How to define successful citizen initiatives? A professional perspective.

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Citizen initiatives in rural areas

• Big government – Big society

• Depopulation

• Role of citizen initiatives
  » Formally or informally organized groups of citizens taking action to contribute to the public domain
• Are citizen initiatives a good replacement of former public services?
• Definition of success in citizen initiatives?

Research question: How do Dutch professionals of the northern rural areas perceive success and failure of citizen initiatives?
The work of Vickers

• Four dimensions of success
  • Survival: maintaining dynamic balance
  • Efficiency: optimizing self-maintenance
  • Growth: maximizing the flow of resources
  • Functional success: optimizing functional performance
Methods

• Three focus group discussions

• 23 participants in total

• Discussion on what is seen as success/failure

• Three rounds in each session
Results: What is success?

1. Importance of process

Olivia: [Talking about a project that should have become very large]... ‘Well, now it is split up in little bits. And it is not the success that it was supposed to be. I think. But the little parts and the process is very successful indeed. And then the question remains, is that a problem?’

Emily: ‘So it is the free-styling as well, I think that it is very important too. That you can shift to different…’

Isabelle: ‘But then you should say, it is not the issue whether your original goal has been met, but is there a result. And that can be in little parts too. I think getting results might be very important.’
Results:
What is success?

2. Being active

Oscar: ‘Being active, for me that means that citizens come into motion, that they do something, that they take action. I think that is success in itself. That they apparently see something around them and say: that is worthwhile, that concerns me.’
3. Always successful

Olivia: ‘[…] well, when is it not a success? We often see things that did not work out, or were stopped, went bankrupt, or… But those people have learned so much. So the process in itself has been a success when you consider the timespan we expect of governments and citizens. Than it is not at all bad what we are doing. The pioneering is already a great success.’
Results:
What is success?

Success:
- Importance of process
- Activities within the initiative
- Always!
- Power with citizens, not government

No success:
- When nothing happens/no activity
- Citizens not in charge
- Damage to (living) environment
- No community-support
Vickers’ success vs. findings

- **Survival** in line with ‘being active’
- Efficiency
- Growth
- **Functional success** vs. process and activity
Conclusion and discussion

• ‘Soft’ evaluation of success

• Success: who decides?