Towards a Sustainable Landscape: Constructing Identities and Ambitions in a Citizen Initiative in the Making

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Abstract: The recent proliferation of citizen initiatives that aim to contribute to sustainable landscape transition prompted us to study how members of such an initiative in-the-making try to position themselves in their environment in order to make a meaningful contribution. We use a single case study in the east of the Netherlands to study how members discursively construct identities and ambitions through the inclusion of people and ideas over time. We applied an interactional framing analysis to 20 audio-recorded and transcribed meetings of the citizen initiative. The results show that various actors and ideas were included over time, resulting in the construction of different ambitions and identities over time. Ambitions changed in response to new event and changing circumstances. To justify these changing ambitions, the members constructed new identities during their conversations, using different interactional framing strategies. The study reveals that the process of finding an ambition and identity continuously changed direction, paradoxically, due to a lack of direction that hindered the members in making coherent and sustainable decisions. We conclude that a citizen initiative should actively interact with their relation groups to find a direction that supports the process of effectively positioning their initiative and contributes to the shared goal of improving the quality of the living environment.

Keywords: citizen initiative; identities; ambitions; interactional framing; discursive construction; positioning; self-organisation; sustainable landscape; landscape transition; case study

1. Introduction

Our physical environment, and that of many species worldwide, is under threat. Demands and impacts of climate change, biodiversity loss, food production systems, energy transition, and flood-risk protection are putting our landscape under pressure [1,2]. Concurrently, there is a proliferation of self-organised citizen initiatives in support of improving the quality of the living environment [3–10]. The involvement of citizens in policy development and implementation is not new as it reflects a broader societal and scientific trend over the last twenty years, which is known as the transformation from government to governance [11,12]. The recent landscape challenges, however, spark renewed interest in the contribution of these citizen initiatives to the planning, conservation, protection, and development of the physical environment [13–15], thus, the domain of sustainable landscape planning.

The rise of citizen initiatives does not stand in isolation; it relates to a broader shift towards active citizenship [16,17]. In active citizenship, we can distinguish between participation and self-organisation. Participation refers to practices whereby the government invites citizens to participate, in various degrees, in procedures and frameworks set by governmental agencies [18]. Self-organisation is initiated by citizens who organise themselves in order to realise a collective ambition [9,19] in which citizens
themselves define the goals and how to achieve them, independent from governmental or other external organisations [10]. Arnstein’s [20] participation ladder distinguishes between different degrees of participation, whereby a citizen initiative could be placed at the end of the ladder, where citizens take the initiative and ask the government for support. Academics generally refer to these forms as ‘citizen initiatives’, but terms such as civic engagement, grassroots initiatives, community initiatives, civic initiatives, and citizen-led development are also used [10]. Such initiatives often emerge out of self-reliance, in response to discontent with current ways of doing [21] and their vision of a creating a better society [22]. Wagenaar et al. [15] show that ideals, dreams, the wish to do good, ownership, and the search for meaning are drivers for launching a citizen initiative. There is a broad variety in the manifestations of citizen initiatives [23], varying in scale of operation, issue at stake, spontaneity, duration, formality, relation to public policy, and disciplinary backgrounds [16]. What we mean here is different from the political term ‘citizen initiative’, where citizens write a motion and collect signatures to put it on the political agenda, thus, turning the action and responsibility back to the government. We focus on citizen initiatives concerned with the quality of the living environment. Examples of such citizen initiatives can be found in the provisioning of green space [24], landscape conservation [25], urban–rural fringes [26], improving liveability [27], urban regeneration [19], and revitalising rural areas [28].

Although citizen initiatives have attracted increasing attention over the past years [24–27], many questions remain regarding their functioning and contribution to sustainable landscape development [3] and their transformative potential is still an important topic of scrutiny [6,15]. Currently, there is limited understanding of how these initiatives operate, how members negotiate their mission and goal, and position their initiative in relation to other initiatives and organisations within and outside the region. Understanding how the members of a citizen initiative in-the-making construct a potential contribution to landscape development is essential for understanding their role in socio-ecological transition [29].

This paper studies a recently started citizen initiative in the east of the Netherlands driven by concern about the region’s quality of biodiversity and landscape. Our study focuses on how the members of the Sustainable Landscape Initiative (as we call it in this paper) in-the-making negotiate their identity (who are we, who not?) and ambition (what do we aim to achieve, what not?). We aim to understand how they position their initiative in their environment and try to organise a meaningful contribution to the development of a sustainable and biodiverse landscape. Understanding how the members establish the position of their initiative is important, because some citizen initiatives prove very successful, whereas others disappear almost instantly [8]. In order to study the process of how this initiative’s members position themselves, we adopt a discursive approach, starting from the following questions:

- **GRQ**: How do the members of the citizen initiative (discursively) construct their identity and ambition?
- **RQ1**: What actors and ideas are included and/or excluded in the interactions within a citizen initiative in the making?
- **RQ2**: What strategies do the members use to construct and legitimate the inclusion and/or exclusion of actors and ideas?
- **RQ3**: What is the effect of the inclusion and exclusion of people and ideas on the initiative’s ambitions and identities?

First, we discuss the theoretical basis of our study. In the method section, we elaborate on the research approach, case study design, and methods for data collection and analysis. Then, we present our results, structured by a timeline: five phases in the process illustrated with interaction segments. In the discussion, we compare theory and practice in answering the research questions, reflect on the methods used and explore avenues for future research. We finish with the main conclusions.
2. Materials and Methods

In this section, we briefly discuss four issues: (1) organisations in their environment, (2) identity dynamics, (3) inclusion and exclusion, and (4) framing. After these theoretical starting points, we give an outline of the research methods.

