

# Collaboration

In the cultural  
sector

Cultural  
COMMONS

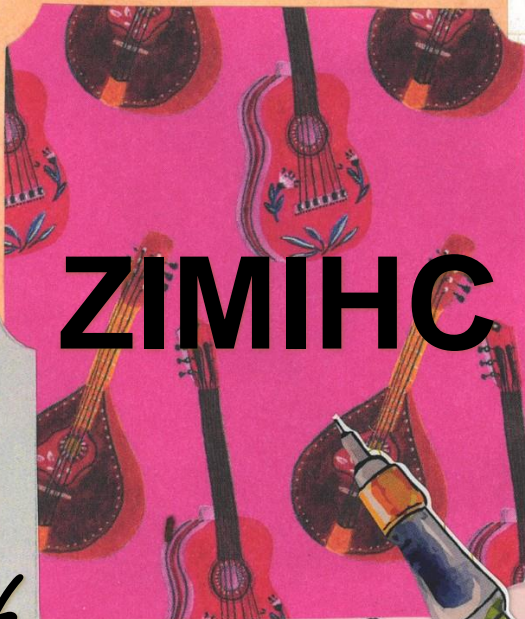
## ZIMIHC

Municipality of  
Utrecht




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...oties hebben op ons brein  
...nze hormonen.







# **THE CULTURAL COMMONS IN COLLABORATION WITH THE MUNICIPALITY**

**Overcoming tensions in the collaborative process**

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## Preface

### Cover page

The cover page visually represents the hands-on approach of this research, with images of my hands engaged in work, highlighting the ethnographic nature of the study. At the top of the page, three boxes symbolize the key stakeholders of the collaboration analyzed in this research. Each box visually reflects its respective stakeholder:

- 👉 Municipality of Utrecht: The left box features a formal background with the official logo and a traditional serif typeface reminiscent of an old ink pen. This represents the municipality's structured and official role.
- 👉 ZIMIHC: The central box is bold with a bright pink background, with an illustration of the arts being performed. The eye-catching typeface and relatively common pen used for writing symbolize ZIMIHC's vibrant and accessible nature. Its central position on the cover page underscores ZIMIHC's role as an intermediary in the collaboration between the municipality and cultural commons.
- 👉 Cultural Commons: The right box showcases musical notes in the background, referring to the neighborhood choirs central to this study. The modest and creative background, coupled with a pencil typeface, conveys the organic and evolving nature of the cultural commons.

Overall, the cover page highlights the theme of performing arts, with a particular focus on music. It reflects the interconnected roles of ZIMIHC, the cultural commons (neighborhood choirs), and the municipality's cultural participation team in promoting the performing arts in Utrecht.

### Acknowledgments

I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to several individuals who were essential to the completion of this research. First and foremost, I am grateful to the Municipality of Utrecht for allowing me to conduct fieldwork there. I especially want to acknowledge my supervisor, Liesbeth van Droffelaar, for her consistently cheerful attitude and constructive feedback.

I also wish to thank ZIMIHC for their cooperation. I deeply admire their passionate commitment to the arts and their efforts to provide a space for culture in Utrecht. A special thanks to Appie Alferink for his open and friendly demeanor.

I am also grateful to Aart van de Maas for taking the time to discuss my research and the broader topic of cultural commons in mutual conversation. Your assistance has been invaluable.

Lastly, I want to express my gratitude to Kim Loyens, my thesis advisor from USBO, for her thoughtful and responsive guidance and her always insightful feedback.

For now, I hope you enjoy the read!

## Abstract

This study explores the intricate dynamics of collaboration between municipalities and cultural commons, focusing on the Cultural Department of the Municipality of Utrecht and its interactions with ZIMIHC and local cultural commons, such as neighborhood choirs. The research addresses the central question:

*What are the areas of tension in the collaborative process between the cultural commons and the municipality of Utrecht, and how can these tensions be addressed to improve future collaboration?*

To answer the research question, data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with policymakers, ZIMIHC employees, field experts, and members of cultural commons. These interviews were complemented by open-ended observations, generating qualitative insights into the collaboration dynamics. The analysis was conducted through critical and grounded ethnographic research, providing a comprehensive view on the cultural and institutional contexts that shape these collaborations.

The study reveals that successful collaboration requires a delicate balance. Direct collaboration through formal funding streams often proves restrictive, while informal networks and a facilitating role from the municipality yield better results. The strength of cultural commons lies in their independence from rigid bureaucratic structures, allowing them to address local needs more effectively. Consequently, the study recommends shifting from a top-down approach to one that supports initiatives through an open, service-oriented stance. This can be achieved by fostering networks, fulfilling a facilitating role, and maintaining a receptive and listening approach.

The role of the municipality should focus on creating supportive infrastructure and investing in personal engagement and local connections, without attempting to exert control. By adopting this approach, a stronger cultural community can emerge, better aligning with the needs of residents and the policy objectives of the municipality. A critical note is also made regarding the cultural commons' operational approach. For genuine commitment to the process, the cultural commons may need to take more initiative themselves. The study's findings are grounded in existing scholarly literature and established theoretical frameworks, particularly the principles of Ansell and Gash, which emphasize the importance of collaboration and stakeholder engagement in public governance.

## Table of Contents

Preface.....	4
Abstract .....	6
1. Introduction .....	9
2. Theoretical framework.....	19
2.1. Cultural commons .....	19
2.1.1. Historical perspective of the commons.....	19
2.1.2. Defining the (cultural) commons.....	20
2.2. How can institutional logics be defined? .....	21
2.2.1. Institutional logics within municipalities and cultural commons.....	22
2.3. Collaboration .....	24
2.3.1. Principles for successful collaboration, .....	24
2.3.2. A model of collaborative governance .....	25
2.4. Conclusion .....	29
3. Methodology.....	30
3.1. Philosophical and methodological perspective.....	30
3.2. Design: ethnographic research.....	31
3.3. Data collection: methods and selection of respondents .....	32
3.3.1. Document analysis .....	32
3.3.2. Observations.....	33
3.3.3. Interviews .....	34
3.4. Data analysis.....	36
3.5. Research quality .....	38
3.6. Reflection on my role as researcher.....	39
4. Results and analysis.....	41
4.1. What is the current situation? .....	41

4.1.1.	Initial trust level.....	41
4.1.2.	Resource and power imbalances .....	45
4.1.3.	Incentives for participation .....	47
4.1.4.	Constraints on participation.....	51
4.1.5.	The challenge of achieving interdisciplinary collaboration.....	56
4.1.6.	Conclusion current situation .....	59
4.2.	Tensions in the collaborative process .....	60
4.2.1.	Trust-building .....	61
4.2.2.	Commitment to the process.....	63
4.2.3.	Shared understanding .....	68
4.2.4.	Intermediate outcomes.....	73
4.2.5.	Face-to-face dialogue .....	78
4.2.6.	Conclusion tensions collaborative process .....	80
5.	Discussion.....	82
6.	Conclusion.....	89
7.	Recommendations .....	91
	Reference list.....	94
	Appendix.....	101
	Topic List interview Municipality and ZIMIHC .....	101
	Topic List Interview Cultural Commons .....	103

# 1. Introduction

*"We are the neighborhood choir... That's what we call it. Some years ago, one of the choir members hung up a note at Albert Heijn. Choir wanted. And then some people came who were interested. Then they had some people together, but then they were still looking for a conductor, of course. They put up another note".<sup>1</sup>*

## Research problem

*"We are the neighborhood choir... That's what we call it. Some years ago, one of the choir members hung up a note at Albert Heijn. Choir wanted. And then some people came who were interested. Then they had some people together, but then they were still looking for a conductor, of course. They put up another note".<sup>2</sup>*

## Research problem

The example above illustrates the bottom-up, informal nature of a neighborhood choir, alternatively known as a cultural common<sup>3</sup>. You can easily imagine how this approach contrasts sharply with the formal, bureaucratic systems of the local government. This contrast becomes significant in light of the challenges faced by municipalities in the Netherlands, ranging from poverty and sustainability to integration, safety, and housing (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties, 2023). While these challenges are not new, the methods employed to address them are undergoing a change. There is a notable shift away from conventional top-down approaches typically led by the government towards a more citizen-centric focus (Helleman, 2019). A strong example of how bottom-up cultural initiatives can play a pivotal role in addressing societal issues is the 'Buurten Over Grenzen' initiative (Beens, 2021). In this project, various groups from Overvecht organize monthly events centered around their own cultures. The aim of 'Buurten Over Grenzen' is to preserve the musical and culinary traditions from different countries while also passing these cultures on to a new generation and to neighbors. Projects like this help to enhance social cohesion in Overvecht, where it is not as high as in many other neighborhoods in Utrecht (Gemeente Utrecht, 2023). This example recognizes the growing importance of local community involvement and acknowledges that many complex issues cannot be effectively tackled by singular entities alone (Rovers, 2022). This emerging agenda, which sees the local level as an environment to address complex social issues, underscores

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpt from an interview with a cultural common in Utrecht.

<sup>2</sup> Excerpt from an interview with a cultural common in Utrecht.

<sup>3</sup> Refer to Chapter 2 for a comprehensive definition.



the importance of exploring collaborations with bottom-up initiatives. It also highlights the significance of municipalities adjusting their governance strategies accordingly, and the cultural commons possibly changing their approach to organizing.

Simultaneously, a transition from hierarchical class structures to a society characterized by new forms of citizen engagement is notable. Many citizens now seek less dependence on established groups and criticize the authorities for favoring market interests and being too impersonal and rigid (Ministerie van Volksgezondheid, Welzijn en Sport, 2022). This dissatisfaction has sparked a rise in initiatives where citizens take charge to tackle social issues, using available knowledge and promoting transparency (Helleman, 2019). These changes are restructuring traditional roles and giving rise to new collaborations that blur the boundaries between public and private sectors, and between non-profit and profit organizations. This has led to the emergence of the commons, referring to citizen-led initiatives to self-organize and address collective challenges (Gielen, 2023).

From the above, we can conclude that the rise of the commons is a response to various societal and political shifts. This is also what Thijs Lijster (2022) argues in his book 'Wat we gemeen hebben: een filosofie van de meenten'. These initiatives respond to the perceived shortcomings of traditional governance structures and management philosophies. For example, New Public Management is a governance strategy that has led to a way of working that imposes certain limitations. This approach prioritizes efficiency and effectiveness, often at the expense of empathy and citizen engagement (Helleman, 2019). Many commons initiatives seek to revitalize these overlooked aspects.

It is crucial for municipalities to respond effectively to the rise of the commons. Given budget cuts and the need to rebuild trust in government, the commons present an intriguing alternative (Gielen, 2023). However, the principles of bureaucracy and the commons differ significantly (Armitage, 2007). Commons are centered on neighborhood needs, operating informally, while the municipality focuses on city-wide interests with a more formal approach. Thus, there is a challenge in facilitating collaboration between these two stakeholders to foster an environment where synergies can emerge. Achieving this synergy is complex due to the varying interests and perspectives of those involved in urban issues. The tension between governmental aspirations and citizen realities is often described as the clash between the 'system world' and 'live world', as articulated by scholars like Habermas (1996) and Van der Lans (2010). Consequently, municipalities can remain detached from the actual needs of the community, operating from a metaphorical ivory tower. This makes collaboration or even communication difficult.

This study focuses on areas of tension when a common and the municipality work together. As mentioned earlier, there's a shift away from the traditional top-down approach, where one dominant actor, such as the government, dictates proceedings (vertical governance). Instead, diverse actors are coming together to develop creative solutions at a local level (horizontal governance). These collaborations involve new actors joining the table or existing parties taking on different roles. The changing roles and power dynamics among these stakeholders are at the basis of this research (Helleman, 2019).

One of the "new" stakeholders at the table is the commons. Commons refer to the collective distribution, utilization, and management of public resources and shared assets, like parks, streets, buildings, and public facilities such as libraries and community centers. It also encompasses intangible assets like culture (Helleman, 2019). Which is the focus of this research. The choice to emphasize cultural commons stems from the differences in how culture is perceived and valued in society, often hindering successful interdisciplinary collaboration. Besides, another reason to emphasize culture as the focus of this research is that culture impacts everyone and that it is accessible to the broader community. By concentrating on cultural commons, the greatest potential for impactful change can be realized. From this point forward, the focus is solely on cultural commons, such as neighborhood choirs, children doing crafts, or elderly writing poems.

When examining the cultural commons, particularly in relation to municipalities, several relevant studies should be considered. To begin, the book 'Plekken van hoop en verandering' offers an overview of the knowledge gained, providing further insights into the effectiveness of commons in promoting inclusive and participatory cultural initiatives (Helleman et al., 2019). Additionally, between 2019 and 2021, Aart van der Maas conducted research on how neighborhood cultural centers collectively foster inclusive cultural participation (Van Der Maas et al., 2019). He developed an inclusive guide for employees of the Municipality of Utrecht, which shows that commons can be useful in achieving inclusive cultural participation. This aligns with the work of Pascal Gielen (2023), whose book 'Vertrouwen' emphasizes the role of cultural commons in restoring trust in government institutions. Another important literature work is that of Thijs Lijster 'Wat we gemeen hebben: een filosofie van de meenten' in 2022. The comprehensive body of works from Gielen en Lijster form the foundation of my study.

There is already some knowledge on this topic within the municipality. For example, the Visitation Report on the Cultural Policy Plan 2017-2020 provides valuable insights. It recommends that the municipality encourage more cross-connections and consultations between cultural institutions (Culturele Zaken Gemeente Utrecht, 2017-2020). Additionally, the report advises municipalities to

support the development of more neighborhood cultural centers, in line with the recent sector analysis of amateur arts, and to strengthen their effectiveness with a programming budget (Culturele Zaken Gemeente Utrecht, 2017-2020).

However, the question remains whether this advice has been effectively implemented in practice because working effectively with the cultural commons requires the municipality, specifically the cultural department, to take on a different perspective. Assuming a different viewpoint is challenging and not straightforward due to the municipality being rooted in systems and bureaucratic structures. More research is required to explore how a collaborative process can be effectively materialized. Therefore, this research will focus on the tensions surrounding existing and possible collaboration.

## 1.1. Organization description

### 1.1.1. Municipality of Utrecht

The Municipality of Utrecht is a pivotal entity in the governance and planning of Utrecht, a prominent city in the Netherlands. As a local government authority, it is responsible for overseeing public services, formulating policies, and facilitating community engagement. According to its policy plan, the Municipality of Utrecht is committed to creating an inclusive and sustainable urban environment. The municipality seeks to collaborate with a range of stakeholders, including residents, businesses, and civil society organizations, to improve the quality of life for its citizens. As of January 1, 2024, Utrecht has a population of 374,374, with two out of five residents having a foreign background (Utrecht Monitor, 2024). Emphasizing a proactive approach to urban challenges and a dedication to innovation and participation, the Municipality of Utrecht aims to focus on building a city that serves everyone (Gemeente Utrecht, 2024).

Aligned with the overarching municipal policy, the cultural affairs department formulated the following ambition:

*“Culture stimulates thought, evokes emotions, and provides relaxation. This is important for our mental and physical well-being. Culture makes a significant contribution to the vibrancy of the city and the connection between residents. We aim to be an inclusive and accessible cultural metropolis, offering a rich palette of disciplines and genres. The cultural offering grows with the city, and culture is experienced and visited close to home. Professional artists and amateur practitioners have sufficient physical and financial space to further develop themselves”. (Jaarstukken 2023, Gemeente Utrecht).*

This aspiration is a central theme in cultural policy in Utrecht. It focuses on fostering a diverse and innovative spectrum of arts and culture through collaboration with both the cultural sector and

residents. Furthermore, this policy serves as the foundation for determining subsidy allocation criteria. The cultural commons are, however, not specifically mentioned.

### **1.1.2. ZIMIHC**

ZIMIHC is a major location for amateur art in Utrecht with three theaters available. It aims to provide a space for as many people as possible who engage in or want to engage in art, both beginners or advanced. It offers opportunities to practice and present art and draws a comparison with sports, where people can easily participate close to home. ZIMIHC achieves the same with their cultural centers. Their work begins in neighborhoods without defining where it ends. Artists decide for themselves what they want to achieve, which presents challenges in justifying subsidies to the municipality.

ZIMIHC employees are demand-driven, supporting and facilitating amateur artists. They argue their relevance by pointing out that art is increasingly used as a tool in cross-domain issues, ranging from social to health-related matters. Much of ZIMIHC's work is project-based, which is intensive but necessary to uphold their core values: amateur art, community contribution, talent development, hospitality, and social cohesion. In short, ZIMIHC facilitates creativity and stimulates ownership within art and culture.

ZIMIHC is a relevant choice as a case organization due to their broad mission: stimulating creativity in society (ZIMIHC, 2021) and their role as an intermediate in the cultural field in Utrecht. In this study, ZIMIHC is examined both as a cultural common in collaboration with the municipality and in terms of its role within the cultural sector. Although they are not the most typical cultural commons due to their size and organization, their vision aligns with the principles of cultural commons, embracing a broad understanding of art and culture. They believe that creating art is timeless and universal, which is a key requirement for a commons (Over Ons - ZIMIHC, 2024). Within this vision everyone has ownership over art and culture. They also assert that art plays a role in the daily lives of all cultures, being especially relevant in Utrecht since a lot of citizens have a foreign background (Utrecht Monitor).



### **1.1.3. Cultural commons: local choirs**

Cultural commons are community-driven initiatives where cultural activities and resources are collectively shared and managed (Gielen, 2023). These initiatives often foster local engagement and creativity, reflecting the unique character of their communities. A prime example of a cultural common is neighborhood choirs—community-based singing groups that bring residents together to perform and enjoy music collectively. For this research, the Gezelligheidszangclub de Leeuweriken and Wijkkoor 't Akkoord, both located in Utrecht and meeting at community center De Leeuw were selected. For instance, Wijkkoor 't Akkoord gathers every Monday evening and they perform a diverse range of music, from classical songs to musical, film, and pop tunes ('t Akkoord Homepage, z.d.). Further, they hold at least one concert each year for friends, family, and acquaintances, and every five years, they organize a special anniversary concert with a more elaborate presentation. In recent years, they have performed at neighborhood events, Central Station, and during the Christmas season at care facilities. Their website highlights the importance they place on connecting with their audience, which is why their performances are done without sheet music. They describe themselves as a friendly group committed to each other and always striving for excellence, with a focus on the enjoyment of singing together and enhancing quality. Initially formed as a neighborhood choir, it now includes members from outside the area as well. This exemplifies the nature of the cultural commons to make what is shared even more common (Gielen, 2023). The Gezelligheidszangclub de Leeuweriken follows a similar approach but has a more informal character. They do not have performances and sing along with well-known songs from a CD.

In line with ZIMIHC's emphasis on the performing arts, these two choirs were specifically chosen as examples of cultural commons, demonstrating how community-driven cultural activities can strengthen local cohesion and participation.

## **1.2. Research objectives and questions**

The overall goal is to open a door to possible collaboration between the municipality and cultural commons that questions established norms, supports institutional transformation, and leaves space for creativity and learning from failures. Thus, a collaboration on different terms than they are now: shifting from control to collaboration within interdisciplinary networks. Instead of depending on strict frameworks and regulations, it adapts continuously to its changing environment. The specific objective is to clearly identify the tensions in the collaborative process between the municipality and cultural commons. Only once these tensions are understood can a collaborative approach be developed that supports the growth and efficient functioning of cultural commons. Gaining this insight can improve cooperation between local governments and cultural commons and strengthen

the role of cultural commons within the broader cultural sector in the long run. The aim is further to provide recommendations on how to take the first steps as municipality in fostering collaboration with the cultural commons. Accordingly, the main research question is as follows:

*What are the areas of tension in the collaborative process between the cultural commons and the municipality of Utrecht, and how can these tensions be addressed to improve future collaboration?*

To answer this question, first, it is important to define the key concepts of this study. To do so, several theoretical sub-questions have been formulated, which are addressed using scientific literature (see chapter 2). Then, the focus shifts to answering the empirical sub-questions. The first step is to assess the current situation regarding the collaboration between the Municipality and the cultural commons. Additionally, it is crucial to clarify the differences in perspective between policymakers and the local community. To address these questions, an ethnographic case study was conducted. The following case was examined: the collaboration between the Municipality of Utrecht—particularly its cultural affairs department—and ZIMIHC, an established entity in the cultural sector, as well as two local cultural commons, specifically neighborhood choirs.

### **1.2.1. Theoretical sub-questions**

1. What theoretical factors explain successful collaboration, and which principles are essential for initiating such collaboration?

Before analyzing the current collaboration between the municipality and the cultural commons, it is essential to first understand what the literature defines as successful collaboration, and how it can be achieved. To do so, the model of collaborative governance by Ansell and Gash (2007) is used extensively.

2. How can the cultural commons be defined?

The concept of cultural commons is not widely known, so it is important to thoroughly explore its meaning. This involves first defining commons in general and then specifying what makes them cultural.

3. How can institutional logics be defined and used to understand the difference between municipalities and cultural commons?

Institutional logics are crucial because they shape the thoughts and behaviors of actors, affecting whether and how a collaboration can succeed. This is achieved using, among other sources, the works of Alford and Friedland (1985) as well as Thornton et al. (2012).

### **1.2.2. Empirical sub-questions**

1. What are the existing policies and operational frameworks/logics within the cultural department of the Municipality of Utrecht?
2. What are the operational principles and methodologies of ZIMIHC, a cultural commons organization?

Understanding how different actors approach their work, along with their motives and frameworks, is crucial. This knowledge can reveal areas of tension as well as potential opportunities for collaboration.

