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INFORMAL PLANNING IN DEPOPULATING RURAL AREAS

A resource-based view on informal planning practices

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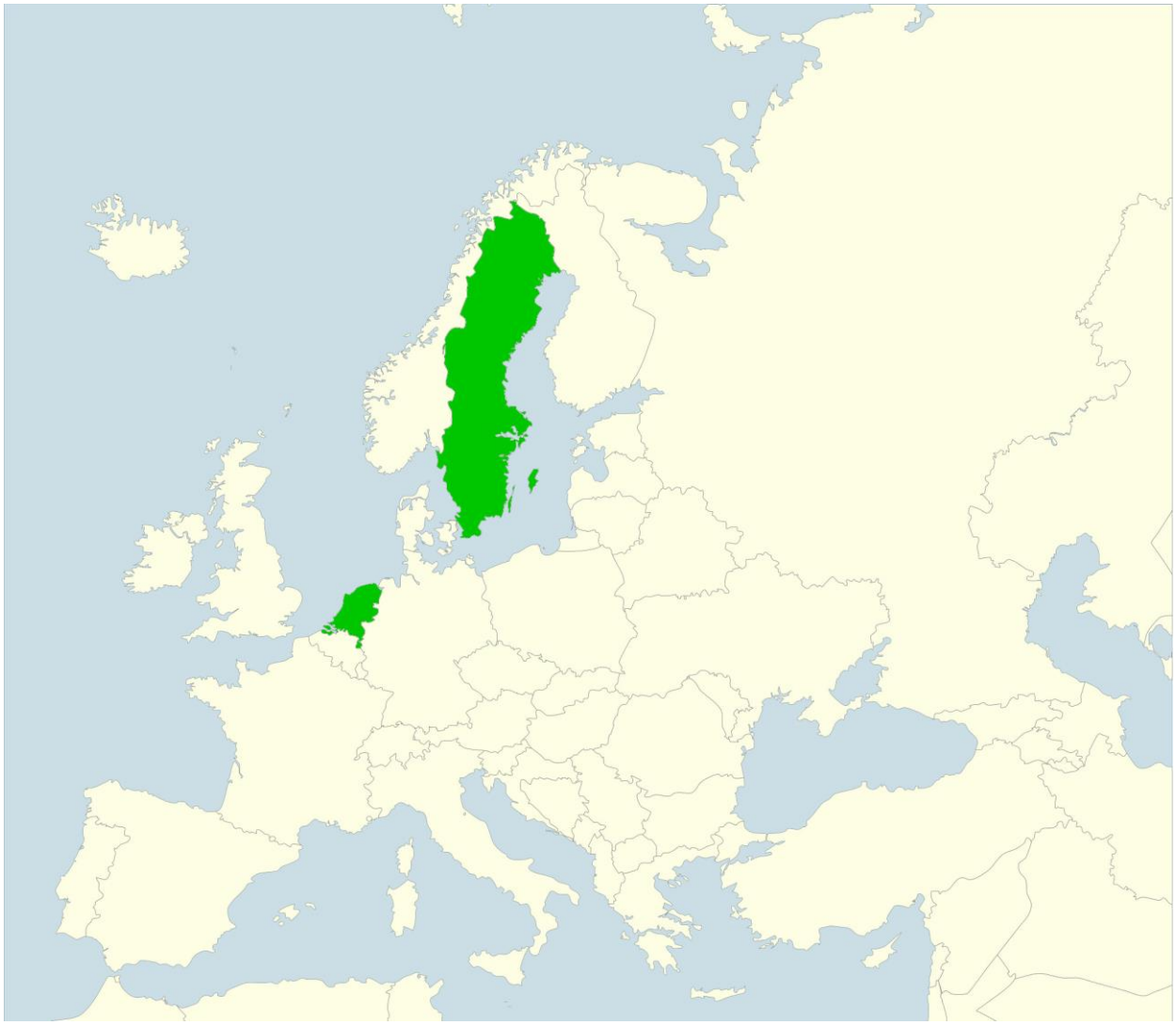

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Abstract: Planning research has increasingly recognised that planning in depopulating areas differs from planning in growth areas. Several studies have sought to identify planning theories and strategies that are capable of meeting the challenges presented by depopulating areas. However, most of these studies and strategies are based on dense urban environments. This paper seeks to add to planning theory and practice by focusing on informal planning practices in rural depopulating areas. Starting from a resource-based view, the paper introduces an analytical framework that allows a systematic examination of the resources that are generated through informal planning practices in such areas.

Key words: Planning, informality, informal planning, resource-based approach, resource-based theory

Sammanfattning: Planeringslitteraturen har nyligen börjat uppmärksamma att planering i områden med långvarig befolkningsminskning skiljer sig från den planering som äger rum i tillväxtområden. Flera studier har försökt utveckla planeringsteori och planeringsstrategier som kan möta de utmaningar som uppstår i områden med långvarig befolkningsminskning. De flesta av dessa studier, teorier och strategier utgår emellertid från täta, urbana miljöer. Denna artikel syftar därför till att lämna ett planeringsteoretiskt bidrag genom att fokusera på informell planering i landsbygdsområden som genomgår en långvarig befolkningsminskning. Med utgångspunkt i ett resursbaserat perspektiv introduceras ett analysschema som möjliggör en systematisk undersökning av de resurser som genereras genom informella planeringsinitiativ i sådana områden.

