

Villagers' self-organisation in spatial planning

The relationship between village visions, village councils and collective identities within a village

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“People laugh at me because I’m different, I laugh at them because they’re all the same.”

Preface

During my study years, I have been faced with many challenges. Now the time has come to look back and I can truly say that it is the journey that counts, not the destination. The ups and downs you are faced with as a person, determine who you are. But still, it is also important to remember, every once in a while, who you want to become. This is what keeps you going.

Looking back, I realize how important my years as a student were for the person that I grew into. Looking forward, I realize how important they are for who I want to become. So, what better way to end my career as a student with a thesis on identity?

I would like to thank the people who made it possible for me to do this research. In particular, my thanks go out to Geerhardt, Wil, Wietse and their fellow village council members for their enthusiasm and support in organizing the village evenings that form the basis of my research. Also, special thanks goes out to the 25 students who helped me in the Science Shop project that gave cause to this thesis. And last, but not least, I would like to thank my supervisors. Noelle, thanks for your contagious, never-ending enthusiasm. Raoul, thanks for your support along the way and showing me the ‘art and feel’ of pragmatism, which is so important in planning to get things done.

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Summary

The research presented in this report focuses on the relationship between village councils, village visions and the construction of collective identities of villagers during village evenings. A village council is an association or foundation that consists of villagers and performs various tasks and roles in issues that concern the village. A village vision is a document in which the villagers express their wishes for the near future of their village. It addresses spatial and social problems that the villagers experience.

The village vision is developed under the guidance of the village council. To obtain input for the vision, the council organizes village evenings, during which the villagers exchange their ideas, wishes and opinions about the future of the village. Because the villagers are a member of several interrelated networks within the village, their views are likely to differ. This makes it a challenge to develop a village vision. The input provided by the villagers during the village evenings and the collective identities of the villagers (how they attribute meaning to themselves and others in relation to a certain context) are related to each other. To understand how this works and what the consequences are for the villagers, the village council and the development of a village vision, the main research question is stated as follows:

In what ways and with what effects does the development of a village vision relate to the (re-)construction of collective identities within a village during village evenings?

To answer this main research question, four issues are addressed: (1) the organization of the village evenings by the village council, (2) the issues discussed by the villagers during the evenings and how they become relevant to them, (3) the exchange and negotiation of the collective identities of the villagers by themselves during the evenings, and (4) the relationship between the village evenings and the (re-) construction of the council's collective identity by its members.

To study their exchange and negotiation during the village evenings, the collective identities of the villagers are perceived as discourses. Through these discourses, the villagers attribute meaning to themselves and others within a relevant context. The differences that are constructed by them, based on certain characteristics, become part of their discourse. Under the influence of group processes, such as the felt motivation to reach consensus and tendency to polarize, the villagers may try to maintain the boundaries between themselves ('us') and others ('them').

To gather data on the relationship between the collective identities of the villagers and the development of the village vision, eight village evenings were organized in cooperation with the three village councils of Nietap/Terheijl, Wergea and Zuidbroek. During these evenings, observations were made on the interaction between villagers. Special attention was paid to the group processes of 'consensus seeking' and 'polarizing'. Furthermore, the discussions were captured by the villagers themselves by using specially designed forms. Together with the observations, these documents were analyzed to understand how the discourses developed along the course of the evenings and with what effect.

From the organization of the evenings, it becomes clear that the turnout is largely determined by the way the village council invites people to the evenings. The councils use a local magazine or a door-to-door letter, but also invite people within their own network. Furthermore, the expectations of the villagers play an important role in their decision to come.

During the village evenings, it becomes clear that many issues are discussed, but that some issues are more important than others. The current situation in the village determines what the villagers discuss and therefore the discourses that they exchange.

Under the influence of the tendency to reach consensus and to differentiate from others, many issues discussed during the evenings are attributed meaning on the basis of the dominant discourse. Villagers try to 'outdo' each other in giving examples that support the majority view. Also, they look for differences between themselves and others and try to make these bigger. Past actions are important in this respect, because they provide a strong sense of collective identity in some cases.

The organization of the evenings becomes an action system. During the village evenings, the participants discuss problems they perceive for the village. They also think of solutions and who is responsible for implementing these solutions. This way, they attribute meaning to certain actions. Also, the village evenings themselves are attributed meaning, because they are perceived by the villagers as a form of collective action.