3. What does the existing collaboration between the municipality, ZIMIHC, and the cultural commons entail?

The starting point is the current relationship between the actors, as these initial conditions have a define impact on the potential for a successful collaborative process. De starting conditions named by Ansell and Gash (2007) are used here.

4. What are the current challenges impeding this collaboration?

The current challenges in the collaboration can provide valuable insights into where future tensions in the collaborative process might arise.

5. What changes are needed to achieve successful collaboration between the municipality and the cultural commons?

This last empirical sub question is also essential because it seeks to identify the specific adjustments and improvements necessary for fostering a successful collaboration between the municipality and the cultural commons. By understanding what changes are needed, actors can address existing tensions and create a more effective and harmonious collaboration.

## **1.3. Scholarly and practical relevance**

Understanding the conditions necessary for a fruitful collaboration between the municipality and the cultural commons is vital for both scholarly and practical reasons.

### **1.3.1. Scholarly relevance**

The current body of scholarly literature on the cultural commons highlights a gap between theoretical insights and practical application (Van der Maas 2017-2021; Lijster, 2022; Gielen, 2023). Although much has been written about the potential of the cultural commons, there remains a pressing need for concrete strategies that stakeholders, including governance bodies like municipalities, can implement. The potential lies in the fact that the cultural commons emphasize shared ownership, collaborative management, and democratic governance. This makes it a powerful framework for addressing contemporary social challenges (Ostrom et al., 1999). It enables communities to collectively manage and benefit from resources, thereby contributing to resilience, innovation, and social cohesion. However, current theoretical work doesn't offer concrete tools for how a successful collaboration should look like, leaving a void that this research seeks to fill. Although current literature indicates that tensions exist, there is still a lack of specific information on where these tensions lie within a collaborative process and concrete examples of them. This ethnographic case study, focusing on the collaboration between the Municipality of Utrecht, ZIMIHC, and the cultural commons, has the potential to provide new information and practical tools due to its close proximity to the field. Furthermore, by integrating existing literature on collaborative governance with studies on the cultural commons, this research can offer fresh academically sound insights (Ansell and Gash, 2007; Nabatchi and Emerson, 2015). In short, by identifying the tensions within the collaborative process and possible tools for a successful collaboration, this study aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

### **1.3.2. Practical relevance**

From a practical standpoint, a local perspective is increasingly recognized as essential for tackling complex social problems, especially in times of budget constraints. The shift towards local solutions is not only an organizational tactic but also a response to the need for more participatory and inclusive governance models. By focusing on the local scale, this research underscores the potential for municipalities and cultural commons to co-create solutions tailored to their communities' unique needs and contexts.

Moreover, in an era of widespread mistrust in governmental bodies, finding alternative models of engagement and collaboration is crucial. This research addresses the need to develop new working methods that can rebuild trust. On top of this, it could foster effective partnerships between municipalities and cultural community-driven initiatives. By understanding the conditions for successful collaboration, municipalities can avoid the pitfalls of shifting responsibilities onto citizens



without adequate support. This also ensures that cultural local initiatives are genuinely empowered rather than burdened with unrealistic expectations.

In his book, Pascal Gielen (2023) highlights the critical importance of investing in cultural commons, especially in the context of rising distrust in government institutions like municipalities. Gielen argues that cultural commons can play a pivotal role in restoring social cohesion and trust. This theoretical perspective underscores the practical relevance of understanding how municipalities and cultural commons can collaborate effectively to foster a sense of community and belonging, thereby addressing broader societal issues.

In conclusion, answering the question of what conditions are necessary for a fruitful collaboration between the municipality and the cultural commons is highly relevant both theoretically and practically. It addresses a critical gap in the literature and provides practical insights that can improve the effectiveness of local governance and cultural community engagement. By doing so, it contributes to the broader goal of fostering inclusive, participatory, and trust-based relationships between governmental bodies and its citizens.

## **1.4. Readers' guide**

This report is structured to provide a comprehensive analysis of the research topic, beginning with the theoretical framework (chapter 2). The initial focus is on answering the theoretical questions that are essential for understanding the concepts of this study. First, the concept of cultural commons is defined. To do this thoroughly, this chapter starts by defining the broader concept of commons, followed by a detailed exploration of cultural commons. Next, the concept of institutional logics is discussed in depth, with a particular focus on how these logics apply to both bureaucratic systems and cultural commons. The concept of collaboration is also defined and theorized, drawing on theories related to collaboration in organizations, such as collaborative governance.

Following the theoretical framework, the methodology of this ethnographic research is outlined (Chapter 3). This section primarily covers the interviews and observations conducted during the study. The results of the ethnographic fieldwork are then presented, addressing the empirical questions to ultimately answer the main research question (chapter 4). In the final sections of the thesis, the discussion highlights the scientific implications of the findings and connecting it to existing literature (chapter 5). The research question is answered in the conclusion (chapter 6) and practical recommendations are provided in the last chapter (chapter 7).

## 2. Theoretical framework

In the theoretical framework, the key concepts of my research are explored, and thereby the theoretical questions are addressed. These concepts include the cultural commons, institutional logics, and collaboration within the context of collaborative governance. For clarity, the central concept is consistently highlighted in italics.

### 2.1. Cultural commons

#### 2.1.1. Historical perspective of the commons

The first concept to examine for my study is that of the *cultural commons*. Defining the *cultural commons* requires giving a historical perspective. After all, history itself is a *common*. Narrated through multiple voices, history serves as our collective memory (Caffentzis & Federici, 2014). Traditionally, the *commons* referred to natural resources like forests, grasslands, and bodies of water that were collectively used and managed by a community. This was particularly the case during the Middle Ages within the feudal system (Arvidsson, 2020).

In the 20th century, a renewed academic interest in the commons became visible, particularly through the work of Garrett Hardin (1968). In his paper, "The Tragedy of the Commons", Hardin argued that individuals acting in their self-interest could exhaust common resources, leading to long-term collective loss. This perspective highlighted the challenges of managing common resources in an increasingly globalized world. In contrast to Hardin's pessimistic view, Elinor Ostrom's work provided a more optimistic and nuanced understanding of *the commons*. Ostrom's research showed that communities could effectively manage common resources through locally crafted rules and collective action. Her book, "Governing the Commons" (1990), outlined principles for successful common-pool resource management, emphasizing the importance of local governance and community participation. This is a key work within the commons discourse and is used extensively in my research.

Today, the concept of *the commons* extends beyond natural resources to include digital, cultural, and urban *commons*. In urban settings, *commons* can encompass shared public spaces, community culture, and collaborative initiatives aimed at enhancing social cohesion and sustainability (Gielen, 2023). The rise of digital commons, such as open-source software and creative commons licensing, reflects the evolving nature of shared resources in the digital age (De Rosnay & Stalder, 2020). *The commons* now symbolize a broader commitment to collective ownership and democratic

governance. This contemporary understanding aligns with movements advocating for participatory democracy and social justice. This perspective also resonates with the doctoral research of Aart van der Maas (Van Der Maas et al., 2019). Van der Maas argues that by revisiting and reimagining *the commons*, communities and policymakers can address challenges through collaborative and inclusive approaches.

In summary, the historical perspective of *the commons* reveals a dynamic and evolving concept rooted in collective management and community engagement. From medieval agrarian societies to modern urban and digital contexts, *the commons* continue to inspire innovative approaches to managing shared resources and fostering social resilience.

### **2.1.2. Defining the (cultural) commons**

The principle behind *the commons* is a prefigured form of shared wealth. These *commons* are not limited to small-scale experiments but include global social formations. *Commons* are not only mechanisms for sharing resources but represent a way to creating collective matters and fostering common interests in every aspect of life (Caffentzis & Federici, 2014).

In general terms, *commons* are social systems where resources are shared by a community of users and producers. This community defines the modes of use, production, distribution, and circulation of these resources through democratic and horizontal governance forms. For this study, the definition of *the commons* offered by author, policy strategist and international activist David Bollier (2014) is adopted. This definition is particularly pertinent as it expands upon the foundational work of Ostrom (2000), which was already mentioned in the paragraph above. Bollier's definition is comprehensive, encompassing three essential elements that define *the commons*: common property, activity, and management and ownership. Firstly, *commons* are established and safeguarded by specific communities, often referred to as 'citizens' collectives' in urban contexts. They are not naturally occurring but are shaped by human activities, a process referred to as 'commoning' (Gielen, 2023). In addition, it must operate autonomously in relation to governmental and market influences. Secondly, *commons* involve activities performed by community members themselves. Lastly, the third element applies to the distinct forms of management and ownership within *commons*, which also differ fundamentally from those found in market or state institutions. In summary, *the commons* are characterized by collaborative ownership, community activities, and unique management practices all according to community norms and rules.

With the definition of *the commons* established, the next step is to define the concept of *cultural commons*. The *cultural commons* encompass the shared heritage of society, traditions, knowledge,

and artistic expressions that belong to all members of a community (Gielen, 2023). Guided by principles of autonomous self-governance, equality, and mutual solidarity, the *cultural commons* emphasize collaboration, trust, and nurturing care to foster collective well-being. This concept emphasizes the importance of open access, allowing individuals and groups to freely engage with and contribute to cultural resources, thereby enriching societal resilience.

## 2.2. How can institutional logics be defined?

A second concept central in my thesis is *institutional logics*. This term first was introduced by Alford and Friedland (1985) to describe conflicting practices and norms within institutions of modern Western societies. They named *capitalism*, *bureaucracy*, and *democracy* as three institutional orders of logics. Each with different practices and norms that influence how individuals engage in political struggles. Alford and Friedland further developed the concept to explore the relationships between individuals, organizations, and society. They viewed institutions as supra-organizational patterns rooted in practices and systems that individuals and organizations use to produce and reproduce their lives and derive meaning from their experiences (Greenwood et al., 2017). They argue against individualistic and rational choices within society. Instead, they theorize that each institutional order has a central logic guiding its organizing principles. The practices and symbols emerging from the institution are used by individuals, groups, and organizations, allowing them to elaborate on and possibly change these elements to their advantage (Friedland, 1991). It can also provide a sense of identity for these individuals, groups, and organizations.

The concept of *institutional logics* is also defined by Jackall (1988). He used the concept in his analysis of ethical conflicts in organizations. Jackall (1988) elaborates on how people within organizations create a complex set of norms, rules, and behaviors based on their experiences and the context in which they operate. These norms and behaviors, although constructed and contingent, become regularized and predictable over time, forming what he referred to as an "institutional logic"—the framework through which people within that social world operate. Jackall, like Friedland and Alford, saw institutional logics as embodied in practices and norms, and reproduced by cultural assumptions.

Building on these ideas, Thornton et al. (2012) defined *institutional logics* as the patterns of behaviors, beliefs, values, and rules that people in a society develop over time. These patterns shape how individuals work, organize their lives, and understand their social world. Unlike some theories that separate these aspects into different categories, Thornton et al. (2012) see them all as interconnected parts of how institutions function. Their perspective emphasizes how individuals' actions are influenced by the shared practices and beliefs that define their social environment.



Although definitions of *institutional logics* may differ in emphasis, one core principle is the same: to understand individual and organizational behavior, it must be situated within a social and institutional context that both regulates behavior and creates opportunities for action and change. When analyzing collaboration between two entities, as in my research, it is essential to consider this context to fully grasp their individual and organizational behaviors. Therefore, it is crucial for my research to examine the *institutional logics* of both the municipality and the cultural commons.

### **2.2.1. Institutional logics within municipalities and cultural commons**

For my research, it is focal to discuss two distinct institutional logics: that of the municipality and that of a cultural common. Beginning with the *logic of the municipality*, which is what can be called the *bureaucratic logic*. This is because a municipality can be considered a bureaucracy because of the way it often operates. Hence referring to a municipality as a bureaucracy highlights its composition of various departments and agencies, each with specific responsibilities, all working under the broader direction of elected political leadership (Peters, 1981). This view reflects the everyday functioning of local government, where bureaucratic processes are essential for maintaining order, consistency, and efficiency in public administration. The everyday functioning as described here as a lot to do with the *bureaucratic logic*.

The primary aim of *bureaucratic logics* is to ensure equity for all citizens. Within this framework, organizational control plays a crucial role, aiming to minimize risks and maximize accountability. Therefore, bureaucratic organizations uphold values such as rationality, thoroughness, comprehensiveness, legality, neutrality and predictability (Meyer et al., 2013). According to this logic, the responsibilities of a municipality are viewed as highly organized and standardized procedures, where all citizens are treated without discrimination, leaving little room for customization (Freidson, 2001). Additionally, the bureaucratic approach views tasks as a linear system with numerous procedures. Within this system, collaborations are defined in terms of predetermined procedures, maintaining an impersonal and hierarchical nature to prevent bias (Kalberg, 2016). So, civil society relies on universal access, availability, and quality of municipality services, yet they have limited influence over their own doing and are not actively involved in its co-production. Bureaucratic organizations are driven by the desire to maintain their rational functioning. They address deficiencies in their operation by modifying existing procedures or by introducing additional formal regulations.

Secondly, the *logics of the cultural commons*, as described by Helleman (2019), revolve around several key principles. Foremost, there is a strong emphasis on ownership, where users seek more

control over shared spaces and scarce resources. This manifests in two ways: some users advocate for a system based on sharing, collaboration, and mutual coordination, making these resources accessible to all. Others prefer to manage these resources as a group, maintaining control within a self-organized system that prioritizes the shared rules, values, and norms of their own group (Lijster, 2012). Additionally, autonomy is a crucial element for many initiatives within the cultural commons. These groups strive for both operational and financial independence, often aiming to proceed with minimal or no support from government or market forces. However, in practice, many find that some level of external support is necessary to sustain their activities. Lastly, democratic legitimacy within the cultural commons is not always rooted in representativeness or equality. Instead, groups typically form around individuals with shared passions, skills, and needs, allowing them to pursue their own agendas and methods, rather than adhering to a formal democratic process (Gielen, 2023). This approach highlights the importance of common interests and goals over traditional notions of democratic representation.

To reconcile these two logics, it is essential to consider two perspectives on local governance. Helleman et al. (2019) highlight distinct approaches to local organization: the first perspective emphasizes control, top-down management, and formal, linear processes, aligning with bureaucratic logic, and therefore the *logic of the municipality*. The second perspective advocates for a bottom-up approach, emphasizing organic and horizontal processes, which aligns more closely with the *logic of cultural commons*, as highlighted in Figure 1.

Perspective 1	Perspective 2
Top-down (centralized)	Bottom-up (decentralized)
Procedural, orderly (control)	Organic, less streamlined
Professionals at the wheel	Residents and users at the wheel
Vertically organized (hierarchical)	Horizontally organized (flat)
Subject-specific, sectoral	Area-specific, integral
Statistics and models	Images and stories
Problem- and supply-oriented	Solution- and demand-oriented
Standardization (uniformity)	Diversity (pragmatism, flexibility)
Structured, tangible, predictable	Spontaneous, unpredictable, uncertain
Formal	Informal
Linear process (blueprint)	Cyclical, self-renewing process
Rational action	Experimentation, improvisation

Effectiveness, efficiency	Pleasure, emotion, own pace
Profit maximization	Social value creation

Figure 1: Helleman et al., 2019. Different ways of thinking and working on shaping cities and neighborhoods

According to Helleman et al. (2019, p. 20), "Neither perspective is inherently superior (...). However, many experts observe a shift from the first perspective to the second. The first perspective contributes to social inequality. Proponents of the second perspective advocate for novel and improved methods to foster a more equitable society." The first perspective aligns closely with the current bureaucratic functioning of the municipality. In contrast, the second perspective calls for granting citizens greater decision-making power, ensuring that decisions are made transparently, openly, and comprehensibly. Rather than imposing top-down regulations that may hinder collaboration, Helleman et al. argue that more support and space for autonomy should be provided for cultural citizen initiatives. These perspectives are important theoretical lenses when examining the collaboration between cultural commons and the municipality.

## 2.3. Collaboration

### 2.3.1. Principles for successful collaboration,

The second perspective on local governance, illustrated in Figure 1, closely aligns with the strategy of *collaborative governance*, which brings together multiple stakeholders and public agencies to engage in consensus-driven decision-making (Ansell & Gash, 2007). Building on this argument, one could say that *collaborative governance* supports the logic of the cultural commons, which is closely tied to Helleman et al.'s (2019) second perspective. Increasingly, governments are adopting *collaborative governance* as a strategy to mobilize resources, generate creative ideas, and secure political support, ultimately leading to outcomes that create public value (Nabatchi & Emerson, 2015). Just like the cultural commons, *collaborative governance* provides a 'pluricentric' alternative to 'unicentric' hierarchical government and 'multicentric' market competition (Van Kersbergen & Van Waarden, 2004). It brings together actors in networks held together by mutual recognition of the need to exchange resources, and to constructively manage their different interests, ideas, and perceptions in pursuit of joint solutions to common problems (Dionne et al., 2004). A collaboration aligned with the logic of the cultural commons would therefore resemble a cooperative effort where resources such as knowledge, space, and cultural assets are shared openly among participants.

Before delving further into how *collaboration* would appear according to the institutional logics of the two key stakeholders in my research, it is important to first define the concept of *collaboration*.

The term *collaboration* is often used interchangeably with cooperation and coordination to describe interactions between organizations (Alter and Hage, 1993). In government documents the terms coordination and *collaboration* are frequently used to describe the same sort of interaction (Wanna et al., 2009). These varied uses can blur the meaning of *collaboration*.

As a noun, *collaboration* often refers to inter-organizational structures created to facilitate interaction, such as networks or alliances (Cropper et al., 2008). A different definition is that *collaboration* occurs when ‘two or more people work together to create or achieve something’ (Collaboration, 2024). This takes shape through ongoing interactions and relationships that form synergies that co-create something new (Mandell, 2002). Effective *collaboration* is facilitated through structural arrangements that allow for horizontal authority and flexibility in adapting to changes. This is a structured nonhierarchical social interaction that avoids both chain of command and competition (Powell, 1990). It is therefore closely associated with *collaborative governance* (Keast, 2016).

Furthermore, a clear and inclusive process is essential for ensuring equal involvement and responsibility in inquiry, dialogue, constructive conflict, decision-making, action, and reflective evaluation (Flynn, 2019). These participative practices create mutual understanding, shared language, and identity, which strengthen interpersonal relationships, a sense of collective power, and commitment to a common purpose. Such cohesion is necessary for sustained synergy (Larson et al., 2002). The relational aspect is the glue that builds and maintains *collaboration*, with actors making decisions together about the future (Gray, 1994).

### **2.3.2. A model of collaborative governance**

In short, *collaboration* requires two-way communication, with all participants actively involved at every stage of the decision-making process. A key feature of *collaborative governance* is its focus on



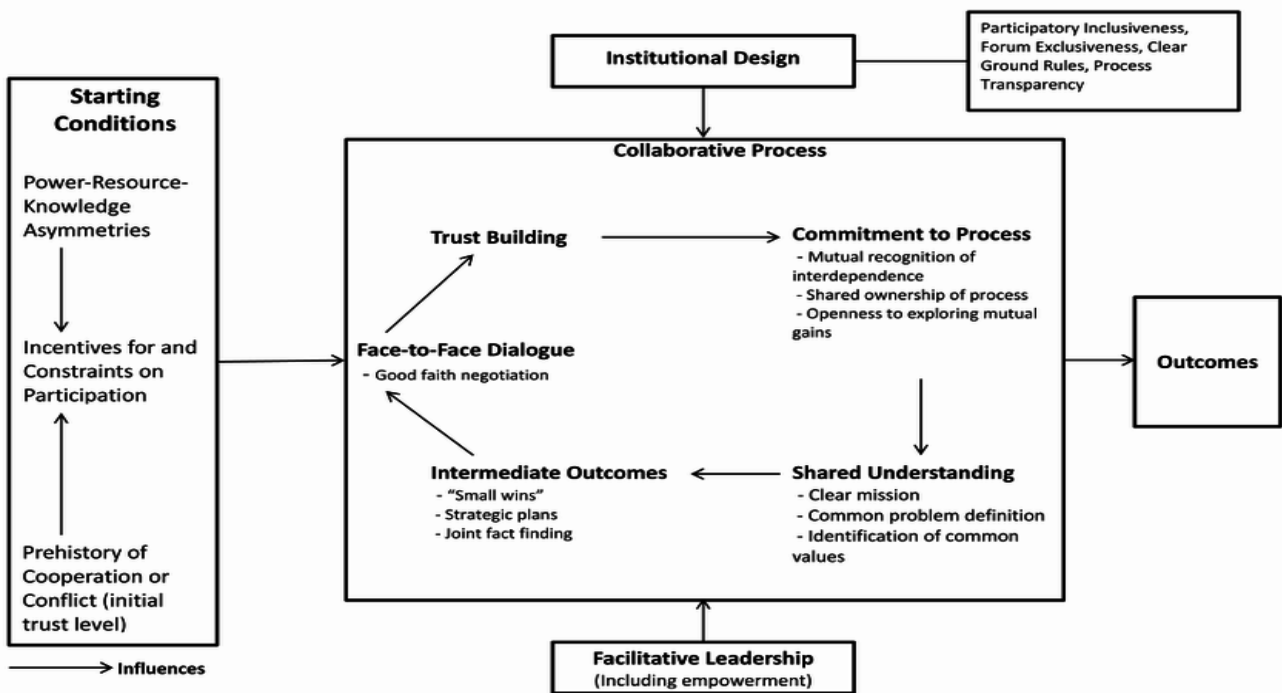


Figure 2: A model of collaborative governance. Ansell and Gash (2007)

public policies and issues, which sets it apart from other forms of consensus decision-making. This emphasis on public matters aligns well with the goals of this study.

