



Critical upscaling. How citizens' initiatives can contribute to a transition in governance and quality of urban greenspace

Carmen B.E.M. Aalbers^{a,b,*}, Karina Sehested^a

^a Copenhagen University, Rolighedsvej 23, Copenhagen, Denmark

^b Wageningen Research, PO Box 47, 6700 AA Wageningen, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

Studies show that municipalities often develop a type of urban greenspace that is rather uniform in its shape and use. Citizens' initiatives develop different types of greenspace. This article uses concepts from transition studies and identifies what happens during a citizens' initiative in urban greenspace in the Netherlands in terms of transition of municipal management and development and how these initiatives can lead to a change of practices of the municipality. A single, qualitative study of Diepenheim Inside-Out-Forest in the Netherlands as a critical case is presented, based on 8 semi-open interviews. The study gives insight in how the municipality has changed in relation to this one case, and how such transition of 'regime' takes place. The study explains how the different benefits that arise in a greenspace development and management initiative relate to the 'critical knowledge' and 'situated knowledge' of the actors involved and that the quality of urban greenspace is very much the result of that knowledge. 'Fit and conform' and 'stretch and transform' are usable strategies for the empowerment of such initiatives through sharing of resources, and policy advocacy by 'critical niche' innovators.

'Regime' is not uniquely a feature of the local state but also of market parties and citizens themselves with their own values and routines. A change among all parties seems needed if greenspace is to be developed, managed and used differently.

1. Introduction

1.1. Disagreements on (urban) greenspace

There is strong evidence for the fact that strong emotional and cultural drivers divide nature conservationists, and local land users and residents. (e.g. Jones et al., 2016; Reser and Bentrupperbäumer, 2005; Satterfield, 2001; Satterfield, 1997; Kleeman, 2001). Buijs (2009a) explains that citizens protest against urban development plans by the state because of their feelings of attachment to greenspace and their disagreement with the changes. Not only do citizens and the (local) state at times disagree about developments, but classifications, preferences and assessment of urban greenspace also differ between state and citizens (Dakin, and Huntziker both cited in Buijs, 2009b, p40; Nicol and Blake, and Harrison and Burgess both cited in Van Herzele and Wiedemann, 2003). Municipalities often develop a type of urban green that is rather uniform in its shape and use: parks. These are areas where little free human interaction with nature is possible. In the literature this limited shaping of greenspace is referred to as 'parkification' of nature (Littke,

2015).

Numerous management and development initiatives in greenspace taken by citizens and small companies¹ have emerged in Europe over the last decades (e.g. Lohrberg et al., 2016, p.7). Fors et al. (2015) observe that studies of these initiatives have focused on the process factors and impacts of participation, rather than the physical impact on greenspace. However, Aalbers et al. (2015) analysed 40 initiatives by citizens and small companies in greenspace in the Netherlands and interviewed some 50 citizens and entrepreneurs. They described the discourses, practices and photos of the greenspace of these initiatives and compared them with those of municipalities. The authors found that the initiatives develop a kind of greenspace that differs in scale and identity from state developed greenspace and which responds to the desires of locally involved residents. It is generally developed at low cost, often without designs nor technical specifications. The gardens often give the perception of being 'a bit messy', because of work in progress or a different maintenance regime than that of the municipality/local state (Aalbers et al., 2015, p128). A further series of studies preceded the research: joint site visits to public greenspaces by

* Corresponding author at: Copenhagen University, Rolighedsvej 23, Copenhagen, Denmark.

E-mail address: Carmen.Aalbers@gmail.com (C.B.E.M. Aalbers).

¹ 'Small companies' refers especially to the one person companies active in greenspace development and management. Those involved aren't always green professionals and can have another job or business aside.

researchers together with citizens of different age and cultural backgrounds in two urban districts (Aalbers and Bezemer, 2005); photo-shoots by teenagers of green spaces they find ugly or beautiful (Ruiter and Aalbers, 2005); and a joint design process with different social groups of a neighbourhood park in Amsterdam (Aalbers and Haars, 2006). These studies demonstrate the discrepancy between existing public green space developed by the municipality and the wishes of citizens in terms of use, access and shape of green space. Furthermore, views on the future (design, use and management) of green space also differ between citizens themselves (e.g. Ruiter and Aalbers, 2005; Aalbers and Haars, 2006). Various studies also point out the pros and cons of green space developed or managed by citizens and set out the factors hindering their participation. (Appendix A) The discrepancy between citizens and the state in relation to what matters (knowledge, emotional ties/values) when developing, preserving and managing urban nature, can be considered to be a problem in terms of the lack of legitimacy of these policies. Initiatives by citizens and small companies present the interests and values of the different initiating parties in terms of how they want to relate to urban nature, and the knowledge and efforts they have been willing to put into its management and development (Aalbers et al., 2015). It also means that the state policies do not always acknowledge the multiple meanings of urban green space for the urbanizing society (e.g. Luederitz et al., 2015; De Groot et al., 2010; Hartig et al., 2014) which may result in foregoing the benefits of urban nature for the city. Poulsen et al. (2014) refer to benefits that should be promoted as a tool for creating healthy urban environments.

