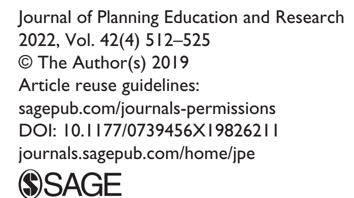

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Broadening the Scope of Spatial Planning: Making a Case for Informality in the Netherlands

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Abstract

Informality originated in the field of urban planning studies related to the global South. As this particular debate is aimed at making a contribution to planning theory in general, the concept has gradually traveled beyond the global South. This article explores how informality can be used to analyze community-led planning practices in Western countries, by reflecting on its usability in a country that has a strongly formalized planning context, namely, the Netherlands. By expanding what is currently described as spatial planning, informality makes planning theories and practices more inclusive in cases where unregulated planning activities are performed by nongovernmental actors.

Keywords

informality, formality, planning theory, planning practice(s), global south, civic initiatives, Dutch planning

Introduction

Dutch spatial planning has always been seen as a paradigmatic case of successful spatial planning, especially in the eyes of non-Dutch planners and planning researchers (Pojani and Stead 2015). Spatial planning in the Netherlands has traditionally been viewed as a task for the government, and the central government subsequently perceived itself as playing a major role in this process. During the past few decades, the role of nongovernmental actors (citizens, entrepreneurs, civil society organizations, etc.) in spatial planning in the Netherlands and many other Western countries has changed (Needham 2014). This is partly because nongovernmental actors became more critical toward the plans made by the government and demanded that they should also be granted more involvement (Healey 2006). This development is reflected in theories and methodologies that are applied in collaborative or participatory spatial planning, and this defines how citizens can be involved in planning practices designed by governments (Allmendinger 2002; Forester 2008; Healey 2006). However, current planning theories and methodologies in the Netherlands, and in other Western countries, are still mainly focused on how governments should deal with spatial planning, irrespective of whether the theories or methods that they use concern technical solutions or the setting up of participatory practices (Hall and Tewdwr-Jones 2010). The term used for these kinds of participatory practices has typically been “citizen participation,” exemplifying that governments take initiatives and that citizens at best can give their opinions. In accordance with these governance practices, planning theories have also mainly focused on governmental action or, to put it differently, the formal roles of planning (Davoudi and Pendlebury 2010; Watson 2012). Other forms of spatial planning—such as grass-roots activities by citizens, entrepreneurs, or other local stakeholders—are often not acknowledged as planning practices (Hillier 2001; Innes, Connick, and Booher 2007). In contrast, the way nongovernmental actors (citizens, entrepreneurs, social organizations, etc.) intentionally change the spatial organization of their living environment (how they plan) is understudied and often misunderstood (Briassoulis 1997). Boonstra and Boelens (2011, 99) suggest that we should look beyond an exclusively government-focused perspective and turn our attention to citizens and businesses, and review their contribution to spatial planning. However, Boonstra and Boelens (2011) do not provide a detailed discussion of the consequences that their community-focused (outside-in) perspective for planning practice might have. Their proposal to change perspective therefore remains largely theoretical. In the following section, we argue how the concept of informality adds an outside-in perspective to planning practices, and how this enhances an earlier attempt by Helen Briassoulis

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(1997, in this journal) to conceptualize the formal/informal continuum.

Although informality is a major issue in cities in the global South (AlSayyad and Roy 2004), and has recently also been adopted in the "global North" (McFarlane and Waibel 2012; Mukhija and Loukaitou-Sideris 2014), it has largely been neglected in Dutch spatial planning—even though governmental spatial planning in the Netherlands is subject to the general long-term neoliberal tendency toward a retreating and decentralizing government, as it is in many other Western countries. This trend was recently amplified and accelerated by the post-2008 financial crisis, which resulted in severe austerity measures. For example, in 2013, when the Dutch king delivered his speech at the opening of the parliamentary year, the government declared that from now on the Netherlands would be a "participation society."[1] In this new era, civil society should take policy initiatives and assume responsibility for implementing them, and the government was to participate only minimally in the process, if at all. Making the civil society responsible for solving its own problems, with only minimal support from the government (Syssner and Meijer 2017; van der Steen et al. 2015), exemplified an actual change in thinking in the participation culture in Dutch spatial policy.

In this contribution, we focus on planning practices implemented by nongovernmental actors through informal interaction, which can still lead to planned outcomes that serve particular or broader public interests (Briassoulis 1997). We use the concept of "informal planning" to refer to all planning activities outside the formal regulatory procedures that are conducted by nongovernmental stakeholders (Mukhija and Loukaitou-Sideris 2014).

Informality has been widely used in studies of urban planning in the global South (Healey 2012; Watson 2012), and although these studies aim to contribute to planning theory in general, at present the concept is gradually being recognized beyond studies of the global South (Mukhija and Loukaitou-Sideris 2015). The aim of this article is to explore whether and, if so, how informality could be used to analyze planning practices beyond the global South, by reflecting on its usability in a country with a highly formalized planning context, namely, the Netherlands. By expanding what is currently described as spatial planning, informality is, in our view, able to overcome some of the shortcomings of the aforementioned collaborative theories. We argue for this stance in the second section: "Theoretical and Conceptual Points of Departure." In the third section, we discuss our materials and methods. In the fourth section, our theoretical reflections are confronted with a case study of De Achterhoek, a region in the eastern part of the Netherlands that is facing a major societal challenge: population decline. Within the Dutch planning system, traditional planning practices do not provide satisfying solutions to mitigate the effects of population decline (Kempenaar et al. 2015; Meijer and van der Krabben 2018). Stakeholders in De Achterhoek are trying to go beyond these practices to deal with this challenge. Their attempts have resulted in different performances of informality. Our analysis of this case study shows how the concept of informality could help us to contribute to spatial planning as a body of knowledge and a set of practices. These matters are discussed further in the final discussion.

Theoretical and Conceptual Points of Departure

Informality in the Global South

In the first decade of this century, the concept of informality was introduced and debated within the field of urban planning in the global South.[2] Rather than employing a formal, procedure-led, and government-centered interpretation of planning, informality focuses on the planning capacities of nongovernmental stakeholders and tries to explain how they have contributed to or taken over planning in their own informal ways (Altrock 2012; Porter 2011a). One of the leading authors engaged with the informality debate is Ananya Roy (Roy 2005, 2009a, 2009b). Roy (2009a) presents informality as "a mode of production of space defined by the territorial logic of deregulation":

> Inscribed in the ever-shifting relationship between what is legal and illegal, legitimate and illegitimate, authorized and unauthorized, informality is a state of exception and ambiguity such that "the ownership, use, and purpose of land cannot be fixed and mapped according to any prescribed set of regulations or the law." (Roy 2009a, 8)

What is essential to understanding Roy's (2009a) conceptualization of informality is to realize that it tries to avoid a unilateral view on informality. According to Roy (2009b), informality is complex and can manifest in many ways, not particularly in opposition to formal planning. Accordingly, informality is about planning activities unregulated by governmental authorities (Castells and Portes 1989). However, informality does not have to concern itself with illegal activities; it can also be extralegal, that is, outside formal regulations (Porter 2011a).