Sökord: Planering, informalitet, informell planering, resursbaserat perspektiv, resursbaserad teori

Overzicht: Planologisch onderzoek laat in toenemende mate zien dat planning in krimpgebieden wezenlijk verschilt van planning in groeigebieden. Verschillende studies hebben geprobeerd planningstheorieën en strategieën te identificeren, die aansluiten bij uitdagingen waar krimpende regio's mee te maken hebben. Echter, de meeste van deze studies en strategieën zijn gericht op een stedelijke omgeving met een hoge bebouwingsdichtheid. Dit artikel richt zich op informele planningspraktijken, in rurale krimpgebieden; en heeft als doel om vanuit dat perspectief een bijdrage te leveren aan planningstheorie en strategieën. Met de resource-based benadering als uitgangspunt, introduceren wij een analytisch raamwerk waarmee op een systematisch wijze hulpbronnen, gegenereerd door informele planningspraktijken, kunnen worden geanalyseerd in krimpende regio's.

Trefworden: Planning, informaliteit, informele planning, resource-based benadering, resource-based theorie

1. Introduction

The question of how to plan for areas with shrinking populations has received increasing attention in planning research during the past decade. Research has established that the type of planning that is required for communities that are characterised by population decline is different, at least in part, than the planning for communities that are characterised by population growth. Although several studies from different parts of Europe and North America concluded that population loss has severe implications for policy and planning, this issue has received relatively little attention in planning theory or practice. In Europe, the current planning paradigm is considered to be heavily informed by the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP), which has been criticised

for its ardent focus on growth and urban environments (Richardson 2000; Murray 2010). Several scholars agree that since growth has been the primary policy target in Europe at all policy levels during the last decades, growth has received the most attention in contemporary planning theory and practice (Bontje 2005; Martinez-Fernandez et al. 2012; Wiechmann and Pallagst 2012; Sousa and Pinho 2015; Hospers and Reverda 2015).

In the literature on depopulation, the maintenance of a growth-oriented planning strategy is believed to potentially increase negative consequences in areas of population decline. Growth-oriented investments may fail to result in economic revival (Häuβermann and Siebel 1987), or local governments in such areas may lack the resources for investments in the first place. Several researchers have noted the need for alternative planning strategies for shrinkage, or even for a paradigm shift in planning (Hospers 2014; Kempenaar et al. 2016; Wiechmann 2008).

A growing number of scholars have responded to the plea for alternative planning perspectives. However, most of these studies have been carried out in urban environments such as Detroit, Philadelphia and Leipzig. In such contexts, depopulation materialises in the hollowing out of urban cores and/or in urban sprawl, and the planning strategies advocated in these settings often involve attempts to use vast spaces in innovative ways, such as for 'greening the city' (Haase 2008; Pallagst et al. 2009; Németh and Hollander 2016). The spatial manifestations of shrinkage, however, differ in urban and rural contexts, as do the policy and planning implications of shrinkage. In this paper, we aim to add to the burgeoning literature on this topic by focusing on planning practices in rural depopulating areas. However, it is still somewhat unclear what planning in rural depopulating communities entails. *Who* plans in these areas? *What* is being planned, and with what *results*? And how and with what analytical tools should students, researchers and practitioners observe, analyse and understand planning practices in such areas?

This paper is based on a broad ethnographic study of smaller settlements in the Netherlands and in Sweden. During our study, we identified five informal planning initiatives in the Netherlands and six initiatives in Sweden. By taking data from our observations of these initiatives, and by applying a resource-based perspective in our analysis of the data, we seek to contribute to planning theory in general and to the discussion about planning in depopulating areas in particular. More specifically, we seek to contribute to this literature by providing an analytical framework that can potentially be used by policy makers or by students and researchers in their planning studies. Our framework is based on two rudimentary yet interrelated observations. First, it builds on the notion that in order to understand planning in sparsely populated areas, it is necessary to acknowledge both formal and informal planning practices. Here, our analytical focus is on informal planning practices. Second, our framework builds on the observation that since the resource base is altered in depopulating areas, it is necessary to take a broader perspective in order to understand the available resources. That is, we adopt a resource-based view of the planning process, and focus on resources that are planned and resources that are generated through planning. In conclusion, we suggest that informal planning practices can generate a wide range of resources that can be used for the potential benefit of the local community.

1.1 Aim of the paper

The aim of this paper is to present an analytical framework that allows us to systematically examine the resources that are generated through informal planning practices. The analysis enabled by this model provides a more systematic understanding of what informal planning in depopulating areas entails, and gives a more nuanced understanding of the resource base of these planning practices. In this way, this paper contributes to planning theory by providing a deeper understanding of and new perspectives on planning in rural depopulating areas.

