Original research article

Institutional 'lock-out' towards local self-governance? Environmental justice and sustainable transformations in Dutch social housing neighbourhoods

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ABSTRACT

In their efforts to improve social housing neighbourhoods, Dutch housing associations attempt to encourage tenants to take a more active role. Generally speaking, bottom-up initiatives and participatory approaches have become popular among Dutch policy-makers as ways to achieve sustainable energy goals. While the rise of local energy cooperatives seems to support this view, we also see that particularly in deprived neighbourhoods, there is no bottom-up activity, nor will it occur without external support. This paper thus examines a case of an externally initiated programme in a Dutch social housing neighbourhood, aiming to place tenants' needs at the centre. Applying an environmental justice framework, we address both the historical-institutional legacies and the tenants' positions, showing how institutional pressures built up over time have resulted in a diluting of the programme into a top-down technology-pushed approach. The relevance goes beyond this case: without ensuring the quality of the participation, institutional lock-ins can produce perverse outcomes, with the programme failing to achieve its (energy-efficiency) goals while the intended beneficiaries lose out. As a counterweight, an active process of capacity building is proposed, using an environmental justice approach to examine the conditions for local self-governance and how to address these in a participatory intervention.

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1. Active citizens and local sustainable innovation

Local bottom-up initiatives and participatory approaches are increasingly regarded as solutions for various implementation problems in the areas of renewable energy generation, energy saving and efficiency improvements, both in the Netherlands and across Europe [1]. Examples of citizens who organise themselves 'bottom-up' to collectively solve societal problems at a neighbourhood level have stirred enthusiasm among policy makers [2,3]. The resulting Dutch 'participatory society' policy discourse, in some ways similar to the British 'Big Society' discourse, has however invoked criticism from those warning that initiatives that are distributed unevenly across society cannot be expected to serve as an alternative to the withdrawing welfare state [4,1,5,6]. In addition,

the participatory society-discourse reflects a rather instrumental view of the citizens involved and is based on assumptions about upscaling early-mover best practices in laggard neighbourhoods. However, such trickle down effects are unlikely to occur. In fact, in many neighbourhoods, especially deprived ones facing a lack of resources (financial, time, relational) and/or capabilities, no bottom-up activity is occurring at all (or not the kind that policy-makers would like to see), nor will it occur without support from external (public) organisations.

In academic literature, there also seems to be great interest in bottom-up initiatives, judging by the growing number of studies on the dynamics of grass-roots level self-mobilisation of communities, making use of theoretical concepts drawn from socio-technical innovation and transition literature [7–9]. Without denying the importance of these studies, our observation is that we also need to focus on the numerous situations where *no* grass-roots dynamics seem to occur. In such cases, external initiative can in principle encourage local mobilisation and participation. However, this raises questions regarding the roles of and the relations between the initiator and residents and how these can change during the

process. After all, an external initiative involves a risk, that instead of working towards locally relevant goals, the participation increasingly aims at getting people to commit to ideas 'from outside'. A lack of recognition of local needs undermines the quality of the participatory process. In fact, occurrences of clashes between supra-local sustainability goals and local (sustainability) goals and needs are well-documented and usually relate to a lack of recognition of the latter by the project initiators [10–13].

We have identified several elements that require attention when scrutinizing externally initiated programmes aimed at neighbourhood improvements: the quality of the participation process, the recognition of local (and heterogeneous) goals and needs, the distribution of benefits and disadvantages, and the extent to which capabilities and resources are sufficiently present among residents locally to be able to voice concerns. The latter aspect is especially important when addressing deprived neighbourhoods. The concept of environmental justice is a very suitable evaluative framework; it offers the opportunity to engage with and reveal the relational and power-laden dimensions of externally initiated efforts at sustainability innovations as they unfold locally and affect (and are affected by) peoples' daily lives.

In recent years, the environmental justice concept has evolved to analyse and evaluate issues, especially in the dynamics of our energy systems regarding the relationship between energy concerns and well-being [14–20]. Our aim is to contribute to this literature, by taking a closer look at initiatives targeting sustainable improvements in deprived neighbourhoods.

In the Netherlands, the majority of the lowest-income households live in social housing. Of the three million rented homes in the Netherlands, around 75% are owned by housing associations, semi-public organisations assigned to provide affordable rental housing (state-subsidized).[1] National government sets the rules for social housing allocation and stipulates the responsibility of the housing associations, which includes maintaining or improving the quality of neighbourhoods.