Cities in the global South grow rapidly and in a chaotic manner. Driven by large-scale migration from the rural hinterlands, the spatial development of these cities is often neither controlled nor regulated. According to Simone (2004), it is not only the massiveness of migration that leads to slums. As a consequence of incomplete bureaucracies, failing tax collection systems, and corruption, local governments often lack the resources and planning capacity to build infrastructures (paved roads, sewerage systems, electricity supply), provide local services (health care, education, recreation), or stimulate local economic development (job creation). Consequently, many citizens, entrepreneurs, and other local stakeholders develop alternative spaces themselves (Simone 2004). These insurgent practices are employed not only by

citizens and smallholder firms but also by large firms and even governments that operate in the vacuum created by the absence of formal regulations (such as ownership). Informality makes the spatial organization of cities in the global South function differently from that arising from formal planning. Roy (2009b, 86) stresses that informality must not be regarded simply as a failure of the formal planning found in those cities in the global South; "these systems are neither anomalous nor irrational; rather they embody a distinctive form of rationality that underwrites a frontier of metropolitan expansion." This rationality could very well be based on the local knowledge about the physical landscape and proximity to facilities and infrastructure, instead of the analyses made by professional planners.

In our view, the key characteristic of informality in spatial planning as exemplified in this body of literature is that, instead of focusing primarily on the role of governments or procedures, it regards spatial planning from a more holistic viewpoint (Porter 2011b; Watson 2009; Yiftachel 2006). Within this view, small, nonofficial, spontaneous, and community-led changes in the spatial organization are also considered as planning practices. In addition, "other" stakeholders—such as citizens, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), or even project developers—can be considered as planners, thus including their capacity to substitute the role of governments as planning officials (Briassoulis 1997, 108).

Informality: A Global Concept?

Outside the global South, informality is also an emerging theme in planning theory and practice alike. If one takes a close look, it can be observed how many more informal practices are being used in Western countries, such as the Netherlands, than one might think upon first sight (Allmendinger et al. 2015; Porter 2011a). Neat and ordered places hardly exist. Where people live, places are occupied and adapted. Adaptations can be modest—for example, when neighbors adapt public space to their needs—or more substantial, for instance when people decide to build their own community center or rehabilitate national heritage (van Dam, Eshuis, and Aarts 2008). Davis (2006) points out that insurgence in the global South is in essence not that different from the act of squatting in other parts of the world. In both cases, the urban spatial organization is adjusted, appropriated from below, by citizens. Perera (2009, 52) writes that formal urban systems are incomplete as well; "these have gaps, cracks and depend on exceptions." It is within these gaps and cracks that informality occurs.

A well-known study on informality in a Western planning context is that by Innes, Connick, and Booher (2007), who describe informality as unregulated behavior that involves casual and spontaneous interactions and encourages personal affective ties among participants. Their description follows from a case study in a quite formalized context that had both land use regulations and procedures for planning processes. Nevertheless, these regulations and procedures were not effective enough to enable the development of a long-term plan for the region. A group of nongovernmental actors decided to make their own plan, which was later incorporated by official bodies. Innes, Connick, and Booher (2007) note that informality is not an exclusive way of acting for "other" stakeholders. Governments, authorities, and official bodies also perform informality. This is because they are compelled to do so to make the formal process work. As Innes, Connick, and Booher (2007) claim, these processes remain largely invisible and are often hardly documented.

The gentle, affective description of informality provided by Innes, Connick, and Booher (2007) does not match the more substitutionary view provided by Roy (2009a), who explicitly distances herself from their view on informality:

> In planning circles the term [informality] has been recently used by Innes, Connick, and Booher (2007) to mean planning strategies that are neither prescribed, nor proscribed by any rules; the idea of informality also connotes casual and spontaneous interactions and personal affective ties among participants. In this use informality becomes an element of communicative rationality, a Habermas-lite if you will. (Roy 2009a, 8)

For Roy (2009a), informality has a more radical connotation, wherein formalized claims to land are largely absent, instead of focusing on the informal performance of planning practices. Roy explicitly does not conceptualize informality as "a consensus-seeking alternative" to regulated planning practices. Sometimes it is a necessity, a survival strategy; it is not aimed at consensus at all, but is a political claim for land, or simply a better life.

These different meanings of informality are bridged by the formal/informal continuum introduced by Briassoulis (1997), in which different gradations of informality are mapped (Figure 1). As Roy's research focuses on contexts with no or very little enforcement of formal state regulation, her analysis of informality can be placed within the "complete substitution of formal by informal planning" end of the continuum. Innes, Connick, and Booher's (2007) description of informality instead belongs to the complementary part of the continuum.

Consequently, informality can be considered a continuation of formal planning practices. Insufficient formal planning practices create a need for informal solutions performed by both governmental and nongovernmental stakeholders. On one hand, governmental stakeholders act in informal ways for various reasons. This is, for example, the case in countries with clientelistic forms of governance, where the boundaries between formal and informal are unclear (Keating 2001). In other instances, formal regulations are adjusted to increase room for

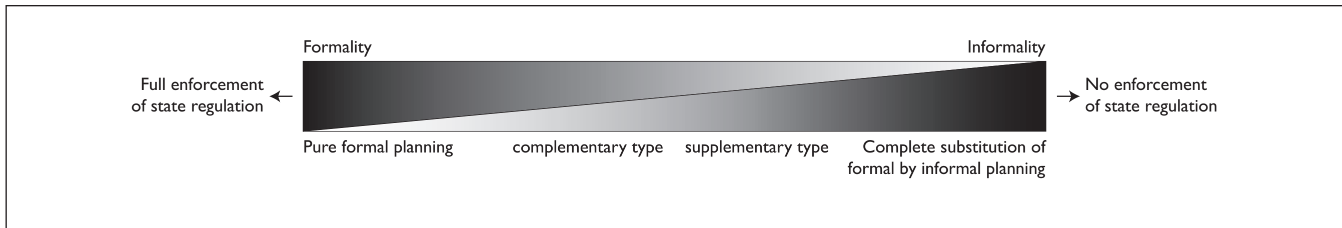

Figure 1. The formal/informal continuum (Briassoulis 1997).