In answer to the main research question, four conclusions can be drawn:

- The choices of the village council in the organization of the village evenings, determine who participates and therefore determine what discourses are exchanged and negotiated.
- Current events determine what collective identities are relevant to the participants during the village evenings.
- Partaking in the village evenings, provides the participants and the village council a reason for constructing similarity and difference.
- The village evenings become action systems themselves.

From the research it becomes clear that the village evenings can have a large impact on the collective identities of the villagers who participated. Under the influence of group processes, such as the felt need to reach consensus and the tendency to polarize, the participants exchange meaning and negotiate about this. In doing so, they construct similarity and difference in relation to other groups or individuals outside, but also within the village. In turn, this construction of similarity and difference may have consequences for the construction of collective identities in everyday life within the village and the mutual relationships between villagers.



Figure 1: Villagers interview each other during the village evenings

1 Research into village visions, village councils and collective identities: an introduction

1.1 Introduction

The research presented in this report focuses on the relationship between village councils, village visions and the construction of collective identities of villagers during village evenings. A village council is an association or foundation that consists of villagers and performs various tasks and roles in issues that concern the village. Village councils are mainly found in smaller villages that are part of a larger municipality, consisting of multiple (small) villages. They often act as an intermediary layer between villagers and officials of the municipality, such as civil servants or the municipal council. An important instrument for the village council is the village vision.

A village vision is a document in which the villagers express their wishes for the near future of their village. It often addresses spatial problems that the villagers experience, such as the lack of parking spaces, traffic safety and the maintenance of public gardens. The visions are increasingly used to express ideas on social issues. Villagers may, for example, want to prevent the local school or supermarket from disappearing or stimulate local associations (e.g. a soccer or drama club) in order to keep the village ‘liveable’. After the vision has been drawn up, it can be sent to the municipality as a recommendation. The municipality can take the ideas expressed in the vision, into account when developing or implementing their policies, but has no legal obligation to do so.

A village vision is developed by the villagers under the guidance of the village council and emanates from their collective identity. Through the vision they express who they are and what they want for their village. On the other hand, the development of the village vision can also have consequences for the construction of collective identities by the villagers. This research aims to provide an understanding of how the vision process and collective identities of the villagers relate to each other and what consequences this can have for both.

In this chapter the context and approach of the research are presented. In paragraph 1.2 the phenomena of village councils and village visions are placed within the wider context of the shift from government to governance. Furthermore, the important role that identity plays within this shift, is explained. Paragraph 1.3 problematizes the development of a village vision in relation to the construction of collective identity within the village. This leads to the research questions and objectives, which are presented in paragraph 1.4.

1.2 Village councils and village visions in relation to governance

Village councils and village visions are increasingly important ways for citizens to organize themselves in issues of spatial planning. They can be placed within the broader shift from *government* towards *governance*. This shift suggests that policy making is no longer solely taking place within the representative bodies of government institutions alone, but becomes increasingly a shared responsibility of state, market and civil society. (Kooiman, 2003; van Leeuwen & van Tatenhove, 2010) According to the sociologist Ulrich Beck, the shift towards governance means that there is a growing opportunity to get involved in decision-making. Any private actor, varying from a company to an individual citizen, can be involved. (Holzer & Sørensen, 2003) As a consequence, government bodies have to rethink their roles and responsibilities. New rules of the game and new steering mechanisms have to be developed in order to deal with the new actors involved in policymaking. (van Leeuwen & van Tatenhove, 2010)

The development of a village vision is a clear illustration of the shifting boundaries between the state and civil society. It is not the municipality that takes the initiative in developing policies for the village, but the villagers themselves, under the guidance of the village

council. By developing the vision, they try to exert influence on the political decision-making regarding their village. The municipality has to take into account this new phenomenon and learn how to deal with it.

An important aspect related to the shift from government towards governance is the search of people for their *identity*. In its essence:

“Identity gives us an idea of who we are and of how we relate to others and to the world in which we live.”