1.2. State and citizens management of green space

Europe wide the quality and management of (urban) green space has obtained substantial attention since the 1980's in relation to both theory and practice (Lindholm et al., 2015). Studies include not only the role of the state, but also of local communities in management, 'place keeping' (Dempsey et al., 2014) and development of green spaces (Fors et al., 2015; Jansson and Lindgren 2012; Buizer 2008; Buijs et al., 2017; Poulsen et al., 2014; Schukoske 2000; Lohrberg et al., 2016; García et al., 2014; Ernwein, 2014; Barron 2017; Kurtz 2001). In the Netherlands a change of nature policies has taken place: from a formerly heavy accent on biodiversity and conservation (Buijs et al., 2014) via a conservation/development discourse towards more inclusive policies. The policies 'Nature for People, People for Nature' (2000), 'Nature-vision 2014' (Dijkma, 2014) and numerous 'Green Deals', for example for 'New Urban Nature', are in favour of a broader understanding of nature, including nature as contributor to human wellbeing (so-called 'ecosystem services' (e.g. Luederitz et al., 2015; Braat and De Groot 2012; De Groot et al., 2010), and a larger role of citizens and companies in developing and managing green space. A study by De Boer et al. (2014), part of a longitudinal series of 4 surveys since 1996 among a representative group of 1500 respondents, concludes that among the Dutch population nature has a low priority as a state policy field, though respondents generally see the state as responsible for nature. Simultaneously, the recent vision (Dijkma, 2014) by the Dutch national state gives much attention to enhancing the role of citizens and business in nature management. According to De Boer et al. (2014) 11% of citizens are very actively involved with nature: in decision making and in actively using and protecting nature, which at its simplest level can be the act of hanging up a bird nest box.

Though the total area of, and number of citizens involved in green initiatives is limited (De Boer et al., 2014) and the execution of these initiatives is demanding (Aalbers et al., 2015), improving the connection of these initiatives to state practices may render urban development more inclusive of a broader meaning of nature and of the more diverse relations between humans and nature that these initiatives express (Aalbers et al., 2015). This broadening could contribute to increasing the services and benefits of urban green space. Furthermore, citizens who feel attached to green space are more likely to protest

against its loss (Buijs 2009a; Kleeman, 2001) and thus may help to preserve it. Finally, citizens often contribute their own work, which can help reduce management costs (e.g. Aalbers, 2002).

1.3. Bridging the gap

In the governance literature collaborative and deliberative approaches are promoted in urban and green space management. For instance, network governance (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003) and collaborative planning (e.g. Innes and Booher 2010; Healey, 2006, 1997) have largely influenced urban planning research and practice in Europe (Sehested 2009). Recently, 25 years after the argumentative turn (Fischer and Forester 1993) and the emergence of collaborative and deliberative governance as a paradigm in theory and practice, reference is being made to the legitimacy and credibility deficits of these types of governance (e.g. Sørensen and Torfing, 2016; Metzger et al., 2014). This article searches for alternative theory in relation to bridging the gap between public authorities and local innovations by citizens, especially concerning the knowledge and values of nature in these innovations which are different from the institutionalized knowledge at the level of the state. The latter are the object of social innovation studies (e.g. Moulaert et al., 2013, 2016; Bock 2016; Mayer 2012, 2013) and transition theory (e.g. Smith and Raven 2012; Smith et al., 2015, 2016; Rip and Kemp, 1998; Geels 2004). The application of transition theory to the issue of participation in development and management of urban green space is new. Transition theory has assembled a body of knowledge to offer concerning upscaling of small innovations to changes in larger governance regimes in society. It also offers knowledge about barriers to sustainable development innovations, such as socio-cognitive processes, market processes, sociological processes and structures that form a selection environment for technical innovations (Smith and Raven, 2012, p1026). These barriers hinder innovations that do not fit these processes and structures. Only those which fit go through. The multilevel perspective in transition theory in particular builds upon social structuration theory with its duality between structure and agent (Giddens, 1984) which may be expected to be relevant to initiatives of citizens as agents encountering the structure of the local state. Socio-ecological systems, namely agents interacting with urban green space, can be considered as socio-technical systems where the ecological part of the system obeys physical law, as for technical systems. Transition theory studies how innovative socio-technical systems can survive, be strengthened or mainstreamed and conceptualizes the barriers that initiatives face. This article aims at a reconnaissance of the applicability of transition theory by means of a case study for deeper understanding of what happens in a citizen initiative in urban green space and in relation to its context. It investigates how municipal management and development of urban green space can become more reflective of citizen's ideas and relationships with nature.

Values and knowledge in so-called 'niche innovations' that have to face the local-state practices in the form of a so-called socio-technical regime, are central in transition theory, and are conceptualized as 'critical' and 'situated' knowledge. The change of practices in niche-innovations and of the socio-technical regime are conceived as (micro) social innovation or a transition. With help from these and more concepts from transition theory, this article will try to answer two research questions by means of the case study: What happens during a citizen's initiative in urban green space, in terms of transition of local state management and development of urban green space? How can these initiatives lead to a change of practices of the municipality?

The study is a qualitative case study and aims at making a significant theoretical and practical contribution (Tracy, 2010) to the research and practice of initiatives by citizens in urban green space.

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