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# Community-led and Government-fed: Comparing Informal Planning Practices in Depopulating Regions across Europe

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## Abstract

Community-led planning is in the spotlight of planning research and practice. Moreover, in rural areas, community initiatives are viewed as a panacea for dealing with the effects of depopulating. This article aims at providing more insight into how communities plan in depopulating contexts, by comparing community-led planning initiatives and community–government interactions in three European countries: The Netherlands, Spain, and Sweden. Based on this comparison two observations arose. First, community initiatives and their ways of practicing planning informally show large similarities in all of the three research regions, despite large variations between the case study regions in their geographic, institutional and demographic context. Second, despite similarities at community-level, the differences in institutional settings, however, lead to localised variations in community–government interactions, and consequently in their relationship to formal planning. In conclusion, we reflect on what a shift from community-led to government-led planning implies for the development of spatial strategies in depopulating regions.

**Keywords:** community-led planning; citizen engagement; rural shrinking regions; governance

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### 1.0 Introduction

Community-led planning in its various forms—like community initiatives, DIY-urbanism or organic urban development—is in the spotlight of spatial planning research and practice (Boonstra, 2015; Elshof & Bailey, 2015; Van Straalen, Witte, & Buitelaar, 2017). Framed as the youngest generation of participatory planning, citizens no longer act as consumers of governmental planning practice, but have become critical producers as well (Boonstra, 2015). In both urban and rural environments community-led planning is advocated and problematized. On the one hand, community-led planning initiatives are praised for their contributions to (a) social coherence; (b) empowerment; (c) cost-efficiency; (d) local problem ownership; and (e) strengthening the autonomy, independence and self-reliance of citizens (Agger & Jensen, 2015; de Haan, Meier, Haartsen, & Strijker, 2018; Healey, 2008). On the other hand, critical voices claim that planning is a profession, that should not be taken over by unqualified laymen (Alexander, 2015; Curry, 2012; Myers & Banerjee, 2005); or that governments are at risk of becoming exploitive or relying too much on the voluntary input of citizens (Bisschops & Beunen, 2019; van Dam, Duineveld, & During, 2015). Also, the rather unstructured and informal planning efforts of citizens are occasionally regarded as marginal, unlawful, or in conflict with governmental planning agendas (Mukhija & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2014).

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For a long time, planning efforts by non-governmental actors have been invisible. Even though cases of community-led planning are increasingly produced and displayed as examples of good governance, little is known about the planning capacities of non-governmental actors (Boonstra, 2015; Briassoulis, 1997). With what intentions do citizens decide to take faith in their own hands and start making plans for their local environments? How are community-led decision-making processes shaped at local level, and how do these processes lead to planned outcomes? What circumstances influence planning at community-level? Furthermore, especially in contexts with strong statutory planning, interactions with governments are unavoidable: what is the influence of these interactions on the processes and outcomes of community-led planning? These questions formed the starting point of a four-year research project into processes of community-led planning in depopulating regions across Europe.

The shift towards less formalised and community-led forms of planning is amplified in rural areas that face depopulation and economic decline (Rocak, Hospers, & Reverda, 2016). Here, local governments have difficulty arranging future plans and creating development opportunities for dispersed and declining rural settlements. They lack the funds and instruments to plan for a future without growth (Kempenaar, van Lierop, Westerink, van der Valk, & van den Brink, 2016; Wiechmann, 2008). A number of communities in depopulating regions step into this vacuum and take over planning tasks from local governments, or develop new and innovative initiatives (Syssner & Meijer, 2017). Following this development, several researchers have concluded that dealing with population change demands a 'paradigm change': where growth and economic development opportunities are absent, planners and other policy-makers should focus on the needs and capacities of citizens who do not wish to out-migrate (Hospers, 2014; Korsten & Goedvolk, 2008).

Several European rural regions have been dealing with depopulation and have developed alternative planning strategies over time (Beetz, Huning, & Plieninger, 2008; Leetmaa, Kriszan, Nuga, & Burdack, 2014; Schlappa, 2017; Syssner, 2016; Tietjen & Jørgensen, 2016). Currently some Dutch depopulating regions are experimenting with the above paradigm change and focus on empowerment of rural communities, but also actively outsource planning tasks to community-level to increase their financial efficiency (De Stentor, 2011; Provincie Gelderland, 2013). In other countries, such as Spain and Sweden, rural areas are less densely regulated, and governments follow a less pro-active approach towards community initiatives. Still, also visible here is a shift from government-led towards community-led planning (Davoudi & Madanipour, 2015; Wills, 2016). In Spain, it is mainly communities themselves that take faith in their own hands to maintain liveability and local level development opportunities. Here, governments hardly reach out for rural areas. In Sweden, where rural regions are vast and sparsely populated, local governments have little means to distribute services and development opportunities equally. Here, rural communities are stimulated by non-governmental organisations to develop initiatives themselves (Bjärstig & Sandström, 2017; Pérez-Fra, López-Iglesias, García-Arias, Sineiro, & Lorenzana, 2012).

In their turn, a growing number of citizens are eager to step into this vacuum where governments no longer guarantee close by facilities or development opportunities via extensive spatial plans (Li, Westlund, Zheng, & Liu, 2016; Rocak et al., 2016). They believe that they are more capable than local governments to fulfil local needs, and find each other in a shared love for the place they are living in. This results in local communities that decided 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: these are planned changes into the spatial organisation of villages and their surroundings that are initiated and implemented by inhabitants of rural communities (Meijer, 2018; Van Assche & Verschraegen, 2008). Community-led planning, or planning initiatives developed by non-governmental actors in general, is often associated with a high degree of informality and contrasts with governmental and formalised planning processes (Briassoulis, 1997).