2.1. Understanding Organisations in Their Environment

From an organisational perspective, citizen initiatives emerge as new organisations that need to tune in with the current arena of organisations, which, in this case, are involved in the governing of the landscape in a specific region. In this self-organisation process, citizen initiatives are under continuous negotiation, both within the initiative and in relation to other organisations [30–32]. Citizen initiatives do not operate in a vacuum but relate to an environment of organisations where different formal and informal initiatives work to improve the quality of the living environment. The environment of an organisation, its biotope, consists of the network of organisations that either help or hinder that organisation [33]. These organisations may have shared, overlapping, or contesting goals, but at least all ‘have an interest in the actions of that organisation and the ability to influence it’ (p. 16, [34]). Communication, then, functions as antennae for exploring and mapping the environment and adjusting an organisation at the right time in order to function optimally in realising its ambitions [35]. From this perspective, the establishment of a citizen initiative is an issue of positioning in its environment, where the members negotiate their added value in relation to other existing actors [36].

2.2. Identity Dynamics

Positioning an organisation is about ‘how people use words to locate themselves and others’ (p. 2, [37]). Positioning an organisation can be understood as an ongoing process of sense-making [38], where the members of an organisation make sense of (1) what is at stake, (2) what others do, and (3) what to contribute themselves. Positions are either implicit or explicit and can be contested, refused, and assigned in interaction among actors [39]. Davies and Harré [40] emphasise the dynamic and processual character of positioning [41]. A position implicitly limits how much is logically possible for a given actor to say and/or do and is properly part of the repertoire of actions at a certain juncture in a certain context [42]. An organisation’s position can be seen as identity (who are we?) and ambition (what do we aim to achieve?). Identities are not stable but continuously (re-)constructed in interaction [41]. An identity can be understood as framing of oneself in relation to what is at stake (p. 236, [43]), their position in relation to the issue and others involved. From this perspective, we understand positioning as an ongoing process where the members of a citizen initiative negotiate and construct their identities and ambitions in relation to those of other actors [33].

2.3. Inclusion and Exclusion

Members of an initiative in-the-making can position their initiative by including or excluding actors and ideas, to define what the initiative is (and what not) and what it does (and what not). Inclusion and exclusion influence the initiative’s identity and ambition and, vice versa, the perceived or desired identity and ambition influence what to include and/or exclude. From an interactionist perspective, inclusion refers to the deliberate or accidental selection or deselection of what to include in a conversation [44] and can refer to people, ideas, regions, or strategies. Inclusion is based on assumptions about current realities (e.g., events, phenomena, and developments) and, subsequently, what actions to take and by whom, based on what reality ought to be. Inclusion refers to defining what is at stake, who should be involved, and what the process should look like. The inclusion or exclusion of actors and ideas is discursively constructed in interaction [45] where the members frame and legitimate what and who should be included (as relevant) and what and who should not be included, thus are excluded, as every inclusion is simultaneously an exclusion [44,46].
2.4. Framing

In order to uncover how inclusion and exclusion are brought about in interaction and effect on the construction of identities and ambitions, we adopt a framing approach. Framing starts from the idea that realities are constructed and reconstructed in interaction [47]. Although not always consciously, but nevertheless actively, people construct specific frames to achieve certain goals [43]. Following Entman (p. 52, [48]), we understand framing as selecting ‘some aspect(s) of a perceived reality and mak[ing] them more salient in a communicating text [or interaction], in such a way to promote a particular (1) problem definition, (2) causal interpretation, (3) moral evaluation, and/or (4) treatment recommendation for the item described’. Dewulf et al. [49] distinguish between cognitive and interactional framing, whereby the first focuses on frames as cognitive knowledge structures, and the latter on how people negotiate meaning in interaction. We opt for an interactional approach, as we aim to understand how negotiators and disputants co-construct meaning while they are interacting [49]. The members of the citizen initiative may frame the issue at stake (issue frames, including causes and solutions), the self of the citizen initiative (identity frames), the other organisation(s) (characterisation frames), the relationship between the citizen initiative and other organisations (relationship frames), and how to proceed (process frames). These frames are not crystallised and static but change over time consequent to continuous framing and reframing in different contexts [50,51].

In sum, organisations position themselves in their environment by constructing identities and ambitions through framing in interaction in which inclusion/exclusion of actors and ideas is realised. These sensitising concepts give direction to a frame analysis of conversations among the members of the citizen initiative. Our analytical focus is twofold, focusing on (1) the inclusion/exclusion in conversations and (2) its effect on the construction of identities and ambitions over time.

2.5. Methodology

This research is conducted from a socio-constructivist perspective, arguing that meaning and identity are constructed in interaction [47]. We perform an interactional framing analysis to study the effects of inclusion/exclusion on the construction of identities and ambitions over time. A single case study approach was adopted to generate context-dependent and in-depth understanding [52] that captures the richness and depth of reality (the power of the example) [53]. We selected the case on several criteria: (1) a citizen initiative aiming to improve the quality of their living environment; (2) possibility to study the citizen initiative from the start and over time; and (3) access to meetings, documents, and internal communication. Taking a longitudinal perspective allowed us to analyse the dynamics in the construction of identities and ambitions over time, providing a processual understanding of the present-day situation in light of the constant reconstruction of past events [34].

2.6. Case Study Background

The research situates in a Dutch context, in an area of around 6000 hectares in the east of the Netherlands (see Figure 1). The area is bounded by a river to the north, the German border to the east, a moraine to the south, and a regional city to the west. The area consists mainly of floodplains, grasslands, and agricultural land, intersected by small waterways and hedges, with farms and small villages scattered over the land. The reed lands and marsh forest along the riverbank have a Natura 2000 status. The Sustainable Landscape Initiative, founded in 2018, aims to promote a biodiverse landscape through fostering a transition towards nature-inclusive agriculture in their area. In addition, the members formulated a special goal of connecting between initiatives in their region. The citizen initiative consists of six members who are inhabitants of the area or the bordering city, although the composition changed over time.
2.7. Methods for Data Collection

We collected the data over one and a half years through participatory observation of 20 internal meetings that took place once per month at the kitchen tables of citizen-initiative members and lasted around two hours each. The meetings were in Dutch and audio-recorded with the attendees’ permission. We supplemented the recording with the agenda, attachments and minutes and kept personal notes during each meeting. In addition, we had access to members’ e-mail and WhatsApp-communications in between the meetings during the entire research period. To get an understanding of how these meetings influenced the context in which the citizen initiative operated, we attended several external meetings where the members interacted with other stakeholders. Finally, we collected relevant policy documents and newspaper articles. The data are thus ethnographic in nature, providing a view from within a citizen initiative over time.