In their efforts to improve neighbourhoods, Dutch housing associations are increasingly looking for innovative ways to mobilise residents, to trigger active participation so that residents themselves take a more active role and responsibility in improving their neighbourhood. This signals the intention to move away from more traditional approaches that aim at acceptance of ready-made solutions (energy efficiency improvements through renovation) devised for social housing neighbourhoods. Acknowledgement is now growing that such approaches do not result in desired acceptance levels. Large-scale retrofitting programmes in social housing neighbourhoods must be legally approved by 70% of the tenants, which can be quite a challenge. But even when such retrofitting has taken place, the envisaged energy performance improvements may not transpire – e.g. if residents do not use the innovative ventilation systems as intended [21–24].

The case in this paper is about the Airey neighbourhood in the Dutch city of Eindhoven. It is exemplary with regard to the sort of challenges many deprived neighbourhoods are facing: degraded housing stocks, high energy bills, low comfort levels due to low energy efficiency, socio-economic decline, little social cohesion, problems like indebtedness, addiction and long-term unemployment.

In line with its short term strategy for the period 2013–2017 explicitly aiming for a more demand-driven approach to neighbourhood improvement [25], housing association Woonbedrijf developed the so-called "Neighbourhood Transformation" approach, focusing on renovation and improved energy effi-

ciency. The idea was that the programme would be co-created with and at some point handed over to the local neighbourhood community. However, these aims did not materialise in practice, raising the question why it proved to be so difficult. A central question therefore is what challenges such an externally initiated programme faces. Based on our analysis of these challenges, the question how to stop it diluting into a top-down technology-pushed approach (which happened in this case) is asked. The aim of this inquiry is to learn how a top-down programme (by a public actor like a housing association or municipality) can become more effective in supporting a local capacity building process for self-governance – particularly in local contexts where such capacities are absent. We will provide an evaluative account and point out how this case analysis is relevant to similar contexts (low-income neighbourhoods with little self-mobilisation and requiring sustainable improvements) in the Netherlands, but arguably elsewhere in Europe too. We furthermore aim to formulate practical recommendations for future interventions in similar contexts elsewhere.

2. Conceptualising local action in complex domains

2.1. Path-dependency and rules of engagement

A central point of departure for the intervention in the Airey neighbourhood was improving energy efficiency. Energy-related interventions affect and are affected by a variety of policy domains besides energy policy, including: housing (energy efficient homes and local renewables generation), social policy (local self-governance in micro-grids), spatial planning (planning, zoning), environmental policy (climate change policies, energy efficiency targets) and fiscal policies (green tax reforms) etc. Furthermore, multiple scales of policy and decision-making, diverse (networks of) actors with different needs, various interdependencies and incumbent 'ways of doing' present challenges to change [16,12].

The domain of energy, like housing, is socio-technical in nature – involving physical objects, infrastructure, institutions, actors, networks and social norms that have co-evolved over time [26]. This historical co-evolution is captured by the notion of path-dependency, which rejects the idea that the same forces will give similar results in different places at different times [27]. In other words, context matters, and as part of this context, institutions play a crucial role – being the formal and informal rules of behaviour [28,29]. Institutions like shared norms, policies and regulations contribute to reproducing ways of doing at various levels in organisations and in society, even when it is clear that these practices are not sustainable. This reproduction is captured by the concept of lock-in [30,31]. A lock-in refers to a perpetuation of 'choice' favouring particular options, while arguably better alternatives are available. The sources of lock-in can be technical, physical, institutional, social and organisational [31]. Socio-technical governance processes often merely strengthen the existing organisation of power in a particular context, but they may also challenge it and thus contribute to a 'lock-out' [30,32,33]. By 'lock-out' we refer to a process of becoming aware of the seemingly self-evident perpetuation of certain trajectories, followed by efforts to change this. Such efforts should then probably target the sources of lock-in, which are institutional, physical, social, or a combination of these.

The point we are trying to make is that what happens in local contexts is highly influenced by arrangements and institutions on higher scale levels. At neighbourhood level, it is relevant to focus on path-dependent developments from various domains in order to learn how these have contributed to – in our case – the failure of a housing association's aim to work in a more participatory and demand-driven manner.

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[1] https://www.government.nl/topics/housing/contents/housing-associations.