Comparing the planning capacities of communities, in diverging depopulating regions across Europe can provide new insights in the changing relations between local communities and governments, and formality and informality. Previous research into this topic has contributed to our understanding of planning under depopulating circumstances, community–government relations and informal planning practices in three European depopulating regions with varying institutional and geographical backgrounds: De Achterhoek (the Netherlands), Galicia (Spain) and Östergötland (Sweden) (Meijer, 2018). In this article I will focus on the comparison of community-led planning practices in all three case study regions. This comparison is guided by three research questions: (a) How can community-led planning be characterized and compared by examining rural depopulating regions with diverse institutional settings across Europe? (b) What is the effect of differences in institutional setting on community-led planning and community–government relations? (c) What does a shift from government-led towards community-led planning imply for the development of planning strategies in rural depopulating regions?

This article continues with a theoretical background taken from literature on informality and community-led planning (section 2). Section 3 discusses the methods used for this research and the selection of case studies. In section 4 I will further elaborate on two observations based on our research and provide several explanations for the found similarities and differences. Finally, in section 5 I will reflect on the implications of this observation, and what a shift from government-led towards community-led planning implies for the development of formal and informal planning strategies in rural depopulating regions.

## 2.0 Background: Formal and Informal Planning

The shift from government-led to community-led planning is often associated with a shift from formal planning practices to more informal planning approaches (Davoudi & Madanipour, 2015; Innes, Connick, & Booher, 2007). In this section I will elaborate on the theoretical aspects of a shift from formal to informal planning and on how informal planning is practiced by communities in depopulating regions.

### *2.1 From Formal to Informal Planning*

As argued in the introduction, spatial planning is often associated with how governments coordinate the spatial organisation of our environment. During the course of time, governmental efforts to coordinate plan-making became institutionalised and formalised, and they were subsequently studied as such (Davoudi & Pendlebury, 2010; Hall & Tewdwr-Jones, 2010; Van Assche, Beunen, & Duineveld, 2012). However, as Briassoulis (1997) argues, formal governmental planning is only one path to organise the world we live in spatially:

> Formal planning—the institutionalised activity carried out under auspices of state—is one possible path to meet social ends, in the process shaping the physical and socioeconomic world. At the same time, some other planning paths, outside the domain of formal planning, may account for developments occurring without the intervention of formal planning. This other domain is what this study calls the domain of informal planning—planning activities not institutionalised but, nevertheless, leading to planned outcomes that serve particular interests, although they may serve the broader public interest as well. (Briassoulis, 1997, p. 106)

This article concerns planning practices beyond governmental and formalised planning and focusses on how communities plan. The formal–informal divide is a conceptualisation often used in planning theories (McFarlane & Waibel, 2012; Othengrafen & Reimer, 2013; Van Assche et al., 2012). Whereas the activities of governments tend to have a more formal character, those of non-governmental actors, like communities, are best described as being informal: they are unregulated by authorities, but instead they are based on social, casual or spontaneous networks, and underlying traditions, norms and values (AlSayyad & Roy, 2004; Innes et al., 2007; Porter, 2011a). In many cases, the concept of informality is used to indicate invisible and otherwise unconsidered planning practices.

In their book, "The Informal City", Mukhija and Loukaitou-Sideris claim that informality is often understudied, and misunderstood by planning professionals and researchers in the Global North, as it generally associated with illegal and irregular activities (Mukhija & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2014). Nevertheless, informality is of relevance for almost every planning practice. To begin with, it is of relevance as a *complement*, in formal government-led planning. Even though the formal character of planning is often foregrounded, informal practices—such as social interaction, the formation of networks or raising public support for formal decisions—play an important role in making government-led planning work (Spaans & Zonneveld, 2016). In this article however, I focus on another dimension of informality: a dimension that replaces or substitutes formal planning. As a *substitute*, informality is of particular relevance as a planning concept that can be used to explain other types of planning that do not belong to the formal government-led classification of planning (Altrock, 2012). A wide range of academic literature deals with informality as a substitute (see for instance AlSayyad & Roy, 2004; McFarlane, 2012; Porter, 2011a; Roy, 2005; Watson, 2009). Informality as a substitute deals with planning practices that do not depart from formal procedures, official planning documents and regulations, but replace such formal planning activities with ad hoc, flexible, spontaneous, insurgent, voluntarily and sometimes illegal planning processes (Porter, 2011a). However, whereas publications from Western Europe, Northern America and Australia traditionally dominate planning literature, most of this literature is based on studies whose point of departure is from the Global South (Watson, 2013). Studies on informality, that have the Global North as their point of departure are rooted in contexts where statutory planning plays an important role as well, are limited (Mukhija & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2015). Previous research in this topic has provided more insight into how informality is practiced by non-governmental actors, why they plan and with what results (Meijer, Diaz-Varela, & Cardín-Pedrosa, 2015). In the remainder of this section I will elaborate on these findings.