2.8. Methods for Data Analysis

After the meetings, we manually and literally transcribed the audiotapes to capture the interaction precisely, using f4transkript software. We performed an interactional framing analysis to study what actors and ideas were included/excluded, how inclusion/exclusion was discursively achieved, and the effect on the construction of ambitions and identities of the citizen initiative over time. We coded the transcripts using iterative coding as a tool to order and interpret the text (e.g., what has been said) using both AtlasTI and manual coding [55]. In the analysis, we coded for (1) inclusion/exclusion of actors and ideas; (2) issue, identity, characterisation, relationship, and process frames used to legitimate inclusion/exclusion; and (3) decisions on ambitions and identities. During the coding process, we used open coding, axial coding, and selective coding iteratively, as these coding are not sequential but rather overlapping [56]. We started from predefined theoretically informed codes (top-down or axial coding) based on the three themes above, and added empirically informed codes that emerged during the process (bottom-up or open coding), followed by selective coding to isolate and elaborate higher-order codes (selective coding). We used the themes of inclusion/exclusion (i.e., code ‘inclusion actor’, ‘exclusion idea’), framing strategies (i.e., code ‘identity frame’, ‘characterisation frame’), and effect (i.e., code ‘decision ambition’). We thus combined deductive and inductive logic, and in the end, the results are the product of an ongoing intertwining of deductive and inductive approaches. To ensure trustworthiness, the three contributing authors started with joint coding, followed by individual coding that we compared afterwards. In doing so, we iteratively worked towards a coding-tree.

3. Results

The results are structured using a timeline (see Figure 2) that gives an overview of the development of the citizen initiative during the research period from September 2018 to December 2019.
Figure 2. Phases in the process of constructing ambitions and identities.

After collecting, transcribing, and coding the meetings, we distinguished five phases in which we identified a change in identity and ambition. In each phase, we analysed moments in the interactions that played a decisive role in the further development of the initiative’s identities and ambitions. Each phase, lasting around four months, starts with the ambitions and identities that resulted from the previous phase. In these interactions, we specifically focused on what actors and ideas were included or excluded, how inclusion/exclusion was brought about, and how this contributed to the (re-)construction of identities and ambitions over time. We show the dilemma(s) that the members faced as the circumstances and interactions changed, how the members discursively resolved (and legitimated) each dilemma using framing and strategies, and the effect on the (re-)construction of the citizen initiative’s identities and ambitions. In the results below, we present the main findings of our coding process.

3.1. Phase 1: ‘We Are Explorative Connectors’

The first phase is explorative, whereby the initiative’s first members search for an ambition that adds to what other organisations are doing to make the area more sustainable. At the meetings, the members discuss the dilemma of how to present themselves to involve farmers (and their lands), working towards (and resulting in) an identity as a connective citizen initiative with the ambition to connect organisations in order to support nature-inclusive agriculture.

The citizen initiative starts in November 2017 when the initiator calls for volunteers in the local birdwatchers’ periodical, where he reported an alarming study showing a 75% decrease in insects and the cascading effects on other species such as meadow birds [1]. The initiator also had witnessed this decline in biodiversity over the past 10 years in the area, particularly in the agricultural inlands surrounded by Natura2000 areas, and decided to start a citizen initiative.

Five inhabitants respond to the call ‘to turn the area into an organic Valhalla’ and form a group from early 2018 onwards. During their first monthly meeting, the members argue that, although the area looks relatively green and blossoming on the outside, its agricultural lands are ‘as dead as a doornail’. Their ambition is to improve the biodiversity of these agricultural lands (covering 50% of the area, CBS Statline, 2019), referring to successful examples of nature-inclusive agriculture elsewhere in the Netherlands. This ambition implies that farmers are the most important actors to be involved in their activities. The inclusion of farmers means characterising farmers as not the ones to blame, but rather as the victims of a system that forces them to continuously intensify their business. In the meetings that follow, the members discuss strategies on how to present themselves in order to involve farmers, as in the next segment (the letters in this and the following segments refer to the members of the citizen initiative present at their meetings):

P2: If someone calls us, what should we say? I mean, we need a good story! We earlier agreed to call ourselves not ‘biological’ but ‘sustainable’, right? That is already less threatening towards farmers!

P3: Originally, we were called ‘biological and sustainable’ indeed, haha!

P1: Or we simply cite the minister of agriculture?
P5: Yes!
P1: Carola!
P2: Yes, that is actually a very good idea!
P1: Yes!
P2: And then we say, well, there is a transition towards nature-inclusive agriculture on the national level, and we want to help shape this in our area. Maybe that is a good idea! And that’s it.

This interaction demonstrates that the members realise that language is performative: involving farmers is an issue of carefully choosing words, excluding language that may be threatening for farmers (‘sustainability instead of biodiversity’). Another strategy for involving farmers in their initiative is connecting to the national ambition for nature-inclusive agriculture as promoted by the minister of agriculture (‘citing the minister’) to strengthen and legitimate their initiative. Moreover, to create an entry point to include farmers, the members present themselves as citizens of a nearby regional city, who aim for local products, sustainable development, and short food chains:

P3: So, we are a citizen initiative, I mean, concerned nature enthusiasts?
P5: Yes! We are citizens of [city] and its surroundings and we want to eat and drink products from our area! As much as possible from our surroundings with short transport chains! And we are helping farmers to accomplish that!
P1: Exactly. That is much more than being nature lovers!
P2: Haha! That you are a bird-, euh, nature enthusiast, H!
P5: Haha! We do not care about those birds! [sarcastic]
P4: The term nature lovers can scare some farmers away!
P2: ‘Bye bye!’
P5: Exactly! But we want to consume your products! How can we do that?
P4: Yes!
P5: I do not want anonymous milk! I want your milk!
P2: Local [area] milk!
P5: How can I get that?
P2: Yes!
P3: The Sustainable Landscape Initiative!

