

The Role of Communities in Creating a more Sustainable Future

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ABSTRACT

Communities can play a possible role in adapting to and mitigating the risks of climate change that threaten humanity. By using the concept of community competences this thesis looks at two community initiatives focused on sustainability to get a better understanding of the way such initiatives make decisions and act collectively, while also contributing to a better understanding of the concept of community competences. Multiple data collection methods are used to get a better understanding of the extent to which community competences are developed: Eleven semi-structured interviews are analyzed and complemented with a document analysis of the statutes from the initiatives and available news articles about the initiatives. The results suggest that both initiatives have to some extent developed all community competences. Differences in the degree to which the competences are developed can primarily be explained by the way the initiatives are organized. Both initiatives struggle with reaching everyone in their district to participate. They also experience bureaucratic issues when dealing with the communities.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Climate change is often called the biggest challenge for mankind today (Karl, 2003; Mair, 2014; Sun & Yang, 2016). To reduce the risk of climate change, adaption and mitigation is needed (Sun & Yang, 2016). Adaption, to address the short- and long-term consequences associated with climate change and mitigation to avoid increasing reliance on carbon intensive structures (Saavedra & Budd, 2009). Both local and national responses are needed to do so (Saavedra & Budd, 2009). Since dealing with climate change has to happen at multiple levels and within multiple sectors, it is often characterized by fragmentation, occurring when decision-makers each believe that they have correctly defined the problem (Sun & Yang, 2016). This lack of shared understanding leads to less connection and coordination among institutions, organizations, individuals and policies. This has several implications, such as partly accessible knowledge, but most importantly hinders stakeholders to make progress in addressing the challenges that climate change brings (Sun & Yang, 2016; Biesbroek, et al., 2011; Sun & Yang, 2016).

A way to overcome this fragmentation, might be through community responses: Local actors' networks can substitute action on national level (Eisenack et al., 2014) bridging the gap between government and policy, and the wishes from individuals living in the affected areas. The possible role for communities in creating a sustainable future is being increasingly acknowledged, pointing to the importance of local responses next to national policies (McKenzie-Mohr, 2000; Jackson, 2005; Seyfang, 2006). Local responses mean that communities have to develop and enhance their ability to cope, adopt to, and shape change and have to make decisions to encourage a more sustainable future (Budd & Saavedra, 2008).

The extent to which communities are able to do so, is often described as community resilience, which is among other things influenced by a community's competences: The way that they make decisions and are able to act collectively (Norris et al., 2008). If these competences are well developed, communities are able to activate their full potential for resilience (Brown & Kulig, 1996). The concept of community resilience is primarily applied to disaster management, but there is good reason to believe that it is equally applicable to climate change (Norris et al., 2008; Brien et al., 2012). The research on measuring community resilience is quite extensive, with multiple tools developed to measure the concept both quantitative and qualitative (Sharifi, 2016; Sherrieb et al., 2010). However, the research on the specific elements that foster community resilience remains scarce. Consequently, the concept of community competences, a key driver for community resilience, is remaining vague. Although there is a long-standing call for a better development of the concept, this did not lead to more research on the topic (Eng & Parker, 1994; Goepfinger & Baglioni, 1985). Additionally, there is little research on the question if the concept of community resilience is indeed applicable to other forms of collective stressors, such as climate change. Therefore, this research contributes not only to a better understanding of the concept of community competences, but also sheds light on the question if the overarching concept of community resilience is applicable to communities dealing with the risks of climate change.

The research is interdisciplinary: Integrating insights from disaster management, geography and community psychology to come to a better understanding of the concepts that are studied. This increases the likelihood of a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon (Roper & Brookes, 1999). If there is a better understanding of what makes a community function effectively, larger society can benefit from this by applying this knowledge to already existing communities focused on sustainability. Consequently, existing communities can improve their impact on dealing with the risks of climate change. Therefore, this thesis looks at two community initiatives that focus on creating a more sustainable future to see to what extent they have developed their community competencies and how this can be explained. This thesis is written for the WaardenMakers, a platform that supports societal initiatives in the province of Brabant to increase their impact in relation to sustainability.

2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The world has seen an increasing trend in annual climatological, hydrological and meteorological loss events since 1980 and there is now consensus that this trend is caused by climate change (Hoeppe, 2016). This trend is ought to have severe consequences for the way that cities have to be managed in the long term (Hoeppe, 2016). To manage the risks of climate change, policy makers and scientists are increasingly looking at the concept of community resilience. The concept of resilience was originally mostly used in psychology and ecology where psychologists describe resilient individuals as persons who, after disruptive events in their life, use their personal strengths to grow stronger and even function

above the norm (Tusaie & Dyer, 2004). In ecology it is used to describe the ways the environment adapts after being confronted with a variety of risks (Kulig et al., 2013). After being primarily applied to the individual level and the environment, the concept of resilience found its way to the community level: A community is resilient if they are capable to act intentional and meaningful (Kulig & Brown, 1996).

Before elaborating on the concept of community resilience, it is essential to first explain what is meant by the term “community”. The notion of a community is contested, being defined in several different ways across disciplines, with no definitive meaning (Mulligan et al., 2016). It is best defined on a case-by-case basis, focusing on the specific area of interest of the research (Kais & Islam, 2006). A definition that is broadly used is “a diverse group of individuals, who have common interests, are linked by dynamic socio-economic interactions, and engage in collective action” (Sharifi, 2016 p. 630). It is also being defined as “an affective unity of belong and identity”, or “a unit of collective action” (Kais & Islam, 2016, p. 3). A combination of those definitions seems to work best for this thesis, with a focus on what binds the community together as well as their potential to act. In this study, community is thus defined as: A shared group of individuals who have common interests, are linked by socio-economic interactions, and engage in collective action (Sharifi, 2016; Alshehri et al, 2014) and who have the capacity to collectively identify problems, allocate resources, make decisions and act on them (Kais & Islam, 2016).

