

# Exploring the challenges of citizen initiatives for a more sustainable Utrecht

A summary of the research conducted in service of special interest group CITizen Engagement and Urban Sustainability (CITEUS)

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## 1. Introduction

Our primary research aim was to identify and explore current societal challenges and questions regarding citizen engagement in green management and the energy transition in Utrecht. This was approached from the perspective of citizen initiatives and the municipality. Additional attention was paid to issues regarding the democratic legitimacy of citizen engagement as this was one of the key themes discussed during the first two workshops with the municipality. The ultimate goal was to formulate recommendations for future research. This explorative research increased our understanding of how engagement for sustainability is currently organised around citizen initiatives in Utrecht and the challenges that exist here; it made us engage with practitioners and citizens in knowledge co-creation; and we identified, created and strengthened transdisciplinary links. The full scientific report is made publicly available on [the CITEUS webpage](#).

## 2. Methods

*Data collection:* Before starting the preliminary research, two workshops were hosted to discuss key challenges regarding citizen engagement in Utrecht. Also, desk research enabled stakeholder mapping, creating a broad overview of a diverse range of local initiatives and engagement opportunities. The output of this, complemented with recent knowledge and information about citizen collectives in the Netherlands, resulted in a set of interview topics and list of respondents. Two methods of data collection were applied during the research with different aims:

1) Interviews with citizen initiatives and municipal employees, with the purpose of getting a basic understanding of the questions and challenges faced by them. In total, thirty-six interviews were conducted for this research, of which a majority taken with citizen initiatives. 2) A transdisciplinary workshop with citizens, municipal employees and researchers, with the purpose of working towards a mutual understanding of the challenges by combining perspectives, sharing knowledge about successful cases, and co-creating opportunities to accelerate citizen initiatives. The research was concluded with an interdisciplinary workshop aimed to prioritise knowledge gaps and identify research questions for joint research.

*Research approach:* We conducted the research from an explorative and inductive approach, in order to capture the challenges as perceived by the research subjects. To increase understanding of underlying problems, assumptions and structures, interviews were semi-structured to open-ended and provided room for personal input. Clarifying questions were added to the interview questions during the interview series for the sake of better understanding certain reasonings.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Challenges and questions from citizen initiatives

Citizens, initiatives and organisations communicated challenges and questions regarding the following topics, sorted based on their perceived priority (number of times mentioned and stressed importance) (Table 1, 2, 3). They are categorized according to the same structure as the recent report by Tine de Moor and colleagues<sup>1</sup> on challenges from citizen collectives in the Netherlands. We distinguish three main categories of challenges: internal procedures (Table 1), member dynamics (Table 2) and in the relation to municipality (Table 3). Sometimes, a challenge means something slightly differently for green initiatives than for energy initiatives; their interpretations are therefore separately explained.

Challenge	Interpretation in green initiatives	Interpretation in energy initiatives
<b>Financial limitations and insecurities</b>	Financial independence is rare; sometimes pressured to devote to additional commercial activities	Financial independence is rare; sometimes pressured to devote to additional commercial activities; cooperatives must ask large and high-risk investments from citizens, to which only a minority responds
<b>Professionalisation and upscaling</b>	Lack of knowledge and willingness to professionalise causes difficulty in reaching the level of professionalism necessary for successful growth and receiving subsidies	Growing financial, legal and technical complexity and responsibilities, combined with a lack of knowledge and resources, causes difficulties in reaching the high level of professionalisation necessary for competing with private companies
<b>Leadership</b>	Leadership is challenging because of the heavy workload for one or a few people, and/or the unwillingness of members to take up a succeeding leadership position	Leadership is challenging because of the heavy workload for one or a few people, and/or unwillingness of members to take up a succeeding leadership position
<b>Long-term vision and target-setting</b>	A short-term focus and lacking ambitions on the long-term create temporality in the CI's existence	The long development phase can be demotivating; future financial and political insecurities complicate long-term planning
<b>Measure and communicate impacts</b>	Expressing impact is considered hard, attributed to a lack of "hard" data; attempts to communicate cross-domain value usually fail	Measuring and agreeing upon potential negative effects of (new) projects is considered difficult; as is communicating the urgency of positive impacts
<b>Make a well-considered choice for legal form</b>	Doubts about how to formalise; to become a foundation, association, cooperative?	Doubts about if/when/how to formalise as a (separate) cooperative; complexity of constructing a legal form that is 50% locally owned

Table 1: Challenges in internal procedures

<sup>1</sup> Institutions for Collective Action (2020) *Krachtiger als Collectief: uitdagingen van burgercollectieven in Nederland*, anno 2020. Retrieved from [www.collective-action.info](http://www.collective-action.info)

