stopped and many volunteers dropped out. This was especially visible during the first lockdown. These were mainly older people who are simply afraid, people who have started doing something else in the meantime or people who no longer feel like participating because it has taken a long time. Many regional area coordinators are therefore afraid that it will be difficult to start up initiatives again after the lockdown. In addition, many residents indicated to the regional area coordinators that neighbourhood centres in particular find it difficult to set up meeting places COVID-19 proof and are nervous about what the reactions will be from people when the QR-code must be shown (VD; WK).

GR states that not the corona crisis alone affect communities in Groningen, it is a combination of factors. For example, several municipalities are dealing with earthquake problems, there is a decline in volunteers, an ageing population, but also many young people. As a result, many conflicting interests can be discovered. In addition, several municipalities have merged, which was not always easy. Especially for the municipalities of Eemsdelta, Hogeland, Westerkwartier and Westerwolde. The process of creating one new municipality is not easy if each municipality before had its own culture, way of working and agreements. Corona has thus not been the only challenge in the province of Groningen in the past year and has sometimes made other processes even more difficult.

4.1.3 Goals of regional area coordinators

When looking at the ways in which the regional area coordinators wanted to solve or reduce the above-mentioned consequences, a few similarities and differences can be discovered in the approaches between various municipalities. Starting with the similarities, at the beginning of the corona crisis the approach in every municipality was a bit reluctant, there was a lot of uncertainty about the virus and the measures. Another similarity between all municipalities was the will to continue to seek and maintain contact and make connections, both internally and externally. In Oldambt, for example, they mainly tried to involve other colleagues within the process. In this way, the work of solving problems continues internally when externally (outside) less could be done. Many regional area coordinators went looking for creative ways to keep in touch with residents, although

some municipalities focused more on this than others. These creative ways and examples are further explored in the next paragraph. Furthermore, many municipalities also worked together with welfare state professionals to reduce or prevent the consequences of the coronavirus. The role of the regional area coordinators is, therefore especially in this period, to activate people to participate when possible. This is because villages often depend on active people and if they disappear fewer initiatives will arise after the corona pandemic.

But also differences could be discovered, this mainly concerns how active the regional area coordinators were. For example, GR remained clear, strict but honest about what was not possible for residents to organize. In other municipalities, it was not so much indicated what was not possible, but rather what was possible. PE mainly focused on long-term thinking, so looking to the future, what the next challenge is and how to solve it. This is a difference with VD who mainly focused on creative short-term solutions during the lockdowns. WK has mainly reasoned from the vision of the municipality itself. This was based on the reasoning that a village or neighbourhood itself often knows best what is important and how to ensure your own liveability. A lot of responsibility is therefore placed within the village itself. It was also indicated that regional area coordinators often find it difficult to determine what is needed for a village or neighbourhood, since the municipality does not determine the national corona measurement. WW made it depend on what the residents themselves came up with, because within the municipal organization itself they were searching for what the role of regional area coordinator should entail during and after the pandemic.

4.1.4 Positive consequences

Despite all the negative consequences, there were also a few positive side effects. Digital meetings are generally more efficient for professionals. Regional area coordinators are often on the road to visit villages but since this was no longer the case, the time that is normally spent to travel could be spent on other things. In Veendam, they mainly took the time to think about how the work of the regional area coordinators and welfare state professionals could be improved and think about what is needed to further develop the work: *“I have started to collaborate much more with other stakeholders. I noticed that everyone was in need of more cooperation, discussion and coordination on what we can do for each other and residents. So, this period has helped me a lot to set up even better cooperation between many different stakeholders” (10-11-2021).*

The corona period has also forced regional area coordinators to think more creatively about how the consequences can be reduced or fixed and how to keep in touch with residents. In Table 4 a small overview has been made of such creative ways that stood out in a couple of interviews. This table mainly shows that many ways to keep in touch took place outdoors and online. The innovativeness but also creativity was especially called upon in these kinds of crises situations. However, the question is whether this creative thinking process will be stimulated again when the corona crisis is over. Many municipalities but also residents will benefit from this creative process because many municipalities in the province of Groningen do not have a sizeable fund at their disposal for initiatives, which means that you have to be able to think creatively about how to create more money. A good proposal of how this can be permanently stimulated in the future is given by the regional area coordinator of Groningen; an inspiration festival. At such a festival, every village or neighbourhood can show what they have organized that year and how they have solved their problems. In this way, residents do not only encounter each other during conversations, but they can also inspire each other with ideas and show what is possible.

Municipality	Creative solutions
Eemsdelta	Dike conversation
Groningen	'Stem van Groningen' or 'Stem van Ten Boer' (i.e. digital interactive citizen participation platform)
Stadskanaal	Balcony bingos, walking clubs
Veendam	Groceries service, call line, giveaways, neighbourhood team, walk and talk with youth, pop-up car
Oldambt	Neighbourhood car with coffee

Table 4. Creative solutions to keep in touch

(Source: Author)

4.2 Resilience

4.2.1 Creating community resilience

During the interviews, regional area coordinators were also asked how resilience in the province of Groningen was achieved and what the most important aspects were. What mainly came back in the interviews was that resilience must mainly come from the residents themselves. According to ED, the resilience must already be there, it is not something you can create from scratch. HL states the same as ED, but also that resilience depends on whether there is a good meeting space; a central place to meet each other in order to maintain resilience. Important aspects thereby that were often mentioned were creativity, self-organization, self-reliance, and independence. PE takes this one step further and argues that resilience must be part of the nature of people and states: *“Resilience is something you have to constantly reinvent and adapt to the situation and then move on”* (04-11-2021). OL and WK add that in addition to the nature of the people, it also depends on where you live. SK states that it depends on the cohesion in a village or neighbourhood; do people know each other, can they talk to each other, demographics, how active is the neighbourhood council, how creative are the people, what kind of work do welfare institutions, the church, sports clubs, etc. VD and WW mainly state that a resilient neighbourhood or village is created by resilient people who are the drivers for a common goal. People who want to take the lead and who want to put energy into certain activities with enthusiasm, are often people who are committed to their own living environment. This can even differ per neighbourhood.

