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Initiative-rich communities and governmental planning monopolies – A Dutch view on Swedish community-led planning

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Introduction

In 2011 I started writing a PhD-thesis on community-initiated planning practices. Within planning research this theme was (and still is) understudied and repeatedly misunderstood. However, when explaining the topic to fellow researchers, planning professionals or 'normal' people, most actually come up with quite an extensive list of examples that entail community-led planning practices. In fact, most people are familiar with citizen or community initiatives: a group of neighbours that decides to improve their local living circumstances and start building meeting places like a community centre, sports accommodations, community gardens, recreational routes, renovate local heritage, take over village schools or public transport links or develop activities to attract tourism. All of these initiatives can be regarded as outcomes of community-led planning.

For my PhD-research I visited communities in the Netherlands, Spain and Sweden, and in every country I experienced the unknown presence of community-led planning. Before I wrote an article for PLAN (2016, 5/6) about my experiences in Galicia, Spain (When citizens step in...), and made some references to Swedish community-led planning. When traveling from Spanish community-led planning to a Swedish context, I expected some differences. What I did not expect, was that the Swedish context would be so different from my experiences with Dutch planning. And yet, every country has got its own particularities, Sweden is not different in that respect. Moreover, comparative research is an excellent way to map these particularities, and to think beyond the taken for granted familiarities of your own country. In this paper I would like to share 4 of the most insightful and surprising observations about community-led planning in Sweden, seen from a Dutch perspective.

1. Participation? Or self-organisation?

In 2014 I stayed for two months as a guest-researcher at the *Centrum för Kommunstrategiska Studier (CKS)*, in Norrköping. Based at this research group, my idea was to visit examples of community initiatives and interview the initiators. Furthermore, I was interested in how these examples were embedded in the general government-led, planning system. Therefore I also interviewed municipal policy-makers. However, it turned out to be a rather complicated task to get across my research interests and to find sufficient examples of self-organising communities. Where community interests are well embedded in the Swedish planning system, self-organising communities are hardly studied. Then again, examples of community participation were often mentioned when I explained my research interests. Most municipalities are proud of the ways in which they tried to engage community views, and quite some researchers have studied this phenomenon. However, there are some important differences between community participation and self-organisation. When referring to community participation, communities participate in governmental planning processes. Citizens can raise their concerns and ideas for future development, but in most cases a first draft has been made and the possibilities for implementation of community views are limited. When speaking of self-organisation, communities are in charge of the planning process: they design, decide and implement what is being planned. Off course, this still needs to be compliant with governmental planning regulation. Nevertheless, communities plan in very different ways than local governments do. Instead of organised, regulated and formalised, community-led planning is informal, networked, everyday, ad hoc, spontaneous, creative and unregulated.

2. Autonomous communities do exist!

Though invisible as planning practices, it does not mean that community initiatives are non-existent in Sweden. My research got kick started when a Swedish colleague mentioned Docksta (www.dbt.se), a Northern Swedish community that initiated numerous activities (they took over elderly care and primary education facilities, but also build sports facilities and a cable car service). By taking over and expanding the number of services, this community prevented extreme out-migration and deprivation. But above all, they had changed the local spatial organisation considerably.

Also in Östergötland I found quite some communities that made and implemented plans for the future of their villages. Within this region, the village of Grytgöl was remarkably self-organised. Though they have a committee that keeps contact with the municipality, most projects (they run amongst others a sports accommodation, meeting centre, library, youth hostel and a playground) are realised independent from municipal policies:

"We have made every issue, every question and every activity a responsibility of the club [Grytgöl IK], so it is some kind of mini-municipality. Concerning the municipality of Finspång, I think they like us, because they always said that nothing is impossible in Grytgöl: they can take care of everything. Perhaps we are doing too much. But if we don't do all things, no one else will do it for us."

(Board member of Grytgöl IK, SE)

Also other communities in Östergötland were surprisingly initiative-rich and capable planners. I visited an indoor soccer hall in Kuddby, an ice hockey rink in Valdemarsvik, well-maintained cultural heritage and touristic routes in Tjällmo and came across some people determined to reinstall the train stop in Godegård. All these projects were owned and maintained by local communities. Compared to the Netherlands these communities were much more autonomous and ran larger scale projects. Perhaps not surprisingly: Swedish rural areas are vast compared those in the Netherlands, where not only everything seems to be close by, but also is well supported by governments.