The concept of community resilience is primarily applied to disasters, as the process of being able to “bounce back” after a disturbance (Berkes & Ross, 2013; Norris et al., 2008). If a community is resilient, they are able to react to those disturbances well. How resilient a community is, is influenced by four adaptive capacities: economic development, social capital, information and communication and community competences (Norris et al., 2008; Bajayo, 2012; Sherrieb et al., 2010). Because the scope of this thesis does not allow for an extensive elaboration of all four capacities, the focus lies on explaining community capacities, which are central to this thesis. But before elaborating on community competences, it is first important establish if there is indeed reason to believe that the concept of community resilience is equally applicable to other forms of collective stressors. Research suggests that the concept of community resilience is indeed equally applicable to other forms of collective stressors (Norris et al., 2008). When communities are more resilient, they are better able to face the risks of climate change. This is illustrated by a growing interest in the concept of resilience for approaching broader social and environmental challenges (Cretney & Bond, 2014; Béné et al., 2012). However, it is noted that community resilience to climate change still lacks meaning and associated activities (Twigger-Ross et al., 2015).

Since there is reason to believe that the concept of community resilience is a good fit to understand how communities deal with the necessity of creating a more sustainable future and deal with the risks of climate change, how do we then define community resilience in this light? It might be worth

considering reframing the concept in terms of being more sustainable than what has already been, to being a forward-looking process of change that seeks to address a wide range of environmental and social issues (Fazey et al., 2018). This definition is still in line with the general consensus that community resilience is better defined as a process than an outcome (Brown and Kulig, 1996; Norris et al., 2007) and second, that it makes more sense to conceptualize community resilience as adaptability rather than stability (Hadmer & Dovers, 1996; Waller, 2001). When conceptualizing community as a stability, it does not account for the possibility that a community can increase their resiliency. But, when defining community resilience as an adaptability, it does account for the process of change that the community can undergo working towards a more sustainable future.

However, this definition does not account for the capacities that enable this process, which are the key element of this thesis. Those capacities are important, because they influence how resilient a community is. A definition with an emphasizing the process of change that seeks to address a wide range of environmental and social issues, that also takes in the capabilities that enable this, seems to work best for this thesis. This means that community resilience in this thesis is defined as: ‘‘A forward looking progress linking a set of adaptive capacities to addressing a wide range of environmental and societal issues’’ (Norris et al., 2008; Fazey et al., 2018)

The following capacities enable community resilience: Economic development, social capital, information and communication and community competences (Norris et al., 2008; Bajayo, 2012; Sherrieb et al., 2012). Although all capacities are important to the resilience of a community, but it are community competences that are needed to act on them (Bajayo, 2012). Being so crucial to a community its ability to act, community competences will be focus of this thesis. Originally, the concept of ‘‘a competent community’’ was introduced by Cotrell in 1976. He proposed seven essential preconditions (competences) to a competent community: (1) Commitment, (2) participation, (3) self-other awareness and clarity of situational definition, (4) social support, (5) articulateness and effective communication, (6) conflict containment and accommodation (6) management of relations with larger society, (7) machinery for facilitating participant interaction and decision-making (Lochner, 1999). Because the scope of this thesis does not allow for an extensive research on all the seven competences, the focus lies on the five competencies that allow a community to act, which are: (1) being able to tell a coherent story about who they are and what they need, both inside and outside the community (effective communication and articulateness), (2) facilitate interaction and decision-making among participants, (3) maintain contact with and getting support from larger society, (4) having a clear idea about their own position and this position in relation to others inside and outside the community, (5) are able to speak about and work out conflicts (Lochner, 1999).

After recognizing community competence as enabler of community resilience, community competence is often summarized as ‘‘having to do with collective action and decision-making’’ (Norris

et al., 2008, p. 141). Others have described it as ‘‘the skills, motivations and powers required to activate a community’s potential for resilience’’, those skills, motivations and powers being a clear derivative of Cotrell’s dimensions (Bajayo, 2012). It often remains unclear how these concepts can be seen in practice, with broad terms such as ‘‘critical reflection’’ or ‘‘creativity in problem solving’’ (Bajayo, 2012). Therefore, in this research I am focusing on five of the original competencies as proposed by Cotrell, as written down above.

Research suggests that for a community to use these competences, it is important that they feel that their collaborative action can and will produce positive change (Bajayo, 2012). Next to this, it seems that the amount of formal empowerment, whether or not institutional structures allow communities genuine opportunities for being included in the decision-making, and substantive empowerment, if communities and institutions work are working together in a partnership, are important indicators for communities in succeeding to use their competencies and work towards a positive outcome (Bajayo, 2012).

Knowing that community competences are a key enabler for the resilience of a community, the central focus of this thesis is: To what extent are community competences developed in Klimaatplein Heusden and Duurzaam Soesterkwartier and how can this be explained? Three sub questions are formulated to help answer this question: (1) What are community competences? (2) To what extent are they developed in Klimaatplein Heusden and Duurzaam Soesterkwartier? (3) How can this be explained?

Yin (2003) notes that when doing a multiple case study, similar or contrasting results can be expected, based on the studied cases. Since Klimaatplein Heusden and Duurzaam Soesterkwartier are quite similar, the expectation is that both cases have developed the community competences to similar extent, in order for them to be a functioning community (Lochner, 1999).

3 | METHODS

3.1 | Design & procedure

The design of this thesis is a qualitative multiple case study. To get both a deeper understanding of the concepts that were studied as well as to see if certain expectations became a reality in practice, a qualitative design therefore was a good fit for this study. A case study is appropriate when contextual conditions are important or ‘‘how’’ and ‘‘why’’ questions are the focus (Yin, 2003), which is both the case in this thesis. A multiple case study allows the researcher to analyze within the context of each case and across cases and it gives more insight in similarities and differences between cases. The evidence from these types of studies is generally seen as more reliable (Yin, 2003), although this effect will be limited in my thesis because I am only studying two cases.

3.2 | Sampling & data collection

3.2.1 | Criteria

Since this thesis was written in consultation with the WaardenMakers, where I was doing my internship, they were involved in the decision of which initiatives to study. This implicated that my search for sustainability initiative to study, started in the province of Brabant. There was no clear overview of sustainability initiatives in the province of Brabant to be found, so my internship providing me with suggestions of initiatives that could possibly fit the criteria that I used, which were: Functioning for two or more years, focusing on sustainability and being run by volunteers. The focus on sustainability was central to this thesis, and thus was a logical criterion. When selecting initiatives that were functioning for more than two years, I wanted ensure that they had at least some experience with functioning as a community, which would increase the chance that they could provide me with valuable information. The criterium of volunteers increased the likelihood to get better idea of how communities function when started by locals.