Ansell and Gash (2007) propose a model of *collaborative governance* with four groups of independent variables that explain successful *collaborative governance*: starting conditions, institutional design, leadership, and collaborative process. Figure 2 shows this model. Starting conditions set the basic level of trust, conflict, and social capital that become resources or liabilities during collaboration. They narrowed these conditions to three variables: imbalances in resources or power among stakeholders, incentives for stakeholders to collaborate, and the history of conflict or cooperation among stakeholders. In terms of a contingency theory of *collaborative governance*, they conclude that power and resource imbalances require a positive strategy of empowerment and representation for weaker or disadvantaged stakeholders.

Incentives for stakeholders increase when they see a direct relationship between their participation and concrete, tangible policy outcomes (Brown, 2002), but decline if they perceive their input as merely advisory or ceremonial (Futrell, 2003). A prehistory of conflict creates a vicious cycle of suspicion, distrust, and stereotyping, whereas a history of successful cooperation can foster social capital and trust, leading to a virtuous cycle of collaboration. Ansell and Gash suggest that if there is a

prehistory of antagonism among stakeholders, *collaborative governance* is unlikely to succeed without high stakeholder interdependence or steps to remediate low trust and social capital.

This is also suggested in the social exchange theory. It states that relationships are formed and maintained based on the costs and rewards involved (Cook et al., 2013). In the context of *collaboration*, reciprocity is crucial; each participant needs to benefit from the *collaboration*. Trust and commitment are also essential, as the expectation of future rewards, such as support and shared goals, strengthens collaboration. Finally, equity is a key factor within social exchange theory, as a fair distribution of costs and benefits enhances satisfaction and motivation to collaborate. This last point aligns in particular with the bureaucratic logic of the municipality. Namely because ensuring fairness in both the *collaborative process* and its outcomes makes it easier to justify actions and decisions. This approach also reflects rational action, fitting well with the more formal perspective of Helleman et al. (2019) (see Figure 1), where contributions are matched by corresponding returns. This illustrates that institutional logics are crucial in shaping how a *collaboration* is operationalized.

Returning to the model by Ansell and Gash (2007), institutional design, referring to the basic protocols and ground rules for *collaboration*, and leadership within the *collaborative process* are critical for procedural legitimacy but are beyond the scope of this study. This study focuses on the *collaborative process* itself. Ansell and Gash identify five crucial points for successful *collaboration*: face-to-face dialogue, trust building, commitment to the process, shared understanding, and intermediate outcomes. These five principles are central in this study.

Face-to-face dialogue is important in *collaborative governance* because it fosters trust, enhances communication, and facilitates mutual understanding among stakeholders (Bavelas, 2022). This type of direct interaction allows participants to engage more deeply, clarify misunderstandings immediately, and build stronger relationships, which are crucial for successful collaboration. According to Ansell and Gash (2008), face-to-face dialogue is a key component in the *collaborative process*. They argue that such dialogue is vital for trust-building and developing a shared understanding among stakeholders. The direct communication helps in resolving conflicts, aligning interests, and ensuring that all voices are heard, thus contributing to more effective and inclusive decision-making.

Secondly, trust building is essential for *collaboration* because it creates a foundation for open communication, reduces conflicts, and enhances cooperation among stakeholders (Vangen & Huxham, 2003). Trust facilitates the willingness of participants to share information, take risks, and commit to the *collaborative process*. Without trust, stakeholders are less likely to engage fully, which

can lead to misunderstandings, reduced effectiveness, and potential failure of the collaborative effort. According to Ansell and Gash (2008), trust-building is a critical component of successful *collaborative governance*. They emphasize that trust helps to overcome historical conflicts and power imbalances, enabling stakeholders to work together towards common goals. Trust also fosters a cooperative environment where participants feel secure and valued, which is essential for sustained *collaboration*.

Commitment to the process is crucial for *collaboration* because it ensures that stakeholders remain engaged, motivated, and focused on achieving the collective goals (Scott & Boyd, 2020). High levels of commitment help sustain the *collaboration* through challenges and conflicts, as stakeholders are more likely to invest the necessary time, resources, and effort to see the process through to completion. Without commitment, the *collaboration* can falter due to lack of participation, inconsistent effort, and unresolved issues. Ansell and Gash (2008) highlight the importance of commitment to the *collaborative process*, noting that it is essential for maintaining momentum and ensuring that stakeholders continue to work towards shared outcomes. They argue that committed participants are more likely to build trust, engage in meaningful dialogue, and develop a shared understanding, all of which are key to successful *collaboration*.

Shared understanding is vital for *collaboration* because it ensures all stakeholders have a common perception of goals, processes, and outcomes (Bittner & Leimeister, 2013). This mutual comprehension helps prevent misunderstandings, aligns expectations, and facilitates coherent decision-making. When stakeholders share an understanding, they can more effectively coordinate their efforts, leverage each other's strengths, and work towards a unified vision. According to Ansell and Gash (2008), developing a shared understanding is a key component of successful *collaborative governance*. They argue that it allows stakeholders to align their interests and actions, which is essential for overcoming differences and achieving consensus. Shared understanding also helps build trust and commitment, further strengthening the *collaborative process*.

Intermediate outcomes are important in any process because they provide milestones that help maintain momentum, build trust, and demonstrate progress. This is evident from research within healthcare, but it certainly also applies to the *collaboration* process (Zeira & Rosen, 1999).

Intermediate outcomes can offer tangible evidence that the collaborative efforts are working, which can motivate stakeholders to stay engaged and committed to the process. Additionally, achieving intermediate outcomes can help to resolve conflicts, reinforce shared goals, and adjust strategies as needed. Ansell and Gash (2008) emphasize the importance of intermediate outcomes in *collaborative governance*. They argue that these milestones help to sustain the *collaboration* by

providing regular feedback on progress, allowing stakeholders to celebrate small successes, and making necessary adjustments along the way. This ongoing validation of the collaborative effort is essential for maintaining the enthusiasm and dedication of all participants.

## **2.4. Conclusion**

In this research, the concepts of institutional logics and collaboration are critically examined to understand the dynamics between cultural commons and local governments. The primary challenge for local governments lies in developing effective mechanisms for collaboration with cultural commons, which necessitates the creation of new institutional networks and legal frameworks that bridge the democratic logic of governance ('democracy of all') with the specific logic of the commons (Bollier, 2014). Given that the institutional logics of cultural commons and local governments differ significantly, these differences can lead to tensions, particularly during collaborative efforts. This study will explore where these tensions arise within the collaborative process and how they can be managed to foster more effective relations.

## 3. Methodology

This chapter outlines the empirical approach taken to answer the central research question:

*What are the areas of tension in the collaborative process between the cultural commons and the municipality of Utrecht, and how can these tensions be addressed to improve future collaboration?*

The chapter begins with an explanation of the philosophical and methodological perspectives that underpin this study. It then describes the ethnographic design employed, followed by a discussion of the data collection process including the selection of methods and respondents. Next, the chapter details the data analysis procedures and explains how the research quality was ensured. The chapter concludes with a reflection on my role as the researcher in this study.

### 3.1. Philosophical and methodological perspective

First, the research positioning of this study is outlined. This is done using the seminal work on research methods by Cohen and Kitayama (2019), who argue that what is recognized as knowledge is influenced by the social and positional power of those who advocate for it. In other words, knowledge claims are always shaped by systems of truth, requiring attention to issues of domination, exclusion, privilege, and marginalization (Ceci et al., 2002). As a researcher, I adopt a normative stance actively reflecting on how things ought to be—specifically how collaboration between the cultural commons and the municipality should be structured. I also give a voice to a marginalized group, the cultural commons, often overlooked in the cultural sector. With these considerations in mind I approach this research from a critical perspective.

A critical epistemological position aligns well with the research question because it emphasizes questioning dominant structures, including logics of the municipality. The research question seeks to identify the sources of tension in the collaborative process between the cultural commons and the municipality, and explores ways to address and overcome these issues. A critical epistemological position allows for a deeper examination of the underlying logics and power relations involved in both the question and its potential answers. It helped me to challenge existing paradigms and consider alternative perspectives, which is essential when addressing complex social issues such as collaboration between actors with differing logics.



## 3.2. Design: ethnographic research

To answer the research question of this study an approach rooted in a critical perspective, paired with a corresponding methodology was used. It was to challenge beliefs and assumptions and to question traditional social systems. A methodology aligned with this perspective should not aim to be a science in search of general laws, but rather one in search of meanings (Van Hulst, 2008).

Therefore, ethnographic fieldwork is fitting.

Geertz (1977) argued that the purpose of ethnographic fieldwork is to investigate the systems of meaning that people in the field employ. Engaging in critical, ethnographic fieldwork involves 'being there' to understand the sense that people under study make of their experiences (Rhodes, 2007). Within my fieldwork at the municipality of Utrecht, focused on cultural affairs, I had eight months to do observations. Being an intern at the municipality gave me access to meetings, discussions, and the team. On top of that, my fieldwork allowed me to get close to all sorts of settings of local governance, including those that are inaccessible to researchers who rarely or never visit the field.

The concept of governance points to both the changing practices of governing and a new vocabulary to describe them (Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003). Therefore it cannot be taken as a straightforward given reality. This is why Rod Rhodes (2002) advised the study of governance to be conducted in a critical manner. According to Rhodes the focus of the study of governance needs to be on sense-making and this needs to be supported by ethnographic fieldwork. Therefore my focus was on actors' views of their world, bringing me as a researcher close to practice and data. This involved looking for 'raw' data in the sense of being close to the people's original sense-making (Fenno, 1986).

Fieldwork enables ethnographers to discover the variety of ways in which people experience reality, partly through their own experiences of what happens in the field. Ultimately, the idea behind ethnographic fieldwork in an critical mode is that fieldworkers immerse themselves in others' worlds. This involves 'both being with other people to see how they respond to events as they happen and experiencing for oneself these events and the circumstances that gave rise to them' (Emerson et al., 1995).

In line with the epistemological position of this research is ontological realism suggesting the existence of a reality independent of our awareness or understanding. Following Tong Zhang's argument, observable events stem from underlying mechanisms that may not be immediately visible (Zhang, 2022). Thus, to fully grasp the social world, it's crucial to explore both observable phenomena and the concealed structures driving them. This was essential in analyzing collaboration because the reasons some things work while other do not are not always immediately evident.

Ethnographers talk to people in the field through official, semi-structured, or open interviews, but more casual conversations are also possible. This dialogue allows ethnographers to look behind the facade of everyday appearances for the hidden and marginalized tales of the field (Van Hulst, 2008). I made fieldnotes of my observations and thoughts. I also continuously evaluated my observations in comparison to existing literature and engaged in constant conversation with the employees of the Municipality of Utrecht.

Furthermore, ethnographic fieldwork often challenges the conventional boundaries of academia. This aligned with my goal of bridging the gap between academia and the social contexts where unfair power dynamics persist (Mason and Purcell, 2014). By embracing context-specific knowledge and the diversity of perspectives, ethnographic fieldwork can provide new insights into collaboration. This directly addressed the aim of my research question.

In short, ethnographic fieldwork offers benefits for studying sense-making in local governance. It provides a rich array of data and the opportunity to delve into the intricacies of politics, bureaucracy, and administration (Van Hulst, 2008). Being immersed in the field allowed me to observe individuals as they navigate and interpret their environments. The insights came from being directly involved in the setting where I could explore how people experience local governance. Besides, I developed my own understanding from these interactions. It helped me understand where the tensions lie and also that it is indeed very hard to overcome.

### **3.3. Data collection: methods and selection of respondents**

To collect my data, I conducted a combination of semi-structured interviews with municipality policymakers, ZIMIHC employees and cultural commons. I also made field-notes of my observations and spoke with experts. This method generated qualitative data providing in-depth insights into the dynamics of collaboration between the Municipality of Utrecht and the cultural commons. By immersing myself in the field and engaging directly with stakeholders I revealed both the interactions and underlying principles that contribute to successful collaborations as well as the sources of tension. Additionally, my research is grounded in existing scholarly literature and uses established theoretical frameworks.

#### **3.3.1. Document analysis**

The first step in data collection involved document analysis. This was crucial for understanding the context of the study and gaining insights into the municipality, ZIMIHC, and the cultural commons.

This phase included analyzing documents received from respondents that detailed their projects and methods. It also encompassed ZIMIHC's four-year policy and last year's annual report, research from one of the experts, and a brochure with a visual representation of the results. The cultural commons had minimal documentation—only a few pictures from gatherings and small-scale performances. Additionally, I extensively reviewed municipal policy documents, including the PowerPoint presentation on "Herijking Samen Stad Maken: Geen Utrecht Zonder U," slides from a participation course, the cultural participation implementation program, the cultural policy document and materials from roundtable discussions on cultural participation.

### 3.3.2. Observations

In addition to document analysis, observations were conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the interactions and dynamics within the municipality of Utrecht and in its relationship with the cultural commons. Observations took place throughout the eight months of my fieldwork. During the first six months I spent twenty hours per week at the municipality's *Stadskantoor*, which was later reduced to eight hours per week in the final two months. My observations included routine workplace activities as well as more focused observations during team meetings. Meetings occurred every Monday and fell into three types:

- Short Update Sessions: Brief updates on individual and team activities.
- *Werkoverleg*: A one-hour meeting where topics were discussed in greater depth, with more detailed updates and opportunities for questions and discussion.
- *Cultuurlab*: A two-hour, flexible meeting format that included various activities such as visiting *Berlijnplein* (a municipality-sponsored project), attending a presentation on changes in municipality-wide participation policies and brainstorming sessions for a new policy plan for cultural real estate.

The observations conducted during these meetings offered valuable context and insights into the collaborative processes and organizational dynamics involved. Specific moments of observation included a meeting between ZIMIHC and the municipality where the current state of the cultural sector was discussed. I also observed a meeting between the employees of the cultural department and a neighborhood office. Additionally, I visited the community center De Leeuw where I interviewed neighborhood choirs. I also attended a two-day course for municipality employees on effective participation with the community. This is a selection of examples from a much larger context.

During these observations, handwritten fieldnotes were taken to capture both verbal and non-verbal interactions, organizational processes and the general atmosphere. The aim was to identify patterns, behaviors, and contextual factors that might not be evident through interviews alone. This approach provided insights into the day-to-day functioning. The observations also provided valuable context and nuanced insights into the dynamics of the collaboration between the cultural commons and the municipality.

By closely examining real-life interactions and behaviors, I gained a clearer understanding of the underlying issues and opportunities within the collaborative process. This enhanced insight allowed me to formulate more targeted and insightful questions during interviews improving the quality of the data collected. The observations were also integrated into the analysis of the research results, often used to contextualize interview quotations. Consequently, my observations played a crucial role in shaping both the recommendations and the depth of analysis in my research.

### **3.3.3. Interviews**

Last but not least, I gathered data through interviews with employees of the Municipality of Utrecht who are actively involved in cultural affairs. Three participants were chosen from the cultural participation team, which is closely linked to amateur arts and the cultural commons. They maintain contacts with ZIMIHC, a key organization in my case study. The first policymaker was selected due to her knowledge on the subject. Her role as an external consultant provided an outside perspective on the collaboration. The second policymaker was chosen for his long-standing experience as a member of the cultural participation team. The third policymaker, though new to the team, brought valuable experience from other municipalities. Given that a third of the cultural department team was new during my fieldwork provided a reflective view of the team dynamics. The fourth participant from the municipality played a crucial role in drafting the current policy and evaluating applications. Her involvement was relevant as policy formulation and assessment are closely tied to the municipal logics.

I began the interviews by asking about the initial conditions required for a collaborative process, focusing on the power dynamics and resource distribution between the municipality and ZIMIHC, the incentives for both parties to collaborate, and the history of their collaboration. Following this, I asked the participants how they envision a successful partnership and what tensions they perceive in the process. For a more detailed explanation I refer to the topic list in the appendix.

I also conducted four interviews at ZIMIHC. The participants were selected for their extensive experience in the field and their frequent interactions with municipal employees and the cultural

commons. One participant, with thirty years of experience and significant expertise, was interviewed twice. In the first interview that I conducted and in the very last one. Speaking with this participant on two occasions was particularly valuable due to their foundational role in ZIMIHC and their managerial responsibilities. The second participant was chosen for their knowledge of the cultural commons and their role in managing ZIMIHC's internal operations. The third participant was selected for their role in connecting with the field and facilitating numerous networking events. The interview structure for ZIMIHC participants was consistent with that used for municipal employees, as described above.

Additionally, I interviewed two cultural commons, both of which were neighborhood choirs. These choirs were selected because they fall under the performing arts category, aligning with ZIMIHC's target group and the cultural participation team at the Municipality of Utrecht's cultural affairs department. The first cultural common was chosen due to its long-standing presence, well-established organization and experience in navigating the field. They even have a very basic website. The second cultural common was selected for its informal and low-key nature. This cultural common had no written or digital documentation. I learned about the existence of both commons by visiting a community center where they meet weekly. In this way, a comprehensive view of operational logics of the cultural commons could be developed. This interview was structured somewhat differently. I began by inquiring about their founding, activities and their organization structure. Next, I asked about their position in and perspective on the cultural field, specifically whether they collaborate with other choirs or are part of a network. Lastly, I explored their current collaboration with the municipality and whether they would like to see any changes in this relationship in the future. For a more detailed explanation, I refer to the topic list in the appendix.

Lastly, I conducted two interviews with experts on the topic. These participants were selected due to their ongoing research on cultural commons or their key roles in the cultural field in Utrecht. The interviews focused on their perspectives on the current situation and their visions for the future, particularly regarding potential collaborations. For these interviews I applied an open-ended approach. I did not use a topic list because the goal was to encourage a fluid and organic discussion. This format enabled me to adjust the conversation's focus based on the participants' responses, following up on unexpected but valuable insights and exploring new angles as they arose. This approach was well-suited given the participants' expertise and the aim of the interviews to gather deep, innovative perspectives.

In total twelve interviews were conducted to gather data for addressing the research question. Each interview lasted approximately one hour on average. However, one interview with a cultural

common could not be recorded. Only a brief summary of that conversation is available with no transcript. The remaining eleven interview transcripts are available upon request from the author. All interviews were conducted in Dutch. The quotations used in this study have been translated into English by the author. To ensure confidentiality, each participant was assigned a number. The code "P" stands for participant, followed by a letter indicating their associated organization and a number.

Municipality employees: PM-1 to PM-4

ZIMIHC employees: PZ-1 to PZ-4

Cultural commons: PC-1 to PC-2

Experts: PE-1 to PE-3

In the results chapter these codes are extensively used when referencing quotes from the interviews. The interviews served as the primary source of data collection for this research.

### **3.4. Data analysis**

In analyzing my data, I utilized thematic coding as a key method. This approach served as a heuristic to identify and read the patterns within the qualitative data, focusing not just on labeling but on establishing connections (Richards & Morse, 2012). The process was cyclical, involving multiple iterations of going back to the data to refine categories, themes, and sensitizing concepts. I used NVivo software to facilitate thematic coding, which helped in structuring and analyzing the data effectively.

By later clustering these codes according to their similarities and regularities, patterns emerged that enabled the development of categories. The concepts were identified with a particular focus on the underlying principles of collaboration. The focus is on understanding how these factors relate to one another and interact within the context of the fieldwork.

To organize the data, I used the model proposed by Ansell and Gash (2007). Although this is a causal framework, the variables from the model serve as thematic factors rather than indicators of causality



in this qualitative research.

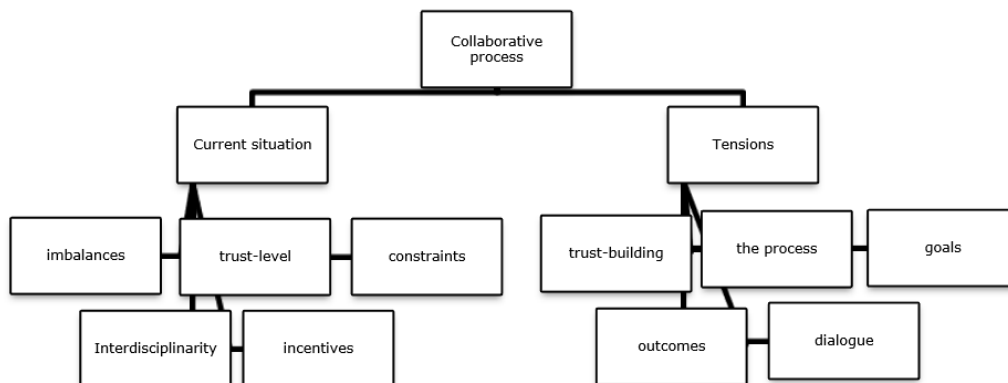


Figure 3: Systematic view of the coding framework

To further illustrate how I coded the data, two examples are provided below. The first example demonstrates how a specific piece of data was coded, following the same process applied throughout the entire research data analysis. Here is an excerpt taken from an interview transcript: The one-word capitalized code in the right column is called a thematic code, which summarizes the primary topic of the excerpt (Saldana, 2012):

<p><i>"But yes, we just talked about that. It's challenging because it needs to be someone who has the time<sup>1</sup>; you can't just say, 'Hi, I want to gather some information because we're making policy. Oh, goodbye, we're done.' You need to build a sustainable relationship with people.<sup>2</sup> And that's not possible from the position we have here."</i></p> <p><small>*excerpt from an interview</small></p>	<p><sup>1</sup> CONSTRAINTS A constraint on the current collaboration is lack in time.</p> <p><sup>2</sup> THE PROCESS This respondent thinks building a sustainable relationship is important for the collaboration. This has to do with the commitment to the process.</p>
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The coding framework that emerged guided my contextualization and critical view of the findings. I then reflected on how these insights impact the collaboration between the cultural commons and the municipality. These reflections are detailed in the results section of my thesis. In the discussion section, I critically assess how my findings align with and contribute to existing literature.