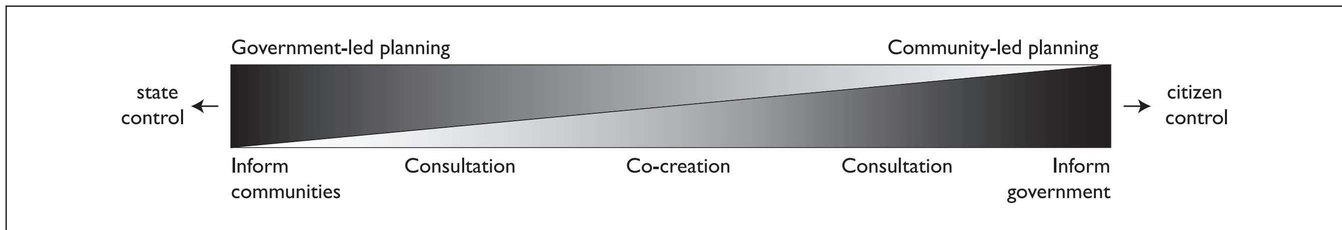

Figure 2. The continuum of government/community-led planning.

maneuver and to experiment with informality. Examples can be taken from plans that have been developed by public–private partnerships or are based on unsolicited proposals (Halleux, Marcinczak, and van der Krabben 2012), do-it-yourself (DIY) land development (Jonkman 2012), and the spontaneous city concept, where users are asked to develop or codevelop city designs (Urhahn 2010). The involvement of formal actors in informal practices, and vice versa, has shown that there is a gray area between the formal and the informal. Conversely, how and why nongovernmental stakeholders practice informality also varies. Where formalized land use regulations exist, stakeholders can choose to circumvent them and develop their own plans. These circumventions might be illegal or they could serve as a supplement to formal planning regulations (Altrock 2012).

Instead of only focusing on the occurrence of informality complementary to formal planning, Boonstra and Boelens (2011) plea for a larger embedding of informal planning practices employed by nongovernmental actors. Informality would then not only serve as a supplement to incomplete formal systems but also partly replace them through deregulation. This, as described in the introduction, resembles the current situation in the Netherlands, where formal spatial planning as we knew it in the past, has made its return. Informal networks of NGOs and individual citizens are increasingly assuming responsibility for solving spatial problems and developing their living environment further.

Toward an Analytical Framework

Although informality and community-led planning are related, they are not necessarily the same. We have argued that informal practices can be employed by governmental actors, while nongovernmental actors can also act in formal ways. Especially in hybrid planning situations, with strong nongovernmental stakeholders and solid formal planning contexts, an interplay between formality and informality, and between governments and communities, is inevitable. To analyze planning practices employed in such a context more precisely, we have added another dimension to Briassoulis's (1997) formal/informal continuum: the government/community-led continuum (Figure 2).

This continuum shows the different gradations of community-led planning and the involvement of governments. Within the context of statutory planning, communities can be restricted to informing governments about their activities by, for example, applying for mandatory permits. Consultation involves more direct and intensive interaction between governmental and nongovernmental actors (communities). Mutual input produced by both stakeholders can result in partnerships of cocreation, in which citizens can negotiate and engage in trade-offs with governments (Arnstein 1969). Obviously, the length of this continuum can be extended toward citizen control (where formal planning is not enforced), or toward the other extreme, which is state control. It is important to note that within a country several versions of this continuum can coexist, as governments and communities are not unified groups of stakeholders and have diverging interests and power relations. Therefore, even in a situation of citizen control or cocreation, communities can be overruled by governmental decisions.

Figure 3 shows how the two continuums can be combined into a framework consisting of four categories of planning practices: statutory planning, clientelism, self-organization, and institutionalized community planning. Statutory planning deals with government-led formal types

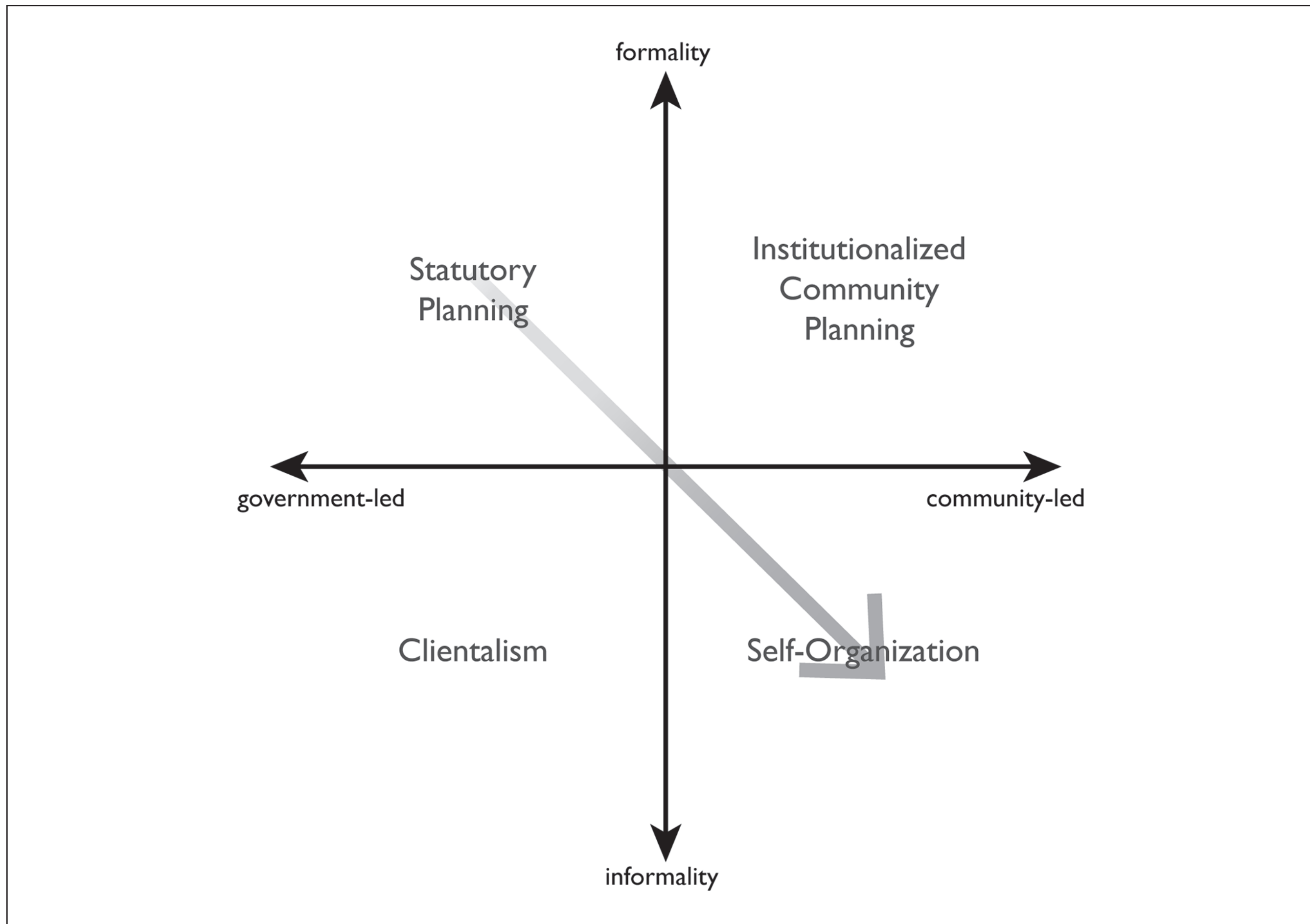

Figure 3. Shift from government-led formal planning practices (statutory planning) toward community led-informal planning practices (self-organization).