3.2.2 | Description of cases

Ultimately, this led to two sustainability initiatives: Duurzaam Soesterkwartier in Amersfoort and Klimaatplein Heusden in Heusden. Duurzaam Soesterkwartier is a sustainability initiative in Amersfoort and was founded around 2010. It consists of a board and around 200 members who participate in several projects related to sustainability. Klimaatplein Heusden was founded in 2019 and wants to inspire and connect cores in the municipality of Heusden to take sustainability in their own hand. Klimaatplein Heusden itself consists of three core people and the participating cores have their own projects that they work on. It remains unclear how many people exactly are participating, since it is not possible to become a member of Klimaatplein Heusden.

3.2.3 | Data collection: Interviews

To collect data, I conducted semi-structured interviews. When insight in experiences, beliefs and motivations are wanted, semi-structured interviews are helpful (Gill et al., 2008). Consisting of several key questions that the researcher wants to touch upon, they offer enough space for the interviewer or interviewee to diverge from the subject and talk about an idea, or to respond more detailed (Pope & Mays, 2006). It gave the interviewee the possibility to speak freely about their thoughts and experiences, whereas as a researcher, you do not have to commit to rigid questions alone (Adams, 2015).

3.2.3 | Sampling participants

Although it was preferred to conduct interviews face-to-face, this was unfortunately not possible due to COVID-19 restrictions, meaning that interviews were held online via Microsoft Teams. Interviews lasted around 30 – 45 minutes. To select participants within the initiatives, a combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling was conducted (Sharma, 2017), where both people close to

the decision-making process (e.g., board members) and ‘regular’ participants were tried to reach. Any contacts the WaardenMakers already had within the initiatives and the spokespersons of the initiatives who could be found on the websites of the initiatives were contacted and asked to participate. If they agreed to do so, they were asked if they knew any other members of the communities that would want to participate. Unfortunately, it was harder than foreseen to get people to participate, meaning that several people who initially agreed to do an interview, were not responding to emails later on. In consultation with my internship, it was decided to broaden the scope for interviewees to ensure that there would be enough interviews at the end, meaning that employees at the municipality of Amersfoort and Heusden that were in contact with the initiatives would also be asked to participate. This would lead to a better understanding how the municipality and the initiatives worked together. In consultation with the WaardenMakers, I selected the most suitable employees (i.e., the ones that were in contact with the initiatives) at the municipalities for the interviews and tried to reach them by email and phone. Fortunately, two of the four people agreed to do an interview. Ultimately, this led to eleven interviews. However, this was still not enough in terms of data to ensure that I could answer my research question properly.

3.2.3 | Data collection: Document Analysis

This led to the next step, which was to amplify the interviews with document analysis. The documents that have been analyzed are the statutes of Duurzaam Soesterkwartier and Vrienden van het Klimaatplein as well as any news articles that were written about the initiatives: ten articles regarding Klimaatplein Heusden and four articles regarding Duurzaam Soesterkwartier. The statutes would provide formal information about the decision-making process, whereas the news articles gave more information about how the initiatives communicate and maintain relationships with larger society. The interviews and documents complemented each other: the statutes are recorded without the researcher’s intervention whereas the interviews are done with the researchers’ intervention. This way, information about a potential difference in what is formally decided and what is seen in practice was acquired. This information was helpful explaining why some competencies are more prevalent than others.

The concept of community competencies has not been researched extensively, which makes it hard to operationalize. Consequently, this research is more explorative of nature. This makes it harder to definitively decide in which initiative the community competences are better developed. The operationalization as described in table 1 will form the basis to answer which initiative the community competences are more developed, as based on the theoretical framework.

Concept	Operationalization
Self-other awareness and clarity of situational definition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Clear idea about the role of the board and different projects * Clear idea about what the community can and cannot do
Conflict containment and conflict accommodation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Community members are able to express different opinions without being oppressed * There is a formal procedure prescribing what to do when conflicts occur * Community members try to work out problems and resolve these problems
Management of relationships with larger society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Community is / feels supported by municipality through concrete actions such as subsidy, knowledge, etc. * Community is able to maintain contact with other organizations in society and benefit from them
Machinery for facilitating participant interaction and decision-making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Community has written down procedures for decision-making * All participants are given the opportunity to participate in the decision-making process * Participants are offered the opportunity to interact * Community is able to finish projects
Articulateness and effective communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Needs, views, attitudes and intentions are expressed by community through various sources * The community is able to tell a coherent story about who they are and what they need * The community is able to express various positions in the community, such as the board vs. individual projects

Table 1. Operationalisation concepts

3.3 | Analysis

The interview data were transcribed verbatim and coded and analyzed using Nvivo. Coding allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the data as well as improves credibility of the findings as it increases transparency (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). The coding process was both deductive and inductive. It started off with a theory-driven, pre-defined list of codes, such as: ‘*conflict containment*’ or ‘*participant decision-making*’. This led to an increased focus on the things that were known to be important. The deductive codes, as well as the material that could not be placed within the pre-defined codes, was coded more inductive in later coding stages. (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). This meant that there were three phases in coding: First, the focus was on descriptive coding, meaning that all material that could be placed under the pre-defined codes was coded (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). What could not be placed under these predetermined codes, was coded inductive in the second round. Codes such as ‘*enthusiasm*’ or ‘*draagvlak*’ occurred. In the third round, the material was once again looked at more inductive and the focus was on redefining, pattern exploring and categorizing codes. (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). During coding, memos were used to reflect on choices and to keep thinking about the analysis to limit the positive bias that might occur when working with predetermined codes: It helped focusing on what was actually happening in the data instead of only focusing on the predetermined codes (Glaser, 1978; Birks et al., 2008). The results were reported in the results section.