### 3.5. Research quality

Critical research must fully acknowledge its cultural, historical, and political context and promote equality between researchers and participants. It should also aim to create an agenda for change that enhances the lives of the participants, demonstrating catalytic validity (Cohen & Kitayama, 2019). This is crucial to remember when conducting interviews and analyzing data. In qualitative research, subjectivity and emancipation are key elements, meaning it should be assessed differently than quantitative research (Easterby-Smith et al., 2008). Therefore, I follow Symon and Cassell's (2012) criteria for evaluating qualitative research, focusing on three main points: quality output, quality process, and quality performance.

To begin, I assessed the quality of my research by evaluating its contribution to the understanding of a particular topic. This includes both gaining new insights into the subject and formulating practical outcomes based on those insights (Symon and Cassell, 2012). Secondly, I assessed my research by focusing on the quality of the process and its documentation, ensuring that I, as the researcher, maintained reflexivity throughout. Thirdly, I assessed the quality of my research on how I created and presented a credible narrative of the research. This included ensuring the research is logical and internally consistent, clearly showing how the initial theorizing led to specific research strategies and how the theoretical conclusions are supported by relevant data (Symon and Casell, 2012). Due to the philosophical diversity of qualitative research, there is an emphasis on maintaining epistemological consistency throughout.

Additionally, I considered the sub criteria of 'trustworthiness' from the article by Symon and Cassell (2012) as alternatives to traditional notions of reliability and validity in qualitative research. For my research focused on cultural commons and cultural matters within the municipality of Utrecht, I applied the criteria as follows:

**Credibility:** This criterium ensures that the research findings are believable and accurately reflect the experiences of participants. In the context of this study credibility was achieved by using triangulation, which involved gathering data from multiple sources such as document analysis, observations and interviews.

**Transferability:** This refers to the extent to which findings can be applied to other contexts. In this research, transferability is supported by providing detailed descriptions of the cultural department and the specific cultural commons within Utrecht. While this description doesn't necessarily guarantee the findings' applicability to other contexts, it does allow the reader to assess that applicability for themselves.

**Dependability:** This criterium emphasizes the stability of findings over time. In this qualitative research, replicability is somewhat limited, partly because I, as the researcher, am the primary instrument of data collection. However, dependability is maintained to some extent through the use of a systematic coding framework and categorization based on Ansell and Gash's article. This approach helps ensure that other researchers can build upon my work.

**Confirmability:** This ensures that the findings are shaped by the participants rather than by researcher bias. To achieve confirmability, the research involved obtaining informed consent and asking open-ended questions during interviews, allowing participants' perspectives to guide the results. Additionally, by actively listening and creating a comfortable environment for participants, I aimed to minimize socially desirable responses.

By applying these criteria, the research aims to produce findings that trustworthy within the context of the cultural commons and cultural issues in the municipality of Utrecht.

### **3.6. Reflection on my role as researcher**

As an critical ethnographer, I will immerse myself in the field over an extended period of time to experience and understand how employees at the municipality, ZIMIHC and the cultural commons perceive their socio-political realities. This is reflected in their behaviors, speech, and writings. It's crucial to recognize that this perspective cannot be fully understood without my mediation as the researcher. This will demand a degree of sensitivity, flexibility, interpersonal skills, and reflexivity on my part.

As a researcher investigating the conditions crucial for establishing a successful collaboration between the Municipality of Utrecht and the cultural commons, my positionality is shaped by a blend of cultural awareness, socio-economic privilege, and Christian values. These elements inform my approach to the cultural commons and the collaboration with the municipality.

The potential demographic differences between myself and the participants of my research can add complexity to my work. These differences span socio-economic status, ethnicity, language, education level, and religion. In my research, I find myself within the world of highly educated and predominantly white individuals in the municipality, while the people I speak with in the field experience a very different reality. They are just getting by day-to-day, not really focusing on what a municipality does. There is often a gap in thinking and language between them and the municipality. For instance, the municipality uses bureaucratic and formal language, which can be difficult for most people to understand, particularly the terms and systems referenced in this language. However,

these diverse identities also provide fertile ground for critical reflection. As I embark on this research, I am aware of the power differentials, biases, and potential blind spots that may influence my interactions and critical perspective.

Being a resident of Utrecht, I bring personal experience and knowledge about the city. These experiences shape my perspective and foster a deep interest in exploring the area further. My familiarity with the city enhances my understanding of its cultural scene allowing me to notice intricate details and social dynamics. However this familiarity might also be a pitfall as I might unintentionally neglect new perspectives or critical aspects, assuming that I already know the city and its cultural sector.

Two meaningful experiences further inform my perspective on the cultural sector in a city setting. During my work at the Museum Speelklok and the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, I encountered predominantly white, homogenous groups of visitors, reflecting the socio-cultural dynamics within high art institutions. Addressing these issues as part of the inclusivity team at the Stedelijk Museum was a constant challenge, highlighting the complexities of fostering diversity and inclusion within such spaces.

Additionally, through my volunteer work at the Paper Cafe, I have directly encountered the gap between the municipality's bureaucratic logic and the citizens themselves. Many individuals struggle with basic literacy in Dutch, limiting their ability to engage with cultural institutions and fully participate in civic life. These experiences underscore the importance of recognizing and addressing barriers to (cultural) participation and the need for inclusive approaches that cater to diverse demographics within our society.

My positionality is not a static backdrop but an ever-evolving dynamic that necessitates continual reflexivity. Through this process of self-awareness and critical engagement, I hope to navigate the interaction between researcher and subject effectively. My aim is to ensure that my presence does not obscure the voices of those whose stories I seek to illuminate.

## 4. Results and analysis

Here the results of the ethnographic fieldwork are presented, addressing the empirical sub questions to ultimately answer the main research question:

*What are the areas of tension in the collaborative process between the cultural commons and the municipality of Utrecht, and how can these tensions be addressed to improve future collaboration?*

The chapter is divided into two main sections. The first section evaluates the existing collaboration between the Municipality of Utrecht, ZIMIHC, and two cultural commons, concentrating for the most part on the challenges and opportunities. The second section delves into the tensions present within such a collaborative process. The analysis draws on the model proposed by Ansell and Gash (2007). Furthermore, the second section distinguishes between the cultural commons perspective and the policy perspective, addressing the first two empirical sub-questions concerning the municipality's policy logics and the operational principles of a communing initiative. There may be some overlap between the two sections, as the tensions within the collaborative process are often evident in the current state of affairs.

### 4.1. What is the current situation?

In this the first section the starting conditions outlined in Ansell and Gash's (2007) collaborative governance model are applied to analyze the current relationship between the municipality and the cultural commons. This includes examining the collaboration in the past regarding the initial trust level, both positive and negative associations, the balance of resources and power among stakeholders, and the incentives and constraints of the current partnership. Additionally, a recurring theme from the interviews—the challenge of achieving interdisciplinary collaboration—is included in the analysis.

#### 4.1.1. Initial trust level

First, the initial level of trust in the current relationship between the municipality and the cultural commons will be analyzed. Interpersonal contact has emerged as a key factor in shaping the trust levels between stakeholders in the collaboration. This was highlighted by many participants during the interviews. The positive and negative perceptions stakeholders have are often rooted in their past experiences with the collaboration. This, in turn, affects their current levels of trust (Ansell and Gash, 2007). In assessing the current situation, many positive interactions from the past and the recent changes that have introduced a more critical perspective came to light.

### **Strengthening trust through interpersonal contact**

When discussing the positive aspects of the collaboration in the past, the impact of interpersonal contact was frequently mentioned. Stakeholders consistently emphasized how these personal interactions induced trust. As one municipal employee noted:

*"I think we in Utrecht are quite close to the sector. For example, we have an above-average contact with the city" (PM-2).*

This above-average contact is manifested in, among other things, the regular interactions facilitated by the 'broedplaatsennetwerk.' Since April 2020, Utrecht's creative hubs have been represented within this network, which includes approximately 135,000 square meters of space and 10,000 tenants. This network serves as a breeding ground for entrepreneurship, creativity, and innovation in the city (*Hoe We Betaalbare Ruimte Voor Kunst & Creativiteit in Utrecht Kunnen Waarborgen*, 2022). A municipality employee described their current interactions with the field:

*"We work a lot with the creative hub network, and there are also many umbrella meetings. Then there are the account holder consultations. What I personally notice the most is that with certain projects, for example, BOKS in Overvecht, they're currently in a temporary location, and at some point, they'll be moving to a new location. In those cases, I'm more in contact with a specific party on a project basis. Or, for example, when writing a specific regulation for youth culture centers in Leidse Rijn, Vleuten-De Meern, I'm in contact with organizations like De Vrijstaat or Cultuur19. But that's very specific to a particular regulation or renovation. So yes, that's basically how my contact with the field is currently shaped" (PM-1).*

The project-based meetings, the participant mentions here, are instrumental in fostering relationships and are viewed as positive for the overall interaction with the cultural field. In the specific relationship between ZIMIHC and the municipality, interpersonal contact also plays a crucial role. ZIMIHC enjoys an especially close relationship with the municipality. This is evident from the involvement of policymakers in ZIMIHC's events and the responsiveness of municipal employees regarding this account. One municipal employee described their relationship with ZIMIHC:

*"I find it very pleasant with ZIMIHC. It's important that as an account holder, you build a good relationship with your account. We have frequent meetings" (PM-4).*

Another striking example of this close relationship is the participation of a municipal alderman in ZIMIHC's 35th-anniversary celebration, not just attending but performing at the event. Such gestures



surpass formalities, reinforcing trust and collaboration through personal involvement. The municipality's support during challenging times has further solidified this relationship. For instance, the municipality's financial assistance was vital in helping ZIMIHC navigate a period of financial difficulty, which bolstered ZIMIHC's trust in the municipality. As one participant reflected:

*"We almost went bankrupt, but we survived thanks to the municipality of Utrecht, which has always supported us" (PZ-1).*

Such support is particularly vital in the cultural sector, which often faces financial challenges and uncertainties. The presence of strong interpersonal contact paved the way for this support, aligning with the broader literature that underscores the importance of personal relationships in building and maintaining trust between cultural commons initiatives and municipalities (Gray, 1994).

### **Recent changes and its impact on trust**

However in recent years, there have been notable shifts in the interpersonal relationships between the municipality and the cultural commons, including ZIMIHC, which have affected communication, accessibility, and ultimately, the trust-level. First of all, although the municipality has aimed to build personal relationships, this approach has often been seen as relatively passive. Additionally, the focus has frequently been on addressing immediate, tangible issues rather than on broader cultural development, which stakeholders have perceived as a negative shift. As one ZIMIHC employee highlighted:

*"That role is about being proactive, not just sitting in a district office waiting for a resident to come in, to put it bluntly. And there are many people in the district offices who are actively engaged with residents. But I think there's still much more that can be done. What you mainly see now in the district offices is people coming in with questions about playgrounds or unsafe situations in the street. But not when it comes to things like wanting activities to take place in a music venue or wondering if something can be done with an empty school building. I think those cultural questions don't reach the district offices" (PZ-4).*

Hence, while there is some level of contact, there is a clear need for deeper and more meaningful interactions. This gap in engagement has been exacerbated by other underlying issues that have eroded trust. In recent years, tensions within the cultural sector have increased, partly due to changes in municipal leadership and the resulting policy shifts. These shifts have included changes in

the criteria for subsidy applications, leaving many long-supported cultural organizations without funding. A municipal employee acknowledged this shift and its effect on the trust-level:

*"I think our trust level is not super good at the moment between the field and the municipality. They have suffered a lot from the change of guard, and they feel a bit betrayed by this advice" (PM-2).*

A ZIMIHC interviewee also reflected on the impact of these changes:

*"The sector was really shaking last time. There was profound tension and little ventilation. I find the political system unsafe at the moment. Why? Because it can just happen that if you, as an organization, haven't performed well enough, you might have to lay off twenty people. Very business-like. And that's quite tough" (PZ-2).*

The tensions and lack of communication, referred to by the interviewee, were during the recent subsidy allocation process. This has been particularly troubling, not so much for ZIMIHC but for other cultural commons in the city. Correspondingly, there is noticeable lack of direct engagement with unsubsidized organizations, including most of the cultural commons, creating an environment of uncertainty and stress when these groups do describe to apply for funding. The absence of contact makes the process even more daunting than before, contributing to the heightened tensions within the field. A municipality employee recognized this situation:

*"We want to be accessible to unsubsidized organizations, but I feel that is happening less now" (PM-1).*

In this context, being accessible refers to being open and available for conversation. The current lack of accessibility and personal contact has created an unsafe environment, which has further damaged the trust between cultural organizations and the municipality. As mentioned shortly above, this issue is also linked to the changes in municipal leadership. The impact of this was evident throughout the entire fieldwork. Whenever I visited cultural organizations, I noticed considerable uncertainty about the status of this issue. This uncertainty created an uncomfortable atmosphere, which negatively impacted these organizations' trust in the municipality (fieldnotes, author). This underlines the importance of transparency. These findings support Flynn's (2019) argument that dialogue is crucial for maintaining a positive relationship.

In short, the current level of trust between the cultural commons and the municipality has diminished due to decreasing interpersonal contact and transparency, which are both crucial for maintaining strong relationships. Both the municipality and ZIMIHC share this view.

#### 4.1.2. Resource and power imbalances

Secondly, this analysis will examine concerns related to the imbalance of resources and power. According to Ansell and Gash (2007), recognizing existing imbalances in resources, power, and knowledge is essential for achieving successful collaboration. Accordingly this aspect represents another starting condition outlined by Ansell and Gash. During the interviews, knowledge imbalances did not explicitly emerge; therefore, the focus here is solely on resource and power imbalances. That is that the relationship between cultural commons and municipalities is marked by a complex interplay of power and resources. This dynamic can create both opportunities and challenges in achieving a balanced relationship.

##### Resource allocation

One key aspect that emerged from the interviews is that cultural commons often operate with limited resources. While they frequently do not require financial support from the municipality, they depend on the municipality for other essential resources such as materials, electronic equipment, and larger spaces than their own facilities or homes. For example, many community groups can benefit from the use of municipal spaces at no cost because they do not charge for their services or seek funding. As one participant described:

*"We don't need money, and we can use the community center's space for free. We also print our booklets there" (PC-2).*

This arrangement underscores the municipality's role in supplying resources that bolster community activities. The municipality's support goes beyond just providing resources; it also involves practical assistance, such as advocating for the cultural commons to secure affordable workspaces through negotiations with property organizations. One participant noted:

*"Subsidies help them organize programs and activities. Part of this support can also come from helping with housing, by negotiating cost-price-secure rent with property organizations" (PM-1).*

The results suggest that real estate is a critical factor in the collaboration between the municipality and the cultural commons. However, since many community spaces are municipally owned, this reveals a resource imbalance between the stakeholders. It creates a dynamic that can be both beneficial and restrictive. So while these resource exchanges facilitate community activities, they also impose certain limitations on the cultural commons. As one respondent pointed out:

*"Collaboration incentives are often tied to real estate because many buildings are municipal properties that we rent. This creates a mandatory relationship, which generally works well but can sometimes be challenging. You want to do a lot, but you also feel somewhat restricted" (PZ-3).*

The dependency on municipal real estate means that while community activities can take place, the municipality often controls decisions about the use of these spaces, sometimes without sufficient consultation with the cultural sector (fieldnotes, author). The current relationship can thus sometimes feel transactional, with the municipality seen as the 'banker' and the cultural initiatives as 'clients' seeking resources.

The analysis of the results has made it clear that resource imbalances between stakeholders are indeed a crucial factor to address before initiating collaboration, as they influence the overall dynamics of the relationship. This principle is evident in the collaboration between the cultural commons and the Municipality of Utrecht, where the balance of resource allocation affects their collaboration. The dependence on municipal resources creates both opportunities and challenges for collaboration. On one hand, it serves as a strong incentive for the cultural commons to engage with the municipality. On the other hand, the control the municipality exerts over these resources presents challenges. This dependency thus highlights the need for flexible and supportive municipal policies to promote community development. As mentioned in the theoretical framework, this aligns with the trend of governments increasingly adopting collaborative governance strategies to mobilize resources and achieve public value outcomes (Nabatchi & Emerson, 2015). So accordingly the municipality of Utrecht should already be on the right track.

### **Power imbalances**

However, the top-down, control focused approach of the municipality was a recurring theme during the interviews when talking about the current collaboration. Hence, it became apparent that this approach has an impact on the existing power imbalance between the municipality and the cultural commons. This focus on control was noted by a ZIMIHC employee:

*"Half of your subsidy is spent pleasing the municipality, and then it's still a question of whether it's worth all the effort. I think that is, in general, a kind of excessive way of controlling" (PZ-3).*

This requirement to please the municipality places the cultural commons in a subordinate position. The power lies with the municipality. Consequently, this controlling approach can detract from the quality of cultural activities. The time and effort required to secure and justify funding can be overwhelming, diverting attention from core activities. As another participant commented:

*"So that's just, exactly, that's just very pleasant. And with that, we can just, you know, continue everything. But it sometimes still feels a bit like, oh yeah, hey, there's a funding opportunity, oh, let's run towards it. Whereas, yes, I think it's much more about the value or, how we collectively want to pursue that goal rather than us always just acting nice and obedient, like, well, are we doing it right? Yes, well, please" (PZ-3).*

This feedback underscores a dependency in the relationship rather than a collaborative pursuit of shared goals on an equal footing. The emphasis on control reinforces this dependency and can impede the development of a more equitable collaboration. A power imbalance can thus hinder the formation of a collaborative and fair relationship, an issue highlighted by Powell (1990), who describes equity as horizontal authority.

Nevertheless, when assessing the current situation there are indications of a potential shift towards more equitable practices already happening. The same participant observed:

*"But I do hear that there is a shift happening, and also, the municipality of Utrecht is really focusing on citizen participation, so really hearing the voice of the citizen. And there, you can already see those commoning principles increasingly trickling down. So, they also don't want to sit in that ivory tower and say from there, yes, this is how we are going to do it. But in practice, it still works that way if you are the receiving party" (PZ-3).*

This suggests that while the municipality is making efforts to embrace a horizontal authority, the reality for cultural commons is that they often still have to deal with an "ivory tower" approach. This signals an ongoing power imbalance that affects the effectiveness of the collaboration.

In conclusion, while the municipality is making efforts to address both resource and power imbalances in the collaboration, practical progress remains limited. Stakeholders in the cultural sector still perceive these imbalances on a daily basis, indicating that more needs to be done to resolve them effectively.

#### **4.1.3. Incentives for participation**

A third starting condition identified by Ansell and Gash (2007) that affects the effectiveness of collaboration is the incentives and constraints on participation. To thoroughly analyze the current situation, it is relevant to consider both aspects. This section (4.1.3.) will focus on the incentives, while the following section (4.1.4) will address the constraints.

Regarding the incentives for participation the following themes emerged during the interviews: efficient cost management, policy development and local insight, and achieving an ecosystem approach.

### **Efficient cost management**

To begin, one of the primary incentives for municipalities and cultural commons to collaborate is that of cost management. For example, the rising costs of facilities, such as rehearsal spaces, make it challenging for community groups to sustain their activities. Subsidizing these costs or making spaces available helps maintain affordability for the cultural commons. This makes it an important incentive for the cultural commons to collaborate with the municipality. As one of the neighborhood choirs noted:

*"The costs of rehearsal space are getting higher. ZIMIHC and Parnassos are quite expensive. I think that's why the municipality subsidizes it, to keep it affordable so we can continue singing" (PC-1).*

This financial support not only helps cultural commons to continue their activities but also fosters a cultural scene that benefits the broader community. Which is an incentive for collaboration for both the municipality as ZIMIHC, being an established cultural common. Smaller cultural commons often focus less on overarching goals and more on their immediate surroundings. Another incentive for the municipality that also connects to cost management is that cultural commons often address social issues proactively, preventing problems before they escalate. This preventive approach is highly valuable for municipalities, as it reduces the need for reactive measures and associated costs. An interviewee pointed out:

*"And then, it's like this: We, as arts organizations, often find ourselves in the prevention corner. So, it's not a problem yet, but we're preventing potential issues. But because it's not a problem, you don't see it. You only notice it when it's gone. That's when you start to see the effects, and then it starts costing money" (PZ-2).*

By supporting these organizations, including the cultural commons, municipalities can enhance social well-being and address potential issues early, thereby avoiding the need for more intensive and costly interventions later. The mutual recognition of resource exchange needs is crucial for bringing stakeholders together (Dionne et al., 2004), thus an important incentive for collaboration.

