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The *participation society* and its inability to correct the failure of market players to deliver adequate service levels in rural areas

Koen Salemink*, Dirk Strijker

University of Groningen (NL), Faculty Spatial Sciences, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

This paper critically reviews the ‘participation society’ inspired policy measures of two Dutch provinces (Drenthe and Groningen) for providing rural broadband. Based on a database with broadband initiatives, interviews with stakeholders, focus groups and document analysis, it analyzes how rural broadband initiatives and regional governments interact in their ventures to provide superfast broadband to rural communities. Essential in this is that in the Dutch participation society concept, citizens’ initiatives are seen as an important actor to deal with failing service delivery by market players in rural areas. The relation between regional governments and citizens’ initiatives, however, is troublesome, resulting in inadequate policies. Key findings are that even when governments come up with supportive policies for citizens’ initiatives, initiatives still experience governmental efforts as constraining factors. Regional governments apply ‘old style’ governance and construct generic policy instruments, forcing initiatives to put a lot of effort in complying with generic policy requirements or political goals. Overall, solving a national market problem at the regional level proves to be problematic. More national guidance is needed to solve the rural broadband gap.

1. Introduction

From an international perspective, the Netherlands is often regarded as one of the most advanced countries when it comes to telecommunications infrastructure (Akamai, 2017; Lemstra and Melody, 2015). This strong international position informs and impacts how the Netherlands shapes their telecommunications policies. In fact, on many occasions the Dutch minister for Economic Affairs points out that ‘97% of the Netherlands has access to a Next Generation Technology’ (Letter to the Parliament DGETM-TM/15027850, 2015). The devil is in the detail, however: nearly all households and businesses that belong to the group of three percent which are excluded, are located in rural areas (Salemink & Strijker, 2016a). This makes that in the Netherlands, the problem of material digital inclusion is first and foremost a rural problem.

The so-called rural broadband gap is a common problem in countries throughout the world and also a regularly addressed issue in this journal (see e.g. Feijóo, Ramos, Armuña, Arenal, & Gómez-Barroso, 2017; Gruber, Hätönen, & Koutroumpis, 2014; LaRose, Gregg, Strover, Straubhaar, & Carpenter, 2007; Prieger, 2013; Whitacre, Gallardo, & Strover, 2014). In a highly urbanized country like the Netherlands, though, rural issues are not placed highly on national policy agendas, and over the years the case of rural broadband provision has proved to be a prime example of this. The national government in Den Haag has continuously stressed that a lack of Next Generation Access is only a marginal problem, and solutions to this problem should be sought locally or regionally, i.e. on a municipal or provincial level (Letter to the Parliament DGETM-TM/16181300, 2016). In the context of Dutch planning tradition,

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: k.salemink@rug.nl (K. Salemink).<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.telpol.2018.03.013>

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with provinces as the customary governmental body in rural development and country-side related policies (Terluin, 2003), this means that mainly provinces have taken on the responsibility of plan making and policy making for rural broadband provision.

On the national level there is, however, an overarching policy agenda that impacts how sector-specific policies are shaped: the development towards a participation society, or '*participatiesamenleving*' in Dutch (De Haan, Meier, Haartsen, & Strijker, 2017; Verhoeven & Tonkens, 2013). The participation society promotes self-reliant communities and entails more responsibility for citizens and local action groups (Gieling, 2018). The participation society ought to be stimulated by a government that no longer prescribes citizens what they should do, yet it should facilitate citizens' initiatives in what they want to achieve. Despite ongoing critiques of this policy agenda stating that most of it is 'responsibility talk' instead of 'responsibility endowment' (e.g. König, 2015; Verhoeven & Tonkens, 2013), the idea of a participation society is very much noticeable in various public policies and public life (De Haan et al., 2017; Uitermark, 2015a).

Telecommunications is one of the sectoral policies in which the idea of a participation society resonates. The national government shifted the problem of rural broadband provision to lower levels of government. At the same time, these lower levels of government struggled with how to make sense of their renewed role in the participation society. This resulted in policies to stimulate rural broadband provision that strongly relied on local and civil action, endowing citizens with many responsibilities, but also many legal and financial risks (Bock, 2016; Salemink & Strijker, 2016a). This begs the question, then, to what extent the participation society can serve as a means to solve the rural broadband gap.