Many regional area coordinators indicated the differences in the degree of resilience before and during the pandemic were not striking. ED and GR indicated that due to the corona crisis, you could really see how resilient the society actually is. One could mainly see at the beginning of the corona crisis that people started organizing things themselves out of solidarity, with each other and for each other. These are signs that a society is resilient when there is a crisis. PE says that it is not yet possible to provide insight into whether the degree of resilience has increased or decreased due to the pandemic. VD indicated that it had not seen any difference.

Nevertheless, regional area coordinators always strive to increase, stimulate or maintain the resilience. However, they generally do not have an organizing role but a supporting role. Most regional area coordinators try to identify what is going on in the neighbourhood, try to link up with that and invest in it: *“As a municipality, you have to facilitate things that residents need to remain resilient”* (ED, 29-10-2021). Regional area coordinators therefore always strive to activate people to participate in their own neighbourhood or village, try to look at what the residents find important, what residents' capacities are and how to respond to this as a municipality. If resilience is already there, regional area coordinators do not always have to respond to what is happening. But if residents ask or need help from the municipality, you as a regional area coordinator must still be there for the residents. Visibility in the neighbourhood also plays an important role. In this way,

residents know who the regional area coordinators are and therefore are more likely to ask questions. WW states that it wants to expand the area-oriented work. This means that regional area coordinators will be actively present in the neighbourhood and thereby link the connection between the physical and social domain. In this way, you are more accessible to residents. However, this is now difficult due to the 1,5-meter distance rule, but even then it is important that residents are able to contact regional area coordinators, know where they can go and get a quick answer to the questions they have.

The difficult thing about the task of increasing, stimulating or maintaining resilience is that citizen participation is somewhat more difficult to implement in practice than it is on paper and especially during this period. OL says that the aim is mainly to increase the co-reliance of the communities and in this way to keep the villages and neighbourhoods liveable. However, there is no special formula for this because what applies to one community does not apply to the other community. That is why it remains so important to respond to the needs of residents and what is mainly asked for. However, the difficulty also lies in the fact that if there is nothing going on in a neighbourhood to keep people active for improving their own living environment. Setting long-term goals is therefore difficult as it can deter and demotivate residents. Regional area coordinators are therefore happy with the small steps that are taken. This is explained by VD: *“Often people are willing to participate if it is a short-term project, but once the project is over, people drop out again. So, you have to be dynamic and let people go, but you also have to find them again when you need them. It is becoming a very dynamic game”* (10-11-2021). This dynamic game shows that not every resident, initiative, neighbourhood or village is driven by the same motivation and that this motivation can differ per situation. Regional area coordinators must therefore constantly reassess and redefine the situation in order to provide the best possible assistance.

4.2.2 Differences in resilience

During the interviews, it was also asked whether regional area coordinators see a difference in resilience when comparing different areas and communities. The results showed that there is a difference between the size of the village (small vs large) and between socio-economic scores (low vs high).

In larger villages the social cohesion is often lower as people are less reachable, everything is more anonymous, and people have often consciously opted for independence. The structures in larger villages are often put together differently and there is no natural self-organizing network. The regional area coordinators of Westerwolde see this especially in Ter Apel and the regional area coordinators of Oldambt in Winschoten. Smaller villages often have fewer facilities which mean that people are more dependent on each other, so connections are often closer (SK). People know each other better and see each other more, in this way people will help each other faster. Many regional area coordinators speak of ‘Noaberschap’ and more social cohesion in smaller villages. Noaberschap in smaller, predominantly agricultural, communities can be seen as a moral duty to assist if they need help. HL adds to that: *“Small villages are generally better organized, which means that these villages quickly realize which people needed a little more attention or help”* (02-11-2021). This also applies to sports associations or a community centre, such organized groups already have a social network, which makes it easier to maintain contact. Westerkwartier shows a clear distinction in the types of villages, they make a distinction between large villages, basic villages, and residential villages. In the large villages and basic villages there are facilities, in the residential villages there are no facilities. People in residential villages are often more independent and the help they ask for is often specifically demand-oriented.

The difference in resilience as a result of socio-economic status is mainly addressed by the regional area coordinators of Hogeland, Oldambt, Pekela, Stadskanaal and Veendam. Factors such as education level, social problems, type of housing, earthquake problems, debts and crime all play a role in the degree of resilience. People with a low socio-economic status often have no options, no resources, no attention and less energy to concentrate on improving the living environment. Neighbourhoods and people with multiple problems often receive more support and attention from welfare organizations and community work. People with a higher socio-economic status are better organized and often also have the means to concentrate on improving the living environment. These kinds of people also get support, but this is minimal. Support and help from regional area coordinators can therefore decrease as the resilience increases. This support can vary from extra encouragement, just applying for a permit, information from experts, funds or to show how to set up an initiative.

4.2.3 Resilience in post-corona

How the level of resilience will develop after the pandemic remains to be seen, yet three municipalities gave their view on how they think it will develop based on results from the past. WK is convinced that you can learn something from every pandemic and crisis. The villages in the municipality of Westerkwartier are often smaller, which means that there has traditionally been a lot of resilience and 'Noaberschap', and not just now during this pandemic. However, they do see an upward and downward trend in this. An example of such a trend is given about the theatre associations; 10 years ago the enthusiasm for such associations completely collapsed and 3 years later it is completely revived without a particular reason. SK said that they think that corona does not necessarily affect the resilience of residents, how residents organize themselves and the working method of these regional area coordinators. They state: *"Neighbourhoods with multi-problems were already there before the corona crisis and will therefore not be different during or after the corona" (05-11-2021)*. The working method of the regional area coordinators of Stadskanaal will therefore not change, but rather become more intensive. HL hopes that the resilience and self-reliance that has been built up will be preserved. It is a municipality that has merged and now sees that the resilience of the inhabitants can have a positive influence on new policy plans.