1.2 Our cases

The empirical part of this paper builds on two broad ethnographic case studies that were carried out in smaller settlements located in Östergötland, Sweden and De Achterhoek, the Netherlands. Interviews and observations relating to five informal planning initiatives in the Netherlands and six initiatives in Sweden form part of our data. All planning initiatives included in our study share a context of rurality and population decline. It is important to note that rurality is an elusive

concept. In terms of population density, the Netherlands and Sweden display extreme differences. The Netherlands has a population density of 408.68 inhabitants per square kilometre, whereas the corresponding value in Sweden is 21.90. By examining these diverse cases, we can provide instructive examples of how our analytical framework can be used to systematically observe and analyse the resources that are generated through informal planning practices.

1.3 Outline of the paper

In Section 2, we provide a background by briefly introducing the concepts of formality and informality in planning. Although formal planning is not the centre of attention in this work, we briefly summarise the formal planning systems in the Netherlands and in Sweden. This is done to provide the reader with a basic understanding of the planning context of our studies. In Section 3, we introduce our theoretical framework. Here, we present an analytical framework that allows us to systematically examine the resources that are generated through informal planning practices. In Section 4, we briefly refer to our methods and data from the Netherlands and Sweden. In Section 5, we demonstrate how our analytical framework is used in practice, and show how the financial, material, human and organisational resources are generated in each case. Lastly, we conclude that informal planning initiatives can generate a wide range of resources that can be used for the potential benefit of the local community.

2. Background: Formal and informal planning practices

This study empirically investigates a wide range of informal planning initiatives in the Netherlands and in Sweden. A common argument in research about informality and informal planning is that there is a need for a more nuanced and less dichotomous approach to the concepts of informality and formality. Rather than referring to informality and formality as two distinct categories, the formal/informal divide should be challenged (McFarlane and Waibel 2012), and the difference between them should be seen as one of degree (North 1990; Altrock 2012). For analytical purposes, however, it is necessary to establish a contrast between the concepts (Walter 2013, 81). Thus, formal institutions have been referred to as being primarily 'based on explicitly defined rules and norms, on rights and duties to enable and to limit social interactions, to achieve certain goals and to structure the distribution of power' (Meyer 2006, 17, quoted in Altrock 2012, 190). Informal institutions are understood to involve codes of conduct, norms of behaviour and conventions (North 1990) that are shaped by the perception, beliefs, shared values and behaviour of the actors involved (Reimer, Getimis, and Blotevogel 2014).

In the context of planning, one can certainly assume that formal planning processes contain elements of informality. Likewise, one can assume that informal planning practices can be formalised in different ways. In this article, the concept of formal planning is used to refer to the kind of planning that is government-led and shaped mainly by formal structures and through formal negotiation. Informal planning, on the other hand, is used to refer to attempts by citizens to 'adapt space according to their needs (…) outside the formal planning system' (Kušar 2010, 159).

2.1 The formal planning context

To understand the conditions under which informal planning practices emerge, it is necessary to have a basic understanding of the formal policy and planning systems. In Sweden, local governments have a monopoly over the planning process. The formal planning process is manifested in multiple planning documents. However, only the Comprehensive Plan, which covers the whole municipality, is compulsory (Nyström and Tonell 2012, 196). The Swedish planning framework clearly promotes the idea of deliberative (Forester 1999) and collaborative planning (Healey 1997) – that is, planning that embraces the idea that residents, civil society and business representatives should have a say in the planning process, even if that is often is reported to be complicated (Nilsson 2007, 432).

Compared with the Swedish planning system, the Dutch planning system is more hierarchical, consisting of three different tiers. Spatial plans are developed at the national, provincial and local level. Each plan however must be in line with higher level plans. All levels have the statutory

power to develop comprehensive or framework plans (*structuurplannen*), although binding land allocation plans (*bestemmingsplannen*) are only developed at the municipal level (van der Valk 2002). Local planning is mainly responsible for allocating housing and industrial areas, for safeguarding national interests such as water safety and cultural and natural heritage, and for strengthening the Dutch economic position. Despite the formal context, the Netherlands has a long tradition of forming public-private partnerships (also denoted as *polderen*) for the development and implementation of planning measures.

2.2 The informal planners

Although informality may be traditionally associated with developing countries, several studies demonstrate that informality is an integral part of both North American and Western European planning practices (Mukhija and Loukaitou-Sideris 2015; McFarlane and Waibel 2012). As pointed out by Kušar (2010, 159), '[h]umans adapt space according to their needs also outside the formal planning system'. In this study, informal planning is broadly understood as planning that builds on everyday interactions and personal networks, and that is conducted by institutional agents, such as village groups, sports clubs, community organisations and so forth, without a formal mandate to plan. However, even if the informal planners lack the formal mandate to plan, their activities intend to lead to certain outcomes that, as stated by Kušar (2010, 159), 'serve particular interests' as well as 'the broader public interest' (ibid.). As it will be demonstrated below, informal planning practices involve infrastructure maintenance and improvement, the running of schools, and the arrangement of cultural events and sports facilities.