Challenge	Interpretation in green initiatives	Interpretation in energy initiatives
<b>Pursue inclusivity</b>	CIs don't have the knowledge and resources to overcome biases in culture/ ethnicity	CIs don't have the knowledge and resources to overcome biases in culture/ ethnicity, gender, socio-economic background, age and housing
<b>Member recruitment</b>	Difficulty in continuing to attract enough members to ensure CI longevity	Difficulty in attracting enough members to realise a viable energy project and in increasing membership to spread impact
<b>Manage expectations</b>	Potential high expectations of new members can often not be fulfilled and are quickly adjusted to reality	Leaders feel responsible towards members who hold them account; expectations are difficult to manage in the vulnerable and unpredictable social environment

Table 2: Challenges in member dynamics

Challenge	Interpretation in green initiatives	Interpretation in energy initiatives
<b>Barrier of financing and collaboration because of divergent legal/ organisational form</b>	Initiatives feel that the municipality struggles to value them correctly: (Legal) collective organization is necessary to fit subsidy requirements and to formally collaborate, while larger CI's feel like being treated too much as project developers	Cooperatives feel that the municipality struggles to value them correctly: should the be treated as citizens or as a company? Cooperatives receive only a (small) starting subsidy, although dealing with high costs and competition throughout development
<b>Dealing with another vision on professionalism</b>	CIs feel pressured to professionalise (bureaucratise) procedures; they feel not trusted or taken serious in realising positive impact	CIs experience that the municipality is more inclined to collaborate with companies instead; but in general, cooperatives are perceived as professional due to their organisational format and expertise
<b>Dealing with hindering or lack of rules</b>	Regulations are often considered as demotivating and inadequate, and are strictly followed by the municipality even when considered ill-suited to the CI in question (size, needs, capabilities)	The municipal-CI relationship is troubled with teething problems of new regulatory frameworks, due to the relative novelty and unknown potential of energy initiatives
<b>Dealing with a (sectoral) vision at municipality &gt; financing</b>	There is discrepancy between the "systemic world" and "living world": a slow subsidy process that fails to respond to multi-sectoral or unrecognized initiatives	CIs experience a slow subsidy process that fails to respond to multi-sectoral or unrecognized initiatives
<b>Dealing with fragmented and complex</b>	The municipality is considered a large, fragmented and complex system, which complicates getting access	Although there is one designated municipal contact person during development, after formation/ implementation this usually

<b>municipal services</b>	effectively; deficient communication and discrepancies between municipal departments causes inefficiencies in municipal-CI communication	disappears; municipal fragmentation in the governance of energy projects delays the process
<b>Dealing with discontinuity at municipality</b>	CIs are often considered to be unstable and temporal, but instability mainly occurs from often changing municipal officials. Discontinuity causes knowledge run-off.	CIs are annoyed by the inefficiency of having to explain and justify themselves repeatedly when the contact person changes. Discontinuity causes knowledge run-off.
<b>Dealing with a lack of responsiveness from municipality</b>	There is a mutual lack of (effective) communication, and CIs dislike the lack of follow-up after initial contact	CIs perceive a lack of responsiveness to their input in municipal actions and formal decision-making

Table 3: Challenges in the relation with the municipality

### 3.2. Challenges and questions from the municipality

Policy advisors and project and programme managers from the municipality communicate other (but related) challenges compared to citizen initiatives. These are categorized and described in Table 4.

<b>Challenge</b>	<b>Green department</b>	<b>Energy department</b>
<b>Determine role in CI upscaling and systemic uptake</b>	How can policy-level knowledge and visions seep through and be taken up in practice?	The emergent and bottom-up character of CIs cannot be easily steered by policy: "it's like steering in the mist"
<b>Dealing with insecurities (about the future)</b>	Lack of knowledge on why many CIs don't last long: how to still facilitate them systematically? Discontinuity causes knowledge run-off	Lacking (but growing) experience with CIs, limited budgets, novelty of CEI and incomplete strategies result in hesitations of (how) to support CIs
<b>Identify success factors and measure impact (of incentives)</b>	Current target-setting for urban green is highly inadequate; comprehensively measuring impacts and success factors of greenery could improve target-setting and negotiations	Limited knowledge on which incentives are most effective and for whom; requesting to gain practical insights

Table 4: Challenges and knowledge gaps from the municipality

### 3.3. Combining perspectives for joint prioritisation and acceleration

Bringing together the municipal and citizen perspectives in the form of a transdisciplinary workshop resulted in various suggestions for improving and accelerating impact:

- 1) Explicitly creating space in the task description of civil servants, and appointing several green and energy professionals, to be physically present in the neighbourhood, which will increase proximity and improve communication;
- 2) Integrating green and energy in the policymaking of other sector and levels, so that green and energy are included from the beginning, instead of trying to fit them in later, which will better align societal needs with the institutional context;

- 3) Structurally bringing together initiatives, municipality and experts, in order to increase the effectiveness and continuity of initiatives;
- 4) Tackling sustainability issues in an integral manner in order to increase governance efficiency;
- 5) Allocating structural budgets to citizen initiatives, which is expected to increase the professionalism, sustainability and legitimacy of initiatives;
- 6) Making more use of quick wins to incentivize disengaged citizens;
- 7) Use unequal investments to create equal opportunities to engage in urban green, renewable energy or energy saving, in order to avoid the exacerbation of socio-economic inequalities;
- 8) Experiment with and consolidate democratic innovations to improve CIs' formal position.