4.3 Citizens initiatives

4.3.1 Types of initiatives and influence

The type of citizens' initiatives that the regional area coordinators in the province of Groningen mainly see were often the same in essence, but still very diverse in terms of ideas. It often concerns the realization of facilities in the public space, so in the physical domain. Examples that were often mentioned are initiatives around greenery, playgrounds, outdoor sports areas, food forests, allotments, biodiversity, dog playgrounds and beautifying the living environment. As residents get a taste of it, regional area coordinators see that the initiatives evolve towards the social domain, so more focused on meeting and taking care of each other. ED states that the first shift towards more social citizen initiatives was seen during the decentralisation of government tasks. Municipalities have less budget to realize initiatives, through which residents themselves stood up to develop informal help and care structures. Due to corona, citizen initiatives within the social domain are rising in popularity. In general, all regional area coordinators are happy with all ideas that citizens have about their own living environment. OL explained: *"We always see citizens initiatives as a good form of citizen participation and there is always room for this within our municipality" (30-11-2021)*.

Often no choices have to be made about which citizen initiatives are supported. In general, the regional area coordinators can answer all requests and provide assistance. Every initiative has a different trajectory which makes it easier to support each initiative (HL). However, this does not mean that everyone gets what is asked for and all ideas are realized. Regional area coordinators have to remain realistic about what is possible and whether the entire community agrees (GR, PE). In the

last paragraph of section 4.2.2 it was already stated which kind of support is given to different groups of people, but what is always the same is that communities themselves must ensure support from society. Community support is seen by all regional area coordinators as the most important aspect of citizen initiatives. This community support can be created by having discussions with initiators and residents, signature campaigns, surveys or residents' meetings. After this support can be proved, regional area coordinators and initiators will jointly look at what a community already has and can create themselves (i.e. knowledge, money and networks), and how regional area coordinators can add to this to get the initiative off the ground. It is therefore always assumed that citizens have to do it themselves and that regional area coordinators only offer help where citizens get stuck. Another argument that is mentioned by ED and VD why citizens' initiatives are not realized is if an idea is in conflict with the policy of the municipality or if there are conflicting interests between residents.

Citizen initiatives are not organized by one type of people. What became clear from the interviews was that you have disorganized residents and organized residents. Disorganized residents are residents who come up with spontaneous ideas and try to seek support. Organized residents are people who are members of a neighbourhood or village association, a village centre, sports association, neighbourhood council, etc. and who therefore already have a fixed network and organization. All regional area coordinators indicated that citizens' initiatives can be organized by both groups. However, you did see that during the corona crisis, people in fixed organizations could continue to organize more easily than people with spontaneous ideas (ED). Individual people often did not know where they stood during the pandemic because the national measures were constantly changing. Several regional area coordinators indicated that individual people who come up with a spontaneous idea are often sent on to an already organized group of people in order to be able to find community support. SK adds that they find this important because it also creates social cohesion in the neighbourhood. It can even be that sometimes a similar initiative takes place elsewhere in the village, at such a moment the neighbourhood council can link those two initiators and can join forces.

During the corona crisis, there has been a decrease in the number of citizen initiatives, because it was simply not possible due to the corona measures. HL adds that when people had an idea it was difficult to find support. During the summer of 2021, there was again an increase in the number of citizen initiatives. SK finds it surprising that after a heavy lockdown so many new initiatives were organized again. ED thinks this is a good example of resilience, as soon as things are allowed and possible again, new energy was created to come up with new ideas. In contrast, ED and VD find it difficult to determine purely based on of citizen initiatives alone whether people are resilient or not. However, citizen initiatives can contribute to or boost the social cohesion, liveability and resilience of a neighbourhood. Citizens' initiatives allow people to talk to each other and meet each other, this can create new contacts and friendship: *"If you have an idea and that idea can also be realized, then you enter a certain state of mind; a euphoric feeling of yes, it is possible. You will share this positive experience on a birthday and with that you will also make other people think. This is how you try to make that circle bigger"* (GR, 25-11-2021). If you want to maintain this social cohesion, liveability and resilience, it is important to continue to support citizens initiatives as regional area coordinators with funds, advice and networks.

4.3.2 Co-production

Regional area coordinators were also asked about their own role within citizens initiatives. It is important for regional area coordinators that if citizen initiatives arise that they try to make every effort to make those citizen initiatives possible. In this way, they invest in citizens resilience, but also maintain the resilience that is already there (ED). Is it very demotivating for citizens that if there is a good idea, it is not supported by the local government.

A bottleneck for citizens is the long procedures within the municipality, which means that initiatives are constantly postponed. HL also experiences and acknowledges this and talks about long procedures of a year, but believes that this is mainly due to the large municipality it has with 52 villages. However, this can differ per municipality as not every municipality has the same amount of villages and thus shorter procedures. For this cooperation to run more smoothly, it is important as a municipality to have a clear idea of what the goal is regarding resilience and liveability.

Another bottleneck for co-production that was often mentioned was financial support. Citizens' initiatives often want to receive money from the municipality, but municipalities often do not have enough funds for this. OL believes that there should be awareness within municipalities that there are limited resources and if citizens want something, they should take action themselves to raise money. Regional area coordinators can help to set up crowdfund actions and contact other funds, but not without the full involvement of citizens. A major step that several municipalities want to take is to transfer the money that is available for initiatives to the citizens themselves. This means that citizens will have the money under their own management. In this way citizens can decide for themselves what they find important and whether and how much money they want to spend on a specific initiative. However, many civil servants find this still frightening, they do not know the citizens well which means that there is a lack of trust. Regional area coordinators are disappointed in this and try to take the civil servants with them into the neighbourhood and show them the citizens initiatives to gain trust. This is not only positive for the civil servants, but also motivating for residents. In this way, they get the idea that the municipality is really interested and that they receive appreciation for their efforts. It is thus important that local government and citizens do it together, this is reflected by the regional area coordinators of Westerwolde: *"You are talking about a society or community and the word says it all, you live together in a village so you have to do it together"* (23-11-2021). It is therefore very important for regional area coordinators that they can appeal to the resilience of citizens. Overall, many participants mentioned that for a good co-production it is important that you act professionally, try to keep each other motivated, but also be able to let go when the motivation is really not there.