This fragment of the fourth meeting shows how the members construct a dependence on the farmers (‘we want your products’), framing themselves as inhabitants and local consumers. In order to prevent being characterised as nature enthusiasts and thus potentially farmers’ enemies, the members emphasise that they are citizens who want to help farmers, with their preliminary name (‘citizen initiative’). The members further strengthen their identity by comparing themselves to other initiatives:
P2: I think that it would be good that, in some way or another, we are a club that simulates and boosts the transition, either from below or from above! I mean, we could start yet another consultation but . . .

P1: Well, but

P2: But I think we should catalyse on the background! Because all those meetings; there is already enough deliberation!

P5: Indeed!

P2: But my point here is, all these deliberations are gooey! And it would be great if we could be the pinpricks in the syrup! Like, come on, take that next step! You know?

The implicit characterisation of the current organisations as ‘too deliberative’ and ‘gooey’ fits with the identity frame: (1) we are not going to talk much, we do things; (2) we are not gooey, we are making progress. These characterisations thus effect their identity as ‘boosters’ and ‘catalysts’. 

P2: We clearly had the plan to be primarily catalyser and connector. We do not need to be in the foreground, anyway. And we are not going to impose something on the farmers! We are really going to help them! We are not telling them what to do as if we know exactly how it should be. It is more a connecting function! And combine that with opportunities that arise!

In sum, the inclusion/exclusion of actors and ideas during the first phase results in the identity of a citizen initiative with the ambition to improve the biodiversity in their area by connecting to, and supporting, farmers who are willing to make a transition towards nature-inclusive agriculture.

3.2. Phase 2: ‘We Are Openminded Solvers’

The second phase is characterised by friction around a proposed milk factory in the area. At the sixth and the seventh meeting, the members in favour of supporting the milk factory support one another, whereas resistance grows after the inclusion of two potential new members, leading to a conflict in the eighth meeting. Gradually, the members work towards the ambition of offering economic alternatives, reinforcing their identity of being flexible, open-minded and making progress; however, with the unexpected consequence of three members resigning.

The second phase starts when a billionaire (who is not part of the initiative) buys a vacant chicken farm in a village just outside the area and initiates plans to turn it into a high-tech milk factory. The milk factory changes the context, as several members argue for including with the milk factory as an opportunity (‘enabler’) to connect with the farmers (‘we have to shed some light into their barns’), referring to successful models elsewhere (‘blueprints’) where a milk factory functioned as an enabler of transition.

The members contact the entrepreneur (as a ‘citizen coalition’) and offer public support for the milk factory in exchange for reserving 25% of the factory’s capacity for local, organically produced milk to offer to farmers in their area. Whereas the members start negotiations with the entrepreneur, one member increasingly contests the potential inclusion of the milk factory during the citizen initiative’s meetings. Two recently joined members P7 and P8 endorse a founder member’s hesitation and argue for contacting and involving farmers first (‘without telling them what to do’). What follows illustrates an attempt to legitimate the inclusion of the controversial milk factory:

P2: When you say to a farmer, ‘you have to be biological’, they will be gone!

P6: So, you refer to models for nature-inclusive agriculture?

P2: Yes, with very low and small steps. And step by step, so that farmers do not have to make a big step, immediately.
P6: Oh.

P2: And that is my professional experience: if we can offer that, we have a chance! Whereas if you start with such a barrier, 90% of the farmers will be gone! (…) With the small footnote that, personally, this is the best attitude we should have, an open door towards farmers. At the same time, you have to drag them out of their hole, because they remain farmers who are hard to get in motion! So we either have to hold out a carrot to them or come up with a very good business model!

P7: Yes, surely.

P2: Farmers often do not come out of themselves, but I have experienced in my work that you really have to drag them over a dike, and whenever that happens, it will start rolling!

P8: Well, in that sense the milk factory could be interesting, right?

P2: Exactly!

The proposal to include the milk factory fits with the assumption that, in order to stimulate farmers to make a transition, they should be offered an (economic) alternative (‘if we can offer that, we have a chance’, ‘it will start rolling’). This process frame entails the characterisation of farmers who, without such model, are difficult to steer towards transition (‘otherwise, 90% of the farmers are already gone’, ‘you have to hold out a carrot to them’). The proposal is legitimated by referring to earlier (professional) experiences twice, with the result that member P8’s response is in favour of the milk factory. The inclusion of the milk factory as an opportunity to stimulate farmers to make a transition is further legitimated by again comparing themselves to other initiatives in the area, who are downplayed as supposedly not responding to the farmers’ needs (‘doing nothing more than research and stocktaking’) and not making progress (‘whereas what is going wrong has already been known for years’):

P7: It is important that, well, the landscape association [organisation aimed at connecting nature, culture and agriculture] is now working on this as well, together with the farmers’ union and the agro-environmental organisation! You have to relate to that! You cannot just start your own thing here! These people have been working for more than 25 years in this area and know e-ve-ry farmer, so I think it is very weird when you suddenly overtake them with something completely different! It has to be connected in some way!

P8: But I suppose it is not the intention to overtake them, right?

P5: No.

P2: Euh, no, that is not the intention, although I would like to say that we said to one another at the beginning that we do not want to be another agricultural, euh, failing model again! I have seen many examples from my professional experience with tons of money for small nature patches and strips at the edges that did not deliver anything!