3.4 | Reflection and ethics

The anonymity and privacy of participants are highly valued, consequently they cannot be traced back from any interviews. Next to this, data was stored on an external drive and transported via a protected device and accessed through a secure connection. The participants filled in an informed consent form: Including information about the research, their rights and stating that the person agreeing to the form, agreed to participate in the research project freely. When conducting a research, there are always influences, one of them being my own position as researcher (Barret et al., 2020). During my internship for example, I have already spoken a lot about the practices of communities focused on sustainability. Although this might make it easier to connect to the participants who I am talking to, it might also lead to me seeing the things I want to see or hearing the things I want to hear. To limit this, I follow an interview guide and try to be as open as possible. To make sure that I remembered everything about the interviews, I wrote down a short note after each interview to reflect on my own position.

5 | RESULTS

5.1 | Klimaatplein Heusden

Klimaatplein Heusden is a platform for initiatives related to sustainability, specifically climate- and energy initiatives in the municipality of Heusden. It is formed by residents from Doeveren, Heesbeen, Vesting Heusden, Herpt and Hedikhuizen. Initially, Klimaatplein Heusden was started by three individuals with a heart for sustainability who want to actively activate inhabitants of the municipality of Heusden to start their own sustainability initiatives in their neighborhood.

5.1.1 | Self-other awareness and clarity of situational definition & facilitating decision-making and participant interaction

Klimaatplein Heusden is not an official association or foundation, but a platform that wants *“Bewoners van Heusden stimuleren om verantwoordelijkheid te nemen van voor hun eigen woonplek en samen op te trekken voor het maatschappelijk belang”*, in the words of one of the founders. They want every district in the municipality to make its own plan. It is necessary for a community to have a clear idea about what they can and cannot do leading to a clear idea about what certain parts of the community can or cannot do (Lochner, 1999). This seems to be the case with Klimaatplein Heusden, with a clear distinction between what the districts themselves have to do and what Klimaatplein Heusden can do. Since Klimaatplein Heusden is not an official association, they do not have a board. Talking to two of the three people that are involved in Klimaatplein Heusden, they both mention that the reason behind this is that they do not want *“baasjes”* who dictate what happens around Klimaatplein Heusden. However, they have founded a separate foundation *“Vrienden van het Klimaatplein”* for situations where finances are involved, and a bank account is needed:

En zo hebben we een aantal jaren geleden, ik meen in 2019, hebben we een dag mede georganiseerd met de Gemeente Heusden, dat was in het kader van het Stimuleringsfonds, of industrie. En daar kregen we vijfduizend euro voor. Ja, bij iemand op de privérekening belanden, dat is niet zo handig.

The participating districts are not included in the decision about what to do with the money, in the words of one of the members of Vrienden van Klimaatplein Heusden: *“Besluiten dat we geld ergens aan uitgeven doen we eigenlijk met elkaar.”* The same participant mentions that the involved cores have their own *“bestuursachtige organisatie.”* This is in line with the goal of Klimaatplein Heusden, meaning that they primarily want to inform and connect people from different cores. Although all the cores have their own board, it could be argued that the board of the Vrienden van het Klimaatplein are

still to some extent involved in the decision-making process of the cores, by being the ones that are in charge of filing for subsidy and/or provide Klimaatplein Heusden with money. As stated in the statutes: *‘De stichting heeft ten doel: a. Het financieel en materieel ondersteunen van de informele samenwerkingsverband van diverse organisaties actief binnen de gemeente Heusden, genaamd Klimaatplein Heusden, alsmede het op enigerlei wijze faciliteren van dit Klimaatplein’*. And: *‘De stichting tracht haar doel onder meer te verwezenlijken door: Het aanvragen en verantwoorden van subsidies voor het Klimaatplein Heusden.’*

It is, however, hard to get everyone to participate for Klimaatplein Heusden. Not every core wants to participate. In the words of the counsellor from the municipality: *‘Maar ik weet ook dat ze daar ook niet in alle kernen evenveel zeg maar, weerklank vinden voor hun initiatief.’* Although they do want everyone to participate, in practice this seems to be a lot harder. When talking to a separate sustainability initiative and a counsellor in the municipality of Heusden, they both say they do not work with Klimaatplein Heusden itself very much, due to the fact they do not facilitate any projects. Although Klimaatplein Heusden its goal is to connect and inspire separate cores, the councilor from the municipality is not sure to what extent they are able to do so: *‘Het is sowieso lastig, bijvoorbeeld hoe het draagvlak is bij dat soort clubs.’* Although they do have formal procedures about decision-making, this is only for the foundation (i.e., Stichting Vrienden van het Klimaatplein). It remains unclear if participants if there is the possibility for participants to interact. This indicates that the competence ‘facilitating decision-making and interaction’ is less developed in Klimaatplein Heusden.

5.1.2 | Maintaining relationships with society

To function, a community needs to be able to get support from larger society and use their resources (Lochner, 1999). Klimaatplein Heusden is mainly in contact with the municipality and gets this support by successfully filing for subsidy. However, participants from Klimaatplein Heusden feel like they cannot effectively utilize the money because of bureaucratic issues with the municipality:

En vervolgens zijn er miljoenen beschikbaar, voor dat hele Noord-Oost Brabant. ... En dat is iets wat je niet als Klimaatplein of als inwoners zelf kan doen. Dat moet je samen met de gemeente doen. En hier lopen we dan tegen de gemeente aan.

This makes it hard to actually achieve things with the subsidy that they receive. In general, participants of Klimaatplein Heusden are rather positive about their contacts with the municipality, apart from both mentioning bureaucratic issues when working with the municipality. In the words of one of the participants: *‘Het kan allemaal sneller, maar dat zijn we van de politiek wel gewend.’* They also struggle with the municipality often already having their own ideas or plans to reach a certain (sustainability) goal. This is not always in line with how Klimaatplein Heusden would like to achieve it, which makes it hard for them to achieve their goals. However, participants note that they do need the

municipality, due to things or projects are often too big for them to work out as volunteers, and more manpower is needed. The councilor of the municipality confirms this: *“Uiteindelijk komen ze naar ons”*. This does have an advantage for the municipality, because this often leads to more *“draagvlak”*, meaning that it is easier for the municipality to follow up on plans if they know it is already coming from the locals.