5. Discussion

After analysing the results this chapter will discuss the most unexpected results in detail and draw out implications through the lens of the theoretical framework. Different aspects of the data will be examined whether the theories discussed earlier prove to be valid and useful for the planning practice.

5.1 The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the work of regional area coordinators

Due to the pandemic, much more effort was required from regional area coordinators than usual. An important theme is keeping in touch with citizens and remaining visible to citizens. Because regional area coordinators and citizens cannot just get together in person, creative solutions have been devised to be able to make a number of decisions and to keep in touch. This is consistent with the literature, where it was shown that communication is one of the most important factors to enhance community engagement and cooperation during the COVID-19 crisis (Yardley et al., 2020).

Although situations between local government and citizens most of the time require a personal approach, regional area coordinators now mainly had to limit themselves to digital contact only. Regional area coordinators were therefore quite active in showing their faces in online meetings or making their voices heard over the phone. Just as stated by Criado et al. (2020), a lot has been invested in using online communication channels. However, special attention was asked for those who are not digitally skilled. Residents who cannot be reached often needed that extra helping hand and support. The problem of the costs of connection to the digital world stated by Den Broeder et al. (2021) is however not mentioned by the regional area coordinators in Groningen. This can be seen as a positive result.

The social resilience that already exists offers, for now, sufficient support for regional area coordinators to discover what the right role is for them during and after the pandemic. However, long-term problems are already arising such as study delay and mental problems for youth and loneliness for elderly. This entails many uncertainties for the future and requires a more intensive and perhaps a different approach from regional area coordinators.

5.2 Resilience as part of the nature of people

The enormous boost that has arisen from the voluntariness of residents is admirable. Without the local government asking, there are plenty of examples that have shown resilience from the residents in the province of Groningen. This is in line with what Steen and Brandsen (2020) stated; participatory planning is only working because citizens have cooperated in big numbers during the corona crisis. In addition, many associations, churches, and welfare organizations have also taken the initiative to bring people together and to continue to maintain resilience. Many municipalities themselves were reluctant to play an explicit role in coordinating citizen initiatives to maintain this resilience at the start of the corona crisis. Besides the fact that support from local government was sometimes really not possible in the pandemic, however, being an overactive local government is also seen as a negative thing in literature. It can cause counterproductivity (Duijn et al., 2020). Society does not thus always need local government to be a society. Many residents can take care of themselves or there are plenty of other organizations in the neighbourhood that can also arrange support for residents and maintain resilience. However, regional area coordinators always keep an eye on things to adapt initiatives to specific situations and certain communities. It can therefore be stated that resilience does not arise from co-production and citizens initiatives, but resilience is often already part of the nature of people in the province of Groningen. This is not entirely consistent with the literature. Here it was argued that a shift to more resilient communities requires a bottom-up approach with three stages: bonding, bridging and linking (Granovetter, 1981; Esteban, 2020). Linking is the last stage and means that cooperation between local government and resident's groups

is needed, however, resilience can be strengthened without the help of the government. Social capital can therefore be seen as a more important factor in the process towards more resilient communities. Resilience can, however, be boosted by co-production and citizens initiatives.

That resilience can be boosted by citizens initiatives can be explained through the shift from the physical domain to the social domain where CRIs and CBIs will take place. As citizens get more confidence in creating initiatives due to more experience also a shift can take place in level of resilience. In the literature, three groups were revealed that were based on innovation and self-reliance: high level, middle life and low level resilience (Fransen and Peralta, 2020). Although this level still depends on personal, social, and environmental factors and can overlap, more experience can provide a higher level of resilience. This was confirmed by the regional area coordinators. Another factor that influences this in Groningen is the increasingly empowering society, which can be traced back to the first generation of the rise of citizen initiatives (Lenos et al., 2006; van de Wijdeven et al., 2013). An example of this that emerged from the results is the increasing demand for financial support. Because citizens enforce their influence in policy, they will also be more empowered to make choices about their own living environment. This will give citizens more confidence to set up a CART process as described by Pfefferbaum et al. (2013) to ensure more resilience that gives communities more certainty for future crises.

5.3 Differences in needs requires a different approach for each initiative

Often there are similarities and differences between communities in certain neighbourhoods and specific initiatives. As could be seen, this is often due to the type of initiative (physical or social domain) and equipment (the extent to which citizens have resources at their disposal). There is often a demand for two types of support. In the first place, this is often financial support, it makes no difference what kind of initiative it is or to what extent citizens have resources. However, due to the limited resources of many municipalities in Groningen, it is often harder to provide initiatives with big amounts of financial support. This did not cause any conflicts between citizens and regional area coordinators. This kind of support can be linked to the instrumental approach described by Oude Vrielink & Van de Wijdeven (2011). Secondly, residents ask for information. Residents often ask for specific information on certain topics in order to reduce the knowledge gap. However, here it does make a difference to what extent citizens have human capital at their disposal. Despite these differences and similarities, regional area coordinators always try to connect to what is needed to provide the best possible help. Therefore, customization is needed as described by VNG (2020), whereby regional area coordinators will have to reassess every time what initiatives need and what they already have at their disposal.