In this paper we discuss the participation society informed policies of two neighbouring Dutch provinces in the northeast of the Netherlands: Drenthe and Groningen. Based on a database with rural broadband initiatives, interviews and focus groups with stakeholders, and document analysis, we analyze how community broadband initiatives and local and regional governments interact in their ventures to provide superfast broadband to rural communities. In our conclusions we focus on commonalities in regional policies and their shortcomings. By doing this, we provide insights into the specific Dutch policy context and the efficacy of participation society informed regional policies for rural broadband provision. More generally, we contribute to the debate on citizen initiatives and the extent to which these can play a role in solving highly complex issues, such as correcting failing service delivery by market players in a competitive international infrastructural sector. Finally, we provide some recommendations on how conditions for citizen participation in complex issues can be improved. Notwithstanding the rather unconventional character of the Dutch context in the global telecommunications policy landscape, this paper identifies some transnational issues regarding the potential role of citizens and communities in telecommunications market failure.

2. Rural broadband provision and the participation society: origin and state of affairs

2.1. Rural broadband in the Netherlands: a brief overview

The Dutch state is proud of its strong position in the digital economy, with '97 percent of all household and businesses having access to Next Generation technologies' (Letter to the Parliament DGETM-TM/15027850, 2015). With the densely built structure of the Netherlands, incumbent KPN (former state telephone company) and VodafoneZiggo (merger of former municipal cable companies) and their predecessors were in good positions to achieve high penetration rates (Lemstra and Melody, 2015). The network topologies are advantageous for upgrading and increasing capacity, as is required now with the developments towards Next Generation Access (Cambini and Jiang, 2009; Lemstra and Melody, 2015). However, the Netherlands faces considerably bigger challenges when it comes to improving their networks in areas which are less densely built, i.e. in the rural areas. Nowadays internationally owned companies such as KPN and VodafoneZiggo are reluctant to invest in rural areas, because according to them there is no sound business case to be formed there. This leaves rural areas in the Netherlands, like many rural areas throughout the world, underserved (Prieger, 2013; Roberts et al., 2017; Townsend, Sathiaseelan, Fairhurst, & Wallace, 2013).

Over the years, the Dutch national government has pointed to European-wide deregulations and privatizations in the telecommunications market, claiming that the regulatory framework does not allow for the required interventions, and that the market has to solve the problem. According to European regulations, government intervention is allowed in 'white market areas' (European Commission, 2013), but because of the 'local and utmost regional character of the problem', the national government regards herself as not the appropriate governmental body to initiate and finance interventions in white market areas (Letter to the Parliament DGETM-TM/15027850, 2015; Letter to the Parliament DGETM-TM/16181300, 2016). With this standpoint – official policy documents and guidelines are lacking – the national government (Ministry of Economic Affairs, since 2017 Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate) shifts the responsibility for rural broadband to lower levels of government, i.e. the provinces and municipalities. This means that regional and local governments are endowed with the task to facilitate and/or stimulate rural broadband provision without central guidance from the national government.

Without central guidance, the provinces and municipalities are forced to invest a lot of time and resources in getting familiar with broadband provision in general; knowledge about technologies, network design, market situation, financial models. Next to this, these governments were specifically forced to gain in-depth and specialist knowledge about the legal issues regarding government interventions in the rural broadband market (Stratix, 2015; Salemink & Strijker, 2016b). Furthermore, they were faced by fore-running citizens' initiatives which were advocating for broadband in their local rural areas. Such initiatives are often led by highly-educated, well-networked and policy-informed key persons (Ashmore, Farrington, & Skerratt, 2015; 2016). These initial contacts between regional/local governments and citizens' initiatives sparked the governments' tendency to focus on local citizens to solve the highly complex problem of a lack of rural broadband provision (Bock, 2016; Salemink et al., 2017).

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