of planning: procedures, regulations, and land allocation plans. Clientelism is also a government-led type of planning, but from an informal perspective: decisions are made based on personal networks and informal ties (see Meijer, Diaz-Varela, and Cardín-Pedrosa 2015, for a more elaborate discussion of this matter). Self-organization refers to community-led, informal ways of planning: decision-making based on informal networks, flexibility, and local knowledge. Last, institutionalized community planning refers to planning practices that are in essence community-led but have been formalized; for example, when communities install a village board as a body of formal representation, or establish procedures (like assemblies, voting) to promote more efficient decision-making. In the Netherlands, we observe a shift from governmental, formal planning practices (statutory planning), toward more informal, community-led initiatives (self-organization). The following section discusses how this has transpired in the case of De Achterhoek, as this study is based on an analysis that was made depicting the continuum from community- to government-led informal planning practices.

Materials and Methods

When examining informality in the planning practices employed in De Achterhoek, we wished to show how useful it is to understand the existing and newly emerging planning practices and to inspire ways of rethinking and retheorizing these practices. However, we did not discover any radically new practices that we do not know from other contexts, such as in the global South. However, each context is so specific that concepts do not travel without being transformed. Our focus is more on informality in Dutch planning practices, and how this relates to the community/government-led continuum. This certainly needs much more emphasis if we wish to permeate the theoretical debates about the future of spatial planning in the global North.

Case Study Area

De Achterhoek is situated in the eastern part of the Netherlands. It is a rural region, with many villages, hamlets, and a few medium-sized cities. During the past few years,

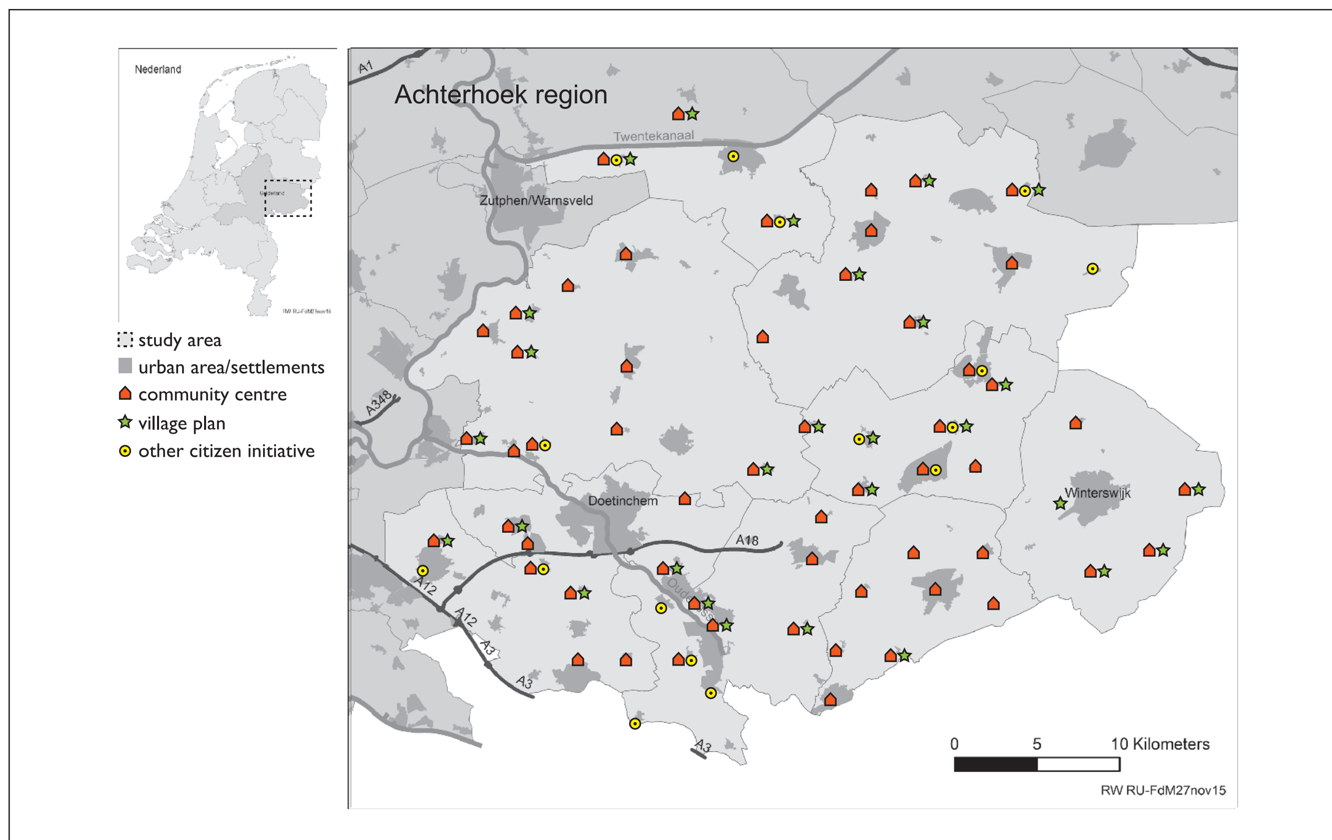

Figure 4. Distribution of community-led planning practices in De Achterhoek.

both its population and its economy have ceased to grow. Demographic change is forecast for the coming few decades: depopulation, aging, and the selective out-migration of young people (Provincie Gelderland 2013; Verwest and van Dam 2010). Besides these national tendencies—which have prompted the process of deregulation, decentralization, and austerity policies—the situation in this particular region is grave, because of the demographic decline. For the local and regional policy makers, it was clear that recognizing the tendency toward demographic decline at an early stage would be the most sensible approach to take. As they had learned from their experiences in other shrinking regions, there was no use trying to reverse this trend. Depopulation is here to stay. However, despite this phenomenon, finding alternative ways to cope with demographic decline was not easy, as the spatial policy instruments have traditionally been designed for situations of growth (Hospers 2014). In De Achterhoek, municipalities established new networks in which they tried to mitigate the effects of demographic decline together with public and private partners (e.g., housing cooperatives, educational institutions, regional businesses, and interest groups). However, without any signs of growth or possible gains for these project partners, this mode of governance is in danger of reaching a deadlock. What then—if there is no certainty that the dip will rise again and continue upward—can government agencies do?