5.1.3 | Conflict containment and conflict accommodation

Klimaatplein Heusden does not seem to deal with conflicts very often. When asked about any conflicts, both participants mention a conflict with someone involved who could not separate his private interest and the interest of the project that he was involved in. This led to him eventually leaving the project. In this matter, it was not possible to work out the conflict. Apart from the usual contradictions in opinions, there do not seem to occur a lot of conflicts. In the word of one participant: *“Je kunt van mening verschillen, de ene is wat activistischer dan de ander, om het zo maar te zeggen”*. However, there seems to be enough room to speak out those differences: *“En natuurlijk botst dat, maar aan de andere kant geeft dat ook de dynamiek en juist de kracht. Dus dat je vanuit die verschillende perspectieven naar iets kunt kijken”*. This indicates that this competence is developed rather well in Klimaatplein Heusden.

5.1.4 | Effective communication and articulateness

A competent community is able to tell a coherent story about who they are and what they need, both inside the community and outside the community (Lochner, 1999). Participants from Klimaatplein Heusden are mostly talking about what they strive to be. They express themselves in interviews to the press, their website and to me in the interviews. Their intentions become clear when talking to the participants. In the words of one of the participants, Klimaatplein Heusden intends to: *“Informereren, te verbinden.”* What they stand for, becomes particularly clear in the way they express themselves towards in the media:

Het aangrijpingspunt bij het Klimaatplein Heusden ligt bij het geloof dat de inwoner of ondernemer op zijn woon- of werkplek ervaart dat hij voor zijn eigen welbevinden op de opgaven moet anticiperen. De leden denken vanuit hun behoeften, zij benaderen onderwerpen holistisch en maken stappen als hun basisbehoeften, zoals veiligheid, gezondheid, zijn ingevuld (Gemeente Cuijk, 2021).

This implicates that Klimaatplein Heusden is very well able to communicate their story and their needs, suggesting a rather well development in their communication and articulateness.

5.2 | Duurzaam Soesterkwartier

Duurzaam Soesterkwartier is a sustainability initiative in the district Soesterkwartier in Amersfoort, the Netherlands. They were founded after an initial riot in their district when the municipality planned to demolish a beloved part of their district that many of the residents were attached to. After successfully protesting these plans, the municipality asked them to develop a vision supporting the preservation of the planned demolition. The vision became sustainability and Duurzaam Soesterkwartier was born.

5.2.1 | Self-other awareness and clarity of situational definition & facilitating decision-making and participant interaction

Duurzaam Soesterkwartier is an official association and thus have a board, which exists of a minimum of three people who are in charge of managing the association. In the statutes there is some information found about formal decision-making: They mention a yearly members meeting, where they vote about certain things: *‘Over alle voorstellen betreffende zaken wordt beslist met een gewone meerderheid van de geldig uitgebrachte stemmen, voor zover de statute niet anders bepalen’*, according to the statutes. This voting however is not obligated to join, so it does not necessary ensure that the decision-making process is done by every member of Duurzaam Soesterkwartier. The yearly meeting seems to be filled in more informally: *‘En we hebben een jaarlijkse ledenvergadering elk jaar. Daar maken we altijd een feest van, dat is geen vergadering. Dat doen we iets actiefs en ludieks met elkaar’*. This informality is illustrative for how decisions are made more generally: *‘Die gingen dan een energieborrel organiseren, nodigden alle burens uit. En zo ontstonden ook initiatieven om straatgewijs allerlei energiebesparingen op te zetten.’* If projects under Duurzaam Soesterkwartier thus start to get more serious, they can start their own foundation to ask for subsidy or hire people. In the words of a member:

Als een initiatief daadwerkelijk serieus en vruchtbaar genoeg is, dan kan dat ook in een juridische entiteit worden gestopt. Ik weet niet of ik het goed zeg zo, maar zeg maar, dat de werkgroep toch een vereniging wordt, of een stichting of een coöperatie. Die hebben hun eigen stromingen, hun eigen juridische zaken, hun eigen financiële afwikkeling, met een bestuur erin. Daar is het bestuur van Duurzaam Soesterkwartier niet verantwoordelijk voor.

Therefore, decision making is mostly done by the participants who are involved in such projects. Duurzaam Soesterkwartier has a hard time getting the whole district to participate, as said by a participant: *‘Toch is het vaak wel dezelfde groepen mensen die de initiatieven nemen.’* The people who participate in Duurzaam Soesterkwartier are quite similar in that they are primarily: *‘Hoger opgeleiden, zoals je in de hele milieubeweging wel ziet’*. And: *‘Die zich zorgen maken om de leefomstandigheden*

van hun kinderen en kleinkinderen. En het zijn hoofdzakelijk huiseigenaren’. Not everyone in Duurzaam Soesterkwartier sees this as problematic, since they differ in their opinions whether they want to be there for the whole district: Some state they want everyone in Soesterkwartier to benefit from their projects, whereas others state that they cannot be there for the whole district. This leads to (negative) reactions from the people in the district that they do not reach: *‘Soms doen mensen ook lelijk tegen ons, dan hebben we allemaal geitenwollensokken aan die we nooit dragen.’* A point of criticism is that they do receive is that they are only there for the rich. These results suggest that Duurzaam Soesterkwartier has a clear idea about what they can and cannot do, as well as how different parts of the community function. This indicates a well-developed self-awareness and clarity of the situational definition. They also are able to facilitate participant interaction and decision-making, although not for everyone.

5.2.2 | Maintaining relationships with society

As a community, Duurzaam Soesterkwartier maintains relationships with the municipality, other sustainability initiatives in Amersfoort and external organizations, such as the housing corporation Portaal. Initially, Duurzaam Soesterkwartier did not want to have too much contact with the municipality. They wanted to operate individually. However, they soon found out they needed the municipality for practical issues, which led to them reaching out to the municipality now and then. This seems to be two-way street: The community reaches out to the municipality, the municipality also reaches out to them. Not only does Duurzaam Soesterkwartier successfully reach out to the municipality: *‘We hebben ook subsidie gekregen voor het CV oké project. Om zo ’n expert naar de ketel te laten kijken en ook een lezing te krijgen van waar moet je nou op letten. En we kregen toen ook een de check door zo ’n expert goedkoper aanbieder daardoor.’* The municipality also reaches out to them: *‘En, er zijn ook wat andere verhoudingen ontstaan. Je ziet bijvoorbeeld dat de gemeente ons nu vraagt van, goh, willen jullie dat en dat organiseren.’* says one of the participants. This interaction is confirmed by an employee from the municipality of Amersfoort: *‘We hebben, we horen zelfs wel eens, we worden veel te veel gevraagd om mee te denken. Ja. Qua meedenken denk ik dat we dat zeker doen.’* The municipality sees the value of Duurzaam Soesterkwartier in the *‘draagvlak’* that they create as initiative. Participants from Duurzaam Soesterkwartier have different experiences working together with the municipality: Sometimes good, sometimes bad. The bad experiences for both initiatives are often due to bureaucratic struggles, which often leads to members losing their enthusiasm, or to delaying or failure of projects. This way, the initiatives cannot be operational and their capacity to facilitate participant interaction or decision making is undermined. They also note that the municipality often already has other plans, leaving little room for them to participate. This is recognized by the employee from the municipality from Amersfoort, although she explains:

De gemeente heeft met al die belangen te maken. En intern moeten wij dat dan ook gaan uitzoeken. Van goh, hoe zit het met het bestemmingsplan. Wat doet onze afdeling vastgoed, wat

is hier voor woningbouw gepland? Nou, noem maar op. Dus we moeten al die belangen op dat moment gaan afwegen. En ook alle procedures. En ja, dat kost ook bij ons heel veel tijd.

Other sustainability initiatives are used to exchange knowledge with. In the words of a participant: *“Informeel en soms georganiseerd zijn er ontmoetingen, en als wij met een kwestie zitten dan weten wij mensen te vinden die daar mogelijk ervaring mee hebben. En ik denk dat nu daar een wederzijdse kruisbestuiving wel heel vruchtbaar is.”* Duurzaam Soesterkwartier also works together with external organizations such as the housing corporation or the Natuurmilieu Federatie Utrecht or housing corporation Portaal. These results suggest that Duurzaam Soesterkwartier is able to maintain their relationships with larger society, as well as get support when needed, although they do experience the usual hiccups.

5.2.3 | Conflict containment and conflict accommodation

A competent community is able to express conflicts and is inventive in solving those conflicts. Conflicts do not get out of hand but are rather faced openly and managed effectively (Lochner, 1999). In Duurzaam Soesterkwartier, there do not seem to occur a lot of conflicts. Rather, they describe it as opposite opinions, which they view as a logical consequence of working together with different people. A reason why conflicts do not occur at Duurzaam Soesterkwartier is that if people have different opinions, they are always free to start their own projects. Often, this happens naturally. It sometimes occurs that this goes somewhat more hostile:

Nou, die paar fanatieke transitie mensen waren het eigenlijk helemaal niet eens met die aanpak. Die zeiden, als je werkelijk wat wilt betekenen in die energietransitie, dan moet je het professioneel aanpakken. En dan moet er een bureau komen waar een medewerker zit, dan moet er echt in geïnvesteerd worden. Dat is echt wel een heet hangijzer geweest.

Although some conflicts sometimes lead to heated discussions, participants note that they have created a space where people do talk about those discussions later. Some also note that they all have more or less the same goal, which is sustainability. Therefore, if someone has another opinion, they talk about it and try to find common ground. The lack of many conflicts and the ability to speak out differences indicates a rather well-developed competence to maintain and accommodate conflict in Duurzaam Soesterkwartier.

5.2.4 | Effective communication and articulateness

Participants share this story and seem to be able to communicate who they are and what they need, both inside the community as well as outside the community. They tell their story based on their prior achievements and their own experiences. An important theme in their communication seems to be their

“bewust blut” attitude: *“Het bestuur had een houding van, wij zijn een vereniging, ze noemen het bewust blut. Die geen subsidie wil, die echt onafhankelijk wil opereren.”* Duurzaam Soesterkwartier expresses itself news articles, their website and to me in the interviews. They also send out a newsletter and, as said, host a yearly event that participants can voluntarily join. The projects within Duurzaam Soesterkwartier also communicate their needs towards the municipality, which sometimes leads to them successfully filing for subsidy. These results indicate that Duurzaam Soesterkwartier has developed this competence rather well.

5.3 | Comparing Klimaatplein Heusden and Duurzaam Soesterkwartier

The concept of community competences applied to Klimaatplein Heusden and Duurzaam Soesterkwartier shows that both initiatives have (to some extent) developed all competences. Comparing Klimaatplein Heusden and Duurzaam Soesterkwartier, several observations stand out. Common elements are that both initiatives have a clear idea about who they are, are able to maintain relationships with the others in larger society, are able to deal with conflicts and are able to effectively communicate their story and needs. They both struggle with bureaucratic issues when dealing with the municipality and with getting everyone to participate. Differences are found in the way that they are organized, the amount of decision-making and participant they facilitate and the amount of internal communication. The results suggest that the concept of community competences is indeed helpful in addressing community resilience in community initiatives focused on sustainability. The results also show that the community competences seem to be related: Without effectively communicating, a community has a hard time maintaining relationships with larger society. Whereas a community its self-awareness and clarity of situational definition seems to influence the extent to which they can facilitate decision-making and participant interaction.

5.3.1 | Self-other awareness and clarity of situational definition & facilitating decision-making and participant interaction

Comparing Duurzaam Soesterkwartier and Klimaatplein Heusden among the competencies “self-other awareness and clarity of situational definition” and “facilitating decision-making and participant interaction”, similarities and differences stand out. Three similarities can be seen: Both initiatives have a clear idea about their own identity and positions on issues to concern to the community and perceive this well in relation to other community components (e.g., the community as a whole / individual projects) (Lochner, 1999). Next, they both take a role as facilitator. Thirdly, they both have a hard time getting everyone to participate, which leads to the same people being involved. There are also differences. Whereas Klimaatplein Heusden wants to facilitate all districts in the municipality in Heusden by informing, connecting and practical help, such as filing for subsidy, Duurzaam Soesterkwartier is only focused on their own district Soesterkwartier. Participants can start their own projects under Duurzaam Soesterkwartier, file for subsidy if they want, and make decisions as they like. In contrast to Klimaatplein Heusden, Duurzaam Soesterkwartier is not involved in this. This leads to an

informal way of decision-making. The way that Duurzaam Soesterkwartier is organized, seems to lead to this informal decision-making process. The association Duurzaam Soesterkwartier is only there to facilitate the needed conditions for projects that exist under Duurzaam Soesterkwartier, but do not provide them with money. Because they make decision in small project groups, they do not need extensive, formal decision-making procedures. Meaning that they have developed a way of decision-making that works for them and were flexible and responsive to what they needed.