3. The governmental planning monopoly

When I came to Sweden I was familiar with the Swedish municipal planning monopoly. This is very different from how spatial planning is organised in The Netherlands. The Netherlands is a densely populated country and spatial planning is generally influenced by a large variety of (public and private) stakeholders, operating at different levels. These stakeholders are invited to the planning table and often take part during the implementation phase as well. This consensus-oriented style of decision-making is referred to the '*polderen*'. *Polderen* has quite some implications for plan-making in general, but also for how is dealt with community initiatives.

In the Netherlands communities are considered as partners to local governments. This implies that municipalities actively stimulate citizen initiatives; often due to austerity measures, but also to increase social cohesion and empower local communities. Recently the Dutch national government adopted a policy to stimulate community-led planning by reversing the role of community and government: instead of citizen participation they now speak of participatory governance. Via this policy Dutch municipalities are further encouraged to facilitate citizen initiatives (and to outsource tasks where possible). In their turn Dutch communities frequently depend on support offered by governments, in the form of subsidies but also when it comes to handling complex bureaucracies.

In Sweden I soon found out that the planning monopoly not only referred to the municipal primary right to develop plans, but also that planning was mostly a governmental affair. In addition, most citizens expected the government to take care of their problems. This resulted in a rather ambiguous attitude towards community initiatives. Some interviewed policy-makers claimed that community-led planning should not have to be necessary: also citizens in distanced communities should be entitled to (basic) social services. Other municipalities restricted to a centralisation of

public services and hardly supported developments in depopulating areas. However, from the community point of a view, a number of them felt that they did a much better planning job than the municipality ever could have done. Moreover, most communities received support from municipal employed *landsbygdsutvecklare* and NGO's like *Hela Sverige Ska Leva*. Nevertheless, a cross-pollination of community and government-led planning like in the Netherlands, is very different from how planning is organised in Sweden.

4. A democratic and gender-aware society

Two recurring theme during the interviews with Swedish municipalities and NGO's were gender and democracy. Also at the university I was often reminded after these issues and their relation with community initiatives. In the Netherlands, Sweden is known as a highly democratic and gender-aware society. And yet, it was not taken as a given by those supporting and reviewing community initiatives. Moreover, in one of their publications the *Sveriges Kommuner och Landsting* (11 thoughts about citizen dialogue in local government) warns for the undemocratic effects of community-led planning:

"The biggest risk is that citizen dialogue leads to a more unequal democracy, where those who are already resourceful get another forum through which to influence decisions. It is not unusual for local and regional authorities to use forums and places where politicians and officers feel safe, such as public meetings in the council chambers. This limits the numbers and types of people who feel inclined to take part. Therefore, the elected representatives must actively seek out citizens where they are and where they gather, in order to obtain their views on the issue in question." (SKL, p30)

In the Netherlands community initiatives are often commended for their positive contribution to democratic decision making. Instead of a more distanced representative democracy, community-led planning can be regarded as a form of deep or direct democracy, wherein citizens have a direct influence in the future of their living environment. The democratic quality of community-led planning however receives little attention. Staying in Sweden made me much more critical towards democratic and gender aspects. In both countries I found that a majority of citizen initiatives is run by higher-educated, retired, white, male citizens. There are many logical explanations for this bias (younger people have much less time available, retired man often regard citizen initiatives as way to dedicate their professional experience for a collective cause), but there is also a risk of the exclusion of views from other groups within the communities. Being aware of these threats is the first step towards preventing them.

Conclusions

Comparing Swedish and Dutch community-led planning has been a fruitful exercise. My research interest in community-led has shed a new light on role of initiative-rich citizens in Swedish rural planning and led to many interesting and productive discussions with my Swedish colleagues. There are numerous things Dutch planners can learn from their Swedish colleagues and vice versa. Nevertheless it is important to bear in mind that every planning practice is context and path dependent. The Swedish situation is unique due the municipal planning monopoly and the historical roots of *byalaget*. The Dutch policy-model did push citizen initiatives forward, but is unlikely to have the same effect in a Swedish context. And yet, in Sweden I became more critical towards gender and democratic aspects of citizen initiatives, and stopped taking community-government relations for granted.

For further reading: an elaborate comparison of Swedish and Dutch community-led planning was published in the Journal of Rural Studies:

Meijer, M., & Syssner, J. (2017). Getting ahead in depopulating areas - How linking social capital is used for informal planning practices in Sweden and The Netherlands. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 55, 59-70.