(Woodward, 1997, p.1)

Today, because of processes of individualization, globalization and secularization, individuals are looking for new ways to determine their identity. Group membership has become a fluid and uncertain process, which no longer necessarily takes place along predetermined categories such as social class, race, gender or religion. This inevitably leads to feelings of uncertainty and a desire for ‘belonging’. People want to belong to a group, in order to obtain security in an uncertain world. (Delanty, 2003)

According to Beck, individualization and the shift towards governance can provide new sources of identity and activity. He refers in this respect to ‘subpolitics’, which means that traditional representative bodies, such as the parliament, political parties and trade unions, are no longer the single most important basis for political decision-making. Individuals citizens are developing an increased political awareness, according to Beck. The old, existing institutions and structures are still important for people, but they slowly ‘withdraw’ from them. (Beck, 1994) In political issues, people take a stance or a role, depending on the situation at hand:

“People leave the ‘nest’ of their ‘political home’ step by step and issue by issue. But that means that in one place people are on the side of the revolution while in the other they are supporting reaction, in one place they are dropping out while in another they are getting involved.”

(Beck, 1994, p. 21)

Referring to the rise of social movements, Castells suggests that the motor behind development within society is the pursuit for identity. The need to create meaning is a primary social force, he claims. This meaning is constructed around issues of identity and contains ideas on how to organize everyday life. But in order for these ideas to become effective, people have to organize themselves into social organizations and institutions. (Stalder, 2006) Through interaction, people can exchange meaning about what the world is and what it should be like, allowing them construct a collective identity. (Hoggett, 1997)

Following the above, it can be suggested that citizens initiatives such as the establishment of village councils and the development of village visions, can become new foundations upon which villagers base a collective identity. However, the relationship between village councils, village visions and the construction of collective identities within the village is much more complicated, raising many questions. To answer these questions, a different approach to collective identity is needed.

1.3 Problematizing the development of a village vision

A village vision is an instrument for villagers to organize themselves and express what they want. It is through the village vision that villagers try to exert influence on decision-making concerning the village, for instance by the Municipality. To reach agreement on what should be in the vision, the villagers need to exchange their information, ideas and wishes and

negotiate about this. This would make the development of the vision problematic in two ways.

The first problem is the role of the village councils in the development of the vision. They are often the initiators of the vision and have an important influence on the process. The village council is often treated as acting on behalf of the whole village (for instance by the municipality), but this can be cast doubt on. The members of the council are not elected in the way members of official government bodies are, such as the city council or the national parliament. But even if this were the case, can the village council speak on behalf of the entire village, considering the fact that it consists of many communities, each with its own values and interests? For the council, the development of the vision is perhaps a way to get a better understanding of what the villagers want, helping them to speak on behalf of the village and legitimize their role. But at the same time, the village council has an important influence on the development of the vision; they decide that the village needs a vision, they make choices about how the villagers are involved and, whilst writing the vision, they make choices about what comes in the vision and what not. The role of the village council in the development of the vision, can therefore have an important impact on the construction of collective identities by the villagers.

The second problem is the role of the villagers in the development of the vision. Treating the village vision as the vision of the whole village, suggests unity. However, villagers are part of several interrelated networks (or communities) within the village that provide them with information, ideas and opinions about the village (such as clubs, neighbour relations and/or family relations). They use these different networks to attribute meaning to themselves and their village. Hence, they derive their personal identities as a villager from the collective identities within the village. Villagers are not a member of just one community with one collective identity, but many communities with just as many (or more) collective identities. Because these different collective identities are not necessarily compatible, this has consequences for drawing up the village vision. The villagers need to exchange and negotiate meaning in order to come up with a shared view on what should be in the village vision (i.e. what the village is and what it should look like). The exchange and negotiation about meaning is interrelated with the collective identities of the villagers. On the one hand, the collective identities in part determine what the villagers believe is important and real (the subject of the negotiation). On the other hand, the negotiation can affect their collective identities since the meaning that is central to these identities, is being challenged in the negotiation.

1.4 The research questions and objectives

1.4.1 The questions guiding the research

The development of a village vision can have important consequences for the way in which villagers organize themselves in matters of spatial planning. The process of drawing up the vision takes place within the wider context of the construction and reconstruction of collective identities within the village. Existing collective identities not only have consequences for course of the process, but the process also has consequences for the construction and reconstruction of these collective identities. Ultimately, this will have consequences for the content of the vision and the overall outcome of the process. To get a better understanding of the mechanisms at play during the development of the vision and the consequences for the outcome of the process, the main research question is stated as follows:

In what ways and with what effects does the development of a village vision relate to the (re-)construction of collective identities within a village during village evenings?