Furthermore, Duurzaam Soesterkwartier has completed more projects than Klimaatplein Heusden. When talking to participants from Klimaatplein Heusden and Duurzaam Soesterkwartier, participants from Klimaatplein Heusden are still in the process of doing things, whereas participants from Duurzaam Soesterkwartier can actually name several projects that they have succeeded, meaning that they were able to successfully let their participants interact and make decisions. This can have a couple of reasons. Not only do they exist longer, but they were also founded in a time where sustainability was a lot less common, which participants from Duurzaam Soesterkwartier suggest as one of the reasons why they are successful. The way that they are organized might also play a role. As said, Klimaatplein Heusden is more focused on bringing together different sustainability initiatives in the region that they are working on and Duurzaam Soesterkwartier is more of an initiative in itself. This reason is also suggested by other sustainability initiatives that work together with Klimaatplein Heusden. These results indicate that they have developed this competence better than Klimaatplein Heusden.

5.3.2 | Maintain relationships with larger society

Originally, the competence ‘‘maintaining relationships with larger society’’ primarily points to the community using the support and resources of larger society to their good (Lochner, 1999), meaning that the community feels supported by the municipality, is able to maintain contact with other organizations in society and benefit from them. However, the results suggests that this is a two-way street in both initiatives. Both Klimaatplein Heusden as well as Duurzaam Soesterkwartier are able to use resources from the municipality, such as getting subsidy or increasing their knowledge via research that the municipality does for them. However, the municipality also sees them as valuable due to the increased ‘‘*draagvlak*’’ when an initiative is coming from locals. Consequently, they are sometimes asked by the municipality to give their opinions about things related to sustainability. In contrast to the value that the municipality sees in the initiatives, stand the bureaucratic struggles that both Klimaatplein and Duurzaam Soesterkwartier experience when dealing with the municipality. As a result, it takes them longer to make progress in the projects or things that they are working at.

5.3.3 | Conflict containment and accommodation

To deal with conflicts in a constructive way, a community should develop procedures to work out conflicts that are fitting to the conflict they face. When conflicts occur, they should be able to talk about this openly and manage those conflicts. While doing so, the community will be able to keep functioning

in a competent way (Lochner, 1999). Both Klimaatplein Heusden and Duurzaam Soesterkwartier seem to work out conflicts quite similarly. Most of the time, there is room to talk about conflicts and work them out together. Sometimes, this means that people leave: Individuals in the case of Klimaatplein Heusden and a project group in the case of Duurzaam Soesterkwartier.

5.3.4 | Effective communication and articulateness

When communities communicate effectively and are able to articulate their needs, views, attitudes and intentions clearly, it helps them to build their resilience (Lochner, 1999). Both Klimaatplein Heusden and Duurzaam Soesterkwartier are able to express themselves via the press, interviews and towards the municipality. However, they differ in the amount of internal communication. Via a newsletter and a yearly meeting, Duurzaam Soesterkwartier communicates to their members what they have been doing. Klimaatplein Heusden lacks this internal communication. A possible explanation for this lack of internal communication in Klimaatplein Heusden could be that they do not have any official members. Possible communication could happen in the participating cores, but on the basis of these results it is hard to say to what extent.

6 | CONCLUSION/DISCUSSION

One of the biggest challenges to humankind today is climate change (Karl, 2003; Mair, 2014; Sun & Yang, 2016). Because of the threats posed to us by climate change, national and local governments need to take measures to adapt to and mitigate the risks of climate change. There is growing interest in the importance of communities as a space for realizing pro-environmental change and realizing a more sustainable future (e.g., McKenzie-Mohr, 2000). This means that communities must develop and enhance their abilities to cope with the changing future, often described as community resilience (Folke et al., 2003). In this context, this thesis sought to explore how the community competences, a key component for achieving a resilience in a community, are developed in Klimaatplein Heusden and Duurzaam Soesterkwartier, two community initiatives focused on sustainability.

The results suggest that in both Klimaatplein Heusden and Duurzaam Soesterkwartier the different community competences are developed. However, the extent to which they are developed differs. Both initiatives have a clear idea about who they are and what they can do, which influences the way they facilitate participant interaction and decision-making. They also are able to deal with conflicts and communicate their needs and story effectively. Both initiatives experience bureaucratic issues when dealing with the municipality, and have a hard time getting everyone to participate. They differ in how they facilitate participant interaction and decision making and the amount of internal organization. An important result is that community competences seem to be related: How the initiatives are organized influences the extent to which they can offer participant decision making and interaction, and participant decision-making and interaction influences the way that relations with larger society are maintained.

In relation to community resilience, Bajayo (2012) notes the importance of formal empowerment for communities to use their competences. Meaning that, for a community to enable their resilience, they need to feel that there are genuine opportunities from institutional structures (e.g., the municipality) for them to be involved in decision-making. It seems that in both Klimaatplein Heusden and Duurzaam Soesterkwartier, formal empowerment is sometimes lacking: Not only do they have to wait a long time before hearing back from the municipality, the municipality also already makes plans without them which leaves less room to participate. This stands in contrast with the municipalities' wish to include residents more in their policies. This is something that policymakers should keep in mind while working towards a sustainable future alongside their residents.

These findings are in line with research on local carbon energy transition cases, where already it is noted that bureaucracy is often a barrier to the success of local communities focused on the energy transition (Allen et al., 2014). Something that both Klimaatplein Heusden and Duurzaam Soesterkwartier also experience. It would make sense that municipalities take a look at how they can work on the bureaucratic barrier that seems to exist for the local communities. Without this barrier, communities can increase their impact on creating a more sustainable future (Frantzeskaki, 2013).