This has been, and still is, the greatest challenge faced by those regions that are suffering from demographic decline. It would appear that this might be the last straw, as local governments are turning toward new forms of participation (Korsten and Goedvolk 2008). In De Achterhoek, municipalities have experimented with outsourcing their tasks to local communities. At the same time, communities actively make and implement plans to maintain livability via informal decision-making (Meijer and Syssner 2017). De Achterhoek is a region whose inhabitants traditionally feel closely connected to their communities; they are proud of their ability to solve problems within their communities and refer to this as "noaberhulp" (traditional neighbor help). Thus, community members who choose to stay are committed to undertaking action to preserve and maintain facilities in their community (Abbas and Commandeur 2013; Melis 2011). Figure 4 provides an overview of all the community-led planning initiatives that have been identified in De Achterhoek.

Data Collection

The data for this case study were derived from a qualitative study that consisted of interviews, a website analysis, and a policy document analysis. The latter study was aimed at identifying diverse community-led planning practices to

Table 1. Overview of Communities Visited and Initiatives Taken in De Achterhoek.

Place	Organization	Identified as (example)	Planning practices (discussed in this article)
Noordijk	‘t Haarhoes	Autonomous initiative Policy-driven initiative	Sports/community center Library
Beltrum	Beltrums Belang	Village plan	Concentrating dispersed locations of community activities in one community center
Zieuwent	Zieuwents Belang	Close cooperation initiative	Restructuring village center
Mariënvelde	Brede Maatschappelijke Voorziening Mariënvelde	Community enterprise	Multifunctional care center
Rietmolen	DAR	Autonomous initiative Policy-driven initiative	Sports center Community center/library

Note: DAR = Dorps Accomodatie Rietmolen.

illustrate the variety of community–government relations within our framework. By making an analysis of community-developed websites, we were able to identify the scope and activities of community initiatives in De Achterhoek.[3] Based on this inventory, we approached and interviewed representatives of five communities that had a wide range of planning interests (see Table 1). The examples include both small and larger scale projects, and both autonomous and government-dependent projects, and they varied in their degree of informal organization. Generally, for each community one or two key initiators (the chair of the village organization, project leaders, etc.) were interviewed. We choose to focus on key initiators as they had a good overview of the projects, and they knew how the relations had been established and how they had evolved with local governments. Besides communities, governmental organizations, and NGOs were also approached for the purpose of conducting interviews, so as to gain a more complete understanding of the interaction within our analytical framework. In total, we held sixteen open, in-depth interviews. The interviews were conducted with local stakeholders involved in six diverging community-led planning initiatives, policy makers (at both municipalities and the province of Gelderland), and representatives of NGOs (e.g., the Association for Small Settlements and De Achterhoek Region). The interviews were aimed at reconstructing the informal planning practices employed by local communities (their incentive, decision-making process, organization, and obstacles) and at gaining insight into how these informal planning practices relate to formal planning (support, procedures, subsidy schemes). Each interview was held at the interviewee’s choice of setting, lasted about ninety minutes, and was transcribed full verbatim. The interview results were then triangulated through a policy document analysis. In the municipal planning documents and on the municipal websites, we checked for formal arrangements concerning support for, and stimulation of, community initiatives. These policy documents include subsidy arrangements, official announcements, and information letters for citizens. Table 1 provides an overview of all the communities that were visited and their planning practices.

In keeping with this focused empirical design, on several occasions, we conducted unfocussed informal (and also unrecorded) talks at workshops, conferences, and meetings, where informality, demographic decline, or new forms of governance were discussed. The lion’s share of these meetings took place in De Achterhoek and were also attended by local stakeholders (initiators of citizen initiatives, municipal policy makers, NGOs). These informal talks served as an early warning mechanism that enabled us to perceive what was emerging in these circles, even before it could be empirically substantiated. The appendix includes an overview of these meetings and where they were held.

Results: Informality in De Achterhoek

In the following sections, we describe several planning practices in De Achterhoek that belong to the emerging domain of community-led, informal planning. All of these examples are, in varying degrees, unregulated, uncontrolled, spontaneous, grass-roots planning practices, employed by nongovernmental actors. Along the continuum from community- to government-led planning, we defined different gradations of citizen-initiated planning practices. It is important to note that these gradations are not bound by clearly defined borders: some practices are predominantly community-led and hardly influenced by governments, while others are the result of close interaction between governments and communities. Nevertheless, departing from four gradations within the community/government-led continuum, we explore informality in De Achterhoek. Figure 5 illustrates the positions of the examples described below within the previously presented analytical framework.

Community-Led Informality

At the community-led end of the spectrum, we identified two examples of somewhat informally undertaken initiatives: autonomous initiatives (such as self-built community centers, playgrounds, and local parks and gardens) and a citizen-initiated platform for bottom-up initiatives. These examples are the result of informal interaction at the community level:

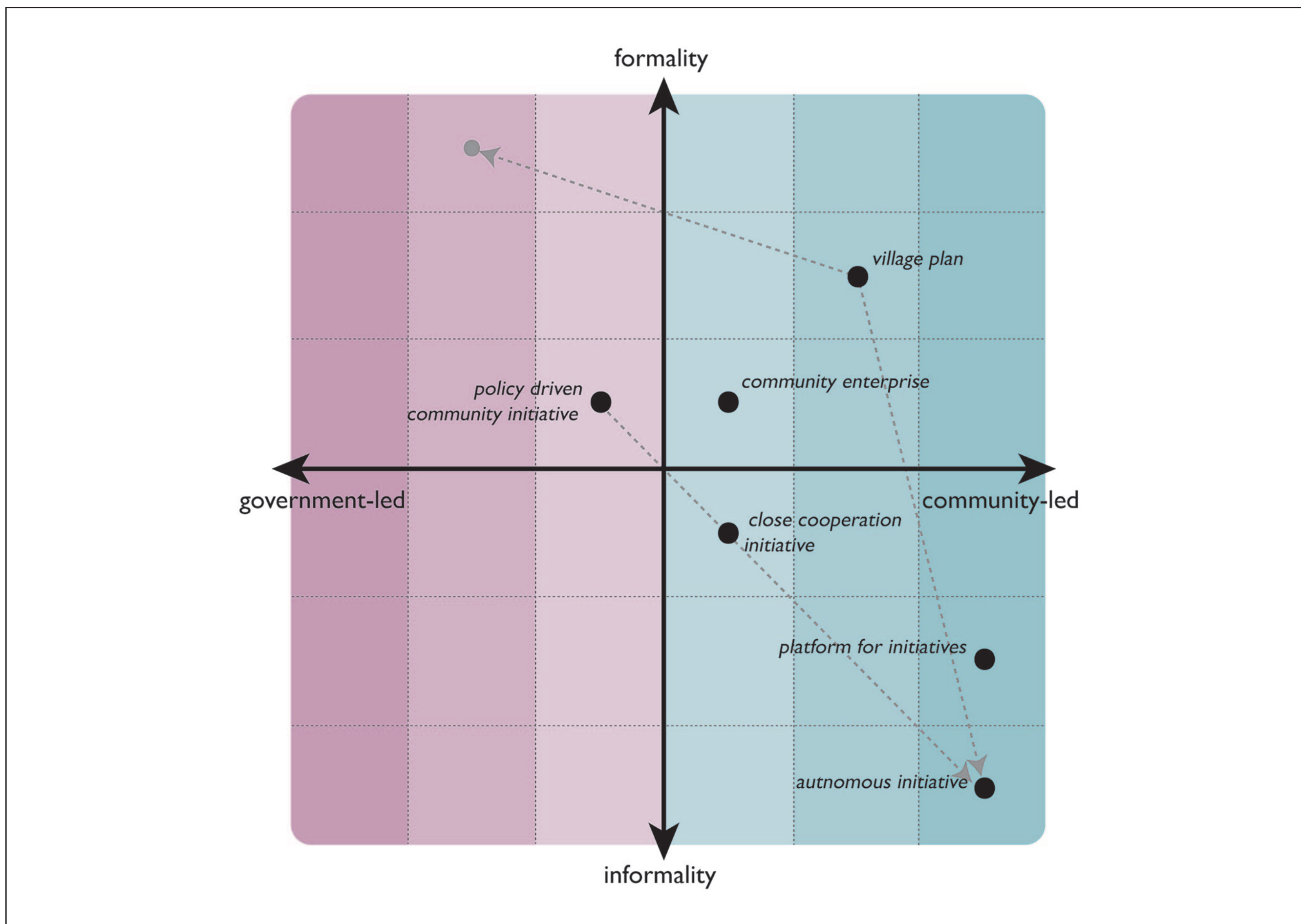

Figure 5. Examples of informal planning practices in De Achterhoek and their positions along the community/government-led continuum, and the formal/informal continuum.

they follow an unregulated, ad hoc, everyday, incremental, and spontaneous planning process.

One of the larger autonomous initiatives was launched in Noordijk, a small hamlet with 840 inhabitants (Centraal Bureau voor statistiek 2015). Here, a group of active citizens decided to build a sports center for use by the local primary school and as a meeting place for local sports and cultural associations. Meeting places such as these are widespread in De Achterhoek: about half of the villages run a community center (fifty-four in total). Noordijk's former school and an adjacent sports hall provided an opportunity, and the village council (an independent, bottom-up initiated, representational organization of village inhabitants) started investigating the possibilities. At first, the council asked the planning department of the Municipality of Berkelland for support. When this approach proved to be unsuccessful, they decided to build the sports center with their own resources. They applied for subsidies from local and regional governments, and took part in competitions that rewarded best practices with grants. The tight budget led to a series of creative organizational solutions. For example, a local contractor, an architect, and an accountant committed themselves to the renovation and exploitation of the sports center. Looking back on the whole process, an interviewed council member praised this method of working. By arranging as much as possible themselves, the sports center could function independently of municipal decisions and activities, and therefore the community priorities could be maintained. Nevertheless, formal planning procedures and land allocation plans are still applicable. In addition, autonomous initiatives must comply with statutory planning or exemptions must be requested.

The decision-making process in Noordijk, and in the case of other similar autonomous initiatives, can be characterized as ad hoc and incremental. Citizens usually start by establishing consensus on a priority list of projects the community would benefit most from and that are actually feasible. This is mostly done informally: matters are discussed in the street, at kitchen tables, or in the local shop. Once this informal conversation has been picked up by the village council (or another representative body), they start investigating the

possibilities for implementation. A council member of Noordijk community center described their decision-making process as follows:

> Because we were unable to resolve this [the establishment of a community center] via the municipality, we said to each other that this process was taking too long and would not work out. We observed some examples in other villages and decided to give the project a push. . . . There were some passionate men in the committee who knew how to organize this; they set up some meetings and showed a positive view of the future; and that is how they made the people enthusiastic about their ideas [of Noordijk]. (Council member of community center Noordijk; author's translation from the Dutch)

In Rietmolen (1,070 inhabitants; CBS 2015), the initiators of an extensive sports center came up against the boundaries of informal planning. Rietmolen is a small and active community that aspired to renew and expand their outdated community center and sports hall, which was located in the village center (van Heek 2011). For this purpose, they found a new location at the edge of the village. Here they could not only build a larger sports hall but also have soccer fields and a tennis court. Just as in the case of the community center in Noordijk, this sports center could be regarded as an autonomous initiative: initiated, planned, and implemented by the community itself. The local village council installed a special committee (Dorps Accomodatie Rietmolen [DAR]; Rietmolen Village Center) to coordinate the building process and communicate with the local authorities. However, as soon as the DAR requested the first building and tree-felling permit, they met severe resistance from the citizens who lived across the road from the building's planned location (De Twentsche Courant Tubantia 2007). Just as in Noordijk, the planning process of a citizen initiative can be informal, but for its implementation, legal procedures have to be followed and this entitles others to formally object. In the case of Rietmolen, the neighbors seized every opportunity to object to the plans and started a judicial procedure at the Dutch Council of State (the highest court of appeal in administrative matters). This judicial procedure seriously delayed the project, but in 2010, the last objection was rejected by the Council of State (De Twentsche Courant Tubantia 2010). This was thirteen years after the first plan had been communicated to the community (van Heek 2011). The wider community was relieved that they could finally proceed with their plans. However, during an interview, the project leader of the sports center reported that the conflict had adversely affected their village life: the "objectors" still feel (and probably are) excluded; conversely, all proponents feel that their ties have been strengthened now that their project has succeeded.

When discussing these events with the director of the Association for Small Settlements (Gelderse Federatie voor Dorpshuizen en Kleine Kernen [GFDKK]), he said that he always advises communities to focus on achieving consensus by informal means first, and to try to prevent any opposition from within the community itself: "Once zienswijzen [the first official step toward formal objections] have been lodged against a citizen initiative, you can forget it."