### **Policy development and local insight**

The policy aim of inclusive and participatory urban development is another compelling reason for municipalities to collaborate with cultural commons. Since cultural commons represent the principles of bottom-up development, where residents play an active role in shaping their city. The example of the neighborhood choir in the introduction of this research report is a good example of this. The way they started up, by just hanging a note in the local supermarket, is bottom-up like and very informal. Once a group was formed, they made it one of their objectives to sing for the less fortunate in the neighborhood, to cheer them up. This demonstrates a small but active role of a cultural common in shaping their city at local level. Something the municipality often struggles to achieve due to the existing bureaucratic distance from the local level. Therefore, successful collaboration with the cultural commons is essential for the municipality to achieve its policy objectives, making this an important incentive for their participation. One ZIMIHC employee articulated a corresponding vision:

*"It has nothing to do with subsidies. It's about what kind of city you want Utrecht to be. If you want it to be a city from the ground up, where residents take care of the city, both physically and socially, then you need to help the residents. Ensure they are heard and seen. Subsidies are nice, but that's not the only way" (PZ-4).*

By embracing this approach, municipalities can create a more engaged and empowered community, leading to sustainable and bottom-up urban development. Hence, this bottom-up perspective is crucial for developing policies that are responsive and effective. By fostering a close relationship with cultural commons, municipalities can tailor their policies to better address local challenges and leverage the innovative potential of bottom-up initiatives. One participant talked about the relevance of a successful relationship:

*"I really enjoy working with ZIMIHC. I believe it's important for an account manager to build a good relationship with their account. So that you have a clear understanding of what is happening. And not just directly in relation to what they received funding for. But also to hear the voices from the sector and possibly create or adjust policies based on that. So that's why it's important" (PM-4).*

Thus, engaging with the cultural commons can provide municipalities with valuable insights into local issues and community needs. Another municipality policy maker also emphasized the importance of supporting local developments:

*"From the government's perspective, it's crucial to recognize what is happening locally and to support what emerges in the community. This is where the difference is felt by many people living in Utrecht. Yes, you take note of it, but it might not necessarily align with what's happening in the city's main*



*theater. That is important too, of course—the whole ecosystem. However, for your daily life and the impact on you as a resident of Utrecht, especially in specific neighborhoods, I believe the real strength lies more in the commons than in the large cultural institutions. Therefore, as a government, it is very important for us to engage with these local initiatives. Yes, we stand to gain a lot from it" (PM-3).*

The statement suggests that municipalities can gain from embracing an approach that includes all community initiatives because the key difference in a city is made at the local level. This is an important incentive for the municipality to collaborate with the cultural commons.

### **Achieving an ecosystem approach**

Another incentive for the municipality to collaborate with the cultural commons is to achieve an ecosystem approach. The term 'ecosystem' has already been mentioned in the interview quote above, but what an ecosystem approach entails is explained here. The cultural ecosystem is a conceptual framework designed to ensure inclusion and diversity within the cultural sector (LKCA, 2023). Drawing from ecological principles, just as a tree grows best when the entire ecosystem around it is also blooming, the cultural ecosystem looks beyond established or traditional cultural practices and recognize what more the system has to offer. This inclusive strategy fosters a cohesive community where everyone has a voice. As the same interviewee remarked:

*"Even those who applied for but didn't receive subsidies are relevant for the municipality. You should invite everyone, not just those you fund, because it's one ecosystem" (PM-3).*

The interview quote suggests that even when cultural commons do not receive direct funding, they should still be recognized and valued. Encompassing a view that can boost the community and create a more equitable distribution of resources and practical support. This incentive for collaboration is widely acknowledged within the municipality. During the recent subsidy allocation process, municipal policymakers placed emphasis on the ecosystem approach, as it was a specific criterion in the evaluation process (fieldnotes, author).

In line with this achieving an ecosystem approach, municipalities recognize the value of identifying and mapping community groups. By understanding the landscape of local cultural initiatives, municipalities can better support and nurture these groups. One way to tackle this is for municipalities to facilitate connections between these groups. This way a more robust and interconnected community network can be created. As one participant explained:

"If the municipality recognizes the many commons groups in the city, it can connect them, so they learn from each other and develop further" (PZ-4).

So, networks strengthen community ties and enhance the collective capacity of cultural commons. This network effect not only empowers individual groups but also contributes to a more resilient and vibrant cultural landscape in the city. Therefore, creating such a network serves as an incentive for collaboration between the cultural commons and the municipality of Utrecht. The discussion and recommendations chapters will place greater emphasis on the importance of facilitating networks.

To conclude this chapter, a successful collaboration between municipalities and cultural commons can be driven by a variety of incentives that align the interests of both parties. Essentially creating a reciprocal relationship is beneficial for community development and local governance. This is also suggested in the social exchange theory. It states that relationships are formed and maintained based on the costs and rewards involved (Cook et al., 2013). Thus, in the context of collaboration, reciprocity is crucial; each participant needs to benefit from the collaboration. Therefore the incentives named above are a key starting condition in achieving a successful collaboration between the municipality and the cultural commons.

#### **4.1.4. Constraints on participation**

The fourth point discussed in this section of analyzing the current situation are the constraints on participation. According to Ansell and Gash (2007) the constraints affect the effectivity of the collaboration, making it an important aspect to analyze when mapping out the current situation.

Regarding the constraints for participation the following themes emerged during the interviews: bureaucratic complexity, resource limitations, and sociopolitical differences and policy misalignment

##### **Bureaucratic complexity**

First of all, a major constraint on participation for the cultural commons is the difficulty they face in navigating the bureaucratic complexities of municipalities. The vastness of large organizations, with numerous departments and intricate procedures, can be overwhelming for smaller, community-based initiatives. As one participant noted:

*"I think partly they may not have the time or inclination to deal with the bureaucratic municipality. It's a large organization with many people and departments. I understand that it takes a lot of work for a small initiative or residents who just want to get things done"* (PM-1).

Another participant pointed out an additional legal hurdle that exacerbates the bureaucratic challenges: *“It also involves legal matters and legal language, which makes it even more complicated”* (PZ-4).

These legal complexities were frequently discussed in the municipality’s workplace, often emerging in daily communications such as responding to emails or drafting texts related to subsidy criteria and other matters involving the cultural sector (fieldnotes, author). Furthermore, accessing funding and resources often requires a level of education and familiarity with municipal procedures, which many community members lack. This issue was highlighted by an interviewee:

*“But sometimes you practically need to have done a whole study to apply properly. So the low-threshold is not there. Or you need another group to shape it. So you think, yes, the desks where initiatives for cultural commons can go, it creates a barrier”* (PZ-3).

The complexity of these procedures can discourage participation due to the considerable time and effort needed to navigate municipal systems effectively. Consequently, access to municipal resources and support is now often limited to those who are already familiar with the system. Established organizations with prior municipal contacts have an advantage, while informal or less-visible groups, such as cultural commons, struggle to gain recognition and support. One ZIMIHC employee observed:

*“For them, it’s much harder to know the way, who to approach, and what to do to get where they want to go”* (PZ-4).

This employee also reflected on their established position as ZIMIHC and long-standing relationship with the municipality, noting the advantage of having personal connections within the municipal structure:

*“I don’t have to try as hard as a neighborhood resident. Because I know the person, when I call, they see on their screen, ‘Oh, PZ-4 from ZIMIHC is calling.’ And that’s step 1, so I don’t go through the general number. It’s harder to reject me because they already know me. That’s the benefit of interpersonal contact”* (PZ-4).

In contrast, cultural commons, lacking such personal connections, often become stuck in the system, being passed around and struggling to make contact with the right municipal employee. As one participant noted, these limitations can hinder the activities of cultural commons, exemplifying how they are shuffled from one place or person to another without resolution:

*"I think we couldn't advance this project because so many different people and funds from the municipality were involved." And "The collaboration doesn't always go smoothly. We eventually resolve things, but it creates a lot of noise, especially at the start of a project. It's a waste of time and energy that could be better spent" (PZ-4).*

These bureaucratic hurdles can slow down the progress of community initiatives, acting as a constraint on the current collaboration. One participant suggested a way to overcome this challenge:

*"Streamlining these processes could significantly enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of collaborative efforts" (PZ-3).*

The issue of bureaucratic complexity will be further explored in the second section, which focuses on the tensions within the collaborative process and the strategies for overcoming them.

### **Resource limitations**

Secondly, a main constrain on participation for municipalities is that they do not have the capacity to engage deeply with numerous community initiatives. The resources of the municipality are often stretched thin due to budget cuts and increasing societal demands. One respondent reflected on this reality:

*"I don't think we have the time to sit down with I don't know how many initiatives every week to share knowledge and advise. That's, yeah. I think we are more about the long lines, the higher goals, and providing frameworks" (PM-1).*

The respondent recognizes that the municipality is responsible for writing broad policy and considering the needs of the entire city. That being enough work to fill up the day. The heavy workload of municipal employees was also apparent during the fieldwork at the cultural department, as evidenced by the demands placed on them in terms of emotional and intellectual effort (fieldnotes, author). Consequently, there is neither time nor cognitive capacity left to focus specifically on the cultural commons. An interviewee explained:

*"We are super busy and have limited hours. How much can we really advocate for groups we don't yet have a relationship with? This is always a balancing act. On the one hand, you want to be as accessible as possible to ensure an inclusive representation, but on the other hand, resources and space are not unlimited" (PM-2).*

This issue is compounded by budget cuts, which limit the ability to hire more staff to reduce the workload. Another respondent highlighted the broader context of these limitations:

*"At the same time, you're asking quite a lot because we have cutbacks both nationally and here in Utrecht. So it has to be done with fewer civil servants, while societal tasks are getting bigger and bigger. And society is really hardening" (PM-3).*

Within the cultural field the willingness of the municipality to collaborate is seen, even though the practical constraints of time and money, often hinder meaningful engagement:

*"It's not that they don't want to, I think, but it's just a limitation of time or resources, or I don't know exactly what it is" (PZ-3).*

### **Sociopolitical differences and policy misalignment**

Last but not least, a third constraint on participation that surfaced during the interviews and observations is the misalignment in sociopolitical perspectives between the municipality and the cultural commons. This misalignment is reflected in their behaviors, language, and written communications. One respondent talked about the issue:

*"I think we have a fantastic team in cultural participation, but something is definitely missing. In more voices or whatever word you can use for it. They are all highly educated, administrative, very scientifically oriented, have a lot of knowledge about cultural participation policy. But we don't live in the neighborhoods ourselves, we don't deal with it daily, we think it up from the city office. Yes. And that is, I think, a shortcoming" (PM-3).*

The participant notes here that municipal employees do not fully reflect the diversity of Utrecht's residents, both in terms of educational background and the associated mindset. This creates a language gap, making effective communication more challenging. For example, the municipality often requires funding proposals to be written in formal, policy-oriented language, which can be a substantial barrier for cultural commoners who are not accustomed to bureaucratic jargon. And this worries the participant:

*"And what worries me, as with the Cultural Policy Plan, is that institutions have to speak the government's language to submit an application" (PM-3).*

Another pointed out the gap between the municipality and neighborhood initiatives:

*"I think the problem with the initiatives fund is that you need to be quite highly educated to find and even think about the possibility of a fund. Many people with good ideas in the neighborhood lack the skills to access it, which is related to their education level. If the municipality always communicates at a higher education level, there's really a gap in accessibility" (PZ-3).*

One of the most noticeable and impactful consequences is that municipal decision-making processes often seem disconnected from the realities of community life. This detachment primarily stems from underlying sociopolitical differences, but also the lack of resident input in high-level policymaking. Without direct engagement with the community, municipal authorities may fail to adequately understand or address local needs. This disconnection can also mean that policies do not fully leverage the potential of bottom-up innovation. Municipalities often overlook the informal, spontaneous, yet highly effective nature of many community efforts. The requirement for formal organizational structures, such as being a registered foundation, frequently conflicts with the informal nature of bottom-up initiatives, which is a considerable strength of cultural commons. As a participant stated:

*"People can always apply for cultural subsidies, but then you have the situation that you always have to be a foundation or association, and that is already a big hurdle" (PZ-4).*

Failing to integrate the informal aspects of commons into policymaking means that the full potential of these community-driven initiatives is not realized. This issue arises because the practical, grassroots nature of community efforts often clashes with the formal expectations of municipalities. This topic will be explored in greater detail in the following section on the tensions within the collaborative process between stakeholders.

In short a sociopolitical difference and the policy misalignment following from this is a constraint on collaborating efforts. For a collaboration to be successful it is important to take the current constraints into account.

For instance, the municipality should allocate (additional) resources to ensure that more time and cognitive capacity are dedicated to the cultural commons. It is also important to be aware of the sociopolitical differences between municipal employees and residents, including bottom-up initiators like cultural commoners. Building a more diverse cultural participation team at the cultural department at the municipality of Utrecht, particularly in terms of educational background and communication skills, could help bridge the existing sociopolitical gap and take away bureaucratic hurdles. This would better align policy with the needs of the cultural commons, addressing the

current policy misalignment. Steps like these have already been implemented for various teams within the municipality, such as those focused on nightlife and street culture (fieldnotes, author). Ultimately, overcoming the current gap can help municipality employees to nurture the cultural commons and foster a healthier and more vibrant cultural ecosystem in the city.

This viewpoint is consistent with movements promoting participatory democracy and social justice, as outlined in the theoretical framework. Van der Maas et al. (2019) further argue that to tackle challenges effectively, policymakers should embrace inclusive approaches and reimagine the potential of the cultural commons. To conclude this section, tackling the constraints paves the way for a more successful collaboration between the municipality and the cultural commons.

#### **4.1.5. The challenge of achieving interdisciplinary collaboration**

Finally, the barriers to achieving interdisciplinary collaboration are considered. This is somewhat of a digression, but since it emerged during the interviews when talking about the current situation, I will briefly address it here. Simultaneously, this theme wraps up the examination of the current situation regarding the collaboration between the cultural commons, including ZIMIHC, and the municipality of Utrecht.

The need for cross-sector collaboration has been acknowledged throughout the entire the entire municipality and the cultural sector—for example between culture, wellbeing, sports and education— however implementing such collaboration remains challenging. Thus the desire for interdisciplinary collaboration is evident, yet the reality often falls short due to systemic constraints. A participant explained this:

*"Sometimes it works very well, but at other times it simply doesn't. This is largely due to the barriers within the municipality. Despite the desire to overcome these barriers between different disciplines and fields, it doesn't always succeed. The wish to break down these walls has been expressed for a long time, but in practice, it remains challenging" (PZ-4).*

These barriers the participant refers to are the existing structures and funding streams, which are often rigid and compartmentalized, making it difficult to support projects that span multiple disciplines. One municipal employee noted:

*"More coordination would really be better. And we do try to seek that out in some places. There are quite a few meetings about the overlap between culture and other departments. But that also depends a lot on who is in charge at the time, if someone leaves, and the workload and willingness.*



*There are also no overarching budgets or anything like that. It would be really nice if that could happen" (PM-2).*

In the context of current collaboration between the municipality and cultural commons, a fundamental constraint on interdisciplinary collaboration lies in how culture is perceived. It greatly depends on whether other municipality departments recognize the importance of arts and culture and are open to collaboration. For example many other departments underestimate the value of culture in areas like well-being. Culture is a powerful tool for achieving various goals, and this includes the contributions of cultural commons. Because they make a difference at the local level through culture. A participant described this:

*"Culture, at this moment... And it's always been this way, there's a fence. That's the cultural policy, so to speak. And everything has to fit within that fence. What art and culture do has to happen within that fence, within those four million. While it is evident... Look, we actually don't need to discuss it with anyone. That it's good for health. That it benefits well-being. That it relates to sports. That it's also good for the city's economy. And why is that fence around it? Because the effects and the impact of what culture does benefit well-being. If you provide good art and culture to people, they are healthier. That saves money. So you see, I wouldn't even remove those four walls around the fence completely. But it is something that is being thought about more often now. It's still somewhat in its infancy" (PZ-1).*

And it's clear that this is being considered, as evidenced by the fact that the most recent 'cultuurnota', a cultural policy for subsidy, attempted to adopt a broader definition of culture. This allowed organizations that previously didn't meet the criteria to receive funding this year. A municipality employee provided an example of such an organization, which is detailed in the sidebar.

So, the cultural department at the municipality is trying to create more room for interdisciplinarity, but it still feels like a

### Example Vocal Statements

*"So, we have now made that much freer as well because there were a number of organizations like Vocal Statements. That's an organization that works in MBOs and VMBOs through culture and singing in choirs, doing a sort of emancipation programs. And because that touched on welfare and education, they always just fell outside the rules of the cultuurnota. We said, culture is their core. There is also a real artistic team that decides how that... It's not just, we sing songs for fun. It really has a purpose and a line and a certain depth. So now they could apply, scored super well, and are also getting funding. On the one hand, it's really nice because there is now room for that cross-domain work. On the other hand, I get criticism from the field, like, there are nine new organizations that overlap with other domains, so to speak. And they're all nibbling away at our culture funds. So, they do something with welfare, but welfare should also pay for that. And now there are all these organizations that are half welfare, just eating up our culture funds. So again, you're constantly in that dilemma. Because you don't want to put a fence around culture, but you also don't want to give the impression that... half of the culture funds are for welfare work. To put it very prestigiously" (PM-2).*

constant dilemma. Each department at the municipality guards its own budget closely, and no one is allowed to dip into it. Sharing isn't really an option, which makes sense given the budget shortages, but ultimately, cross-departmental budgets and greater collaboration could actually save money. A interviewee supported this statement with an illustration:

*"I recently heard a great example related to the Council for Culture, which advocates for collaboration. There's a dance company and a theater company from the far north, from Groningen, who decided they wanted to merge. However, if they merged, they would become an organization that couldn't apply for funding from the Council for Culture because it didn't fit into the Council's categories. So, they decided to apply for funding separately. As a result, they ended up receiving more funding than they would have if they had merged."* (PZ-4).

The case of the dance and theater company in Groningen demonstrates the bureaucratic obstacles to interdisciplinary collaboration. When these companies attempted to merge and seek funding together, they found themselves excluded from funding eligibility due to strict categorizations within the funding bodies. The result being that money could have been used better for other cultural initiatives. Thus, even when there is willingness to collaborate, the absence of overlapping budgets and the bureaucratic demands of different sectors can hinder the realization of joint initiatives.

Another ZIMIHC employee noticed that civil servants are very protective of their own budgets, and collaboration becomes risky because it might mean having less left for themselves:

*"But each department still has to apply for funding from its own municipal budget, and only then can we connect them. So, yes, the cross-domain approach, or like in welfare, I think, is also present, but with culture, there's no welfare aspect. Even though they see that the arts are very valuable for contributing to welfare, we can't draw from that fund. So, yes, I think the barriers are still too high, and each official is also a bit afraid that if they give something away, they might lose their own control"* (PZ-3).

But it also works the other way around—if the cultural department recognizes the importance of other disciplines. What certainly doesn't help is the minimal interaction between different departments within the municipality. For example, during my time at the city office, I noticed that the cultural department was situated right next to the sports department, yet I never observed any communication between them. This doesn't mean it never happens, but it's something I personally did not witness (fieldnotes, author). This topic is explored further in chapter 6. Cultural commons also struggle to collaborate with other sectors in the field for similar reasons. Namely because in the cultural sector, the cultural commons often find themselves having to defend their role within the

broader cultural sector, asserting the value of their work as culture, even without the need for artistic judgment. For example, when a cultural commons group wants to work with a sports group, they face different requirements set by the municipality and have different points of contact at the municipality. This creates confusion and disrupts the collaboration. Moreover, the importance of culture is often undervalued in the sports sector, further complicating efforts to work together.

To conclude, the barriers to fostering interdisciplinary collaboration—whether within municipal departments or between various sectors—pose substantial challenges. These obstacles not only stifle the development and expansion of cultural commons but also complicate and limit their potential for meaningful cooperation with the municipality. The lack of cross-departmental and cross-sectoral synergy ultimately hinders both the effectiveness of the cultural commons and the municipality's ability to support and engage with these community-driven initiatives. As a result, opportunities for creative and holistic solutions are often missed, leaving cultural commons at a disadvantage in their collaborative efforts. Thus to foster meaningful interdisciplinary collaboration, there needs to be a concerted effort to break down 'walls' and create more flexible, cross-departmental funding mechanisms. This would enable municipalities to support projects that address multiple community needs simultaneously, such as those combining culture with health, education, or social services. Without such structural changes, the aspiration for interdisciplinary collaboration will remain largely unfulfilled, and the full potential of cultural initiatives to contribute to broader societal goals will continue to be constrained.

#### **4.1.6. Conclusion current situation**

The current collaboration between the municipality and cultural commons is complex and faces several challenges. Applying Ansell and Gash's (2007) collaborative governance model reveals that trust between the two parties has diminished due to reduced interpersonal contact and transparency. While the municipality aims to adopt a more horizontal approach, cultural commons often still encounter an "ivory tower" mentality, reflecting a persistent power imbalance. The relationship is further influenced by the municipality's control over resources, which creates both opportunities and challenges for collaboration.

Key incentives for participation include efficient cost management, policy development, and the pursuit of an ecosystem approach. However, constraints exist as well, such as bureaucratic complexity, resource limitations, and sociopolitical differences and policy misalignment. Additionally, the difficulty of achieving interdisciplinary collaboration—both within the municipality and across sectors—further hinder the growth of the cultural commons but also the collaboration with the

municipality. The analysis of the current situation highlights the need for a deeper understanding of the collaborative process and tensions that have to be overcome to improve the collaboration between the cultural commons and the municipality.

## 4.2. Tensions in the collaborative process

In this second section, the tensions in the collaborative process between the cultural commons and the municipality are examined. Collaboration between cultural commons and municipalities are fraught with tensions, stemming from the inherent contradictions in their operational logics. As highlighted by an interviewee:

*"Enclosed by capitalist market principles or policy principles. Well, that's where your area of tension lies, because you're with the municipality. And they also benefit from enclosure. So municipalities or policymakers benefit from things being organized. And even though they want it to be accessible to everyone, the paradox is that it ends up being closed off. Because you can't do that thing anymore. People can no longer decide for themselves" (PE-1).*

So, the rigid structures of policy and market principles often conflict with the fluid, community-driven nature of commons, creating a challenging dynamic for collaboration. Indeed, *"Commons are inherently complicated for a government" (PZ-2)*, highlighting the complexity of integrating bottom-up cultural initiatives within formal governmental frameworks. This tension is further exacerbated by the contrasting nature of bureaucratic systems: *"The system is rigid and the other is fluid. And they don't mesh well together" (PZ-2)*. These fundamental differences underscore the challenges in fostering an effective collaboration between municipalities and cultural commons.