#### *3.4. Democratic challenges from a researchers' perspective*

We also include a diagnosis of challenges with democratic legitimacy. A framework of democratic legitimacy principles, based on Bekkers & Edwards (2007), has been applied during the interviews to evaluate how citizen initiatives operate. The following principles have been found to be particularly challenging, and therefore deserve specific attention:

First, the principle of 'inclusive participation' is very important for the democratic legitimacy of citizen initiatives, yet hardly present in the initiatives. Most initiatives fail to create a diverse membership base and to accurately represent the neighbourhood. CIs are not actively tackling internal homogeneity since they are either unaware of the issue or have limited time and resources available to address this next their core (sustainability) focus. The green initiatives are generally more inclusive than energy initiatives in terms of gender, age and socio-economic background, which is partly explained by the required knowledge and resources to engage.

Second, the principles of 'qualitative deliberation', 'responsive representation' and 'responsive decisions' are only moderately present in CIs. Where decisions are made without established mechanisms and where participants do not fully understand the choices at hand, participants do not always feel invited or able to speak up and influence decisions. The unresponsiveness of decisions that results from this is strengthened by a troubling level of direct representation, because of low attendance rates at general meetings and because of a knowledge and activity gap between leaders and regular members, where leaders regularly act outside of members' direct input or oversight.

In the relationship between municipality and citizen initiatives, the principles of 'transparency', 'representation' and 'responsiveness' seem to be most troublesome (so mostly lacking), because of reasons mentioned earlier: a lack of personal communication between small CIs and the large and fragmented municipal system (transparency), the lack of a recognized position of CIs in public administration (representation), a mismatch between municipal responsibility and CIs' ambitions, and the complexity of decision-making in a multi-stakeholder arena (responsiveness).

#### **4. Conclusions and recommendations for further research**

To summarize, the challenges faced by citizen initiatives include (1) dealing with a lack of sufficient time, manpower, expertise and financial resources, making them dependent on collaboration with external stakeholders; (2) difficulty of expanding horizontally to include a larger and more diverse group of (disengaged) citizens, as well as managing the existing group that is often loosely organised and diverse in goals, needs and ambitions, and (3) an experienced distrust and misunderstanding in their relationship with the municipality, with a high sectorality and mental distance that slows down and complicates processes. Initiatives are pushed by the bureaucratic system to be

professionally organised with a board and business model in order to be taken seriously. But when they do, they often face complicated tender procedures and inappropriate regulation from the side of the municipality.

These challenges partly emerge from the voluntary nature of citizen initiatives and the diversity of needs, interests and perspectives present in (civil) society. Moreover, these challenges arise from the size and rigidity of the governmental system on the one hand, with rules and procedures to ensure accountability and democratic legitimacy, as opposed to the fast-changing society pioneered by spontaneous and motivated citizens on the other hand. Consequently, the municipality is insecure about how they can best interpret and facilitate existing initiatives; while simultaneously being ignorant of how-to incentivize and enable citizens that are currently disengaged.

When bringing together the input from municipality, civil society and university, three thematic research questions seem to deserve future priority: How can the municipality and intermediary organisations facilitate and empower pioneering citizens in order to professionalise and upscale CIs? How can municipality and CIs incentivize and enable disengaged citizens to participate in sustainability initiatives in order to enhance inclusivity? And how can CIs become more internally and externally democratic? Specific research topics that arise from these questions include:

- 1) Deepening the concept of inclusivity: who (who has the responsibility to increase inclusivity), what (quantitative and structural data collection), how (dimensions of factors leading to inclusivity) and why (normative and pragmatic consequences of inclusivity);
- 2) Deepening the concept of 'responsibilisation': the search of a desired distribution of responsibilities and accountabilities between municipality and citizens;
- 3) Investigating the role of intermediary organisations and governments in the transfer of knowledge and consolidation of professionalism in CIs;
- 4) Comparing of initiatives in comparable stages but different contexts to draw lessons about external stimuli and barriers to the successes of CIs.

Addressing these questions will contribute to more effective and legitimate sustainability transitions.