## *2.2 The Informal Planners in Depopulating Regions*

The informal planners that are discussed in this research article are generally inhabitants of rural, peripheral and depopulating communities. They plan for conservation of their local living environment, and possibilities for social and economic development (Elshof & Bailey, 2015). A rural community is here perceived as the people that inhabit a rural spatial entity—a village, or settlement—and feel related to each other and the place they live in (Salemink, Strijker, & Bosworth, 2017; Wellman & Leighton, 1979). Yet, it is important to note that not all inhabitants might feel part of the community, that within one place various communities of interest can overlap, and sometimes people from outside a specific place still feel closely related to the community (Walker, Devine-Wright, Hunter, High, & Evans, 2010). This ambiguity is inherent to contemporary community studies: other studies demonstrated that what ties communities together, could also pull them apart (Salemink et al., 2017). In other words, the ambition to build a community centre could strengthen the social cohesion within the community, but also increase feelings of exclusion for those that were not directly involved in process.

The decision-making processes of rural communities can be described as ad hoc, spontaneous, and largely unregulated by governments (Porter, 2011b). Furthermore, informal institutions—norms and values, trust, reciprocity and kinship, but also traditions (such as 'Noaberschap', a historical social obligation to help your neighbours, in De Achterhoek)—form the basic constraints for such decision-making (North, 1990). Most interviewed initiators of community-led planning practices claimed that decisions were made through informal conversations at kitchen tables, on the streets or in local shops and bars. Based on these conversations coalitions were formed and once the initiators felt there was sufficient local consensus action was undertaken: for example to build and sustain a community centre, or to renovate local heritage. Most communities find it especially important to maintain 'third places' to meet each other casually other than at home or work (Tietjen & Jørgensen, 2016). The fear of decline and a loss of such meeting places—among others due to depopulation—forms an important incentive for communities to draw future plans, and build community centres or other meeting places.

Implicit norms and values, and trust relations play an important role in informal decision-making: controversial ideas were corrected through gossip, and overall consensus often counted as a general norm for decision-making. These demarcations of informality, dichotomous to formal planning, have been concluded by other studies as well (see for example: Briassoulis, 1997; Ellickson, 1991; McFarlane & Waibel, 2012; Mukhija & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2014). Other authors claim that the division between formality and informality, but also government-led and community-led planning practices is more nuanced (Koster & Nuijten, 2016; Van Assche et al., 2012). Informality is not entirely appropriated by communities, nor is formality exclusively practiced by governments. This is particularly true in (densely) regulated and formally planned countries, such as Western European Countries. For example, here communities are often bound by formal planning regulations, and are required to apply for building permits. Communities know formal decision-making structures as well: nearly all visited locations had village boards, general assemblies and sometimes they 'mimicked' formal planning procedures (Meijer & Ernste 2019). In both the United Kingdom and the Netherlands parish plans or village plans have become a widespread phenomenon: inhabitants of rural places that design plans to indicate the desired future development of their places and environments (Gallent, 2013; Meijer & Ernste, 2019). Furthermore,

communities and governments are often interdependent. Communities often need financial support in the form of subsidies, generally provided by local governments. In their turn governments display community initiatives as a token of deliberation and good governance and/or promote community initiatives as part of their austerity policies (Syssner & Meijer, 2017; van Dam et al., 2015).

## 3.0 Methods

### *3.1 Case Study Selection and Comparison*

In three regions in The Netherlands, Spain, and Sweden, community-led planning initiatives were compared in relation to government-led formal planning. These countries have strong variations in planning traditions, and geographical settings. In the words of Flyvbjerg (2001) this is a large or maximum variation case study design, which enables researchers "to obtain information of the significance of various circumstances for the planning process and outcome" (p. 79). These planning traditions vary with respect to the embeddedness of statutory planning, the degree of formalisation, the prominence of citizen-involved planning—like participatory or collaborative planning—and degree of devolution. Table 1 provides an overview of the variation in institutional background of the case study regions.

Table 1. *Variation of Institutional Backgrounds in Case Study Regions*

| **De Achterhoek (NL)** | **Galicia (ES)** | **Östergötland (SE)** |
|---|---|---|
| Strong embeddedness of statutory planning—at national, provincial and local level. | Weak enforcement of statutory planning—exists, but not updated or enforced. | Embedded statutory planning, but low in rural areas—no specific land allocation plans. |
| High degree of formalisation | Low degree of formalisation, informality dominates decision-making | High degree of formalisation |
| Citizen-involved planning—in form of citizen participation and self-organisation—prominent feature in planning debate | Citizen-involved planning hardly acknowledged by local or regional governments | Strong institutionalisation of participatory planning, self-governance often not part of governmental planning. |
| Increasing devolution of planning tasks—from central to local governments, from local government to citizens. | Centralisation of policy-making powers at regional level. | Strongly devolved spatial planning, municipalities solely responsible for spatial policy. |

What all case study regions have in common is that they are located in rural parts of the countries and all are subjected to the process of depopulation. For comparison, the object of study remained the same: in all regions I studied concrete and finalized projects, that had an spatial impact and were the outcome of informal and voluntarily established bottom-up initiatives for collective purposes, by local communities (Sartori, 1991). In other words, I have studied informal planning practices, performed by non-governmental actors; in relation to formal statutory planning, practiced by governmental actors. Section 3.2 provides a further overview of the specifics and selection criteria of each of the case study countries and regions.

### 3.2 Case Study Regions

*De Achterhoek, The Netherlands.* The Netherlands has a strong and elaborate planning tradition. Spatial plans are hierarchically developed at national, provincial, and municipal levels (van der Valk, 2002). For a decade, Dutch planning has undergone a devolution of planning responsibilities. Municipalities receive more responsibilities from higher tiers, but in their turn, they also outsource tasks to the level of citizen participation: the so-called double devolution (Davoudi & Madanipour, 2015).