Subsequently, based on information from the regional area coordinators, initiators seem to indicate that they find it valuable if the relationship between local government and citizens runs smoothly. This also affects the degree of citizen participation. This is in line with Lowndes et al. (2006) who argued that government being responsive is seen as an important factor for citizens participation. When local government does not have the ability to empathize with the wishes, needs and situations of initiators, the motivation of citizens to participate will decrease. This creates a mismatch between supply and demand for support. To avoid this mismatch and for cooperation to run smoothly, it is important for regional area coordinators to have a clear idea of what the goal is with regard to resilience and liveability when organizing initiatives. The strategy of regional area coordinators and the municipality can therefore go hand in hand with independent citizens' goals and community actions. However, joint openness and two-way communication are always needed to achieve a shared vision and that creates an ideal situation through user input, municipal support and end-product success for every stakeholder (Cilliers and Timmermans, 2014). Most regional area coordinators did this by having an ongoing dialogue and setting up long-term visions. However, when the situation changes, such as during a pandemic, the long-term visions should be adapted to the

current situation. This also affects citizens initiatives. Although in general there are two thoughts and goals that often ensure the establishment of citizen initiatives in Groningen; 1) increasing the liveability, self-reliance, and social cohesion, or 2) identifying a problem and wanting to solve it. In the corona crisis, it could be seen that more initiatives were being organized that have to do with how do I help people within this difficult period. The social effect as described in the article of Boonstra and Boelens (2011) could be seen clearly.

5.4 Supporting role of regional area coordinators

Regional area coordinators can perform various tasks with regard to citizens' initiatives, but this role is often seen as supporting rather than organizing. This role can be linked to the instrumental approach of Oude Vrielink and van de Wijdeven (2011). Most citizens initiatives in Groningen are supported through financing, material resources or knowledge. Regional area coordinators are thus mainly focused on facilitation instead of stimulation. Although regional area coordinators are personally involved through an ongoing dialogue and visiting the different initiatives, the personal approach is still lacking. This contradicts what Oude Vrielink and van de Wijdeven (2011) stated; there is always a mix in support roles. A reason for this might be that the area-oriented approach needs to be further developed, in such a way that the role of regional area coordinators becomes more focused. This allows them to focus more on the personal approach instead of just dividing money and material resources. This can also be created by stimulation citizens to think more creatively about acquiring money.

The possibility of offering financial support is thus not seen as the most important part of the duties for the regional area coordinators when supporting citizens initiatives. In comparison with all other forms of support, it is not that prominent for regional area coordinators. This stands in contrast to the way citizens initiatives usually view the supporting role of the regional area coordinators. Citizens often see financial support as most important to get initiatives off the ground more easily. This explains why citizens often ask for financial or material support. This behaviour of the support-seeking citizens was often interpreted as hindering by the regional area coordinators as offering support is not all about financial support alone. As a result, other forms of support, such as the personal approach, receive less attention.

In addition, various characteristics of regional area coordinators can contribute to the realization of citizen initiatives. One of the most important qualities is to ensure that citizens are heard and do not get lost in the laws and regulations of the local government. This is in line with the wish of many initiators that want citizens' initiatives to take place quickly. Building a network between initiators and the local government is also seen as an important task of regional area coordinators. From the list made by Duijn et al. (2020) of how local government can support citizens' initiatives, the following important points emerged in the province of Groningen: recognize and legitimize, appreciate, identify services and support functions, assist in obtaining resources and reliable. Regional area coordinators performing as a brokering-function seems to be less important.

6. Conclusion

In this chapter, a summary of the research will be given that will end with an understanding of the main discovery of this thesis. By answering the main research question a theoretical argument will be made based on the case study results and analysis. This will help to make statements that will place the findings into a broader context.

6.1 Research aim and current situation

This thesis started with the message that COVID-19 has given planners a chance to rethink how they can best help communities. Community action was seen as a vital part of this recovery. However, the role of citizens is changing towards more active citizenship instead of only receiving services and bearing rights. Based on this development, the question was raised what the best role of planners could be to support these active citizens as best as possible to become more resilient. Community resilience help community networks to cope with and recover from the COVID-19 effects and to better cope with adverse events in the future. This thesis, therefore, sought to answer the following main research question: *'How can regional area coordinators help to create resilient neighbourhood communities together with citizens initiatives to emerge stronger out of the COVID-19 crisis in the province of Groningen?'* The study aimed was to find out how resilience is achieved in the province of Groningen, how citizens participation and initiatives can help to create this resilience in co-production with local government and which role regional area coordinators have in relation to citizens initiatives and community resilience. The work of regional area coordinators was specifically looked at because they are often the first point of contact for citizens with questions towards local government. Citizens and regional area coordinators are therefore an important sparring partner for each other.

In the current situation, one could see that the main obstacle was not only the COVID-19 pandemic, but also the process of rearranging municipalities in the province of Groningen. In some municipalities, this meant that the function of the regional area coordinator was new or had to be redesigned. This rearrangement took place before the corona crisis, so the virus has ensured that regional area coordinators in merged municipalities were given a difficult task. In advance, it was not expected that this would have a big influence on the work of regional area coordinators. However, this has not had much impact on the citizens. What has had consequences for citizens is the corona crisis itself. The literature showed that the vast majority of the inhabitants of the province of Groningen were affected by the crisis, where loneliness and lack of social contact predominated. This was confirmed in the interviews. The lack of physical contact also affected the work of regional area coordinators as contact with residents encompasses a large part of their work.

The role that regional area coordinators had was a supporting role and not an organizing role. This means that citizens themselves had to shape their ideas about the initiative and the regional area coordinators will provide support where needed. The most important elements for citizens were short communication lines and tailor-made support. Customized support was especially difficult in times of the lockdowns, which means that few new citizen initiatives have arisen within the physical domain. However, many new initiatives have emerged within the social domain that has mainly focused on helping your neighbours at a distance in these difficult times. Regional area coordinators have also started to think more creatively about helping residents. However, the question is whether this creative thinking process will be stimulated again when the pandemic is no longer present.