To analyze these tensions in a structured and scientifically sound manner, the findings are framed within Ansell and Gash's (2007) collaborative governance model. This includes trust-building, commitment to the process, shared understanding, intermediate outcomes and face-to-face dialogue. For each point in the model, distinctions are made between the cultural commons' perspective and the policy perspective, addressing the first two empirical sub-questions concerning the municipality's policy logic and the operational principles of a commons initiative. The perspectives of Helleman et al. (2019) on local governance were also utilized to answer these two sub-questions (see Figure 1). Moreover, a critical perspective has consistently been applied to explore how tensions in the collaborative process might be bridged, focusing on how the differing logics can be aligned more closely.

### 4.2.1. Trust-building

To begin, trust-building is a central principle in the collaborative governance framework proposed by Ansell and Gash (2007). It serves as the foundation for successful collaboration, particularly in complex relationships like those between cultural commons and municipalities. In the previous section on the current situation, the initial trust levels among the stakeholders were examined. It became clear that trust is crucial, as it fosters open communication, mutual respect, and incentives for participation. These elements are essential for bridging diverse logics and achieving a successful collaboration. The following analysis explores how the contrasting logics of the cultural commons and the municipality, as outlined in the theoretical framework, contribute to tensions in trust-building within the collaborative process.

#### Cultural commons perspective

From the perspective of the cultural commons, the entire collaboration should be more trust-based. The current processes, particularly those related to accessing resources, are seen as overly formal and controlling, leading to a desire for a more flexible and trust-oriented approach. As one participant noted:

*"The accessibility of resources is crucial. Currently, the entire process is highly formal, so it could definitely be less formal and more based on trust" (PE-2).*

This formal rigidity creates tension within the sector, fostering anxiety and a noticeable lack of open communication. A ZIMIHC employee described how the sector has been on edge in recent months, uncertain about whether they would receive subsidies. The participant depicted this as a tangible tension, with minimal opportunities for open dialogue and a lack of personal contact. Both ZIMIHC and the cultural commons view this as detrimental to building trust. This aligns with the cultural commons' preference for informality and allowing space for emotional engagement in the process (Helleman, et al. 2019).

Another area where the municipality falls short, according to the cultural commons, is in encouraging and allowing space for development. Cultural commons initiatives emphasize the importance of self-directed growth, where external support acts as a facilitator rather than a controller. *"We also strive to encourage groups to set their own growth and development paths. And we guide them in that process" (PZ-3).* This approach begins with empowering the community: *"It actually begins very much with those commoning methods of, okay, hey, you're in charge, and we can facilitate you" (PZ-3).* In

contrast, the municipality is perceived to operate in a more stern and top-down manner: *"At the municipality, they think in a funnel. Absolutely"* (PZ-2).

From the cultural commons' perspective, the municipality provides insufficient room for development and flexibility. Facilitating growth through empowerment is considered crucial for building trust. According to Ergeneli et al. (2007), there is a significant relationship between cognition-based trust and overall psychological empowerment. Psychological empowerment involves feeling in control of one's own work and being able to influence outcomes. The findings from my study reflect this, as the cultural commons express a desire for self-directed growth. This includes aspects such as self-efficacy, autonomy, and a sense of impact, which they seek from the municipality as a sign of trust and recognition of their value. Ergeneli et al. (2007) support this view, noting that cognition-based trust stems from evaluations of competence, reliability, and integrity. . . As was explained in the theoretical framework, following Lijster (2012), autonomy is a key logic for many cultural commons. This is clearly reflected in the paragraph above.

### **Policy perspective**

On the other hand, municipalities operate within a framework that necessitates formal relationships. *"It remains a formal relationship because there is often so much money involved"* (PM-1).

Policymakers acknowledge that building trust is important, but there is a need to maintain role clarity and enforce certain boundaries and consequences: *"You can build a trusting relationship, but you always have to be aware of your role in the party, the organization, and your role"* (PM-1). This is a clear example of where the municipality's bureaucratic logic becomes apparent.

Another major element is the episodic nature of monitoring and evaluation, which undermines continuous trust-building. *"What people struggle with a lot is that interim monitoring is not considered in your assessment for the next period"* (PM-2). This approach reduces interactions to momentary checks rather than ongoing relationships, which can strain trust.

Moreover, as mentioned before there is a noticeable gap between policymakers and the field, which hinders trust-building. *"I have to say that I don't know more than half of the institutions at all"* (PM-3). Effective trust-building requires personal connections and a sense of being seen and understood (Vangen & Huxham, 2003).

The statement from the municipality employee suggests that this isn't happening yet, as the employee is not even aware of the existence of many institutions. The municipality's focus on control and compliance, particularly with subsidies, contributes to a distant relationship.

*"Because, with subsidies, the advantage is always that if a party we give money to does not execute the plan according to the agreements or does not want to provide accountability, so does not want to give insight into the accounting to explain where the money has gone, then we can always reclaim it"* (PM-4).

This control mechanism, while safeguarding municipal interests, can restrict the trust and flexibility essential for effective collaboration, as outlined by Ansell and Gash (2007). However, the formal structures, episodic monitoring, and role clarity do serve a purpose, as they align with the democratic values we strive to uphold. Additionally, the cultural commons can also benefit from ordered authority, which helps moderate environmental uncertainties, ensuring the cultural commons can do what they do. This stance is supported by Stazyk and Goerdel (2010) in their study on the benefits of bureaucracy.

The tension between cultural commons initiatives and municipalities in trust-building arises from their different operational logics. Cultural commons seek a more fluid, trust-based relationship, while municipalities are bound by formal structures and control mechanisms. Bridging this gap requires a balance of personal, informal interactions and a flexible approach that acknowledges and respects democratic values.

#### **4.2.2. Commitment to the process**

Secondly, tension between cultural commons and policymakers can arise from differing commitments to the process. This tension manifests in various aspects connected to a collaborative process named by Ansell and Gash (2007). This includes mutual recognition of interdependence, shared ownership of the process, and openness to exploring mutual gains.

##### **Cultural commons perspective**

Cultural commons are deeply rooted in a commitment to process and mutual engagement. They prioritize listening and dialogue to foster genuine understanding and collaboration. As one interviewee noted, *"You have to listen first. Absorb it. Yes, first dialogue!"* (PZ-2). The cultural commons' approach emphasizes the importance of a flexible process where ownership is shared among everyone participating. A respondent also explained the view of cultural commons on the mutual recognition of interdependence.

*"You legitimize yourself to each other in an equal manner, from different experiences and perspectives. We strongly believe in that. And what comes with it is that you don't know the outcome"* (PE-1).

For the cultural commons, the collaborative process is successful when it remains open and adaptable, allowing for continuous input and inclusion. This openness extends to the possibility of failure, seen as an integral part of experimentation and learning. Following the second perspective of Helleman et al. (2019), the collaborative process should be characterized by spontaneity, unpredictability, and uncertainty. And also a cyclical and self-renewing process is named by Helleman et al. (2019) as part of this second perspective, which aligns with the operational logics the cultural commons. A participant described the operational approach regarding the organic process of the cultural commons as follows:

*"The project can also fail. We think that's fine. It is new, and it leaves some things unclear for us. We want to avoid becoming an institution. That's always dangerous. So, always go along with the experiment"* (PZ-1).

Another crucial element of commitment to the process is shared ownership. As previously mentioned in the assessment of the current situation, this sense of shared ownership was notably more present in the past. In earlier collaborations, ZIMIHC and other cultural organizations were actively involved in reviewing and shaping cultural policies then they are now. An example of cultural policy document is the *cultuurnota 'Cultuur kleurt de stad'*. A participant referred to this document when explaining the change:

*"Four years ago, we were allowed to read and think along with the cultuurnota. That was really great"* (PZ-2). However, this shared ownership has diminished over time, leading to a sense of loss and frustration among cultural initiatives in the field. *"At 'Cultuur kleurt de stad,' we as umbrella organizations were all very involved. Much more than now. I mean, looking at it, there hasn't been a gain in this latest cultuurnota in terms of field involvement"* (PZ-2).

Despite the reduced sense of shared ownership, from the cultural commons viewpoint, organizations like ZIMIHC continue to be open to exploring mutual benefits and sharing their expertise. This openness was evident during a visit to ZIMIHC with a municipal policy advisor. The municipality employee was grappling with how to articulate and address a challenging situation in the cultural sector. The ZIMIHC team immediately offered their support, demonstrating a genuine willingness to collaborate and seek mutual gains (fieldnotes, author). One interviewee described the situation as follows:

*"We have a lot of expertise and creativity in this area, creativity being an abstract expertise that can be very useful in processes. And yes, that is not being used enough"* (PZ-2). Commons also emphasize their willingness to inspire and assist policymakers, providing insights into the value of culture and its



application in community settings. *"We help you by explaining the value of culture and how you could apply it around amateur art"* (PZ-3).

Openness to exploring mutual gains is the third element Ansell and Gash (2007) identify as crucial to commitment in their collaborative governance model. This idea resonates with the logics of cultural commons, where the concept of 'mutual' is inherently tied to the very essence of what is 'common'. As Lijster (2012) suggests, without commons—such as shared knowledge and culture—there would be no common ground to unite citizens. This perspective underscores the importance of fostering collaborative processes where mutual benefits are actively pursued, ensuring that the 'common' in cultural commons truly serves all the stakeholders involved.

### **Policy perspective**

Then again, policymakers are often constrained by systems that limit their ability to engage in a flexible, open-ended process with other stakeholders. Despite these challenges, there is an understanding that shared ownership of the process can build trust and improve outcomes. As a municipality employee stated:

*"Participation sessions are necessary when making policy. You start by collecting what lives in the city, what needs improvement, what can be different"* (PM-4).

The importance of involving the (cultural) commons in a collaborative process was further emphasized by the municipality through two mandatory training sessions offered to many employees (fieldnotes, author). However, these participation sessions frequently fail to create a genuine sense of shared ownership. Participation typically occurs at the start or end of a process, leaving little room for meaningful engagement or shared decision-making. Even the term 'participation' suggests an imbalance, where one party is merely participating while the other facilitates, rather than collaborating as equals. Participatory efforts are often seen as symbolic gestures rather than sincere engagements.

*"The danger of what happens with participation now is that it becomes a tick-box exercise. Participation should not be just a checkbox"* (PM-3).

Although a municipal employee acknowledges this, it simultaneously went 'wrong' with the recent cultural policy tender, where the following occurred:

*"We sent the cultural policy to all umbrella chairmen a month in advance for their information<sup>4</sup>. If there's something in it that shocks the sector, let us know" (PM-2).*

This is too shallow because input is asked only at the end of a process. For instance, crafting a policy document like the *cultuurnota* takes months, so providing an opportunity for input in the final month is more symbolic than indicative of actual shared ownership. Field observations revealed that policymakers often struggle with sharing ownership of a process due to fears of losing control. This was evident in routine tasks, where employees adhered strictly to their individual roles with little collaboration or assistance (fieldnotes, author). A topic that was extensively discussed in section 4.1.5. on interdisciplinary collaboration. As a result, the collaborative process with the cultural commons remains narrow, limited to a few formal, predetermined moments, and very structured. As Helleman et al. (2019) describe in the more traditional perspective on local governance, the emphasis is on a linear process with policymakers strictly adhering to a procedural blueprint.

Nevertheless, there is a recognition with the municipality that the current approach may not effectively engage cultural commons or allow for a genuine shared collaborative process. A respondent noted:

*"You might wonder if this is the right structure, as there is not much room for an intermediate step" (PM-2).*

Additionally, efforts to include broader participation, such as organizing brainstorming sessions and seeking feedback on the cultural policy, do exist. A policy maker gave an example of this:

*"For the new cultural housing implementation program, we organized a brainstorming evening and invited a wide range of people, including those not usually connected to our network" (PM-1).*

During the fieldwork, it was also evident that there was a willingness among policymakers to adopt a more engaged approach. An example of where this became clear was the reevaluation of the participation program '*Samen Stad Maken*'. In the new version of the policy it stated that Utrecht residents should gain more ownership in the future (fieldnotes, author). The plan was illustrated through a compass, which will help municipal employees in determining whether and how to collaborate with residents. The compass outlines five levels of collaboration, ranging from giving

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<sup>4</sup> Umbrella chairman represent their specific cultural field in overarching cultural organizations meetings.

residents full control to providing them with only a limited role in decision-making (*Herijking Samen Stad Maken: Geen Utrecht Zonder U, 2024*).



Figure 4: Participation compass of the Municipality of Utrecht (*Herijking Samen Stad Maken: Geen Utrecht Zonder U, 2024, dia 12*).

"Local democracy should be more than just going to the polls once every four years. It's not easy; there will always be conflicting interests, and making choices will remain difficult. Having the courage to engage in conversation and truly listen to one another is something that not only the municipality needs to work on. It's something that concerns all residents of Utrecht," says Deputy Mayor Eva Oosters (*Gemeente Utrecht Komt Met Een Participatiekompas Om Vertrouwen Van Bewoners Te Winnen, 2024*).

As alderman Oosters points out, having the courage to engage in meaningful conversations and genuinely listen to each other is a responsibility that extends beyond the municipality. It is a concern for all Utrecht residents, including the cultural commons. A critical perspective on the cultural commons can also emerge from this. The cultural commons are groups that often stay on the periphery, coming into focus primarily when they require something from the municipality. This dynamic complicates the municipality's ability to fully engage in exploring mutual gains. A municipal employee also reflected this sentiment in an interview:

*"I don't know if you can include those commons in this. They are perhaps an elusive group"* (PM-3).

To achieve genuine commitment to the process, the cultural commons also need to take more initiative themselves. Analyzing the results surrounding the topic of commitment to the process it is

clear that it is a two-way street. The cultural commons need to further increase their efforts in exploring mutual gains, while the municipality must recognize the interdependence of the cultural commons and more effectively share ownership of the collaborative process. These initial actions can help address the current tensions related to commitment to the process, which stem from the institutional logics of the stakeholders influencing the collaboration.

### 4.2.3. Shared understanding

The tensions between municipalities and cultural commons within a collaborative process also have to do with the lack of shared understanding regarding objectives and problem definitions. These gaps underscore the difficulties in aligning administrative goals with bottom-up cultural initiatives. Ansell and Gash (2007) identify three key aspects of shared understanding: a clear mission, a common definition of the problem, and the identification of shared values. On top of that, a noteworthy theme emerged during the interviews, namely the differing perceptions of culture in the sector. Cultural commons and policymakers often define culture in contrasting ways making it a relevant topic to discuss at this point.

#### **Cultural commons perspective**

A key goal of cultural commons is to focus on local needs and niche interests. This aim immediately reveals a tension in identifying shared values, as the cultural commons do not desire to serve an entire city but concentrate on a specific area. The underlying reason is that the emphasis of the cultural commons is on sensitivity and local relevance rather than on complete objectivity and inclusivity. As one participant described:

*"In commons, it's about the feeling and it doesn't have to be completely objective or fully inclusive"*  
(PE-1).

Whilst municipalities typically try to operate in a more objective and inclusive manner, this contrasts with the principles of cultural commons. This divergence that arises between the municipality and the cultural commons asks for a critical perspective.

To elaborate on this, an example illustrating how ZIMIHC serves a very specific niche will be discussed. This example is the special edition of "Buurten over Grenzen" — "Cirkel om de Haard," which celebrates Yalda Night, the longest night of the year (Beens, 2023). The "Cirkel om de Haard" event was led by Avan Omar and Ali Authman and is generally a collaboration between a group of friends and the Kurdish community. As a result, the event primarily attracts members of the Kurdish community, with Dutch participants being scarce. A participant talked about this event:

*"It's called 'Buurtovergrenzen.' And it's funny because you would think, 'Hey, that's very diverse.'" And it is. But it's also very monocultural. [...] The Kurdish group, which is called "Cirkels onder de Haard," mostly attracts Kurds. And that's good because then they come and they can use our stage. But I would also like it if it eventually mixed more. But that's just one of the thoughts I have. And do they want that? Why, actually? These are all questions you keep asking. Actually, it's just as non-diverse because it only brings in Kurds" (PZ-1).*

While the focus on such a niche can foster cultural engagement and provide meaningful experiences for specific groups, it has potential drawbacks, as the participant described. To start, by concentrating exclusively on a niche, there is a risk of excluding other community members. This narrow focus can limit the diversity of the audience and reduce the overall reach and impact of the cultural common. Additionally, the lack of emphasis on inclusivity and objectivity might result in missed opportunities to engage with a broader spectrum of the community, potentially reinforcing existing divides rather than bridging them. But these potential drawbacks are primarily viewed as issues by the municipality, as they align with a bureaucratic logic rather than the logic of cultural commons. Cultural commons are more concerned with the enjoyment in the moment, which is can be labeled as shortsighted, rather than with reach and the extent of their influence. This is illustrated by a cultural common describing their overall goal:

*"Just singing. For the pleasure of it, that's what we do. We sing familiar songs, old and new. And often with a CD for accompaniment" and "Yes, and we want to sing, but also just for the enjoyment, you know. We drink tea together as well" (PC-2).*

This perspective of the cultural commons does not align with the larger municipal policy goals. Coupled with the fact that a common problem definition related to the concept of shared understanding, as defined by Ansell and Gash (2007), is hard to find when considering the opinions on potential setbacks. This highlights yet another tension in the collaborative process between the municipality and the cultural commons. However, although we identify a gap in the institutional logics of the cultural commons and the municipality, in practice, the difference is less pronounced. The cultural commons' focus on practices that resonate with their communities and often serving marginalized or underrepresented groups aligns with the municipality's principle of investing unequally for equal opportunities (Gemeente Utrecht, n.d.). The common goal being that the inequality of opportunities between groups in the city should be reduced.

Another aspect of shared understanding from the cultural commons' perspective is their clear mission to stay closely aligned with local needs. While the municipality may have a similar mission, its

bureaucratic logic often hinders its ability to achieve this. In contrast, cultural commons demonstrate considerable adaptability in their programming, effectively responding to the specific needs and preferences of their communities. They frequently gather feedback from local residents and adapt their activities accordingly, emphasizing a more dynamic approach to community engagement (fieldnotes, author). The benefit of this approach is that it allows them to be deeply embedded in their neighborhoods being able to activate groups of people the municipality cannot reach:

*“So that might also be an answer to your question of why we achieve that. Actually, it’s because we do everything project-based” (PZ-1).*

Cultural commons often avoid formal structures to focus on meeting practical and immediate community needs, making them appealing to various groups in the city. The project-based approach mentioned by the participant is one of the methods through which this is achieved. This fits the cultural commons logics of being flexible and having a solution- and demand-oriented focus, an assertion that is also reflected in the theoretical framework of this research. Namely where Helleman et al. (2019) consider the two different perspectives on local governance. The traditional perspective, which emphasizes formal structures, can sometimes exacerbate social inequality. In contrast, the second perspective promotes innovative and improved methods aimed at fostering a more equitable society. This latter approach resonates with the cultural commons' focus on meeting practical and immediate community needs. By engaging with groups that the municipality does not reach, cultural commons play a key role in enhancing social equality across Utrecht’s neighborhoods.

Lastly, an important aspect of shared understanding from the perspective of cultural commons is the identification of shared values. An example to elaborate on this further is the differing perceptions of culture. The cultural commons embrace a broad understanding of culture and engage in facilitating roles to support community-driven projects. This includes diverse cultural expressions such as podcasting, radio, and film, reflecting a wide interpretation of cultural activities. As a result, the cultural commons often misalign with the established criteria for artistic quality set by the cultural sector, the municipality, and the market. A participant explains:

*“They are much broader than just the narrow concept of culture that provinces and municipalities often use. They say it’s about the arts, which is too narrow for me. Culture encompasses everything we share, see, and give meaning to. So, it’s also about shaking hands, or sharing a meal... You see that these neighborhood cultural centers adopt a much broader understanding of culture than just being arts institutions. That’s why they are sometimes difficult to subsidize. They are then judged on*

*artistic quality, but what does that mean for local neighborhoods? It's often considered just amateur art" (PE-1).*

### **Policy perspective**

The municipality acknowledges that cultural commons frequently fall short of meeting the established criteria for artistic quality set by policymakers. To address this, they have made efforts to consider these factors in the latest review of funding applications (fieldnotes, author). A municipal employee described this situation as a 'devilish dilemma' because artistic quality is very flexible concept:

*"It's a devilish dilemma. Because what we've done now is, if you read the cultural policy document, you'll see a section on artistic quality. And we say that artistic quality is not just viewed in the classical sense of the word, namely craftsmanship, expressiveness, and originality. These are somewhat old-fashioned values of artistic quality. But artistic quality really lies in how it is received by the audience. Artistic quality is subjective. It's a concept that works in two directions. So not just the sending, but also the receiving gives it meaning. Thus, we've actually said that culture is very broad. And artistic quality is also very broad. We've also said that there is no fence around culture. Culture is precisely the strength, and that is also very much in the domain of transcending" (PM-2).*

Thus, municipal policy in the past often confined culture to traditional notions of arts and aesthetics, overlooking the broader, more integrative aspects of culture, such as communal activities and everyday interactions. Now, however, they are shifting to a more expansive definition of culture, which provides critical support for cultural policy and the cultural sector. This broader perspective offers legitimacy by framing culture as a central component of meaning and value within societal systems. On the other hand, with the expanded understanding of artistic quality, it has become more challenging to evaluate the merit of organizations applying for funding. This makes the assessment process more complex. The same municipal employee goes on to explain how they currently approach this challenge:

*But how do we determine what falls within that cultural policy document? We said, the core of your organization must be culture. So if you are a welfare organization that provides craft activities to make people happy, then welfare is your core and culture is a means. If you are an organization like 'Appeltaartconcerten', where culture is the core and you bring people together through culture, making it accessible and ensuring that less privileged people can easily attend, then culture is the core of that" (PM-2).*

Additionally, culture is often undermined by market forces and policy frameworks that prioritize economic outcomes over social and cultural benefits. Funding mechanisms and subsidy criteria typically reflect these priorities, which can disregard non-commercial cultural activities essential for community cohesion and identity. For example, the focus on market-oriented talent development in cultural policies may not resonate with community groups primarily interested in participatory activities rather than commercial success. One respondent critiqued this disconnect:

*"Even that cultural participation, after the past decades, has been very much linked to talent development. Industrial talent development. That is a very neoliberal idea. And that you can be marketed. So you start as an amateur in the neighborhood, and then there's a step up at a neighborhood culture house, and then you go to Mojo, and then you go, well, then you go to a business model, it's all market models. But at that neighborhood culture, there are just people in choirs who are not at all focused on their career; they don't care at all; they are just singing because they want to sing" (PE-1).*

Thus, the differing perceptions of culture, and what needs to be achieved by it, between cultural commons and the municipality underscore the need for a more inclusive understanding of culture in policy. Ansell and Gash (2007) call this the importance of the identification of shared values for the collaborative process to be fruitful. Acknowledging and valuing the broader cultural practices that contribute to community well-being could foster a more equitable and supportive environment for all cultural initiatives, allowing culture's full potential to enrich society. This is supported by Gielen (2023) who is referred to in the theoretical framework.