The inclusion of the milk factory fits with the characterisation of other initiatives as not making progress (‘wasting money’, ‘strips and edges’, ‘does not deliver anything’), framing their own ambition as offering concrete solutions (such as the milk factory) that actually contribute to nature-inclusive agriculture and biodiversity restoration and their identity as ‘not another failing model’. The opposing members, however, argue that the inclusion of the milk factory contravenes their identity as connectors. Both the proponent and the opponent seek support for their argument by appealing to former agreements (‘as we said at the beginning’).
In the next segment, during the eight meeting, the four opponents exclude the milk factory by framing the entrepreneur (‘capitalist’, ‘industrial’, ‘enemy’, and even ‘the devil himself’) and his ambitions negatively (‘green washing’), disqualifying the entrepreneur as a cooperation partner, while referring to another area in the Netherlands where the entrepreneur launched similar plans and was taken to the High Court. The proponents, however, disconnect the milk factory from the entrepreneur (‘what else he is doing does not matter’) and suggest ignoring the negative characterisation in order to legitimate their actions as turning evil into good.

P2: I would deal with the biggest devil if that could bring my goals closer!

P7: But, if …

P2: Hold on! Let me finish! If, if that milk factory could succeed in making 25% of the farmers within the municipality transition towards nature-inclusive agriculture, well, I would jump right through the roof! I do not care about the rest, because the alternative is that maybe 5% of the farmers will do something! (..) So the idea behind the milk factory is that, when you drink that milk, your surroundings will be greener and greener! We have to arrange that very carefully with the entrepreneur; there can be no millimetre in between. I don’t care what else he is doing! Otherwise, it is not going to happen! (..) This is an opportunity that is suddenly arising!

P3, P5: Yes!

P2: And if it could help us realise our goals, why not?

P3: Yes! These are the two options the entrepreneur is offering us: cooperate or don’t!

This interaction demonstrates the accumulation of arguments in favour of the milk factory, resulting in a collaboration between the proponents that entails excluding opponents (later on, a few members even resign). The proponents legitimate the inclusion of the milk factory by characterising the opposing members as nit-picking and pedantic, consequently framing themselves as more flexible and open-minded. In doing so, the proponents accept the negative characterisation of the entrepreneur and acknowledge the dilemma (‘dealing with the devil’) as a strategy to reformulate their standpoint. The proponents P2, P3, and P5 endorse one another and argue for including the milk factory nonetheless, using the strategies of framing a lack of alternatives (‘otherwise it is not going to happen’), dichotomising the debate (‘these are the two options’), and downplaying their influence (‘it is likely to happen, whether we cooperate or not’). The inclusion of the milk factory fits with reframing the milk factory from being an uncertain chance towards being inevitable.

The discussion continues over e-mail communication afterwards, resulting in the resignation (self-exclusion) of three opposing members (‘if the milk factory is included, we will resign’). The resigning members argue that the milk factory will be ‘a millstone around your neck’, that it ‘puts pressure on a delicate process’ and ‘divides us’. The remaining members are characterised as an ‘elitist gossip group’, blamed for having ‘tunnel vision’, ‘gone too far in flirting with an industrialist’, ‘without knowing whether farmers want to switch’, and ‘copying models from elsewhere with blinkers on’.

3.3. Phase 3: ‘We Are Critical Safeguards’

In the third phase, the members deal with the dilemma of defining their role and contribution regarding the milk factory. The members seek to resolve the unease around the inclusion of the milk factory by shifting responsibilities to other organisations, resulting in a more process-oriented ambition as ‘critical citizens’.

The unexpected dynamics within the citizen initiative around the inclusion of the controversial milk factory, leading to the (self-)exclusion of three members, leaves the remaining members in
doubt about how to proceed. The members are reconsidering the inclusion of the milk factory and, in particular, whether there would be enough dairy farmers in the area and whether these few farmers would favour the idea of the milk factory:

P4: Do we actually have something to offer to the milk factory?

P1: Huh? Do we need something to offer?

P4: Yes!

P1: Should we?

P4: Well, because there may be two dairy farmers in the area with future perspective, which proved fewer than we had in mind.

P1: Wait! I thought we agreed that we are not going to do any marketing for the milk factory? We are not going to search for farmers! Come on!

P2: But you [P4] mean that we, with our initiative, should contact the farmers?

P4: Yes, we said, ‘we have contact with farmers’, ‘farmers are enthusiastic as well’. That’s what we said in the dairy consortium meetings!

P2: Ah, alright, but I do not think we should.

P4: I mean, maybe we should not have to recruit farmers, but we are opening the possibility for the milk factory, whereas I wonder whether it is a feasible route!

The members start doubting whether including the idea of the milk factory (1) is realistic and feasible and (2) fits their ambition and responsibilities. The number of dairy farmers is continuously debated, varying from 60 to 2 farmers, but not fact-checked. Along with questioning their ambition, the members use the strategy of shifting responsibilities (‘should we offer?’) to resolve the unease with their position with regards to the milk factory. The repositioning and gradual exclusion of the milk factory fits with reframing the milk factory from ‘inevitable’ towards ‘uncertain’, resulting in a reframing of their identity:

P1: We are not going to be a flag on a milk pile!

P2: Exactly!

P1: We have offered them a promising vision! That is what we have done!

P2: Well said, P2.

P3: Indeed. We have been catalysts and will continue being so! Igniting sparks wherever necessary, but we are not the fuel of these initiatives!

P1: It is the entrepreneur who is responsible! And the municipality should secure that and create the right circumstances, that is not our business!

P2: And that does not feel like pulling ourselves back?

P1: No.

P2: No?