3. Theoretical framework: A resource-based view

In this study, we empirically investigated a wide range of informal planning initiatives in rural depopulating areas in the Netherlands and in Sweden. To systematically describe and to analyse the data derived from this research, we developed an analytical framework that allows us to systematically examine the resources that are generated through informal planning initiatives. Thus, rural areas that are characterised by a long-term population decline undergo a structural change, which is often understood to involve a situation in which the resource base is altered. With declining population numbers, the tax base diminishes; with an ageing population, the potential workforce declines; and with selective out-migration, some communities lose key competencies.

With our analytical model, we seek to gain a more nuanced understanding of the resource base in depopulating areas. Our model draws on resource-based theory (RBT) and on a resource-based view (RBV), and should be understood as a tool that scholars, students and planners can use to systematically examine the resources that are generated through informal planning practices. We believe that such an analysis can contribute to planning theory by enabling a more nuanced understanding of the resource base in depopulating areas, and by thereby providing a deeper understanding of and new perspectives on planning in such areas.

3.1 Resource categories

'Resource' is an elusive concept in terms of its substance, as well as in terms of its potential outcome. A common but rather shallow preconception may be that resources are primarily equal to money, and that more money inevitably and indubitably causes organisations to perform better (Boyne 2003, 369). Financial resources are indeed of a great importance; however, the RBV introduces the idea that resources can be of various kinds, and that the capacity of an organisation to utilise these resources is crucial for its survival, growth and overall effectiveness (Barney 1991, quoted in Madhavaram and Hunt 2008, 68; see also Bryson, Ackermann, and Eden 2007; Pee and Kankanhalli 2016). In general terms, a resource has been defined as 'any asset that an organisation might draw on to help it achieve its goals and perform well' (Bryson, Ackermann, and Eden 2007, 704). In business management literature, firm resources have been interpreted as the assets and capabilities that are controlled by a firm and that enable it to 'conceive of and implement strategies that improve its efficiency and effectiveness' (Barney 1991, 101, quoted in Madhavaram and Hunt 2008, 68).

Several attempts have been made within RBV to identify and classify resources in broader categories and in relation to different logics. Barney (1991, quoted in Madhavaram and Hunt 2008, 68) made a distinction between physical, human and organisational capital. Constantin and Lusch (1994, 143) classify resources in terms of *operand* and *operant* resources, where 'operand resources are typically physical, whereas operant resources typically refer to human, organisational, and informational ones' (Madhavaram and Hunt 2008, 67). In this particular study, we make a distinction between *financial* resources, *material* resources, *human* resources and *organisational* resources. The logics and content of these resource categories are elaborated on below.

When we refer to *financial* resources, we include 'cash, investments, and endowment' (Brown, Andersson, and Jo 2015). Financial resources are indeed critical in planning processes, in the sense that some other resources can be achieved by means of financial transactions. However, access to financial resources can also circumscribe human action. In a study of non-profit organisations, Brown, Andersson, and Jo (2015) suggested that such organisations often rely on a variety of funding sources. This reliance on a wide external funding base leads to complexity in managing financial resources and to 'a high degree of external control and restrictions' imposed by funders (ibid., no page number).

In our understanding of *material* resources, we include tangible objects and facilities such as technical equipment, infrastructure, fixed assets and machines (Bathelt and Glückler 2005, 1547; Pee and Kankanhalli 2016, 189). We also include land, raw material and, as Brown, Andersson, and Jo (2015, no page number) suggested, 'other artefacts of value'. As we demonstrate below, however, it can be difficult to distinguish between artefacts that hold value and those that do not. Physical objects can be valuable, but if they are unused and require maintenance, they may be a cost rather than an asset. As Bathelt and Glückler (2005, 1547) suggested, it is thus vital to distinguish between the resource and the service it provides, and to differentiate 'between material resources and their potential multiple potential applications'.

When we refer to *human resources*, we include knowledge, skills and competencies, as well as 'experience, judgment [and] insights' (Pee and Kankanhalli 2016, 189). In our analysis of these resources, we start from the prior observation that depopulating areas meet with challenges in this respect (Syssner 2014; 2015). Since both civil societies and public organisations in depopulating areas tend towards 'downsizing, resignation, or retirement' (Pee and Kankanhalli 2016, 188), these areas need new solutions to new problems; however, they also need new ways of generating knowledge. In our case studies, we are therefore interested in how the skills and knowledge of employees and volunteers become resources in planning processes (Brown, Andersson, and Jo 2015, no page). We are particularly interested in whether planning agents develop any strategies to generate new knowledge or minimise knowledge loss (Pee and Kankanhalli 2016, 188).

In our analysis, we start from the notion that 'knowledge is contextual and path dependent' (Bathelt and Glückler 2005, 1550; see further below). We also assume that spatial and social context are of importance in how knowledge is developed, transformed and used (ibid.). In planning literature, informality is in itself often seen as 'a form of knowledge', or as a certain way of 'knowing the city' (McFarlane and Waibel 2012, 8). We have a special interest in whether and how the knowledge that is generated in informal processes is conceptualised as a resource in formal planning practices.