Another aspect Ansell and Gash (2007) highlight as part of the shared understanding a common problem definition and a clear mission. As described above the cultural commons, aligning with their institutional logics, are focused on niches in the community. Municipalities, on the other hand, are tasked with addressing the needs of the entire city and ensuring inclusivity across diverse target-groups. This often involves a more structured and formal approach to policymaking and inclusive resource allocation. A participant described it as following:

*"Municipalities must balance political considerations, budget constraints, and the need to cater to a broad audience, which can result in a narrower focus on specific policy goals and compliance with political directives" (PM-1).*

Another participant stated:



*“You have a political agenda and policies that are driven by political needs. It’s not about simply asking what everyone wants” (PM-3).*

We can conclude from these statements that the municipal perspective is characterized by a focus on overarching goals and the implementation of policies that reflect political priorities. This approach often involves bureaucracy and can be perceived as less responsive to the immediate and specific needs of local communities. At the same time, it's not just about the specific needs of one community, but also those of other residents, and ensuring that resources are distributed fairly. This is another principle that commons seem to take less into account:

*“The cultural sector’s understanding is often narrow and revolves around funding and not political considerations” (PM-1).*

Thus, while municipalities strive to support local initiatives through funding mechanisms, they may not always have the time or resources to engage deeply with non-subsidized or smaller organizations, potentially leading to a disconnect between policy and practice. Moreover, and as stated before, municipal policy and funding is frequently tied to broader political and financial objectives. The municipality always has to take the political considerations into account. This reflects a top-down approach, as outlined by Helleman et al. (2019) in their traditional perspective on local governance. The challenge for municipalities lies in balancing their broad mandate with the need for detailed understanding of local contexts. As one participant highlighted:

*“There is often a lack of awareness about what is happening on the ground. It’s crucial to step out of our bubble and engage directly with the communities affected by our policies” (PM-1).*

This gap in understanding can result in policies that do not fully address or resonate with local needs, creating tension in the shared understanding between municipal goals and the commons. Both the cultural commons and the municipality need to take measures to close the gap between their differing logics to achieve a better shared understanding, and ultimately a thriving collaboration.

#### **4.2.4. Intermediate outcomes**

The fourth element in Ansell and Gash's (2007) model of collaborative governance is the concept of intermediate outcomes, which will be analyzed in this section. Right off the bat, analyzing the intermediate outcomes in the collaboration between municipal policies and cultural commons reveals tensions. Municipalities often focus on measurable results, a stark contrast to the flexible, process-oriented nature of cultural commons. This misalignment can create friction, as seen in

discussions about small wins, strategic plans, and joint fact-finding. As one participant noted aptly when talking about cultural commons' logics:

*"The municipality wants to think in terms of goals and results, but that approach doesn't fit well with this" (PZ-4).*

### **Cultural commons perspective**

The strength of the cultural commons lies in their ability to function outside the traditional frameworks of government regulation and formal outcomes. These cultural initiatives are often not bound by the strict requirements of the government and can evolve without the pressure to meet specific numbers or goals. This lack of regulation is a great advantage of cultural commons, as it allows them to create and experience art and culture without focusing on financial results or formal objectives. This aligns precisely with the logic of the cultural commons. An example to further illustrate is a choir that, as noted by a participant, *"finds it important to keep things enjoyable and to continue doing fun things"* (PC-1). The choir focuses on the joy of making music and sharing their performances without commercial intentions. *"Everyone is welcome, even if someone doesn't sing perfectly,"* adds another participant (PC-2). Such cultural initiatives focus on community building, strengthening social relations, and personal satisfaction, which is difficult to capture in measurable terms. Likewise, the cultural commons interviewed for this research shared that their primary goal is to sing together and enjoy each other's company in the community center. Their focus isn't on the quality of their performance but rather on the sense of community they create through singing.

Within the cultural commons, the focus is primarily on the intermediate outcomes within the cyclical commoning process. This is evident from the emphasis placed on personal development rather than the pursuit of specific strategic goals. The priority is on fostering a supportive and learning environment, guided by self-imposed criteria. As one participant explains:

*"There is a wonderful inclusive community where culture serves as a binding agent, and where it's not about money, but about expertise, networking, and giving each other opportunities" (PE-2).*

The focus is on empowering community members to chart their own paths of growth and development through culture. This illustrates an ongoing process, which cannot be measured by a final endpoint, only by small wins. However, this presents challenges when it comes to justifying government support or even tracking progress over time in numbers. The formal processes for applying and accounting for subsidies can be daunting, often consuming a lot of time and resources. As described earlier (see section 4.1.4.), the bureaucratic demands are sometimes viewed as

hindering the freedom and creativity that cultural commons aim to foster. And the cultural commons do not deny the importance of accountability requirements and transparency, there is just a call for a more trust-based approach to accountability. An approach that emphasizes open dialogue and project observation over rigid administrative outcomes. As a ZIMIHC employee describes:

*"Seeing is believing. That's what I often and increasingly find myself thinking. You can tell your story a hundred times, and you can even tell it in a very enthusiastic way, but being there, experiencing it firsthand, is the best. For example, when we started, our venues, like the Stefanuszaal, are really amazing places for the entire cultural sector. But they don't know that, so they say, "Yeah, but you're just in a community center." Well, come and take a look sometime. And when they finally come to see it, only then do they say, "Okay, this is different" (PZ-1).*

This story highlights the importance of direct contact, visiting, and experiencing firsthand for a successful joint fact-finding process, which Ansell and Gash identify as crucial for effective collaboration. This includes exploring more narrative forms of evaluation, where artists and project leaders reflect on their achievements, which can be more meaningful than simple numerical data. Here, we again see the two perspectives described by Helleman et al. (2019). The first, traditional perspective relies on statistics and models for accountability, while the second, cultural commons perspective places greater value on imagery and narratives to justify actions. To conclude, from the cultural commons' viewpoint, there is hope for a shift towards more narrative and reflective evaluations. They argue that this method would better capture the intermediate outcomes of their projects. Such evaluations could also engage politicians and city officials more effectively by highlighting the broader effects of cultural initiatives in a more compelling way than mere statistics.

### **Policy perspective**

In contrast, from the municipality's perspective, it is crucial to emphasize outputs and measurable results rather than focusing on the process and journey towards achieving outcomes, as highlighted from the cultural commons' viewpoint. According to the bureaucratic logics there is a strong demand within policymaking for clear, quantifiable metrics. As one policymaker highlights, *"We need to have something measurable"* (PM-2). This issue also came up during the cultural participation team meetings. In one particular meeting, it was noted that evaluating the cultural coaches is challenging because the evaluation process requires quantitative data, while the cultural coaches primarily work in a qualitative manner (fieldnotes, author). So, *"You can't express it in hours, money, models, or linearity"* (PE-1).

This raises concerns about how to evaluate the effectiveness of cultural initiatives without completely sacrificing the objectivity central to bureaucratic processes. As described in the theoretical framework, within the system, processes are defined in terms of predetermined procedures, maintaining an impersonal and hierarchical nature to prevent bias (Kalberg, 2016). For instance, attaching scores to specific terms in a funding application could enhance objectivity. However, this approach might constrain the collaborative process and conflict with the artistic freedom the cultural commons desire. Moreover, even with objective measures, subjective tastes always remain open to debate. A municipal employee described the tensions this creates in the grant allocation process:

*“Those who are unhappy now say that it needs to be much more objective. But those who are satisfied appreciate finally being able to write a plan from their own perspective. So, again, this presents a dilemma. The sector has been fighting for years for more freedom. They want more, but if you give that freedom, you lose measurability. It’s easiest to just say, you get so many points for this, so many points for that, and so on” (PM-2).*

This quote suggests a need for a critical perspective on the cultural commons, which will be revisited in the discussion chapter. It also reveals that policymakers often find it easier to justify expenditures when results are more concrete and specific. For example: *“providing clear data on the number of associations reached or sessions conducted is preferable to more vague descriptions of impact” (PM-4)*. One of the reasons this is so much easier is that policymakers face legal and financial constraints that complicate the process. As, *“budgeting is often fixed and competitive, with specific funds allocated based on tenders and scores” (PM-2)*. The management of substantial public funds thus requires thorough governance and transparency. For example monitoring meetings with the cultural sector are planned to systematically review their annual reports and figures. Accountability for public funds is a fundamental responsibility for the municipality. As one participant notes:

*“It’s public money. We need to account for it to the council and the council to the city” (PM-1).*

This aim aligns seamlessly with the bureaucratic institutional logic outlined in the theoretical framework by Meyer et al. (2013). So, it’s about more than just precise administrative details; moreover it concerns the relationship to democratic principles. This is also explained by another policymaker:

*“You also need to do things properly. As a government, you are dealing with public money, and it must be spent appropriately. It must be accounted for. You can’t just do whatever you want. And that is quite complex. You do this based on what the politicians think, what the administrators think, and*

*how we implement it. Do you create an implementation program? Do you make your policy? You write visions. And all of this is just made up here, in this tower” (PM-3).*

This necessitates detailed reporting and transparency, which can be burdensome. Thus there is an ongoing struggle to balance the need for strict rules with the desire to offer flexibility. Policymakers sometimes find that their own regulations can be excessively stringent:

*“We impose a lot of rules on ourselves here at CZ for a grant application. So it can be easier, really”<sup>5</sup> (PM-3).*

Despite this I did notice that it was often suggested by policy maker themselves that it is not just about quantity but also about quality (fieldnotes, author). The aim is to find a balance where accountability and flexibility coexist, allowing the creative and community-focused aspects of cultural commons projects to thrive alongside necessary financial oversight. One of the participants elaborated on this extensively, summarizing it neatly:

*“You could also ask, “Hey, now that you’ve done this, what is your reflection on it?” That’s, of course, nicer than, “How many people did you reach? How many performances did you give? What did you create?” At the same time, you also have the need to be accountable, so there’s a tension there. But I think it’s an illusion to only focus on visitor numbers and presentation agreements, which are becoming less interesting” (PG-3).*

This perspective aligns with Bunnik's (2016) work, which focuses on assessing the impact of art and culture beyond merely fulfilling presentation quotas. Bunnik’s approach emphasizes evaluating the artistic, economic, and social values being realized. The author states that by embracing this broader perspective, policies can be created and assessed based on these three key values. This approach is unique in that it uses stories and images, making the evaluation process more narrative-driven. An approach aligning with the second perspective on local governance articulated by Helleman et al. (2019). The participant goes on to share her views on this more narrative form of evaluation:

*“I think this approach works even for politics because it engages politicians not with numbers, but with stories like, “Oh, this is what’s happening there.” So, I have hope that this shift will work. It’s definitely a change that’s happening now” (PM-3).*

To conclude, the cultural commons and the municipality should implement a joint fact-finding process, as outlined in Ansell and Gash's (2007) collaborative governance model. This approach

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<sup>5</sup> ‘CZ’ is an abbreviation used in Dutch to refer to the cultural department at the municipality of Utrecht.

involves all stakeholders working together to collect, analyze, and reach a consensus on what intermediate outcomes are relevant. Such a process is vital for building trust among participants, as it ensures that decisions are grounded in mutually accepted facts rather than conflicting interpretations or selectively chosen data. If both the cultural commons and the municipality commit themselves to this effort, tensions in the collaborative process related to intermediate outcomes can be effectively overcome.

#### **4.2.5. Face-to-face dialogue**

The last and fifth principle of the model of Ansell and Gash (2007) is face-to-face dialogue. A relationship between cultural commons and municipalities is often strained by differing views on the importance and feasibility of face-to-face dialogue. For commons, direct, personal interaction is fundamental, while municipalities frequently rely on formal, written communication to maintain objectivity and equality. This creates another area of tension in the collaborative process between the cultural commons and the municipality.

##### **Cultural commons perspective**

Cultural commons initiatives are inherently built on direct, and personal interactions. This face-to-face approach fosters a deep understanding of the community's needs and allows for practical, hands-on engagement. For example, the emphasis on face-to-face dialogue ensures that ZIMIHC remains closely connected to the community. Regular meetings with local groups help identify needs and address issues directly. A participant notes:

*"Once a quarter, we have meetings with such clubs. And then we simply ask, how are you doing? What are you working on? What problems are you facing? And what would you like?" (PZ-1).*

This direct and sincere engagement contrasts with the often detached and theoretical approach of policymakers. Cultural commons initiatives also play a vital role in fostering community cohesion, countering the prevalent individualism by bringing people together. A respondent describes this goal:

*"And also, indeed, yes, making neighborhoods or places nicer and more livable by bringing groups together instead of everyone staying behind their own doors" (PZ-3).*

This genuine community engagement the cultural commons themselves have with the field, the would also like to have with the municipality. One cultural common specifically mentioned, *"We have a point of contact at the community center who is always available to us" (PG-2).*

This face-to-face option for contact and physical accessibility is greatly appreciated. On top of this, the personal touch is crucial with cultural commons: *"If someone from the municipality wants to visit, they should join in the singing, but they are definitely welcome"* (PC-2). This indicates that a more proactive approach is preferred, contrasting with the often passive role the municipality currently plays in relation to the cultural commons. This passiveness is also felt in the field as a respondent stated:

*"If you come from the governance world, you don't understand the real world we live in. So, how much practical knowledge have you gained by talking with people instead of talking about people?"* (PE-2).

In the theoretical framework it is stated that this type of direct interaction enables stakeholders to engage more fully, address misunderstandings on the spot, and build stronger relationships—essential elements for successful collaboration (Bavelas, 2022).

### **Policy perspective**

For municipalities, maintaining face-to-face contact is challenging due to time constraints and the need to remain objective. Interaction is primarily limited to accountholders, with little direct contact with the broader field or informal groups. A municipality employee explains this:

*"From the municipality, there is little time for real face-to-face contact. Only account holders have contact with their accounts. Beyond that, there is little contact with the field or unsubsidized institutions or informal groups"* (PM-2).

Municipalities strive to treat everyone equally and maintain formal roles, which often means that communication is conducted in writing rather than through personal meetings. This is a direct manifestation of bureaucratic logic, as described in the theoretical framework by Freidson (2001). Additionally, personal meetings might give those with existing relationships with policymakers an advantage, leading to an uneven playing field. This municipality point of view was noted by an employee:

*"Looking back, those who already have a relationship have an advantage over those who do not"* (PM-2).

However, building sustainable relationships through face-to-face interactions is recognized as beneficial but is seen as impractical given current formal roles and limited resources. During a visit to ZIMIHC with a municipal policy advisor, this became evident. The policy advisor repeatedly

mentioned that while a less formal approach would have been preferable, it simply didn't feel feasible at the moment (fieldnotes, author). Despite these challenges, there are efforts to be approachable and maintain regular consultations with key stakeholders. For example:

*"The alderman is also really often present at many activities. There is simply a periodic consultation, with those umbrella chairmen" (PM-2).*

This represents progress toward aligning with the cultural commons perspective on fostering successful collaboration regarding the importance of face-to-face contact.

In conclusion, the principle of face-to-face dialogue, as outlined by Ansell and Gash (2007), is yet another challenging aspect of collaboration between cultural commons and municipalities. For cultural commons, direct personal interaction is foundational, fostering deep community connections and practical engagement. This approach contrasts with the municipalities' reliance on formal, written communication, driven by the need to maintain objectivity and equality.

#### **4.2.6. Conclusion tensions collaborative process**

To conclude, numerous tensions exist within the collaborative process between the municipality and the cultural commons. To navigate these tensions and foster a successful collaboration, it is crucial to critically assess the operational logics of both stakeholders, as these logics are integral components of institutional functioning. Understanding organizational behavior within a collaborative process requires situating it within an institutional context (Thornton et al., 2012). Figure 5 provides a visual representation of the findings. The table includes the five principles of collaboration. The two perspectives, those of the municipality and the cultural commons, are placed side by side. This provides a clear view, showing that substantial areas of tension exist in each aspect. The table will also be used as starting point for the next chapter: the discussion.



<b>COLLABORATIVE PROCES</b>	<b>COMMONING</b>	<b>MUNICIPALITY POLICIES</b>
<b>TRUST-BUILDING</b>	Self-determined growth Informal relations Fluid and trust-based contact	Formal structures Episodic monitoring Role clarity
<b>COMMITMENT TO PROCESS</b>	Open-ended Dynamic and creative Experimentation Sharing knowledge	Bound to a rigid system Strictly ordered Fixed moments of communication Reluctant to cede ownership
<b>SHARED UNDERSTANDING</b>	Area-specific Niche interests Close to local needs Broad definition of culture	Diverse target-group Inclusivity Political considerations Narrow definition of culture
<b>INTERMEDIATE OUTCOMES</b>	Strengthening social relations Having fun Joint fact-finding Learning	Numbers Calculable Control Metrics
<b>FACE-TO-FACE DIALOGUE</b>	Personal and direct interaction Engaging approach Listening and dialogue	Objectivity Formal and written communication Lack of time

Figure 5: Tensions in the collaborative process

## 5. Discussion

This chapter explores the implication and relevance of the research findings of my research. It begins by further analyzing the study's results, evaluating how they relate to the theoretical framework. Thus, how this study contributes to or is supported by existing theories.

The analysis of the current situation and the tensions between cultural commons and municipal policies in the previous chapter, underscore the challenges of reconciling autonomous, community-centered approaches with formal governmental structures and accountability requirements. Cultural commons emphasize fluid, trust-based relationships and local values, whereas municipalities often operate within rigid frameworks focused on transparency, objectivity, and formal control mechanisms. These findings show that the divergent logics— bottom-up for the cultural commons versus bureaucratic for the municipality— are at the heart of the tension in the collaborative process. As outlined in the theoretical framework, grasping institutional logics is essential for analyzing individual and organizational behavior within social and institutional contexts (Thornton et al., 2012). Consequently, the findings of my research explored the institutional logics of both the municipality and the cultural commons critically to understand the behavioral differences impacting their collaborative process. A critical epistemological position helped me to question the dominant structures, focusing not only on the logics of the municipality but also on those within the cultural commons. As demonstrated, this approach of questioning institutional logics is supported by theory, which ensures that my analysis of the tensions in the collaborative process is firmly grounded in theoretical concepts. This grounding enhances the trustworthiness of my study.

The fundamental differences identified through the institutional logics led to several points of friction in the collaborative process (section 4.2). These points of friction form the foundation for this discussion, guiding a deeper analysis:

### 5.1. Discussing the tensions in the collaborative process

#### *Trust-building focus versus formal relations*

The findings of my study highlight that the cultural commons seek personal, informal interactions that foster trust, while municipalities are bound by formal procedures. The municipality's formal approach to collaboration creates tension within the cultural field, including the cultural commons. This is particularly because a formal approach often comes with a lack of open communication, which can, in turn, foster anxiety. Achieving a balance between these operational logics requires both

personal engagement and adherence to necessary formalities. Concerning personal engagement, my findings highlight the need for gestures from the municipality that surpass formalities, reinforcing trust and collaboration. Moreover, the results of my research indicate that facilitating growth through empowerment is considered crucial for building trust. This is supported in the theoretical framework, as Gray (1994) states that the relational aspect is crucial in fostering and sustaining collaboration, with participants working closely together. On the other hand, the findings of my study also call for a critical perspective on the operating principles of the cultural commons. For example, the cultural commons may need to comply with essential formalities. Although these formalities can seem burdensome, they often fulfill bureaucratic functions connected to democracy principles. In recent cultural commons discourse, I haven't encountered this level of critical analysis regarding the logics of the cultural commons. The critical epistemology of my research adds value by offering relevant insights to the current body of literature on this subject.

#### *Process flexibility versus rigid systems*

In discussing the tension between process flexibility and rigid systems, it becomes clear from my findings that the cultural commons and the municipality face challenges regarding commitment to the process in their collaboration. The cultural commons emphasize open, adaptable processes with shared ownership, which often conflicts with the municipality's tendency to adhere to rigid systems and reluctance to give up control. My findings reveal that achieving a successful collaboration requires both parties to address this tension. Specifically, the cultural commons need to enhance their efforts in exploring mutual gains, while the municipality must acknowledge the interdependence of the cultural commons and more effectively share ownership of the process. These findings align with Kalberg's (2016) assertion that the inflexibility of municipal procedures impedes adaptation and flexibility in the commitment to the process.