P1: No!
The members resolve the unease around the exclusion of the milk factory with the strategy of shifting responsibilities, characterising the municipality and the entrepreneur as ‘responsible’ and downplaying their contribution (‘not a flag on a milk pile’). The shift in responsibilities affects the lowering of the ambition and expectations from offering economic alternatives towards sketching potential directions (‘igniting sparks but not the fuel’), which entails shifting their ambition towards facilitating the process and their identity as catalysts. In line with the renewed focus on the process, the members expand their ambition towards demanding biodiversity and sustainability policies from the municipality:

P3: It is the question of where we can have the most influence (…). The provincial environmental federation for example has an action plan for nature-inclusive agriculture; so we can ask, ‘do you have that as well, municipality?’ No? When can we expect a plan for our area? Asking questions and demanding policies! It is ridiculous that we do not have such a plan already!

P2: That’s true!

P3: Yes? Do you agree? Because it sickens me!

P1: I think our role is, or should be, that we map and connect obvious plans to an obvious execution!

P3: Yes, that is what I want. Then we can have an influence!

P1: And primarily we should not reinvent the wheel all over again!

P5: Indeed! (..)

P3: I guess that is a way forward, asking the provincial environmental federation on the one hand, could you include our area as pilot in your action plan? And on the other hand, we should demand policies and plans from the municipality, as critical citizens. ‘Do you already have something?’

P2: Agreed. I think that, when we as citizen raise our voice, they will be sensitive to that!

The interaction demonstrates the search for a new meaningful and acceptable ambition and identity. The position of safeguarding the process is legitimated by characterising the municipality as lacking plans and policies, creating a void for encouraging and monitoring the municipality and the provincial environmental federation. In doing so, the members shift their ambition towards stimulating the process (‘not reinventing the wheel’) and their identity as involved ‘critical citizens’ who are allowed to critically assess these organisations. Consequently, with their ambition now broader than helping farmers, the farmers are no longer the main actors to involve.

3.4. Phase 4: ‘We Are Independent Doers’

The fourth phase is characterised by the dilemma that the process-oriented approach (which resulted from the previous phase) has increased their dependence on others. The members work towards an ambition of realising concrete nature satellites and an identity as independent doers.

The process-oriented identity and ambition of the citizen initiative is soon re-discussed. Shifting responsibilities to others would reduce their own influence and increase their dependence on others, which is apparently not what they want. Newly included member P9 doubts also whether there are enough farmers (with a future perspective) in the area and searches in the statistics, which confirms his doubts and adds to the definitive exclusion of the milk factory. The gradual distancing from the milk factory makes other avenues more important, although it is not yet clear what the members aim to achieve now. The members discuss where they can add something:
P3: We have seen examples of acquiring land to make nature prosper! In such a way, we can take matters into our own hands! If we remain dependent on other parties—we do not own or rent land—we have nothing to say about it. Then it will be very hard to have an impact on land that belongs to others!

P2: Indeed.

P3: So, we had the idea to acquire land ourselves, in some way or another, so we could concretely translate our ideals into practice, and transform small pieces of our area!

P2: Yes! Developing nature satellites is what we called it!

P1: And later on, connect them to one another. Then we have reached our goal as well!

The members discuss new ideas such as developing food forests, edible hedges, nature development and solar parks to have influence and bring about (visible) change, thereby broadening the earlier ambition of nature-inclusive agriculture. The members argue that, ideally, each member of the initiative should represent a so-called nature satellite (a pocket of nature), which later can be joined together (‘and then we reached our goal as well’). Along with this change in ambition, the members frame themselves as ‘physical connectors’, legitimating their actions as ‘giving an example’ to others. The inclusion of the idea of developing nature satellites entails negatively framing other initiatives that do not aim for concrete action:

P4: From our perspective, it is very useful that they investigate the biodiversity in our area! Biodiversity, that is what we want as well. But you always keep researching, researching, researching!

P5: You can keep doing research!

P4: But nothing happens!

P5: We know what is going wrong by now!

P4: And WE want to do something! That is a difference for me. That is why we started to talk more concretely about nature satellites last time, although we have not done anything concrete yet. But maybe we should just concentrate on nature satellites and DO something! That is something different. I mean, how long will this research take? I do not know about it, but I assume that it will take at least two years and then there will be follow-up research! And nothing will happen in that time! That does not mean it should not happen, and we could ask about it, but I guess we have a totally different focus!

P1: Yes, ‘there will be follow-up research’, haha!

P4: At least we will not be in one another’s way!

The interaction demonstrates the search for a meaningful contribution when they emphasise their added value (‘we are complementary’, ‘have a different focus’). Creating added value entails framing the attempts of other organisations as passive (‘research’, ‘doing nothing’) and long-term-oriented (‘we know what to do’, ‘how long is it going to take?’), without further checking the activities of these initiatives (‘that is what I assume’), explicitly framing themselves as active and immediate (‘we are doing something’).

During this phase, the members frame their ambition as developing and connecting nature satellites and their identity as independent doers, in response to the assumed dependence on other organisations, at the start of the phase. However, over time, the members find out that several among them have different ideas about what to realise, based on different levels of ambition, expertise, and (financial) support, and that they are nonetheless dependent on others for realising nature satellites.
3.5. Phase 5: ‘We Are Strategic Vision Makers’

During the fifth phase, at the end of their first year, the members again reflect on their identity as well as on their alleged image. The unease around their image is resolved by reinforcing a process-oriented approach (in contrast to the previous phase), reasoning from what other organisations might need. Gradually, this results in the ambition to facilitate debate on the future of the landscape in the area and a new identity as strategic vision maker.

Meanwhile, the initiative’s endeavours have not gone unnoticed by other organisations in their environment. The research of Ekkelboom [57] showed that these organisations characterise the citizen initiative as an action group (identity) and still associate it with the milk factory (ambition). This caused the members to reflect on their alleged image and reformulate their identity:

P1: We are seen as an action group, whereas we are a citizen initiative! But in principle, or not in principle, we have an unbalanced composition with solely nature enthusiasts.