De Achterhoek (257 ihb. per Km2) is a region in the eastern part of the Netherlands, which recently faced depopulation. Even though the effects of depopulation are still not noticeable on a large scale, various actors have already anticipated the future threats and opportunities of this development. Influenced by the concept of the participatory society, several municipalities and the provincial government decided to involve citizens actively to mitigate the effects of depopulation. This participatory approach stands out in the Netherlands and it is often mentioned as an example for other depopulating regions (Ruimtevolk, 2015; Segers, 2011).

*Galicia, Spain.* Galicia is an autonomous region in northern Spain, which implies that regional, spatial development is in general a responsibility of the regional authorities. Galicia (91 ihb. per km2) is one of the most rural regions of Spain with low economic development and severe depopulation in the south-eastern part of this region (Ónega-López, Puppim de Oliveira, & Crecente-Maseda, 2010). Though regional spatial plans have never been established, the regional government is looking for ways to anticipate the effects of depopulation, through rural development plans and participatory practices. At the local level, statutory planning is incomplete: not all municipalities have adopted or updated land allocation plans (Tubío-Sánchez, Ónega-López, Timmermans, & Crecente-Maseda, 2013). A large share of actors—governmental and non-governmental—are unfamiliar with formalised planning practices. Therefore, both governments and communities practice more informal ways of planning, reinterpreting formal polices (Meijer, 2009) and using their political networks to implement policies (Keating, 2001; Ministerie Binnenlandse Zaken en Koningsrijksrelaties, 2014).

*Östergötland, Sweden.* In contrast to the Netherlands and Spain, the Swedish municipalities have an exclusive power to develop and implement spatial plans at local level (Mannberg & Wihlborg, 2008). This can lead to a closer interaction between community initiatives and municipal policies, especially if you take into account the strong tradition of participatory planning (Olsson & Hysing, 2012; Wänström, 2013). Nevertheless, governmental planning and the Swedish welfare-state are vast and dominant; solutions are generally sought within the

domain of governments, which leaves the planning capacities of other (non-governmental) partners unconsidered.

The rural areas of Östergötland are extensive and slowly depopulating (41 ihb. per km2). Often the effects of depopulation are compensated by a centralization of functions in central towns. However, at a local level, several communities initiated their own public facilities in order to fill the void left by governments and to preserve local social and economic development (Li, Westlund, Zheng, & Liu, 2016).

Table 2. *Regional and Municipal Statistics: De Achterhoek, Galicia, and Östergötland.*

| | **De Achterhoek** | **Östergötland** | **Galicia** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Number of municipalities | 8 | 13 | 315 |
| Avg. surface per municipality ($km^2$) | 152 | 812 | 94 |
| Inhabitants per municipality | 37,212 | 33,066[1] | 8,576[2] |
| Avg. municipal budget (per citizen in €) | 2,510 | 6,347 | 534 |
| Population density (per $km^2$) | 257 | 41 | 91 |
| Projected population change (2010–2040) | -8 % | + 12 %[3] | -24% |

Based on: (Bureau Economisch Onderzoek Gelderland, 2016; Centraal Bureau Statistiek, 2015; Instituto Galego de Estatística, 2013; Statistics Sweden, 2016).

### *3.3 Data Collection and Analysis*

The main methods for data collection involve in-depth interviews held with 38 involved community stakeholders—initiators, chairs, and active volunteers—and 21 field visits to the locations of community initiatives (Pink & Morgan, 2013; Schatzman & Strauss, 1973; Weiss, 1995). The interviews and field visits took place between September 2013 and November 2017. The interviewed stakeholders were in the first place ‘informal planners’; non-governmental initiators of local—and predominantly informal—community-led planning initiatives. Appendix A provides an overview of all studied examples of the community initiatives in each case study region. The interviews with the ‘informal planners’ were aimed at reconstructing community-led planning practices—their incentive, decision making process, organization, and obstacles— and gaining insight into how these informal planning practices relate to formal planning—support, procedures, subsidy schemes. Each interview was held on location, lasted about 1.5 hours and was transcribed full-verbatim. Appendix B provides an overview of all interviewed stakeholders, their backgrounds and interview locations.

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[1] The variation between municipalities in Sweden is large. In Östergötland the smallest municipality counts 3400 inhabitants, while the largest has 150.000.

[2] These statistics include municipalities from the coastal zone (Vigo, Santiago de Compostela, A Coruña) which are much larger in size and population number then the interior municipalities, and continue attract inhabitants and capital. The smallest municipality counts 215 inhabitants and has lost 80% of its population since 1940.

[3] Also here the variation is large: the municipalities with larger cities are growing, the other half of the municipalities (and all rural areas) shrinks. http://befolkningsprognoser.se/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ForvBefUtvNyaRegioner.jpg

Visiting the project locations—the field visits—with interviewed stakeholders provided more insight into the outcomes of informal planning practices, and proved to be an efficient method for accessing more detailed information regarding more sensitive topics such as dealing with conflict or difficulties during the planning process (Schatzman & Strauss, 1973). To further map the interaction with formal and government-led planning, interviews have been conducted with 14 municipal and provincial policymakers and 19 representatives of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that promote the interests of village organisations, rural development issues or represent governments.

All data has been analysed using the interpretive policy analysis method (Yanow, 2000). For this article the results of the first round of analysis have been revisited, to search inductively for explaining factors for the similarities and differences in all three case study regions.