Community-Led Formality

Some communities have gone a step further in their efforts to maintain livability and good living conditions. They have coordinated several autonomous initiatives by developing village plans: future initiatives designed and developed by local communities. Village plans are similar to parish plans, or the more recently institutionalized neighborhood plans in the United Kingdom, although they do not have a statutory status (Gallent 2013). In De Achterhoek, village plans are widespread: More than thirty communities (villages or hamlets) have developed such plans since 2005 (Vereniging Kleine Kernen Gelderland 2013). These plans can serve several purposes. Sometimes they are merely a priority list of projects the community would like to initiate. These aspects of village plans are implemented in informal ways, just as autonomous initiatives are implemented. In other cases, the plans are used to communicate ideas and views of the future to the municipality. Although village plans do not have a formal status, several aspects of such plans have been incorporated in the municipal formal planning process since 2005 (Vereniging Kleine Kernen Gelderland 2009).

The community of Beltrum (2,925 inhabitants; CBS 2015) designed a rather extensive village plan. Due to depopulation, the community was struggling with largely unoccupied buildings, high exploitation costs, and disappearing public services. The project coordinator, a building contractor in his professional life, communicated this problem to other community members. They soon realized that addressing all of these issues would be a rather complex task. They therefore decided to structure the planning process, so that they could tackle several concerns at once. The project coordinator explained:

> We first organized brainstorm sessions, in which all kinds of subjects were raised. Sustainability was what we found most important: a sustainable future for Beltrum. At a later stage, we combined and presented the ideas to the community. . . . Afterward, we prioritized the projects and put them into a time schedule: what will we do first, and what will come later. (Project coordinator of the village plan Beltrum; author's translation from the Dutch)

During this plan-making process, the community of Beltrum was assisted by the GFDKK—an NGO that functions as a representative body of all associated village councils (dorpsbelangenorganisaties). The GFDKK actively promotes the development of village plans, and coordinates and supervises the planning process. In response to an increasing interest

among the villages in developing future visions, the GFDKK compiled detailed step-by-step guidelines for the planning process and started to train process supervisors. This fifteen-step process includes an integrated problem analysis, a public hearing, and evaluation and monitoring (Vereniging Kleine Kernen Gelderland 2011). The GFDKK claims to have had bad experiences with less-structured processes, as these usually fail due to a lack of public support within the village or because the municipality does not want to cooperate in helping to accomplish these plans. However, the step-by-step guidelines can also slow down the process and limit flexibility and creativity. Nonetheless, there is a close link with the previously mentioned autonomous initiatives: many village plans include the building of community centers and other DIY planning projects. Although the planning process might seem rigid and formal, in practice, village plans form an important hub for and link to other informal planning practices.

Cocreated Informality

A third gradation along the community/government-led continuum concerns those examples that were initiated by nongovernmental actors, but were developed in close cooperation with governmental stakeholders. Sometimes the agenda of citizens intersects with the planning domain of governments; this could serve as an incentive to discuss partnerships with local authorities. Cooperation is not always fruitful, but it can lead to projects that otherwise would not have been accomplished, either by formal means or by pure informality.

In Zieuwent (2,105 inhabitants; CBS 2015), both the community and the local government wanted to redesign the village center, as the main road split the village in two and was dangerous to cross (De Gelderlander 2011). However, the construction work would require excavation of the graveyard. The community initiated the planning process and developed a new plan for the village center. Below, the director of GFDKK Gelderland explains why this plan could not have been implemented by outsiders, such as local authorities:

> If the community of Zieuwent had not proposed this initiative, it would not have worked out as it has done. [In Zieuwent] the main road ran straight alongside the church. The inhabitants wanted to create a small square there. By creating a bend in the road, the speed limit has been reduced and this made it possible to make a village square. However, this also meant that the new road would run through the graveyard. Together, all of the inhabitants created a new graveyard and a ritual interment was carried out. This was done very carefully and with a lot of public support. That is how this was made possible. (Director of GFDKK Gelderland; author's translation from the Dutch)

The planning process in Zieuwent has both informal and formal aspects. On one hand, creating public support for a new graveyard and designing a new village square was the result of informality: citizens made decisions through their everyday interaction and their personal networks. Road construction, on the other hand, was the municipal's responsibility and could not be resolved in an informal manner.

In Mariënvelde, the citizens and the municipality joined forces to create a large multifunctional care center (zorgaccommodatie), where a doctor, a district nurse, and a physical therapist have a surgery and daily activities are organized for the elderly, the chronically ill, disabled persons, and "healthy" target groups, such as youngsters or women. The development of a community enterprise (Healey 2015), such as the multifunctional care center, is a direct result of the "participatory society": they made use of newly allocated budgets to serve national ambitions to deliver public facilities via society. However, the magnitude of a community enterprise also entails many formal aspects; the citizens of Mariënvelde signed contracts with care deliverers and drew up a list of general rules for public procurement that applied to them as well. These formalities complicated the planning process. The project leader explained the importance of close cooperation with the local government:

> Governments have to facilitate citizen initiatives; this can also be done with knowledge. With the help of a civil servant, you are as a citizen perfectly capable of realizing what you would like to do. . . . From the very beginning we had one policymaker from the municipality at our disposal, with whom we met once a month. We talked about our plans and the possibilities for realizing them. This was very convenient. (Project leader of Zorgaccommodatie Mariënvelde; author's translation from the Dutch)

Nevertheless, establishing a community enterprise also involved many informal aspects. The majority of the work was carried out by volunteers, and the planning process had a much more spontaneous and flexible character compared with a government-led process.

Government-Stimulated Informality

The fourth gradation along the community/government-led continuum involves an anomaly: policy-driven community initiatives. Some municipalities stimulate specific community initiatives. As part of austerity and/or empowerment policies, particular tasks are outsourced at the community level.

The municipality of Berkelland is one of the frontrunners in this respect: it was the first municipality in De Achterhoek to decide that in the face of population and economic decline, it would not be feasible to maintain all the public facilities. As an experiment, they outsourced the library service; libraries were no longer maintained by the municipality, but villages could take them over and were stimulated to do so via a subsidy scheme (Gemeente Berkelland 2015). At first, the municipality of Berkelland tried to organize this process in a

very rigid and formal way. However, as every community has its own history of self-organization, this inside-out driven process of informality formed the first in a series of conflicts between communities and local government. Although most citizen initiatives depend on subsidies for exploitation and new projects, these austerity measures were received negatively by all of the interviewed representatives of the community initiatives:

> On the one hand, the municipality abandons public facilities, but on the other hand, they have money for communities to take over the library. They put a lot of focus on "noaberhulp" [neighbor help] and they believe that these initiatives should come from the communities. We were quite angry, because the community center proves that we have been doing everything voluntarily all the time. (Council member of community center Noordijk; author's translation from the Dutch)

A few years after the completion of Rietmolen's sports center, the community decided to renovate the old soccer pitch canteen and convert it into a community center. The idea of combining several facilities in this community center was catalyzed (and made possible) by the municipal subsidy scheme to take over the library. However, by the time they had submitted their application for the library subsidy, the funding had been capped. Frustrated, but determined to realize their plans for the library, Rietmolen decided to continue using its own resources; members of the community successfully applied for other funding and sought sponsors.