By *organisational* resources, we refer to resources that have been classified and categorised by others in several different ways. Like Pee and Kankanhalli (2016, 189), we include structures that enable planning and coordination as a part of organisational resources. We also include what others have called 'social capital' (Bathelt and Glückler 2005, 1555). In the context of RBV, social capital is understood as a resource in the sense that it is 'a social structure which can be employed by individuals to achieve their own goals' (Bathelt and Glückler 2005, 1555). Social capital is expected to be a resource because it 'enables the formation of mutual expectations and responsibilities', has the potential to give members of social networks 'access to additional information flows' (Bathelt and Glückler 2005, 1556), and generates legitimacy and acknowledgement.

3.2 Relational, contextual and situational resources

In RBV literature, several attempts have been made to further categorise and order groups of resources. Here, we argue that all resources must be seen as being relational, contextual and situational. In a *relational* understanding, a resource is believed to come about in relation to a need or an intended outcome and in relation to the actors who generate it. Bathelt and Glückler (2005, 1547) make a strong argument for a relational rather than substantive understanding of resources, while opposing the habitual idea that resources should be 'limited in terms of their availability', and 'used up through consumption' (ibid.). With a relational understanding of resources, they argue, resources are not necessarily limited, and their use-value or application is not necessarily predetermined (ibid.). As an alternative, these resources 'can be used in many different ways for many different purposes' (ibid.). The value of the resource is thus based on the relationship between the resource and the service it provides for its users.

That resources are *contextual* is critical. This implies that what is conceptualised as a resource in one social, spatial or political context may not be conceptualised as a resource in another setting. A physical entity, a certain skill or an organisational structure may be useless in one context, yet indispensable in another. The value of a resource thus depends 'upon the social context within which goals and capabilities are shaped' (Bathelt and Glückler 2005, 1547). The RBV thus holds the merit of not making *a prior* assessments of what is a resource and what is not; rather, as Brown, Andersson, and Jo (2015, no page number) put it, it identifies the resources that are seen as critical and 'relevant to particular contexts and industries'.

That resources are *situational* is understood here to add a temporal understanding of resources. A resource is a resource not only under certain contextual conditions, but also during specific periods of time.

4. Methods: An ethnographic study in two regions

This paper is based on a broad ethnographic study that was carried out in small settlements located in Östergötland, Sweden and De Achterhoek, the Netherlands. In this paper, we explicitly focus on planning initiatives that were observed in these settlements and that were initiated by community groups outside of the formal planning system. In terms of demography and geography, the Netherlands and Sweden are inherently different. The size of the Netherlands is about one-tenth the size of the Swedish land area. The population density in the Netherlands has increased from 345 inhabitants per square kilometre of land area in 1960, to 503 inhabitants per square kilometre in 2015. Sweden, on the other hand, has a current population density of 24 inhabitants per square kilometre, compared with 18 in 1960 (World Bank). This comparison implies that the planning conditions in Sweden are radically different from those in the Netherlands. In terms of political organisation, however, the cases appear to be fairly similar. Both countries are relatively stable democracies with a certain degree of local autonomy and well-developed welfare states. In addition, both cases share the common property that is to be compared (Sartori 1991) – that is, informal planning initiatives that are initiated outside of the governmental planning process, and that are located in rural depopulating areas. The planning initiatives themselves range from infrastructure maintenance and improvement, to the running of schools, libraries and sports facilities, and to the arrangement of cultural events.

It is a common misconception that comparisons always aim to find factors that can explain the outcome of a certain case. In fact, comparisons can serve many other analytical purposes. One argument for a qualitative comparison, and for the ambition to analyse 'several instances of the same thing' is such a comparison's capacity to make differences and similarities between cases more visible (Ragin 1994, 86). A comparison can help prevent simplification, and lessens the risk of both false particularisation and false universalism (Marsh and Mackie 1995; Landmann 2003). Another argument for a comparative approach is its capacity to generate, advance or complement theory (Ragin 1987, Landmann 2003, Denk 2002). A comparison of a small number of cases can advance theoretical thinking, not by allowing generalising explanations, but by enabling conceptual development and elaboration (Ragin 1994; Ragin and Hein 1993). In this particular paper, our ambition is to present an analytical framework that allows us to systematically

examine the resources that are generated through informal planning practices in each respective case. In this endeavour, we expect to encounter both similarities and differences in our cases.

In both cases, ethnographic field work was done to collect data (Pink and Morgan 2013; Schatzman and Strauss 1973). During our field studies, we observed settlements hosting several informal planning initiatives. Part of our field work consisted of identifying additional instances of informal planning practices via snowball sampling (Atkinson and Flint 2001). To locate instances of informal planning practices, we searched for projects that were initiated by non-governmental actors (citizens or communities), that served a common objective, that were the result of collective decision-making, and that had a spatial impact (changed the local spatial organisation). As informal planning practices are rarely documented, we selected cases through contacts at NGOs, interviewees and other scholars from our scientific network. A total of five projects were visited in the Netherlands and six projects were visited in Sweden.

The ethnographic field included field visits to all project locations, observations of the project results (and its spatial impact) and interviews with key initiators. A total of 16 in-depth open interviews were conducted with key initiators and volunteers: 10 in Sweden and six in the Netherlands. During these interviews, questions were asked concerning the interviewees' organisational structure, availability of resources, means of applying for additional support, and method of dealing with difficulties. To provide a background, an additional 19 interviews were held with involved policy makers in local governments, regional governments and NGOs: 11 in Sweden and eight in the Netherlands. Furthermore, policy documents (such as comprehensive and framework plans), newspaper articles and websites (i.e. of community-led planning projects) were consulted in order to collect contextual information on both regions.