## 4.0 Discussion of Results: Comparing Informal, Community-led Planning Practices

In this section the answers to the first two research questions are discussed:

1. How can community-led planning be characterized and compared, by examining rural depopulating regions with diverse intuitional settings across Europe?
2. What is the effect of differences in institutional setting on community-led planning and community- government relations?

In answering both research questions, two general observations arose. First, community initiatives and their ways of practicing planning informally are very similar on several points in all of the three research regions. Second, despite these similarities at community-level, the differences in institutional settings lead to large variations in community-government interactions. Below, I discuss the findings that led to these observations, followed by explanations and the consequences for community-government interactions.

### *4.1 Comparing Informal Practices at Community Level*

This research involved a variety of case study regions and institutional contexts. In all three regions a wide range of examples of community-led planning practices were found. Though the goals and ambitions of communities varied, the ways of decision-making, forms of local organisation, and limits of community-led planning, were quite similar in all of the regions. As explained in section 2.2 communities developed plans, through rather informal forms of decisions-making, but also within formal structures such as village boards and annual meetings. These similarities are remarkable as other organisations, like local governments, have developed in very different ways throughout history (see section 3.2), leading to large regional and sometimes even local variations in institutional settings. This research provides three plausible explanations for the similarities in planning practice at community level: (a) a strong sense of place, (b) robust informal institutions, and (c) a collective memory for self-governance.

First, in all the regions visited, people experienced a *strong sense of place* (Christiaanse & Haartsen, 2017; McManus et al., 2012). The inhabitants identified with their regions and expressed a love for the place they live in, even though it is subjected to challenges such as depopulation and economic decline. This sense of place was expressed by nearly all interviewed initiators as the main driver for community action. The challenges they faced performed as a stimulant

for collective action, rather than a threat. These observations were underlined by another recurrent theme during the interviews: across all of the case study regions, participants expressed a conviction, that if they could show outsiders by establishing community initiatives, how vibrant, beautiful or proximate their place was, then people would feel inclined to move there. Nevertheless, in all three regions sense of place was expressed in diverse intensities. In two regions place identity is reinforced by strong sentiments of regional identities (Paasi, 1986). This was especially the case in Galicia, where regional identity was intensified after decades of suppression during the Franco regime (Keating, 2001). Here, the expression of a regional identity—such as folklore, popular festivals, promotion of the Galician language—was mentioned as a driving force for the establishment of community initiatives such as libraries, festival grounds, restoring cultural heritage, and establishing meeting places. In De Achterhoek, regional identity was less at the forefront, but inhabitants highlighted regional traditions such as 'noaberschap' (Abbas & Commandeur, 2013) and their strong social cohesion as part of their identity. In Östergötland regional identity did not strengthen the sense of place: people indicated that they felt love for their place and they identified with living there, but not so much with the larger region Östergötland. Irrespective of feelings of regional belonging, sense of place also defined the limits of collective action: most communities were very willing to improve the living conditions for the places they lived in. However, they showed little motivation to be involved in larger networks or regional-based initiatives (Mirck & Aalvanger, 2013).

Second, and subsequently related to regional identity, is *the robustness of informal institutions (*Ellickson, 1991; Van Assche et al., 2012; Van Assche, Beunen, & Duineveld, 2014). In all of the regions the social cohesion, the large number of local organisations and associations and strong local ties were mentioned as being fundamentally important for the development of community initiatives. Their organisational structures were largely based on implicit rules: accountability, reciprocity and kinship are important norms and values (Doheny & Milbourne, 2017). What was mentioned less often—and more often tabooed—was the fear of exclusion: being insensitive of these unspoken institutions or mutual relations is often received negatively by other community-members. Other studies underline the social consequences of being excluded in (remote) rural areas (Gray, Shaw, & Farrington, 2006; Walsh, O′Shea, Scharf, & Shucksmith, 2014). These informal institutions—be it positively or negatively—form the glue between inhabitants of rural communities: due to the lack of (nearby) alternative networks or commercial facilities—like dog-walking services or regular public transport connections—most community members are interdependent.

A third explanation is *the shared memory of self-governance*, present in all of the regions visited (Rauws, 2016; Sandström, Ekman, & Lindholm, 2017). Not only is the institutionalisation of informal networks and rule-sets characteristic of rural regions, so is the historical embeddedness of self-governance. In the past, rural communities in Europe developed institutional infrastructures for self-governance, such as *parroquías, buurschappen* and *burskap* (local community trusts) (Bravo & De Moor, 2008). Although these institutions largely have disappeared and their formal arrangements have been taken over by governments, the memory of self-governance still remains (Salverda, Slangen, Kruit, Weijschedé, & Mulder, 2009). The path dependence of self-governance is reflected in the formal representational bodies that were installed later—such as a village board, *comunidad de monte*, *dorpsraad* or *byalaget*— and cover the same territories as their preceding *parroquías, buurschappen* and *burskap* (Bravo & De Moor, 2008; Sandström et al., 2017). During the interviews,

initiators of community-led planning practices also repeatedly recalled their ancestors and the historical need for taking faith in your own hands and identified themselves with these memories of self-governance. Moreover, compared to the historical, though rudimental, roots of these organisations, governments and spatial planning are relatively young institutions.

The observed similarities of community-led planning processes do not imply that each community plans in the same way and can be approached in a similar fashion. Large variations exist with respect to the above-listed characteristics: each community has its own specific ways of doing things. Moreover, it was mainly the initiative-rich communities which displayed these characteristics. In initiative-poor communities, place identity, robust informal institutions and memories of self-governance were less prevalent. Some of these communities sprang into action more recently, others lacked social cohesion. A culture of self-governance is not easily built and needs time to evolve. Furthermore, this study focused on communities in rural, depopulating areas. Compared to urban or urbanising areas, the influx of new people, alternative ideas and cultural diversity is limited in the studied communities. This enables traditional norms and values in rural areas to persist and to function as a fundament for the development of community-led planning.