My study also highlights another critical tension: the term 'participation' often implies an imbalance where one party is merely participating rather than engaging as an equal collaborator. Gielen (2023) supports this view by noting that participation in cultural contexts often reflects a top-down approach, which is in stark contrast to the bottom-up ethos of the cultural commons. My research contributes to this discussion by providing field examples that demonstrate how the cultural commons, which naturally emphasize shared goals and flexible processes, face increased difficulties due to the municipality's rigid approach. To overcome these challenges and foster a successful collaboration, it is essential for both stakeholders to adjust their operational logics.

#### *Local needs versus inclusivity*

The results of my study highlight that the cultural commons prioritize local needs and niche interests, embracing an adaptable and informal approach to community engagement. Their focus on meaningful local experiences and responsiveness to immediate community needs often contrasts sharply with the municipalities' structured and formal approach to policy-making. Municipalities must navigate broad political and budgetary constraints while striving for inclusivity across diverse populations, which can lead to a disconnect with the specific and immediate needs of local communities. Furthermore, the theoretical framework outlines that the cultural commons inspire innovative approaches for managing shared resources and fostering social resilience (Ostrom, 2000). Guided by principles such as autonomous self-governance, equality, and mutual solidarity, the cultural commons emphasize collaboration, trust, and nurturing care to enrich societal diversity and resilience through open access to cultural resources. However, this study reveals a discrepancy between theoretical ideals and practical implementation. Despite the inclusive nature of the cultural commons as described in the literature, the research indicates that such inclusivity was not fully realized within the Utrecht cultural commons. This gap suggests that theoretical concepts are not always effectively applied in practice.

#### *Broad versus narrow definition of culture*

As the findings of this research tell us understanding the tensions between cultural policy and the cultural commons requires examining the difference between broad and narrow definitions of culture. Within municipal policy, culture is frequently confined to traditional notions of arts and aesthetics, overlooking the broader, more integrative aspects of culture, such as communal activities and everyday interactions. The cultural commons embrace a broad understanding of culture and engage in facilitating roles to support community-driven projects. As detailed in the results chapter, this expansive definition underpins the legitimacy of culture by framing it as a central, dynamic force within society. This broad perspective highlights the responsibility of municipalities to innovate in cultural policy, especially during challenging times marked by budget cuts and the ongoing need to justify funding for cultural departments. This finding is supported by Pascal Gielen (2023), who emphasizes that without broad social support and flexible boundaries, culture risks stagnation, diminishing its overall significance in society.

Another tension highlighted by my research is the difficulty cultural commons experience in securing government support due to conflicts with municipal artistic criteria. This issue is closely tied to the logics of the commons, which emphasize that the sustainability of culture relies on its autonomy and independent social interactions. For them, the right to culture means having the freedom to collectively and autonomously shape meaningful systems. Consequently, this situation underscores

the need for cultural commons to continually reassess their own boundaries, which makes it challenging to align with rigid municipal criteria.

This is supported by existing literature, notably in "The Rise of the Common City" by Lijster and Gielen (2022), which argues that the future of culture depends on its communal nature.

Consequently, it is the government's responsibility to support and cultivate this communal aspect to sustain culture's relevance and vitality. My study further supports this argument by offering detailed, field-specific examples of the municipality's current support and how it could be improved by addressing tensions arising from differing logics.

#### *Informal approaches versus concrete criteria*

My findings also demonstrate that the formal, metrics-based requirements of municipal funding clash with the informal and evolving nature of the cultural commons. This tension poses a challenge for the cultural commons in balancing government criteria while maintaining their autonomy and informality. On the other hand, municipalities face their own predicament. They must account for public money to the council, which in turn must justify expenditures to the city. This aligns with the traditional perspective on local governance according to Helleman et al. (2019). Despite this, there is a desire within municipalities for broader, more flexible criteria. How this must take form is a constant dilemma. Despite the inherent challenges, achieving a more nuanced balance in the principle of intermediate outcomes within the collaborative process is possible.

My findings reveal that from the cultural commons' perspective, there is room for critical reflection. For instance, a municipality official pointed out an ongoing dilemma: those who are denied funding often perceive the municipality's approach as lacking objectivity, while recipients value the autonomy that funding provides. This duality reveals the broader conflict between the desire for greater freedom and the necessity for measurable outcomes. The cultural commons have long sought increased autonomy, but this freedom can sometimes complicate the process of measuring value, leading to frustration when support from the municipality is withheld. This situation underscores the need for a joint fact-finding process, as proposed by Ansell and Gash (2007), which could help reconcile these conflicting perspectives and foster a more balanced approach.

My findings also reveal that from the municipality's point of view, there is room for reflection. The cultural commons inherently excel at expressing themselves through means beyond rational arguments. Their abilities lie more in the realm of creativity. Gielen (2023) supports this view in his book 'Vertrouwen'. He argues that the municipality should use the creativity of the cultural commons to make the invisible, unheard, and unaccountable, visible and audible. Namely because

aesthetic forms of expression, engaging all senses and emotions, can effectively stimulate social or political movements and foster trust. In the focus of my study, I add to this that the municipality should take on a facilitating role, creating opportunities for the cultural commons to organize and regulate themselves effectively. This should include incorporating experiences, images, and videos as legitimate forms of reporting and evaluation.

#### *Face-to-face dialogue versus written communication*

In the analysis of face-to-face dialogue versus written communication, a finding of my research is the contrast between the cultural commons' reliance on direct, personal interactions and the municipality's preference for written communication and formal processes. The municipality aims to maintain objectivity by avoiding personal contact; however, as my findings indicate, objectivity itself can be an illusion. Gielen (2023) supports this perspective, arguing that cultural policy is inherently subjective and reflects specific cultural politics rather than neutrality.

To bridge the existing gap in dialogue between the cultural commons and the municipality, it is crucial to incorporate more personal and sustained interactions within formal policy frameworks. Given that, as described above, objectivity is ultimately an illusion. Moving towards the cultural commons means going beyond distant, written communication. It involves actively engaging with the cultural commons by visiting them in the city, fostering direct face-to-face contact. My own experiences, detailed in the methodology chapter, relate to this issue. Through my volunteer work at the Paper Cafe, I have observed firsthand the difficulties individuals face due to limited literacy in Dutch, which impedes their ability to engage with cultural institutions and participate fully in civic life. This experience has influenced my research bias, leading me to focus more on necessary changes within municipal practices and to be less critical of the cultural commons logics in this regard. I am aware that this bias could possibly undermine the credibility of my research.

#### 5.2. Discussing overall findings

Overall, it has become evident that collaboration between municipalities and cultural commons requires a delicate balance due to the numerous tensions inherent in the collaborative process. TO find this delicate balance it is important to keep in mind that the strength of cultural commons lies in their independence from bureaucratic constraints and their ability to address local needs without rigid structures. Thus, direct collaboration through formal funding streams can be limiting, whereas informal networks and a facilitating role can produce more effective results. Therefore, rather than relying on top-down approaches, the focus should shift to supporting initiatives by adopting an open and service-oriented stance.

This insight aligns with the work of Helleman et al. (2019), who identify an ongoing shift between the formal, top-down perspective and the informal, bottom-up perspective of local governance, in line with different institutional logics. Their research highlights the effort required to transition from one perspective to the other. However, while Helleman et al. (2019) do not specify which perspective is preferable or how to initiate such a shift, my study underscores the necessity of changing perspectives, given the crucial role that cultural commons play in enhancing Utrecht's overall well-being. Thus, in my own research, I took a normative stance to explore how collaboration between the cultural commons and the municipality should be optimally structured. This approach amplified the voice of the cultural commons, a group frequently overlooked within the cultural sector. This perspective is reinforced by Ansell and Gash's (2007) theory of collaborative governance, which emphasizes that addressing imbalances—such as imbalances in power or resources—requires the empowerment and representation of disadvantaged stakeholders. In this manner, by recognizing the distinct contributions of cultural commons and adopting a more trust-based, rather than control-focused, approach, the municipality can empower these organizations and facilitate their development.

In contrast to Helleman et al. (2019) my research also fills the gap by offering concrete actions for municipalities to facilitate this transition. Examples of these actions include fostering networks, adopting a facilitative role, and actively listening to community needs. The municipality's role should be to create supportive infrastructure, invest in personal engagement, and strengthen local connections, all without attempting to exert control. By embracing this approach, a more robust cultural commons community can emerge—one that better aligns with the needs of residents and the policy objectives of the municipality. These actions are further detailed in Chapter 7, where I provide recommendations for the Municipality of Utrecht.

Additionally, my study followed the suggestions made by Ansell and Gash for further research. Accordingly, Ansell and Gash (2007) propose that: "case studies are particularly valuable where the interaction between variables is nonlinear, and intensive ethnographic research might be the most successful strategy for developing greater insight into the nonlinear aspects of the collaborative process. Case study research into trust building, the development of shared understanding, and commitment formation would be particularly valuable" (Ansell & Gash, 2007, p. 562). This recommendation closely aligns with my research approach. By employing intensive ethnographic methods such as in-depth interviews and participant observations, the study delves into the complexities of trust-building, shared understanding, and commitment formation the most elaborate, as these key areas were identified by Ansell and Gash as essential for further investigation.

This alignment not only validates the research methodology but also emphasizes the importance of my findings in enhancing the understanding of collaborative processes.

My research also emphasizes transferability by providing detailed descriptions of the cultural department and specific cultural commons within Utrecht. This thorough detailing ensures that the findings are relevant not only to these specific settings but also to broader municipal contexts and other cultural commons. In short, the detailed descriptions enhance the applicability of the research outcomes, making them valuable for similar environments beyond the immediate case study.

By linking theoretical concepts with empirical findings, this discussion chapter offered a comprehensive analysis of how the theoretical framework informed and contextualized the observed tensions in the collaboration between the municipality and the cultural commons.

### 5.3. Conclusion

This chapter explores the implications and relevance of the research findings, linking them to existing theories and frameworks. It begins by examining how the study's results align with the theoretical framework, particularly in understanding the collaborative tensions between the cultural commons and municipal policies. The chapter also critically evaluates the operational logics of the cultural commons, highlighting their role in some of the tensions within the collaborative process and emphasizing the need for the cultural commons to better explore mutual gains. Additionally, the discussion emphasizes the importance of municipalities adopting a more flexible and supportive role, which would allow for greater autonomy and creativity within the cultural commons. Recognizing the inherent subjectivity in cultural policy and prioritizing personal, face-to-face interactions could help municipalities build trust and foster more effective collaboration. The chapter connects these insights to the broader literature, advocating for a shift in municipal perspectives to better support the cultural commons and enhance overall collaboration between stakeholders.



## 6. Conclusion

In this concluding chapter, I address the main research question of my study:

*What are the areas of tension in the collaborative process between the cultural commons and the municipality of Utrecht, and how can these tensions be addressed to improve future collaboration?*

This study reveals that the current relationship between the cultural commons and the municipality is strained, primarily due to diminishing trust, reduced interpersonal contact, and a lack of transparency—factors that are crucial for sustaining strong partnerships. The collaboration between the municipality and ZIMIHC, an established organization within the cultural sector, is better, but they still encounter the same challenges as other cultural commons. Despite the municipality's efforts to address power and resource imbalances, practical progress in the field remains limited.

Furthermore, a successful collaboration between municipalities and cultural commons hinges on aligning incentives that benefit both stakeholders, such as efficient cost management, informed policy development, and adopting an ecosystem approach. However, barriers persist, including bureaucratic complexity, resource limitations, and misalignment of policies and sociopolitical priorities. The difficulty in fostering interdisciplinary collaboration within municipal departments and across various cultural sectors further exacerbates these challenges. Since, it slows down the development of cultural commons and hinders their potential for meaningful cooperation with the municipality.

Moreover, the findings of this study indicate that the tensions in the collaborative process between the cultural commons and the municipality stem from their fundamentally different operational logics. While cultural commons prioritize trust-based, personal interactions, municipalities often rely on formal structures and control mechanisms. Bridging this gap requires a balanced approach that incorporates personal, informal engagements while respecting bureaucratic and democratic values. Both actors must make concerted efforts to explore mutual gains and share ownership of the collaborative process to overcome tensions related to commitment and understanding.

The research findings also underscore the importance of implementing a joint fact-finding process to build trust and ensure decisions are grounded in mutually accepted facts. This process is vital for overcoming tensions related to intermediate outcomes in the collaborative process. Additionally, the principle of face-to-face dialogue is highlighted as a tension, with cultural commons favoring direct interaction and municipalities relying on formal communication to maintain objectivity.

Recognizing and acknowledging the tensions in the collaborative process is the first step toward fostering a new kind of collaboration between the municipality and cultural commons. Namely, one that challenges established norms, encourages institutional transformation, and embraces creativity and learning from failures. Furthermore, it is important to take the intermediate role of ZIMIHC in the collaboration between the more informal cultural commons and the municipality of Utrecht into account. The next chapter also offers actionable recommendations for the municipality to take initial steps toward building a more collaborative relationship with cultural commons. For further research, exploring the role of digital commons could offer valuable insights, particularly in how municipalities and digital commons collaborate using online tools and social media for communication and resource sharing. Additionally, investigating alternative governance models for collaboration, beyond the framework of Ansell and Gash, could broaden the understanding of how different models influence collaborative processes and outcomes.

In summary, overcoming the constraints identified in this study requires simplifying bureaucratic processes, enhancing communication, increasing resource allocation for community engagement, and fostering a more inclusive approach that recognizes and supports the diversity of community initiatives. The tensions between the cultural commons and the municipality stem from differences in organizational structures, operational priorities, and communication barriers. Challenges that can be addressed with determined efforts from both sides.

To conclude, I hope the findings of this research have demonstrated the critical importance of investing in cultural commons in the coming years. In a society facing many big challenges and increasing polarization, cultural commons offer a unique creative capacity to rebuild trust. A healthy collaboration with the municipality will only enhance the social warmth that cultural commons will be able to bring to communities—and who wouldn't want that?

## 7. Recommendations

Based on the conclusions of this study, several practical recommendations could benefit the Cultural Department of the Municipality of Utrecht, where my fieldwork was done. These recommendations could also be useful for other local governments in fostering collaboration with cultural commons more broadly.

The potential for collaboration between cultural commons and municipalities offers opportunities, but it necessitates a nuanced and strategic approach. While formal funding mechanisms can sometimes constrain creativity and responsiveness, informal methods often lead to more personal and impactful outcomes. Cultural commons derive their strength from operating independently of rigid bureaucratic structures, which allows them to address local needs more flexibly. Therefore, direct governmental intervention may not always be the most effective or desired approach.

To begin it's essential to distinguish between two distinct policy areas: managing subsidies and providing practical support. While subsidies are crucial for supporting residents, they involve complex financial and legal considerations. In contrast, practical support is less about legalities and more about enhancing and nurturing existing community initiatives. To bridge these areas effectively, consider the following recommendations:

### 1. Facilitating networks and connections

Municipalities should actively identify and link different cultural commons groups within the city to promote mutual learning and development. Strengthening the network among cultural commons groups can amplify their impact. Encourage regular interactions and collaborations between different groups, fostering an environment where they can share knowledge and support each other's growth. By facilitating these connections, it can contribute to a more robust cultural ecosystem. This should not only address the needs of subsidized initiatives but also provide support for those that do not receive direct funding.

### 2. Adopting a facilitating and supportive role

Adopting a facilitating and service-oriented attitude is crucial for supporting cultural commons. Effective facilitation involves enhancing existing community activities rather than imposing new frameworks. Accordingly it is important to maintain an open and flexible approach to supporting cultural commons. Encourage experimentation and innovation by being receptive to new ideas and adjusting policies to better fit the needs of these initiatives. It's essential to ask the commons what

they need and how the municipality can best support them, rather than dictating terms. The starting point should therefore always be what the cultural commons need, rather than what the municipality desires. Having talked with cultural commons, municipalities should prioritize providing affordable spaces and empowerment while allowing the commons to maintain their autonomy and organic development.

### 3. Enhancing visibility and understanding

Maintaining visibility and actively listening to community needs is essential. Assign dedicated contact points in each neighborhood to engage with the cultural commons regularly. These representatives should actively seek to understand the unique needs and dynamics of their communities, ensuring that support is tailored. Building personal relationships and being physically present can enhance trust and cooperation.

On top of that, ensure that communication with the cultural commons is clear, inclusive, and accessible. Use language and visuals that resonate with diverse community members and reflect their experiences and perspectives. Effective communication is crucial for fostering understanding.

### 4. Appointing intermediaries

Utilize intermediaries or "bridge builders" who can connect the cultural commons with municipal resources and help navigate bureaucratic processes. Organizations like ZIMIHC demonstrate how intermediaries can effectively connect and support cultural commons. Many cultural commons may not directly approach cultural affairs or seek support from the municipality. Therefore these intermediaries should be proactive, well-connected within the community, and able to advocate effectively for the commons' needs.

The intermediaries should provide a vital link between the community and municipal resources. For example, establish neighborhood intermediaries allocated small budgets to assess local needs and manage local funds. This approach enhances accessibility and responsiveness, ensuring that cultural commons receive the support they require in a timely and flexible manner.

### 5. Balancing formal requirements with flexibility

While maintaining necessary transparency and accountability, strive for flexibility in how requirements are met. Consider alternative reporting methods that capture the qualitative and creative impact of commons initiatives, and adjust funding criteria to better align with the informal

nature of these groups. This should include incorporating experiences, stories, images, and videos as legitimate forms of reporting and evaluation.

In the end, for municipalities to effectively support cultural commons, they must adopt a community-focused approach, recognizing their role as enablers rather than primary drivers. By fostering networking opportunities, adopting a facilitating attitude, maintaining visibility, and leveraging intermediaries, municipalities can create a more supportive environment for cultural commons. This collaborative approach will not only strengthen the cultural scene of the city but also ensure that the needs of both residents and cultural commons are effectively addressed.

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# Appendix

## Topic List interview Municipality and ZIMIHC

Goedendag..

Mijn naam is Julie en ik ben verbonden aan de Universiteit Utrecht. Ik voer momenteel een onderzoek uit over potentiële samenwerkingen tussen de gemeente en de culturele commons en ik zou graag uw medewerking vragen voor een interview.

Voor we beginnen, wil ik graag wat meer context geven over het onderzoek en de procedure van het interview. Dit interview maakt deel uit van mijn masterscriptie, deze schrijf ik bij de afdeling culturele zaken bij de gemeente Utrecht. Hier doe ik onderzoek naar de samenwerking tussen de culturele commons en de gemeente Utrecht. Het doel van dit interview is om meer inzicht te krijgen in hoe er bij de gemeente/ZIMIHC/buurtkoren tegen eventuele samenwerkingen wordt gekeken en waar de spanningsvelden liggen. Uw bijdrage aan dit onderzoek is van enorme waarde en zal helpen bij het verbeteren van mijn begrip van dit onderwerp.

Voordat we beginnen, wil ik uw toestemming vragen om het interview op te nemen. Dit is puur voor mijn eigen referentiedoeleinden en zal vertrouwelijk worden behandeld. Als u bezwaar heeft tegen opname dan zetten we het interview voort zonder opname.

Nu zou ik graag kort iets over mezelf willen vertellen en vervolgens hoor ik graag meer over u en uw ervaringen met betrekking tot samenwerking met ...

1. Kun je jezelf even voorstellen? Wat is je rol bij de gemeente/ZIMIHC?

### Beginvoorwaarden

- Macht en middelen verhouding tussen de gemeente en ZIMIHC
  - Prikkel voor de gemeente en ZIMIHC om samen te werken
  - Voorgeschiedenis samenwerking tussen de gemeente en ZIMIHC
2. Wat is een goede samenwerking voor jou?
  3. Wat is de rol van de gemeente/ZIMIHC op het vlak van cultuurparticipatie?
  4. Wat zijn belangrijke principes in de manier van werken hier?
  5. Wat is de rol van beleid/hierarchie/bureaucratie in de werkwijze?
  6. Kan je omschrijven hoe de huidige samenwerking eruit ziet?
  7. In welke projecten is er samengewerkt? Hoe verliep die samenwerking?
  8. Wat gaat er goed?
  9. Wat kan er beter? Wat zijn de uitdagingen?
  10. Wat is volgens jou nodig om de samenwerking te verbeteren?

## 11. Wie moet daarin iets ondernemen?

### **Principes samenwerking**

- face-to-face dialog
- vertrouwensband
- inzet voor het proces
- gedeeld begrip
- tussentijdse resultaten

## Topic List Interview Cultural Commons

Goedendag..

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### Oprichting en organisatie

- Hoe is uw koor georganiseerd? Heeft u een formele structuur of werken jullie meer informeel?
- Wie neemt de beslissingen binnen uw organisatie? Hoe zijn de verantwoordelijkheden verdeeld?
- Welke soorten activiteiten organiseert uw koor? Hoe vaak vinden deze activiteiten plaats en wat zijn de belangrijkste evenementen of optredens die jullie organiseren?

### Samenwerking met de gemeente

- Kunt u iets vertellen over uw huidige samenwerking met de gemeente? Welke vormen van samenwerking zijn er, en hoe worden deze vormgegeven?
- Welke factoren stimuleren of belemmeren de samenwerking met de gemeente? Zijn er specifieke uitdagingen waar jullie tegenaan lopen in de samenwerking?
- Hoe zou u het vertrouwen in de gemeente beschrijven in relatie tot uw koor?
- Zijn er specifieke ervaringen die dit vertrouwen hebben versterkt of ondermijnd?
- Heeft het type contact invloed op de effectiviteit van de samenwerking met de gemeente en andere partners? Hoe belangrijk is face-to-face contact voor uw koor in de samenwerking?

### **Netwerk**

- Hoe ziet u de rol van uw koor binnen het bredere netwerk van culturele commons? Hoe zoeken andere culturele commons in de regio op?
- Welke waarden deelt uw koor met de gemeente en andere culturele commons? Hoe spelen deze gedeelde waarden een rol in jullie samenwerking en activiteiten?