5. Results: Our analytical scheme at work

During our field studies, we observed several planning initiatives that were initiated outside of the formal planning structure. While focusing on these planning initiatives, we observed that they seemed to benefit the local community in several ways. We became interested in trying to categorise these benefits in a more systematic manner. Accordingly, we decided to adapt a resource-based perspective and to analyse and categorise our data using the analytical tools suggested by RBT. Our initial ambition was to devote equal attention to all resource categories in the analysis. However, we noticed that two of the resource categories appeared to be particularly important: human resources and organisational resources. Their significance primarily consisted of two facets: first, that they utilised existing knowledge; and second, that they created legitimacy and feelings of pride and belonging in the local community.

5.1 Financial resources

Financial and material resources often stand out because they are more tangible than human and organisational resources. We observed that financial resources are transferred from citizens to local governments via taxes, and then partly transferred back to local communities through the provision of social services or as subsidies for encouraging or maintaining community initiatives.

Financial resources can be attracted to local communities through the engagement of volunteers and the time invested by them within local community initiatives. However, financial funding can also be an ambiguous resource. Although the reward of funds from the EU LEADER programme is substantial, some communities hesitate to apply for new subsidies:

> *We've had two quite large EU projects […] and I've been part of both of them. We've put too much time into them, far too much… I had to report the time that I've spent on the project I worked on three different forms of the same things each time […] So that was just one example of the bureaucracy of the EU project. I hesitate quite a lot to apply for that kind of funding nowadays, because the last one was really tough to report, actually.*
>
> Village Board member, Bestorp (Sweden)

Compared with Sweden, Dutch municipalities more actively encourage community initiatives and offer financial compensation to meet specific planning interests. Most municipalities in De Achterhoek have budgets available for citizen initiatives. Most of these budgets are made available for undefined projects, but they sometimes have a specific policy objective. In the municipality of Berkelland, the local library service is transferred from the municipal balance to the responsibility of local communities. If citizens want to maintain a library within their community, they can request a subsidy for compensation; otherwise, the library ceases to exist.

Along with financial resources, responsibilities and risks are transferred. Some initiatives are small and easy to manage, but others involve serious amounts of money (sums of over EUR 1 million are not exceptional) and serious financial risks. The sports club in Valdemarsvik (Sweden) is currently going through a difficult time. To obtain better training facilities, the club members decided to build an indoor ice hockey arena themselves. Although the land and building are officially owned by the municipality, the sports club is responsible for exploitation. For the realisation of this project, the club received an EU LEADER subsidy. However, the project turned out to be more complex and costly than expected:

> *If you want to build this [ice hockey rink], I mean, this is pretty advanced […]. So, you need to be a professional and that is not always the case: that these clubs and associations have those resources. […] That's one of the things that, I think, that we can learn from this project. That you need some professional help to pull these projects off.*
>
> Board member sports club, Valdemarsvik (Sweden)

In the Netherlands, a majority of the municipal representatives in our study agreed that financing operating costs is the responsibility of citizens. However, in most cases, the exploitation of sports and community centres can only be realised with a financial contribution from the municipalities. In particular, older community initiatives based their financial realisation on a fixed (and at that time guaranteed) municipal contribution. However, due to depopulation and declining tax income, this model is no longer viable for most municipalities. A cutback in municipal financial contributions implies a decrease in financial resources for Dutch communities, as other (e.g. private or voluntary) funding possibilities are limited and difficult to access. Moreover, several community centres face bankruptcy due to these policy changes (Omroep Gelderland 2015).

5.2 Material resources

Regarding *material* resources, we observed that they are mostly transacted in kind. Such material resources are technical and physical in nature, and include the supply of materials, machinery or real estate. An example of the transfer of *technical* resources is the distribution of micro fibre networks that is transferred to citizen initiatives in Swedish rural areas. For telecom companies, the construction of such networks in sparsely populated areas is often not cost-efficient. Therefore, Swedish government outsources this distribution to rural communities and their volunteers. Although materials are supplied by the government, the citizens must arrange for adequate machinery to dig trenches and provide micro fibre access to every (interested) household. (For a detailed study of the implementation of micro fibre networks in rural Sweden, see Hermelin and Magnusson 2015.)

Resources that are physical places where activities can occur are often a crucial aspect of a citizen initiative. In the villages, citizens make use of vacant buildings, such as libraries, former town halls or schools, to host their initiatives. If such buildings are owned by the local government, the right to use the buildings is transacted to organisations such as village boards. We observed numerous variations in arrangements that were made concerning the ownership, lease, exploitation and use of physical assets and land. Some arrangements were formalised while others remained informal, implying that these arrangements involve a considerable amount of complexity and opacity, as was the case in Godegård:

> *[The community centre] is owned by the municipality. We have an old deal from '74 where it says that we are allowed to organise things ourselves in this room. Yeah. It's actually only this room and nowhere else [in the building, that is part of the deal], but since nobody is using the other facilities, sometimes we use other parts as well. And the library also*

used to belong to the municipality, but now it belongs to the residents' council [*bygderådet* in the original].