### *4.2 Comparing Community-government Interactions in Varying Institutional Settings*

Although the foundation upon which community initiatives are built is rather comparable in all three case study regions, there are variations in community–government interactions. This is not surprising, as these regions were selected because of their differences in institutional context. Looking back at the results, this has affected the performance of community-led planning in three ways.

Firstly, the position of local governments and their mandate to develop plans differs in all three studies regions, as the institutionalisation of formal planning differs in each region. How statutory planning is organised and—in keeping with this—the local governmental mandate to support or neglect community-led planning affects the opportunities available for communities to develop plans. In Galicia, local governments have little resources to deliver services, especially in deprived and depopulating rural areas. Not all municipalities implemented the mandatory land allocation plan (Plan Xeral de Ordenación Municipal). As such, civil servants and local politicians can make individual decisions, for example, concerning whether they grant building permits for citizen initiatives or not. In some cases, this led to conflicts, in other cases communities used this room to manoeuvre to increase their autonomy (Meijer et. al., 2015). In Sweden, all municipalities have a planning monopoly. This means that they have their own mandate when it comes to territorial development. Planning differs for each municipality, and so does the institutional space for self-governance. Some municipalities choose to centralise all functions and planning responsibilities in the larger and more viable cities. Others actively support the distribution of facilities and infrastructure in rural areas, through the empowerment of local communities as well. The support communities receive for their endeavours differs in each municipality. The Netherlands has, in contrast, a dense planning system. Here, municipalities are mandatory to develop detailed land allocation plans for rural areas as well (unlike in Sweden and Spain, where such detail is only mandatory for urban areas). On the one hand, bureaucratic hurdles and difficulties in understanding formal planning regulations is an issue that Dutch communities have more difficulties with than in the other regions. On the other hand, community initiatives are better secured in the formal planning regime.

Additionally, and in contrast to the other regions, in the Netherlands depopulation is placed on the national policy agenda. Recently the Dutch Ministry of Internal Affairs declared that depopulating regions like De Achterhoek are frontrunners in terms of a turn towards community-led planning and participatory governance; and that this example is to be followed by other —shrinking and growing—Dutch regions (Ruimtevolk, 2015). In de Achterhoek, community initiatives are stimulated from above, and increasingly embedded in the plans developed by municipalities.

Secondly, on top of the different planning traditions, all three countries have different traditions in how they deal with community initiatives and participatory governance. In Spain, governments have a 'difficult' relationship with community initiatives. In Galicia, community initiatives are often not acknowledged, and in some cases even obstructed by governments (Meijer et. al., 2015). Yet, historical institutions such as collectively owned private property (commons) are still intact, and acknowledged by law. These formal institutions provide increased possibilities for communities to generate income and to enjoy autonomous decision-making. In Sweden, participatory planning is strongly embedded and promoted. However, due the existence of a large welfare state and extensive role for government-led planning, participatory planning is to a large extent government-controlled. As such, community-led and informal forms of planning are understudied and neglected within a Swedish context (Bjärstig & Sandström, 2017). Otherwise, Sweden does have long tradition of self-governance and it has vast, rural, depopulating areas where governmental interference is limited (Wänström, 2013). Just like Sweden, the Netherlands has a strong tradition concerning participatory planning. However, here public–private partnerships play an important role in the development and implementation of planning (Buitelaar, Galle, & Sorel, 2011). Involving external stakeholders—such as local communities—in policy-making and deliverance is therefore much more embedded in Dutch planning than it is in the other countries (Meijer & van der Krabben, 2018).

Thirdly, these differences in institutional settings and the interference of local governments affect the degree of autonomy of community initiatives in each separate region. In Spain, initiatives are very autonomous, and they have the resources to do so—such as collectively-owned private land which could be developed. In the Netherlands, initiatives are much more intertwined with local governments and the outcomes are usually the result of a cooperation between communities and governments. On the flip side, Dutch community initiatives are also very dependent on (financial) support from governments. On the one hand, this has led to win-win situations, wherein communities realised successful initiatives and local governments praised increased local commitment. On the other hand, frustrations concerning slow decision-making at governmental level, or the lack of active involvement at community-level are equally present (Meijer & Syssner, 2017). In Sweden, the ties between governments and communities are less institutionalised, but nevertheless most actively organised communities have established productive dialogues with local governments—including funding arrangements—or increased their autonomy and financed their initiatives through community enterprises, EU funding for local initiatives (LEADER funding) or volunteer contributions. These variations are dependant on the municipal planning culture (Meijer & van der Krabben, 2018).

The institutional differences have several effects on the practice of community-led, informal planning. In dealing with these different intuitional contexts, communities have developed diverse strategies for applying for resources—such as funding, political commitment or an indispensable knowledge about formal

planning procedures—and in dealing with or avoiding bureaucracies. Through informal contacts with local governments and other organisations, citizens explore alternative ways to implement their initiatives when this formally appears to be impossible. These alternative strategies can vary from (a) reformulating subsidy requests to better fit municipal planning strategies (mainly observed in De Achterhoek), (b) applying for EU-funding instead of local funding, (c) establishing community enterprises, to (d) strategic use of political support (or neglect) in the absence of statutory planning (Galicia). In all regions it was found that non-governmental organisations, such as associations of small settlements, have an important role concerning the distribution of knowledge in handling formal planning.