Some limitations to this study should be noted. First, there were struggles with finding enough participants for Klimaatplein Heusden. With more time, it could have been possible that additional participants could have agreed to participate. This influences the validity of the research: With less responses it is harder to get an idea about how Klimaatplein Heusden is functioning and to see if expectations became true. To increase validity, the process was well-documented (Leung, 2015) in the form of memos and reflective notes. This helped to keep thinking about the process. To amplify the interviews, documents were analyzed. A benefit of including document analysis is that it functioned as a means of triangulation, as it combined multiple methodologies (interviews and document analysis) in the study of the same phenomenon (Denzin, 2012). This reduced the impact of potential biases that can exist in a study, by collecting data through different methods (Bowen, 2017). Overall, I was able to get a reasonable picture about the functioning of Klimaatplein Heusden.

Secondly, with the concept of community competences itself. It is hard to discuss community competence at the community level: Not only is the definition of community vague but the concept of community competences itself is also hard to research. It is easily confused with individual or interpersonal competence. To help mitigate this limitation, the focus on the community level was explicitly mentioned to participants to ensure that they would talk about their experiences as a community as much as possible. Thirdly, Klimaatplein Heusden and Duurzaam Soesterkwartier turned out to be two quite different initiatives, which led to difficulties comparing the initiatives. Consequently, it was harder to say to which extent community competences were developed, which was already difficult due to the explorative nature of this research.

Concluding, this study shows that all community competences are developed in Klimaatplein Heusden and Duurzaam Soesterkwartier focused on sustainability, suggesting that it is indeed possible to apply the overarching concept of community resilience. The findings show how initiatives struggle with bureaucratic barriers, reaching everyone in their districts and how community competences are potentially related: They seem to influence each other. In this light, future research could study the concept of community competences more quantitative, to get a better understanding about the applicability of community resilience to climate change, and a better understanding of how the concepts are related. Since not only community competences, but also economic development, social capital and information and communication are key to a resilient community, (Norris et al., 2008). Research on all these capacities is needed to look see to what extent they influence resilience. This will lead to a better understanding of the importance of the different capacities. Policymakers can possibly benefit from this by knowing with route to take when trying to strengthen communities in their battle against the risks of climate change.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Interview guide participants initiatives

Hoofdvraag	Doorvraagmogelijkheden
1. Kunt u mij iets meer vertellen over uzelf en uw rol binnen Duurzaam Soesterkwartier / Klimaatplein Heusden?	* Kunt u toelichten waar u zich voornamelijk mee bezighoudt in relatie tot platform Klimaatplein Heusden / Vereniging Duurzaam Soesterkwartier? * Wat was uw motivatie u zich hierbij aan te sluiten?
2. Kunt u mij iets meer vertellen over de manier waarop Duurzaam Soesterkwartier / Klimaatplein Heusden organisatorisch in elkaar zit?	* Vaak is er een verschil tussen de manier waarop een organisatie formeel en informeel bestuurd wordt. * Hoe zou u deze verhouding bij uw project beschrijven?
3. Op welke manier is Duurzaam Soesterkwartier / Klimaatplein Heusden gegroeid?	* Stel dat ik een project zou willen beginnen, is dit dan mogelijk?
4. Hoe zou u de wisselwerking tussen de gemeente en het project omschrijven?	* In hoeverre voelt u zich gesteund door de gemeente? * Oefent de gemeente invloed uit op jullie project? * Op welke manier heeft het project wijken om het project heen beïnvloed?
5. In elke samenwerking komen soms conflicten voor of situaties waarin meningen uit elkaar kunnen liggen. Ik kan me zo voorstellen dat jullie hier binnen Duurzaam Soesterkwartier / Klimaatplein Heusden ook tegenaan zijn gelopen. Heeft u wel eens zo'n conflict gehad binnen de organisatie?	* Hoe hebben jullie dit destijds opgelost? * Wat zou u willen veranderen aan hoe het conflict destijds is opgelost?
6. Is er iets wat ik niet heb gevraagd, dat mogelijk relevant is voor het onderzoek waar u graag over wilt praten?	

Table 2. Interview guide participants

Appendix 2: Interview guide municipality

Hoofdvraag	Eventuele doorvraagmogelijkheden
1. Kunt u mij iets meer vertellen over uw rol bij de gemeente?	
2. In welke hoedanigheid heeft u contact met het duurzaamheidsinitiatief?	* Hoe ziet dit contact er uit? * Hoe zou u dit contact omschrijven?
3. Hoe zou u de wisselwerking tussen de gemeente en het project omschrijven?	* Kunt u hier een voorbeeld van geven?
4. Hoe zou u de wisselwerking tussen de gemeente en het project omschrijven?	* Zoekt de gemeente ook actief contact met duurzaamheidsinitiatieven? Waarom?
5. Zijn er momenten waarop de gemeente en duurzaamheidsinitiatieven / DS / KH botsen?	* Voorbeeld? * Hoe gaan jullie daarmee om?
6. Op welke manier zijn duurzaamheidsinitiatieven van meerwaarde voor de gemeente?	* Waarom niet?

Table 3. Interview guide municipality

Appendix 3: Codetree

- Self-other awareness and clarity of situational definition

- * Self-other awareness (7)
- * Clarity of situational definition (9)

- Management of relationships with larger society

- * Successes (5)
- * Struggles (9)
- * Project → gemeente (7)
- * Motivations and explanations (5)
- * Motivations and explanations gemeente (5)
 - ^ *Verklaring* (2)
 - ^ *Verbeteren en leren* (5)
 - ^ *Onderzoek* (2)
 - ^ *Ondersteunen* (1)
 - ^ *Communicatie* (1)
 - ^ *Bijdrage bewoners* (4)
- * Gemeente → project (4)
 - ^ *Formele afspraken* (9)

- Machinery for facilitating participant interaction and decisionmaking

- * Voortbestaan (5)
- * Tolerating (2)
- * Succes (7)
 - ^ *Progress* (4)
 - ^ *Feelings* (3)
 - ^ *Explanation* (7)
- * Reach (8)
 - ^ *Feelings* (5)
- * Preconditons (3)
- * Motivations (7)
- * Kennis (4)
- * Formal (9)
- * Facilitating participant interaction & decison-making (9)

- Conflict containment and accomodation

- * Explanations (4)
- * Differences (4)

- Articulateness and effective communication

- * Zichtbaarheid (4)
 - ^ *Enthousiasme* (3)
- * Views (3)
- * Kracht (3)
- * Intentions (6)
- * Attitudes (5)