To answer the main research question, four issues will be addressed. First of all, more insight is needed in the role of the village council, since they take the initiative to develop a village vision and are responsible for the organization of the entire process. The way villagers are invited and what methods are used to encourage the discussion between villagers, are just some of the issues that the council members need to address. The choices they make, are expected to have consequences for the process and consequently the (re-) construction of the collective identities of the villagers. This leads to the first sub-question:

- 1) *How are the village evenings organized by the members of the village council and what are the consequences of their choices in this?*

The second sub-question is related to networks that the villagers have formed within the village over time. These networks are formed around certain matters and form the basis for the collective identities within the village. As members of these networks, the participants 'bring along' these collective identities during the evenings. It can be expected that some issues are more important to the villagers than others. This will determine what issues are discussed during the evenings and also what collective identities are relevant to the participants. Because this can have an effect on the (re-)construction of the collective identities of the participants, the second sub-question is stated as follows:

- 2) *How do issues and their related collective identities become relevant to the participants and what are the consequences of this?*

The participants not only bring their collective identities to the village evenings, but also negotiate on them. In their interaction with each other, the villagers exchange meaning which can challenge their collective identities. However, the participants all come from the same village and are therefore part of the same interrelated network. It can be expected that their collective identities are similar or overlap. This may have consequences for the outcome of the interaction of the villagers. This leads to the following sub-question:

- 3) *How are the collective identities exchanged and negotiated upon by the villagers and what are the consequences of this?*

The last issue that is going to be addressed is the effect the village evenings have on the village council. The council members are part of the village, but also form a particular group in relation to the development of the vision. They take the initiative for the village vision and have certain expectations about it, based on the collective identities relevant to them. The results of the village evenings may have consequences for these identities. The fourth sub-question is therefore stated as:

- 4) *How do the village evenings relate to the (re-)construction of the collective identities of the village council and what are the consequences of this?*

1.4.2 The objectives of the research

Villagers can organize themselves in many ways around issues of spatial planning. Village councils and especially village visions are phenomena in this respect that become increasingly important. By looking specifically at the process of the development of a village vision and the role the village council has in this, a lot can be learned about how villagers organize themselves to influence their living environment. The process not only brings together the villagers and village councils, but also connects past, current and future events

regarding the village and its surrounding area. From this, a lot can be learned about relationships within the village and how this relates to the way in which the villagers organize in matters of spatial planning. The research presented in this report has three main objectives: The first objective is to *provide insight in the role of village councils in matters of spatial planning within or around the village*. It appears that they form a rather new and increasingly important layer between government bodies, especially the municipality, and citizens. How they perform this role, what choices they make and how they make these choices, will become better understood through this research. In particular, attention will be paid to their relationship with the villagers and how they deal with different collective identities within the village.

The second objective, related to the first, is to *provide insight in the development and use of a village vision*. The development of visions is stimulated by the Province, suggesting that it is/ can be an influential document. How such a vision is developed by villagers, what the role of the village council is in the process and how the vision is being used by villagers in issues of spatial planning, will be looked into.

The final objective is to *get a better understanding about how the concept of 'identity' can be used in spatial planning issues*, especially at the local level. The concept of identity seems to become more important in planning, but the concept is used in different ways and for different purposes by actors involved. This could have consequences for the process and outcome of planning processes.

To be able to study the development of village visions, the research is combined with a project from the Science Shop of Wageningen University. The project is commissioned by three organizations¹ that support small villages in the development of village visions. At the moment, these village visions often consist of specific problems that villagers encounter in their village. These problems concern mostly spatial issues, such as parking spaces, green areas and housing. The supporting organizations are looking for a new way to develop village visions that include social issues as well. Instead of using an inventory of problems that villagers experience, they want to use the 'village identity' as a starting point to develop a vision.

¹ The three supporting organizations for small villages that participated in the Science Shop project are: De Brede Overleggroep Kleine Dorpen in Drenthe (Drenthe), Doarpswurk (Friesland) and Stichting Groninger Dorpen (Groningen)

2 Collective identities within the village: a theoretical perspective

2.1 Introduction

The concept of identity plays an important role in planning issues and the self-organisation of people. To better understand the role of identity in the vision process, it is important to establish the approach to identity that is used throughout this research. In this chapter, a theoretical framework is presented in which theories of identity are applied to the situation of a village and the development of a village vision in particular.