## 5.0 Conclusions

This research article has sought for the similarities and dissimilarities of community-led planning practices and their interactions with formal government-led planning in three geographically and institutionally different depopulating regions across Europe. In the previous section the first two research questions were discussed: How can community-led planning be characterized and compared, by examining rural depopulating regions with diverse intuitional settings across Europe? What is the effect of differences in institutional setting on community-led planning and community–government relations?

In this concluding section I will focus on the third overarching research question: What does a shift from government-led towards community-led planning imply for the development of planning strategies in rural depopulating regions?

When comparing informality across the three diverging planning contexts in Europe, the similarities between the communities visited stands out the most. Community-led planning initiatives were found in every region and were successful in mitigating the effects of depopulation, though to differing degrees. Moreover, the researched communities had very similar decision-making structures, forms of local organisation and limitations. These similarities could be explained by a strong sense of place, robust informal institutions and a history of self-governance. The found similarities have several implications for the understanding of community-led planning in general. In the first place, as the above-mentioned similarities are found in three rather different regions, they probably can be observed in other European rural regions as well. Examples from other rural community studies support this view (Ray, 1999; Skerratt, 2013; Woods, 2010).

Second, that the core of community-led planning is characterised by strong cultures of self-governance has implications for governments dealing with community-led planning and the development of future planning strategies. Whereas formal, statutory planning is 'makeable' and can be steered in a top-down manner, informal community-led planning cannot. Informal, community-led planning practices evolve in an organic way, follow their own development paths and base their planning objectives on what is desired—or accepted—within the community. Governmental planning can support these community-led planning strategies and lead to win-win situations, but hardly has been able to direct or discourage community initiatives. Nevertheless, not all communities have the capacity to plan. Some communities lack or have under-developed 'cultures of self-governance': they lack a shared understanding of place identity, developed less robust informal institutions or historical notions of self-governance are less prevalent. It is unrealistic to expect all communities to have an endogenous capacity to plan and to take over governmental planning activities. Especially in depopulating regions, a lack of capable community planners can become a problem in the long run, due to selective outmigration

(Hutter & Neumann, 2008). Therefore, an absolute shift towards community-led planning is undesirable in dealing with depopulation.

The regional differences in institutional settings define the room for manoeuvre that communities have to develop their planning initiatives, and the strategies in dealing with (local) governments and statutory planning. Partly, the interaction between communities and governments is a low dynamic, as it is path dependent and rooted in formal and informal institutions: a planning tradition or culture of self-governance is not easily changed. However, through repeated interaction, communities and governments can actively shape and reshape this room for manoeuvre. These government-community interactions are highly dynamic. In all three regions, non-governmental and governmental actors have proven to be successful in establishing alternative strategies and adapting informal institutions to achieve their goals. For gaining an in-depth understanding of community-led planning in the context of (dense) statutory planning, and the development of future planning strategies for dealing with depopulation, insight in these high dynamic interactions are of crucial importance.

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# Appendix A

## *Overview of all Studied Community-led Planning Practices*

| Name of Organization | Place | Undertaken Planning Activities |
|---|---|---|
| **SPAIN (GALICIA)** | | |
| EcoAldea Arqueixal | Albá | Restoration of cultural heritage, touristic accomodation |
| Monte Cabalar | A Estrada | Landscape maintenance, production of free-range heritage cattle |
| Monte Aurosa | Ribeira | Landscape maintenance, collective wood production and fire protection, wind power production |
| Monte Vincios | Vigo | Landscape maintenance, touristic and recreational development, fire protection |
| Monte Teis | Vigo | Landscape maintenance, recreational development, rehabilitation of indigenous forest fire protection |
| Parroquia Muimenta | Muimenta | Recreational area, sports facilitation, restoration of cultural heritage, sports canteen, exhibition area |
| Centro de desenvolviento rural Ancares<br>A Carqueixa | San Ramón de Cervantes | Local economic and cultural development Landscape maintenance, production of cow milk |
| San Cidre cooperative Monte Labrada | Abadín | Landscape maintenance, wind power production, production of free range heritage cattle |
| Komuna Negueira de Muñiz | Negueira de Muñiz | Community centre, landscape maintenance |
| Xermolos | Guitiriz | Library, cultural centre |
| Monte de Zobra | Zobra | Landscape maintenance, wind power production, touristic accommodation and recreational routes |

| Name of Organization | Place | Undertaken Planning Activities |
|---|---|---|
| **SWEDEN (ÖSTERGÖTLAND)** | | |
| Grytgöl IK | Grytgöl | Football field/ sports accommodation<br>Community centre<br>Playground<br>Outdoor hockey rink<br>Library/ cultural centre<br>Hostel |
| Godegård Byalag | Godegård | Mini golf<br>Community centre/ library<br>Plans to reinstall train platform |
| Waldemarsvik IF | Valdemarsvik | Indoor ice hockey rink |
| Bestorp Byalag | Bestorp | Swimming site (open water)<br>Heritage/narrative route<br>Car sharing<br>Prevent school closure |
| Kuddby IK | Kuddby | Sports accommodation/ indoor football hall |
| Tjällmo Byalag<br>Tjällmo Hembygdsförening | Tjällmo | Community centre<br>Recreation route<br>Local heritage museum |

| Name of Organization | Place | Undertaken Planning Activities |
|---|---|---|
| **THE NETHERLANDS (DE ACHTERHOEK)** | | |
| Beltrums Belang | Winterswijk | Village plan<br>Community centre/library |
| ‘t Haarhoes | Noordijk | Community centre/library<br>Indoor sports accommodation<br>Village plan |
| BS22 | Groenlo | Support other community initiatives (non-governmental network organization) |
| DAR Rietmolen | Rietmolen | Indoor and outdoor sports accommodation<br>Community centre/library |
| Brede Maatschappelijke voorziening Mariënvelde | Mariënvelde | Multi-functional care accommodation<br>Indoor sports accommodation<br>Community centre |