Village Board member, Godegård (Sweden)

Material resources such as real estate seem to be abundant in depopulating regions, as vacancy is one of the most notable indications of shrinkage. However, vacant buildings degenerate if they are not used or maintained. If there is no specific need for a location, vacant buildings become worthless and costly. This indicates that the value of material resources depends on relational and contextual variables, such as the transformative capacity of citizens, the location and the availability of financial support for exploitation. In Beltrum (De Achterhoek), the maintenance of all collectively used buildings in the village became problematic:

We now have a community centre, which was built in 1973. For years, it served very well. However, because of shrinkage, Beltrum has more buildings that are [occasionally] used by other associations. Now we have to maintain all these buildings collectively over the long run […].

Chairman of the village board, Beltrum (the Netherlands)

The project coordinator, who is a building contractor in his professional life, communicated this problem with other community members who seemed to be struggling with the same issues: largely unoccupied buildings, high exploitation costs and disappearing public services due to depopulation. To tackle all these issues at once, they decided to structure the planning process. They organised brainstorming sessions and collected ideas from the wider community. Later, this strategy resulted in an overall plan for all buildings and services in the village.

5.3 Human resources

More than the generation of financial and material resources, our informants valued the generation of human and knowledge-related resources. All interviewees in both countries agreed that an early on exchange of knowledge about formal procedures, or the incorporation of informal established local knowledge, are vital resources for the adaptive capacity of citizen initiatives.

Local tacit knowledge is often undocumented yet present within the personal networks of community members. We observed that local knowledge constitutes a resource that can be used for more context-sensitive governmental planning, or for the development of community plans. The Dutch non-governmental organisation GFDKK[3] supports communities that want to develop community or village plans. These plans represent the local interests of citizens, but also provide a discussion document that can be used in communications with local governments. In their support, the GFDKK ensures that village plans are based on a broad local consensus and good argumentation. Given these merits, the villagers' experience, as documented in the village plans, is more likely to be incorporated into the municipal formal planning.

The community of Bestorp (Sweden) was confronted with the closure of the local primary school. According to the statistics of the municipality of Linköping, the enrolment numbers were insufficient to maintain a school there. However, the citizens of Bestorp knew of several young families that could provide pupils in the near future. In order to prevent closure, they wrote a lengthy document using the language normally used by policy makers. In this situation, the citizens, several of whom were academics with access to scientific networks and knowledge, used their local and professional knowledge to convince the municipal politicians.

The utilisation of knowledge also occurs in the opposite direction: knowledge gathered by governments (such as statistics) is used by communities to develop plans. The Local Economic Assessment (LEA), a tool developed by HSSL[4], the Swedish counterpart of GFDKK, is a good example of the transfer of governmental data. With the help of the LEA, citizens can use governmental statistics to create an economic analysis of their area. This analysis can provide

[3] Gelderse Federatie voor Dorpshuizen en Kleine Kernen (Regional Foundation for Community Centres and Small Communities of Gelderland)

[4] Hela Sverige Ska Leva (All of Sweden Shall Live)

further input for local (economic) initiatives, such as the local supply of goods and services, or cultural and social gatherings (Herlitz n.d.).

In our observation, the exchange of knowledge forms part of the interaction between governments and communities, as well as between communities and/or governments and NGOs such as GFDKK and HSSL. Such interactions provide citizens with access to official documents, support communities in interpreting legislation and provide a platform where communities (and sometimes governments) can exchange experiences. Especially in the Netherlands, where formal planning is dense and inevitable, insider knowledge about procedures is a valuable resource.

5.4 Organisational resources

We observed that informal planning initiatives predominantly generate *organisational* resources, and that these resources are understood by the residents as being very important. Power, legitimacy, acknowledgement and responsibility all form part of what we interpret here as organisational resources. However, the generation of these resources takes place in a general context of devolution, and the resources, as such, are not necessarily a result of bottom-up initiatives, but rather a result of a wider societal change.

During devolution processes, existing power structures within communities appear to be reconfirmed. People with networks, key initiators and chairmen are confirmed in their positions of power when more power and responsibilities devolve to the communities. Power structures are also confirmed through the need for communities to formalise their organisations. Our study shows that to receive support from the government, a legal body is often required from the local community. Nearly all of the communities in our study had a village board that provided them with a legal status as a foundation or association.