Conflicts and missed opportunities do not have to be the end of community initiatives. Collectives of strong-minded citizens are often determined to reach their goals, one way or another. Municipal policies, such as the subsidy scheme for libraries, unintentionally inspired Rietmolen to achieve its goals through informal means. From interviews held later with citizens and follow-up informal talks with policy makers, it appeared that municipal policy makers had learned from their earlier struggles. They now pay more attention to local circumstances and engage more actively in dialogue with the communities and their informal ways of planning.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article demonstrated how the concept of informality could support us in contributing to spatial planning in the Netherlands as a body of knowledge and a set of practices. Informality not only broadens the scope of what is usually considered as spatial planning in the Netherlands but also makes a significant contribution to planning practices in both nonformalized and formalized planning systems (or traditions). We have learned from the global South that despite informality, nongovernmental stakeholders are capable of practicing planning; that is, decision-making that is aimed at coordinating different processes of spatial organization. The current situation in the Netherlands not only requires an alternative approach to formalized planning but also provides a localized counterdiscourse—by showing time and time again the practical effectiveness of informality—and presents a to-the-point theoretical conceptualization of the current shifts in the field of spatial planning in the Netherlands.

The positioning of the examples from De Achterhoek in our analytical frame reflect a range of community-led informal planning practices. In addition to the existing literature on informality, citizen initiatives, and outside-in perspectives, the analysis of these examples provides insight into how informality is practiced in a highly formalized planning context. Nongovernmental stakeholders in De Achterhoek have proven that they are capable of effectively employing planning practices within a context of formal, government-led planning. Due to informality, communities were more capable than the municipalities when it came to mobilizing public support, finding cost-effective solutions, and performing a quick search for new opportunities. Today, communities are increasingly demanding to be involved in planning or even to take over planning processes themselves. The interest of communities in drawing up village plans, and in taking the initiative when it comes to developing and maintaining community centers, underlines this development.

Thus, the concept of informality helps us to understand how planning takes place in and beyond formal, legalized, and statutory contexts. Separating community-led practices from informality enables us to provide a nuanced analysis of autonomous decision-making and governmental interference. The newly introduced analytical framework illustrates the dynamics of community-led informal planning practices, in terms of formality/informality and government involvement. The case study evidence demonstrates not only the diversity but also the dynamic character of community-led planning. To implement their ideas, nongovernmental stakeholders strategically employ both formal and informal tactics, just as they demand or ignore support from governments. That the examples that were studied can be localized along the varying gradations of formality and government-led planning within the framework evinces their capacity to adopt their initiatives within an institutional context that is dominated by statutory planning. Furthermore, the location of the examples within the analytical frame is not static. Our results show how community-led planning practices can shift from one quadrant to another, for example, when village plans are adopted in statutory planning or when governmental policies intentionally inspire communities to develop autonomous initiatives.

Extralegal informality as it occurs in the global South is a long way from what we described as Dutch informal planning practices. In addition, examples of government-led informality are not represented in our analytical frame. However, this does not mean that informality in De Achterhoek is a continuation of collaborative planning or is

apolitical. Besides, in the global North, informality has challenged formal governmental planning and democratic processes of representation and participation.

First, the empowerment of nongovernmental actors opens up new pools of local-level politics; it is particularly the elderly, male, highly educated citizens, with good access to formal, governmental networks, who are the drivers behind community initiatives. The result is a concentration of practices at the center of the analytical frame. Other groups are hardly represented on village councils, and their needs are at risk of being excluded from the informal planning agenda. We have observed this before, where in some cases exclusion can lead to serious conflict. Yet, fear of exclusion plays an important role in small communities and has severe consequences, as the example of Rietmolen has shown. Both project leaders and opponents are usually inclined to seek a consensus.

Second, the analytical frame reveals the involvement of governments in community-led planning practices in De Achterhoek. However, this practice also raises a number of questions. It is particularly government-stimulated informality that is at risk of becoming exploitive toward communities. Who decides which initiatives qualify for subsidies against what set of criteria, or when informal planning initiatives become legalized? The same applies to outsourcing facilities to communities in cases where cuts have been made to the budget: does this empower nongovernmental actors, or do they step into a vacuum in which only basic social services are provided? In a more general sense, one might ask who benefits from a stronger emphasis being placed on informal planning practices: is it the government, the communities, or a selected set of actors within the local communities who are able to create public support for their ideas? If the debate is to be moved forward, a better understanding of the democratic implications of citizen empowerment, and especially selective citizen empowerment, needs to be developed. Awareness and critical reflection among policy makers is necessary to prevent unbalanced empowerment and potential exploitive participation from occurring.

Appendix

Visited meetings for Informal Follow-Up Talks.

Date	Meeting	Organization	Place
September 5, 2011	Seminar "Krimp in zicht"	Netwerk Platteland	Den Haag
November 23, 2011	Najaarsconferentie	Netwerk Platteland	Nieuw Amsterdam
March 9, 2012	REGIOATELIER ACHTERHOEK	Regio Achterhoek	Lievelde
March 16, 2012	EUREGIO Bewe(e)gt – krimp grensverleggend aanpakken	Euregio	Bronckhorst
April 18, 2012	Statendebat "Leve de Achterhoek"	Provincie Gelderland	Hengelo
November 28, 2012	Presentatie Agenda Achterhoek 2020	Regio Achterhoek	Bronckhorst
December 7, 2012	Shrinking areas: frontrunners in innovative citizen participation	European Urban Knowledge Network	Essen (Germany)
December 12–13, 2013	Plattelandsconferentie Expeditie Achterhoek	Netwerk Platteland	Ulft
December 10, 2015	Landelijke conferentie bevolkingsdaling	Ministerie van Binnenlandse zaken en Ruimtevolk	Ulft
December 9, 2016	De triomf van het dorp/De wedergeboorte van de stad	Ruimtevolk and Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed	Amersfoort

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Notes

1. See https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/toespraken/2013/09/17/troonrede-2013, retrieved October 19, 2015.
2. Accordingly, many case studies focus on slums and their informal spatial organization. Roy carried out most of her empirical research in India (Roy 2005, 2009a, 2009b), just as McFarlane (2012). Watson (2008) explains planning in her homeland (South Africa) by using the concept of informality. Moreover, a few case studies have been carried out in the United States, but these were done either in governmental vacuums, where formal planning/regulations are absent (Buitelaar 2008; Fairbanks 2011), or as a practice of informal communication within planning practices (Innes, Connick, and Booher 2007).
3. Most communities are represented by a village council that has a website to inform community members about their objectives and activities. Furthermore, local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), such as the Association for Small Settlements, maintain databases on their websites, listing all

the communities they support and their activities (such as community centers and village plans).

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