# Appendix B

## *Interviewed Stakeholders and Their Backgrounds, per Region*

**SPAIN (GALICIA)**

| | Function | Type of Organization | Name of Organization | Place |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Consultant | Consultancy Cooperative | Cidadania | Santiago de Compostela |
| | Expert | University | Human Geography, Advisory board SYMBIOS | Santiago de Compostela |
| ★ | Director | Citizen Initiative | EcoAldea Arqueixal | Albá |
| | Director | NGO | AGACA | Santiago de Compostela |
| ★ | Director | Citizen initiative | Monte Cabalar | A Estrada |
| ★ | Former Chair | Citizen initiative | Monte Aurosa | Ribeira |
| ★ | Chair<br>Secretary | Citizen initiative | Monte Vincios | Vigo |
| ★ | Chair<br>Secretary | Citizen intiative | Monte Teis | Vigo |
| | Director | NGO | ORGACCM | Vigo |
| ★ | Volunteer | Citizen intiative | Parroquia Muimenta | Muimenta |
| ★ | Director<br>Employee<br><br>Director | NGO<br><br><br>Cooperative | Centro de desenvolviento rural Ancares<br>A Carqueixa | San Ramón de Cervantes |
| ★ | Director<br>Chair | Citizen initiative | San Cidre cooperativa<br>Monte Labrada | Abadín |
| ★ | Volunteer/<br>Inhabitant | Citizen initiative | Komuna Negueira de Muñiz | Negueira de Muñiz |
| | Policy Advisor | Ministery of rural affairs | Bantegal | Lugo |
| ★ | Chair | Citizen initiative | Xermolos | Guitiriz |
| ★ | Chair<br>Former<br>Secretary | Citizen initiative | Monte de Zobra | Zobra |

**SWEDEN (ÖSTERGÖTLAND)**

| | Function | Type of Organization | Name of Organization | Place |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Director | NGO | LEADER Kustlandet | Gamleby |
| | Expert | Knowledge institute | TEMA Linköping University | Linköping |
| ★ | Former chair | Citizen initiative | Grytgöl IK | Grytgöl |
| | Rural development officer | Municipality | Linköping Kommun | Linköping |
| ★ | Chair<br>Secretary<br>Board member | Citizen initiative | Godegård Byalag | Godegård |
| | Policy Advisor | NGO | Hela Sverige Ska Leva | Linköping |
| | Civil servant<br>Civil servant<br>Head of strategic planning | Municipality | Finspång Kommun | Finspång |
| | Former chair | Citizen initiative | Kuddby IK | Norrköping |
| ★ | Board member | Citizen initiative | Waldemarsvik IF | Valdemarsvik |
| | Civil servant (strategic planning)<br>Rural development officer | Municipality | Norrköping Kommun | Norrköping |
| ★ | Chair | Citizen initiative | Bestorp Byalag | Bestorp |
| ★ | Chair | Citizen initiative | Kuddby IK | Kuddby |
| | Policy Advisor | NGO | Sveriges Kommuner och Landsting | Stockholm |
| | Entrepreneur | Company | Tjällmo Gästgifvaregård | Tjällmo |
| ★ | Chair<br>Secretary | Citizen Initiative | Tjällmo Byalag<br>Tjällmo Hembygdsförening | Tjällmo |
| | Director | NGO | Hela Sverige Ska Leva | Stockholm |
| | Rural development officer | Municipality | Motola Kommun | Motola |
| | Architect | Municipality | Åtvidaberg Kommun | Åtvidaberg |
| | Policy Advisor | NGO | Hela Sverige Ska Leva | (telephone) |

## THE NETHERLANDS (DE ACHTERHOEK)

| | Function | Organisation type | Name organisation | Place |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Policy Advisor | NGO | Stamm CMO | Assen |
| | Civil Servant | Municipality | Gemeente Berkelland | Eibergen |
| | Director | Regional Organisation | Regio Achterhoek | Doetinchem |
| | Secretary | Regional Organisation | Regio Achterhoek | Doetinchem |
| | Expert | Knowledge institute | Alterra | Wageningen |
| | Director | Regional Organisation | Regio Achterhoek | Doetinchem |
| | Policy Advisor | Regional Organisation | Regio Achterhoek | Doetinchem |
| | Director | NGO | Vereniging Kleine Kernen | Zelhem |
| ★ | Chair | Citizen initiative | Beltrums Belang | Winterswijk |
| ★ | Board member | Citizen initiative | ‘t Haarhoes | Noordijk |
| | Volunteer/expert | NGO | Vereniging Kleine Kernen | Nijmegen |
| ★ | Board member<br>Employee | Citizen intiative | BS22<br>Plattelandsjongeren | Groenlo |
| ★ | Board member | Citizen initiative | DAR Rietmolen | Rietmolen |
| ★ | Board member | Citizen initiative | Brede Maatschappelijke voorziening Mariënvelde | Mariënvelde |

★ Includes field visit (observation of citizen initiative)