Resilience mainly stems from the nature of the people in Groningen and not necessarily from citizen initiatives. However, a community needs people who want to take the lead in making the common goals true and to maintain resilience. This means that to create resilience, regional area coordinators or local government are not necessarily needed. Support and help from regional area coordinators

for citizens initiatives can therefore decrease as the resilience increases. Although, community resilience can be strengthened by organizing citizen initiatives in co-production. As a result, the ideal situation can be ensured in cooperation; a pleasant living environment for citizens in which the goals of the municipality can be achieved.

6.2 Improving support for citizens initiatives towards community resilience

The results of this research do not only contribute to knowledge about how to create resilient neighbourhood communities in the best possible way, but also how planning strategies of regional area coordinators can be improved. In other words, which implications do planners and local government need to take forward from this pandemic for future resilient city planning.

As said before regional area coordinators are mostly using the instrumental approach to support citizens initiatives. However, there is a balance needed between the instrumental approach and the personal approach to empower citizens. Lesser attention should be paid to official procedures, regulations and focusing on dividing financial means. In this way, more attention can be paid to the goals and wishes' of citizens and how citizens themselves can influence their own living environment, instead of what local government want. Being responsive and transparent as local government will show citizens that their concerns and ideas are being heard and acted upon. This will result in more active citizens as well as in citizens' personal success and growth which in turn keep those people engaged in the community and neighbourhood. Next to that, citizens will be less focused on financial support only. Holding up a mirror to citizens and following their self-consciousness will help them to have clear and stable ambitions for initiatives without losing to be inspiring for others and flexible.

In this thesis, both the positive and negative sides of the corona crisis were discussed, but nobody knows when the 'normal level' will return. The initiatives that have arisen to help each other during the pandemic, but also those that arose outside times of crisis must all be seen as equally relevant. The new forms of cooperation and social initiatives that have arisen not only help citizens but also various neighbourhood organizations, municipalities, and provinces. By investing in co-production, community spaces can be created that meet public and policy needs. However, two things are important here: 1) go further than just collecting opinions and wishes from citizens, but create an ongoing dialogue between local government and citizens and reflect on each other and each other's ideas, and 2) do not only invest in short-term solutions, but also long-term preparedness. This does not mean to fully predict the future, but trying to understand and start recovering and adapting for future implications based on developments today.

In conclusion, it is known that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic will be significant and felt for a long time to come. There is much that citizens themselves can do, but there is much more which citizens and local government can do when working together. With co-production, the corona impact can be mitigated to bounce forward to improve well-being for post-corona communities and increase resilience. A new way of working can create new ways of thinking and planning strategies resulting in a more citizens-oriented system with community-driven initiatives that turned out to be important both for the individual and for society as a whole during this pandemic.

7. Reflection

This last chapter will reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of this thesis and how much impact this had on achieving the aims of this research. A consideration will be given about the pros and cons of the whole research. Finally, recommendations for future research will be made.

7.1 Reflection on research and process

When doing this research some limitations occurred. A disadvantage of doing qualitative research is that participants give a different meaning to the concept of resilience, how resilience is stimulated and what supporting citizens' initiatives mean. This can ensure that participants will answer the interview questions differently because everyone will interpret the concepts differently than previously formulated in the report. However, this problem was limited as much as possible by clearly indicating what the concept meant in this study.

A case study in combination with a purposive sampling strategy is not necessarily aimed at generalizing results. Due to the low number of observations, care should be taken when generalizing. Nevertheless, an attempt has been made to provide a good reflection of participants in this study. The number of participants per municipality and the function of these participants were taken into account to match the formulated research frameworks as closely as possible. However, it was not possible to conduct ten interviews with a regional area coordinator from every municipality in the province of Groningen, as mentioned earlier in section 3.2.3. The lack of information from this interview makes it more difficult to form a general picture.

The coronavirus has also influenced the process of this research. Due to the pandemic and the measures imposed by the national government, only one interview was able to take place physically, one by telephone and the remainder of the interviews took place in an online environment. The interview often started later due to technical defects in the online environment. Examples of this are that the researcher and participants could not hear or see each other. As a result, non-verbal communication was excluded which influenced the conversation. This means that the interviews were not conducted in equal circumstances, which may have posed a problem for the answers given. Next to that, it was sometimes difficult to get in touch with the predefined target group. Regional area coordinators have been very busy since the lockdowns which mean that they have less time for interviews.

7.2 Future research recommendations

Based on the results, discussion and associated conclusion, some guidelines for further research can be indicated. First, this research mainly looked at how resilient neighbourhood communities can be created after the corona crisis and what support from regional area coordinators and citizen initiatives contribute to this. However, this research did not look at which factors hinder this process. A comparative study that looks at elements that are decisive in this process will give a deeper understanding. Secondly, this research mainly looked at the perspective of social actors and not at the perspective of initiators of citizens initiatives. More of these stakeholders would have ensured a broader understanding of the main subject. Research about the perspective of initiators can enrich the outcomes of this research. Third, the research showed that it is difficult to already draw conclusions about whether planning strategies will/should change due to the pandemic. It is therefore interesting to conduct a systematic and long-term research that will look at the planning strategies of regional area coordinators before, during and after the corona crisis. A fourth and final research recommendation is a comparison with the other provinces. Different provinces in the Netherlands may have different but also comparable problems concerning resilience and communities. A comparative study in more regions will lead to more insights from which different regional area coordinators can learn.

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9. Appendix

A. Informed consent

A.1 English version

Consent form for a Master thesis at the University of Groningen, Faculty of Spatial Sciences (Study: Society, Sustainability and Planning) to research the influence of regional area coordinators on making neighbourhood communities more resilient.

Participant

By signing this form I acknowledge that:

- I have been informed about the research project.
- I was able to ask questions about the research and my questions were answered to my satisfaction.
- I had enough time to decide to participate in the research.
- I am aware that my participation is completely voluntary and anonymous.
- I am aware that I can skip a question if I do not want to answer this specific question.
- I am aware that I can withdraw from the interview at any time without having to give a reason.
- I am aware that the interview data is locked and will not be shared with third parties or published.
- I am aware that interview data is only used for educational purposes.