Furthermore, we observed that municipalities find it easier to establish public support for their plans if local communities are actively involved. Most of the interviewed municipal officers claimed that they find it important to deal with a formal foundation or association; for them, this is a proof of local support (i.e., legitimacy) and accountability. In this context, a legitimate representative for the community that is capable of negotiating with the local government is an important asset. One such example is the village board of Grytgöl. The board constitutes an organisation that claims, and is widely understood, to represent all the inhabitants of Grytgöl and its surroundings. However, in order to maintain its reputation and legitimacy, the board has the ambition to incorporate all initiatives from the community, because fragmentation of the village would harm its position:

> *A year ago, there were three girls who came to the board, and they asked: 'Couldn't you start a riding section in the sports club?' Yes, […] of course we can. But if we had said no, they would have started their own club, […] and we did not want that.*
>
> Village Board member, Grytgöl (Sweden)

In essence, the shift from government control to citizen initiative is a redistribution of *responsibilities*. It is not new for citizens to carry the responsibility for things of common interest. Rural communities in Sweden and the Netherlands have a history of arranging public facilities themselves: they have developed social and physical infrastructures to solve everyday problems (Abbas and Commandeur 2012; Wänström 2013). At the beginning of the twentieth century, these responsibilities were incorporated by (local) governments and embedded in laws such as the National Health Service or the Housing Act (Hall and Tewdwr-Jones 2010).

Today, public responsibilities are partially reallocated at the community level. Communities take over responsibilities that formerly belonged to the (local) government, such as education, health care, (green) public space, recreation and sports accommodations. This appears to be more the case in depopulating regions than in growing regions. In Sweden, we mostly observed a passive shift of responsibilities towards local communities: facilities are no longer provided by governments, but active citizens can step in to provide them. In the Netherlands, however, we observed a much more active process: the transfer of responsibilities is actively stimulated by governments and is part of their policy plan.

Finally, we observed that informal planning initiatives generate pride and place attachment (i.e. acknowledgement). In the context of local planning practices, these attributes can be understood as organisational resources, since studies indicate that place attachment correlates positively with the likelihood of citizens taking responsibility for the development of their locality (Vaske and Kobrin 2001).

> *The people in this village, they are very proud when they can take over [facilities from the municipality] and when they can develop something and make it a better situation than before. That is some kind of victory, almost as important as winning a football game.*
>
> Citizen, Grytgöl (Sweden)

6. Conclusion

This paper set out to present an analytical framework that allows us to systematically examine the resources that are generated through informal planning practices. Our ethnographic studies demonstrate that informal planning generates a wide range of resources that are understood as beneficial by the local community. Although our initial ambition was to devote equal attention to all the resource categories in our analytical framework, our analysis demonstrates that two of the resource categories appeared to be particularly important: human resources and organisational resources.

To us, the most noteworthy finding was that in a wider context of devolution, informal community groups formalise their initiatives in order to gain legitimacy in negotiations with local governments. In this respect, we could not observe any significant differences between the Dutch and the Swedish cases. The most radical change underlying the shift from governmental planning to citizen initiative is the transfer of democratic principal. The democratic principle is transferred from a representative democracy (the government) to a situation in which citizens themselves decide on the future spatial organisation of their living environment. This implies that part of the power base for making decisions about plans is transferred to the community level. As the communities gain autonomy, the municipalities must trust the citizens to implement plans that represent the needs of the greater community and to avoid (financial) risks. In the Netherlands, communities are actively approached by the government to take over planning responsibilities. Stimulating community initiatives often forms part of municipal, provincial and even national spatial policies. In Sweden, a shift towards community-led planning could also be observed. However, municipalities in Sweden rarely stimulate community initiatives as actively as those in the Netherlands. Rather, communities in Sweden take over facilities that are no longer funded by local governments.

Another important finding was that the generation of resources often relied on and further generated other resources. This finding implies that whether and how resources become resources at all depend on the existence of other resources. Organisational resources may generate financial resources, which in turn lead to an increase in the legitimacy of the organisations representing the local community. Whether and how resources come about also depend on contextual, relational and situational dynamics such as the capacity of citizens, policy settings and political decisions. Although these settings were different in each country, we observed rather similar dynamics within the communities. In both cases, we observed community members with strong informal networks who were able to generate substantial resource bases (whether funding, external knowledge or legitimacy, or acknowledgement). These internal dynamics seemed to be a decisive factor in the realisation of successful community initiatives.

The study presented here should prove to be particularly valuable to students and practitioners who need an analytical tool to observe, analyse and understand informal planning practices in rural depopulating areas. The model introduced here provides a framework for an exploration of the resource base that underpins and evolves from such planning practices. For local planning, the findings of this study have a number of practical implications. In contrast to urban areas (where public facilities are sufficient and citizens are less dependent on local networks), communities in rural depopulating areas rely on local available resources, and on informal networks to access these resources. An integrated understanding of the available resources in such areas is necessary to understand the opportunities for communities to develop and implement plans.

After this introduction of an analytical model that allows us to systematically study resources in informal planning, we now call for further research in which the study of informal planning is followed by an analysis of power relations. As argued by Bathelt and Glückler (2005, 1553), 'power, like social capital, is embedded in all network relations and, at the same time, created through them'. In any planning process and in any planning group, we meet with internal power asymmetries and with a 'plurality of values that need to be managed' (Nilsson 2007, 440). Future research should therefore devote specific attention to how access to and control over various resources influence these internal power asymmetries. Which actors obtain access to the identified resources? To what extent is the distribution of resources gendered, age-dependent or related to issues such as land ownership, levels of education and social capital? Is local government capital transferred equally between and among communities? Or do communities with good networks, active citizens and strong capabilities always come first?

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