P3: Hmm-hmm.

P1: We have said it many times before, even at an early stage: we have a one-sided composition! That hinders us, now.

P2: And the fact, we see ourselves as constructive, we just want to achieve something, and we want many different things as well, but when we are not seen as such, we have a problem!

P1: Yes! Maybe we are not even a citizen initiative... Maybe I put it somewhat boldly here.

P9: Well indeed!

P1: But that is what it comes down to: we are an action group!

P5: Hmm, yes.

P1: One-issue!

P9: But we should do something about that!

P2: No, but maybe we are not a citizen initiative at all! We just want our area to be more sustainable! We try to bring people together that should do something together!

P5: We are not doing anything ourselves, right?

The members abandon the citizen initiative identity frame because of their composition (nature enthusiasts: ‘we are unbalanced, one-sided’) and their ambition (‘we just want our area to be more sustainable’), which they tried to avoid earlier on (see Phase 1). The members use the word ‘just’ twice, which shows defensive behaviour (‘we don’t want anything crazy’). The ambition to do ‘something concrete’, resulting from the fourth phase, is abandoned, by reframing their ambition (‘we are bringing people together who should do something’) and returning to their identity as connectors (‘we are not doing anything ourselves’). The members, however, reflect on their attempts to connect between other initiatives:

P4: Do they [other initiatives, in Ekkelboom’s research] mean we bring about division?

P9: We do not intend to do so, but cause it nonetheless. That is something different.

P2: Well, we are upsetting the status quo!

P11: Hmm.
P2: But maybe we have been rushing like a bull through a China shop!

By framing themselves as ‘upsetting the status-quo’, other organisations are implicitly framed as maintaining the status quo, with the (unintended) consequence, however, of creating relational fraction with other organisations (‘rushing like a bull through a China shop’). Moreover, the members realise their dependence on organisations for acquiring land, knowledge, and (financial) support to develop nature satellites.

Identity (‘action group’) and ambition (‘single issue biodiversity’) are further discussed by the latest member P9, as an outsider, who confirms the outcomes of Ekkelboom’s research [57] and argues that the citizen initiative is seen as a threat (‘we are organising our own resistance’, ‘people do not feel helped with the existence of this group’). P9 rejects the framing as ‘another action group’ (as did the members in Phases 1 and 4) and instead, argues for redefining the relation with other organisations with the proposal of reframing their identity as a working group within current agro-environmental organisations that aim to involve farmers in nature development and management.

P9: The agro-environmental organisation is in my opinion too much focused on execution and too little on strategy! That!

P1: But that is exactly their goal. That is what their chairman said as well. We do not want to take a stance in a societal debate, we are executors, is what he said.

P9: Then we have to offer that! (...) We propose to organise the societal debate!

P1: Asking questions!

P9: Indeed, asking questions. The one who asks the questions has the power! Then you can steer the conversation! (...) I mean, imagine that we could be a working group of the landscape association or the agro-environmental organisation. Imagine that! Imagine how much impact we could have on such a board. That is a different relationship than a clique that gathers once every few months in some living room and starts shooting arrows!

The ambition to be included by the agro-environmental association fits with a power frame: if we are included (‘working group’), we have impact (‘powerful’). The new member is decisive in the shift from legitimating the citizen initiative from within towards the ambition of being legitimised by other actors first (‘making sure we are asked’). The ambition to be included by other organisations as a precondition for realising their ambitions entails the positive characterisation of the agro-environmental organisation (‘as farmers’, ‘powerful’) and downplaying the current identity of the citizen initiative (‘a clique that gathers once every few months in some living room and starts shooting arrows’). The segment concludes with a concrete proposal to organise the collaboration.

At the same time, the segment illustrates how the members build their identity and added-value ambition by, again, distinguishing themselves from others (‘then we have to offer that’, ‘offer a horizon’). The research period ends in December 2019 with the new ambition to organise ‘societal debate about the future of the area’, which paradoxically also entails a negative characterisation of the agro-environmental organisation (‘too much focused on execution and too little on strategy’). In line with this ambition, the members frame their identity as a strategic group and return to a process-oriented ambition (‘asking and recording what the area should look like in 2050’), backtracking on former ambitions by stating that ‘then we have already done a lot’.

4. Discussion

In this paper, we explored the dynamics in ambitions and identities of a citizen initiative in-the-making searching for opportunities to contribute to the development of a sustainable landscape in their region in the east of the Netherlands.
The results have shown that five phases can be identified in which the inclusion/exclusion of various actors and ideas led to different ambitions and identities of the initiative over time. The members started with the idea of improving the biodiversity on agricultural lands, including farmers as main actors, and the idea of nature-inclusive agriculture. The members aimed to start with an inventory of the agriculture in their area, framing themselves as consumers of products and connectors of initiatives, with the ambition of supporting farmers to make a transition. Soon, the members included the opportunity to collaborate with a new milk factory as an ambition, framing themselves as open-minded solvers who offer concrete solutions to farmers, in contrast to other organisations. The milk factory caused a serious conflict among proponents and opponents of such collaboration, leading to the self-exclusion of several members, followed by the remaining members gradually excluding the controversial milk factory and, instead, adopting a new, more process-oriented ambition to steer the municipality and other organisations. As their assumed impact decreased, the members included the idea of developing nature satellites themselves, framing their identity as independent doers and expanding their focus beyond farmers and agriculture. After unease about their supposed image, the members finally decided to collaborate with other organisations with similar goals, with the ambition of facilitating the debate about the future landscape of the area.