I give my permission for recording the interview:

- Yes
- No

I agree with my participation in this research under the above-mentioned conditions.

Name participant:

Signature participant:

Date:

Researcher:

I declare that I have informed the participant about the research and his/her rights. I will notify the participant about matters that could influence his/her participation in the research.

Name researcher:

Signature researcher:

Date:

A.2 Dutch version

Toestemmingsformulier voor een masterscriptie aan de Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, Faculteit Ruimtelijke Wetenschappen (Studie: Society, Sustainability and Planning) voor onderzoek naar de invloed van gebiedsregisseurs op het veerkrachtigere maken van buurtgemeenschappen.

Deelnemer

Door dit formulier te ondertekening erken ik dat:

- Ik ben geïnformeerd over het onderzoeksproject.
- Ik kon vragen stellen over het onderzoek en mijn vragen werden naar tevredenheid beantwoord.
- Ik had genoeg tijd om te besluiten om mee te doen aan het onderzoek.
- Ik ben mij ervan bewust dat mijn deelname volledig vrijwillig en anoniem is.
- Ik ben mij ervan bewust dat ik een vraag kan overslaan als ik deze specifieke vraag niet wil beantwoorden.
- Ik ben mij ervan bewust dat ik mij op elk moment kan terugtrekken uit het onderzoek, zonder dat ik een reden hoeft op te geven.
- Ik ben mij ervan bewust dat de interviewgegevens worden vergrendeld en niet met derden worden gedeeld of gepubliceerd.
- Ik ben mij ervan bewust dat interviewgegevens alleen worden gebruikt voor educatieve doeleinden.

Ik geef toestemming om het interview op te nemen:

- Ja
- Nee

Ik geef hiermee aan dat ik akkoord ga met mijn deelname in dit interview onder de bovenstaande voorwaarden.

Naam deelnemer:

Handtekening deelnemer:

Datum:

Onderzoeker

Ik verklaar dat ik de deelnemer heb geïnformeerd over het onderzoek en zijn/haar rechten. Ik zal de deelnemer informeren over zaken die zijn/haar deelname aan het onderzoek kunnen beïnvloeden.

Naam onderzoeker:

Handtekening onderzoeker:

Datum:

B. Interview guide

B.1.1 English version: Interview guide regional area coordinators

General introduction

- First acquaintance and explaining the purpose of the research
- Discussing and fill in the consent form

Introductory questions

- Can you tell me something about yourself?
 - ➔ Who are you, age, what do you do in daily life, etc.
- How would you describe your function as a regional area coordinator in (..)?
 - ➔ How long have you been working as an regional area coordinator in (..)?
 - ➔ Have you previously worked as an regional area coordinator in other places?

Main questions

Part 1: Questions related to COVID-19

- In what ways has the coronavirus and the pandemic impacted the neighbourhood communities in (..)?
 - ➔ Consequences, influence on individuals, households, etc.
- In what ways has the coronavirus and the pandemic impacted your work, both negative and positive?
 - ➔ Biggest challenges, changes, etc.
- Can you tell me something about the vision you have to tackle the consequences of the corona virus in (..)?
 - ➔ Ambitions and goals
 - ➔ How does the past influence your vision of the future?
- How do you think regional area coordinators, and planners in general, can help communities emerge stronger out of the pandemic?

Part 2: Questions related to resilience

- What is your definition of resilience and resilient neighbourhood communities?
 - ➔ Key aspects
- How do you think resilient neighbourhood communities are created?
 - ➔ Is each process the same or different? And in what way?
- How do you think the resilience in (...) could be increased?
 - ➔ Biggest challenges
 - ➔ Which result do you see as the most successful? And how can we evaluate this?
 - ➔ Is it possible to generalize this results for future plans and policies?
- Who do you think are responsible for resilience in neighbourhood communities? (e.g. citizens, municipalities, (national) government, companies, a combination).
 - ➔ Why and how can they contribute?
- Are there neighbourhood communities in (..) that need more attention to increase resilience?
 - ➔ Why and how can this be achieved?
- Do you think the concept of resilience is just a post-pandemic trend, or is it a concept that will last longer?
 - ➔ Why and what will the effects be for future-proof planning?

Part 3: Questions related to citizens' initiatives and public participation

- What do you think a citizens' initiative entails?
 - ➔ Are there different types of citizens' initiatives?
- In what way you think citizens' initiatives contribute to the resilience of neighbourhood

communities?

- ➔ What makes a citizens' initiatives 'good' or 'bad'? Examples?
- Have you seen an increase in the number of citizens' initiatives during the corona crisis?
 - ➔ How and by whom were these citizens' initiatives organised?
 - ➔ What was the motivation behind these initiatives? (Feelings, needs, reasons, etc.)
 - ➔ What ambitions were these initiatives trying to achieve? And did these ambitions align with local government goals and agenda?
 - ➔ What kind of people participated in these initiatives?
 - ➔ Did these initiatives had an impact on the community and what kind of impact? (Sense of community, sense of place, responsibility, resilience, public participation, social cohesion, etc.)
- What is your role within these citizens' initiatives?
 - ➔ What is the role of citizens and government institutions (municipality, province, government) within these citizens' initiatives?
- Taking all the advantages and disadvantages of citizens' initiatives into account, do you think the role of citizens' initiatives should become more important in the future?
 - ➔ What would be the ideal role of local authorities in this regard? (Communication, financial, thinking along, regulating)? What would be the ideal role of citizens in this?

Closing question

- Do you have any comments, explanations or other statements you would like to share or add to the interview?

Then I would like to thank you for your time and participation in my research. I hope you feel that you have been able to tell your story. If you have any remaining questions, you can always send me an email on: i.zomerdijk.1@student.rug.nl.