In positioning their citizen initiative in its environment, the members changed their ambitions in response to new events and changing circumstances. In doing so, they aimed to seize opportunities that arose in their search to make a meaningful contribution to sustainable landscape transition. In order to justify their changing ambitions, the members constructed new identities that resulted from their conversations in which they justified their changing ambitions and identities with the help of interactional framing strategies such as re-presenting past experiences that would support the new ambition and identity and constantly comparing themselves with organisations with similar objectives. Such comparison was accompanied by the construction of positive identity frames and negative characterisation frames that were confirmed by other members. Interestingly, the initiative had limited contact with the other organisations during their first year. The comparison was thus mainly the result of (changing) assumptions and rumours about the situation and the contribution of other actors, and more or less implicit norms on what should or should not be done. Other organisations were present in what could be understood as a form of implicit audience [58]. In line with Weick [38], our study found that making sense of an organisational environment is a social process that depends on interactions with other actors, whether physically present or not.

To create a distinctive position, the members of the citizen initiative emphasised—and might even have inflated—the difference between it and other organisations that also aim to create a sustainable landscape in the region, a mechanism known as the narcissism of minor differences [59]. The tendency to dissent from others, which can be understood from the members’ urge to get things done themselves as a citizen initiative often emerges out of discontent with current ways of doing [21]. This mirroring strategy (we are and do what others are not and do not do) is common in developing and legitimating an organisation’s identities and ambitions [60] because it creates a void or niche for a new organisation to contribute. It can, however, be questioned whether this mechanism will not in the end harm relations with other actors in the environment, as is suggested in this study by the perceived negative image of the citizen initiative.

Our study also confirms that making sense of an organisational environment is driven by plausibility rather than accuracy [38] As Helms-Mills et al. (p. 185, [61]) argue, ‘we do not rely on the accuracy of our perceptions when we make sense of an event, but instead, look for clues that make our sense-making seem plausible’. This mechanism sheds light on the tendency to legitimate statements, using framing strategies to advance a particular understanding of the (organisational) environment that supports the justification of changing ambitions and identities. Sense-making is thus not a linear process of perception, interpretation, and action, as these processes interfere with one another: our interpretations and actions colour our perception. Christensen and Cheney [62] showed that organisations in-the-making, in their eagerness to contribute and gain recognition, can
lose sight of what other organisations aim for and do, when overshadowed by their own aspirations. The Sustainable Landscape Initiative members, while searching to make a meaningful contribution, indeed positioned themselves based on assumed and normative perceptions of what other actors in the environment were doing, rather than on facts and direct interaction.

Van Dam et al. [9], however, found that information about the environment and relevant actors has a great effect on how an initiative meaningfully positions itself. Both formal and informal communication should function as antennae for exploring and mapping the environment and adjusting an organisation at the right time and in the right way in order to function optimally in realising its ambitions and at the same time build constructive relations [35]. It should be realised that identities are constructed in interactions [43], whereby an organisation gets to know itself (and its environment) in relation to others. It is indeed through conversations with actors with similar goals that people ‘come to understand what their own interests are, what others want, and what fits the common good’ (p. 54, [63]). Effectively positioning an initiative should thus take place not versus an environment, but rather in interaction with that very environment.

Another important implication is that repeatedly changing ambitions results in the lack of a clear and more or less stable identity, and this might be an obstacle to finding a meaningful niche that invites concrete actions. Our study reveals that the Sustainable Landscape Initiative in-the-making indeed consists of a succession of ambitions and identities that are constantly overwriting one another [64]. Ambitions and identities are in a dialectical relationship as it is likely that a change in ambition leads to a change in identity, and vice versa. Similarly, when identity and ambitions no longer match (the dilemma we noticed in the results), the members use discursive strategies to reconstruct either their ambition or identity accordingly, or instead, opt for a whole new position. Obviously, positioning is an ongoing cycle of revision rather than a linear sequence [65]. However, although identities are always in-the-making [40], a too flexible identity can easily result in inertia and an undesired image, as was the case in our study. A clear sense of direction may help to take decisions on what to do and what not to do, as well as to know who you are and are not. Van Woerkum and Aarts (p. 178, [66]) introduced the concept of projective hearing as ‘a way of listening to others, with clear ideas about an ideal sound, but also with openness to emerging voices that could contribute to the mission’. Projective hearing implies listening carefully to what is happening in interactions in the present, and what opportunities arise, combined with a clear vision on what is important in the future that will help to choose what to do and what not to do. Such an approach could help a new citizen initiative like the Sustainable Landscape Initiative to find a meaningful identity and to contribute to a larger whole.

Whereas the practice of citizen initiatives is highly diverse, our study is limited to the analysis of interactions within a single citizen initiative—in this case, a landscape-oriented initiative on a regional scale and with a broad goal. Nevertheless, it has revealed a precarious process of positioning in which several patterns have been identified that may be worth considering for other, similar citizen initiatives in-the-making [51]. As the study is limited to the interactions within the citizen initiative, questions arise about how other actors perceive the initiative (given that positioning is a process of claiming and granting identities), how members of the initiative negotiate identities and ambitions in interaction with other actors, and how this results in a meaningful position that contributes to sustainable landscape transition.

5. Conclusions

In sum, we conclude that, in order to find a meaningful position in an environment, it is essential to recognise the interdependencies with other organisations in that environment. Relating to others is key to being able to contribute meaningfully to a better world. Consequently, to find the right thing to do at the right moment, organisations such as the Sustainable Landscape Initiative should picture themselves as open networks constituted by numerous conversations.
Author Contributions: Conceptualization, W.B., N.A. and R.J.G.v.d.B.; methodology, W.B., N.A. and R.J.G.v.d.B.; formal analysis, W.B.; validation, W.B., N.A. and R.J.G.v.d.B.; investigation, W.B.; data curation, W.B.; writing—original draft preparation, W.B.; writing—review and editing, N.A. and R.J.G.v.d.B.; visualization, W.B.; supervision, N.A. and R.J.G.v.d.B.; project administration, W.B. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Acknowledgments: We would like to acknowledge the Sustainable Landscape Initiative for the possibility to study their citizen initiative in-the-making and providing access to all their data and communication.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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