B.1.2 Dutch version: Vragenlijst gebiedsregisseurs

Algemene introductie

- Kennismaking en uitleggen wat het doel van het onderzoek is
- Bespreken en invullen van het toestemmingsformulier

Introductie vragen:

- Kan je je iets over jezelf vertellen?
 - ➔ Wie ben je, leeftijd, wat doe je in het dagelijks leven, etc., functie/werkzaamheden
- Hoe zou u uw functie als gebiedsregisseur omschrijven in (plaats)?
 - ➔ Hoelang bent u al werkzaam als gebiedsregisseur in (plaats)?
 - ➔ Heeft u hiervoor ook in andere plaatsen gewerkt als gebiedsregisseur?

Hoofdvragen

Deel 1: Vragen met de betrekking tot COVID-19

- Op welke manieren heeft het coronavirus en de pandemie invloed gehad op de gemeenschappen en wijken in (plaats), zowel negatief als positief?
 - ➔ Gevolgen, invloed op mensen, invloed op wijken, etc.
- Op welke manieren heeft het coronavirus en de pandemie invloed gehad op uw werk, zowel negatief als positief?
 - ➔ Wat was de grootste uitdaging?
 - ➔ Is de manier waarop uw werkt/dingen aanpakt veranderd?
 - Hoe kijkt uw tegen deze veranderingen aan?
 - ➔ Zou er nog meer moeten veranderen en/of gelijk blijven?
- Kunt u iets vertellen over de visie die u heeft om de gevolgen van de corona crisis aan te pakken in (plaats)?
 - ➔ Ambities en doelen
 - ➔ Welke gevolgen hebben hierbij een grote rol gespeeld?
 - ➔ Op wat voor manier speelt het verleden een rol in uw visie op de toekomst?
 - ➔ Welke situatie zou u met uw visie willen bereiken?
- Hoe kunnen gebiedsregisseurs, en planners in het algemeen, volgens u gemeenschappen helpen om sterker uit de pandemie te komen?

Deel 2: Vragen met de betrekking tot veerkracht

- Wat is uw definitie van veerkracht en veerkrachtige buurten/gemeenschappen?
 - ➔ Belangrijkste aspecten
- Hoe komen volgens u veerkrachtige buurten/gemeenschappen tot stand?
 - ➔ Is elk proces hetzelfde of verschillend? En op wat voor manier?
- Hoe kan de veerkracht in (plaats) volgens u worden vergroot?
 - ➔ Wat zijn daarbij de grootste uitdagingen?
 - ➔ Welk resultaat ziet u als meest succesvol? En hoe kunnen we dit evalueren?
 - ➔ Is het mogelijk om dit resultaat te generaliseren voor toekomstige plannen en beleid?
- Wie zijn er volgens u verantwoordelijk voor de veerkracht in wijken en gemeenschappen? (Gemeente, nationale overheidsinstanties, burgers, bedrijven, een combinatie?)
 - ➔ Waarom en op wat voor manier kunnen ze bijdragen?
- Zijn er bepaalde wijken en/of gemeenschappen in (plaats) die meer aandacht nodig hebben om de veerkracht te vergroten om sterker uit de pandemie te komen?
 - ➔ Waarom en hoe kan dit worden gerealiseerd?
- Denkt u dat het concept veerkracht slecht een trend is na de pandemie, of is het een concept dat blijvend zal zijn?
 - ➔ Waarom en wat zullen de effecten zijn voor toekomstbestendige planning?

Deel 3: Vragen met de betrekking tot burgerinitiatieven en publieke participatie

- Wat houdt volgens u een burgerinitiatief in?
 - ➔ Zijn er verschillende soorten burgerinitiatieven?
- Op wat voor manier dragen burgerinitiatieven volgens u bij aan de veerkracht van de samenleving?
 - ➔ Wat maakt een burgerinitiatief 'goed' of 'slecht'? Voorbeelden?
- Heeft u een stijging gezien in het aantal burgerinitiatieven tijdens de corona crisis? Voorbeelden van burgerinitiatieven?
 - ➔ Hoe en door wie werden deze burgerinitiatieven georganiseerd?
 - ➔ Wat was de gedachte en motivatie achter initiatieven? (Gevoelens, behoeftes, redenen, etc.)
 - ➔ Wat voor doel probeerde deze initiatieven te bereiken? En kwamen deze doelen overeen met de doelen en agenda van lokale overheid?
 - ➔ Wat voor mensen namen deel aan deze initiatieven?
 - ➔ Wat voor effecten en op welke manier hebben deze initiatieven invloed gehad op de gemeenschap volgens u? (Sense of community, sense of place, responsibility, resilience, public participation, social cohesion, etc.)
- Wat is u rol binnen deze burgerinitiatieven?
 - ➔ Wat is de rol van burgers en wat is de rol van overheidsinstellingen (gemeente, provincie, overheid) binnen deze burgerinitiatieven?
- Alle voor- en nadelen van burgerinitiatieven meegenomen, vind u dat de rol van burgerinitiatieven groter/belangrijker worden moet worden in de toekomst?
 - ➔ Wat zou daarbij de ideale rol van lokale overheden zijn? (Communicatie, financieel, meedenken, reguleren). Wat zou daarbij de ideale rol van burgers zijn?

Algemene afsluiting:

- Heeft u nog opmerkingen, toelichtingen of overige uitspraken die u nog zou willen delen of toevoegen aan het interview?

Dan wil ik u graag bedanken voor uw tijd en deelname aan mijn onderzoek. Ik hoop dat u het gevoel hebt dat u uw verhaal hebt kunnen vertellen. Als uw nog vragen heeft, kunt uw mijn altijd een mail sturen (i.zomerdijk.1@student.rug.nl).

C. Transcripts

To ensure confidentiality, trust and anonymity of the interviews and interviewees, transcripts of the interviews will not fully be published in this thesis. Transcripts are only available after request and if permission is given from both the interviewer and interviewee.

D. Inductive code tree