In paragraph 2.2 it is explained how groups form a collective identity. For this, they not only look at similarity, but also at difference. Paragraph 2.3 goes into further detail on how groups try to maintain their identity. After a collective identity is established, groups must put in effort to maintain it and respond to challenges. In paragraph 2.4 the relationship between collective identity and collective action is described. It is shown that one cannot do without the other. In paragraph 2.5, the theoretical insights are translated to the approach that is used as the basis for the research.

2.2 Groups construct their collective identity in interaction

2.2.1 Group members construct themselves as a group

Group identity suggests similarity. For a group of people to have a collective identity, it is necessary that the group members see themselves as a group. Based on certain characteristics, they perceive themselves to be part of a certain group. (Jenkins, 1996; Van Assche, 2004) Every group that identifies itself as a group, is characterized by the discourse that it uses. It is through its discourse that the group members constructs themselves as a group by attributing meaning to themselves and the world around them. The collective identity of a group is therefore constituted by its discourse. (Hague & Jenkins, 2005; Van Assche, 2004)

A collective identity is not a given, but must be established. The group members have to look for characteristics that make them into a group and reflect upon them, in order to determine what makes the group unique. Once the characteristics have been established, group members have to associate with them to become part of the group. (Jenkins, 1996) The characteristics by which the group identifies itself as a group, are not necessarily 'hard facts'. According to Ford (1999), there are two constructed realities. The *first order reality* consists of facts and data. To be able to measure and verify these facts and data, some kind of agreement is needed about how to do so. Facts and data are therefore constructed. In the *second order reality*, people give their interpretations of the facts and data. They attribute meaning and significance to the world around them. Their accounts of what they see, are laden with opinions, judgments and evaluations. The discourse of a group (i.e. its collective identity) is therefore not so much about the facts and data from the first order reality, but more about how these facts and data should be interpreted; the second order reality. Through interaction, the group members actively construct a shared discourse. They exchange meaning about themselves and the world around them, and negotiate about this. (Hoggett, 1997; Van Assche, 2004) Following Castells (1997), the constructed identities can be seen as the *product of meaning by* and a *source of meaning for* the people involved in the interaction. Over time, the interpretations in the second order reality become part of the first order reality. This means that they are no longer seen as a matter of interpretation, but as a matter of fact. However, both the first order and the second order reality are social constructs. (Ford, 1999) From the above, it becomes clear that identity is constructed in a linguistic process. The words that people use, can be seen as signs, referring to ideas and concepts. To think and talk about reality (attributing meaning to it and negotiate about it) and form a group, people need to use a similar language and have a similar understanding. However, as explained above,

meaning is not an essential property of words, but a matter of convention, negotiation and agreement. (Jenkins, 1996; Van Assche, 2004) The meaning of words therefore derives from structures; the internal relations within a network of signs. (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002) The way people talk in the present and the meaning of the words that they use, is in part determined by past conversations. From this structuralist perspective, meaning is constrained by history or culture. (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Ford, 1999) The interpretation and use of language is part of a culture, but that does not mean that the meaning of words cannot change. In interaction, people negotiate about the meaning of reality and therefore also about the meaning of words as concepts or ideas. They connect new ideas, concepts or things to each other, changing the meaning of words. (Hague & Jenkins, 2005; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002) The discourses of groups are therefore open to change as well. It is through conversations that people construct reality, but the conversations become reality themselves as well. (Ford, 1999; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002)

Looking at the situation in a village, villagers can be considered a group when they construct themselves as a group. The group can be known by the discourse that the villagers use (i.e. how they attribute meaning to themselves as a group and the world around them). For instance, villagers can distinguish themselves as a group based on the idea that everybody in the village knows each other and that there is a strong social cohesion. Maintaining good relationships with neighbours and looking after each other, can be concepts or ideas that are important to the villagers and therefore part of their discourse.

2.2.2 The other is needed to construct the self

A group identity is not just about similarity (what binds us?), but also about difference (what separates us from others?). (Jenkins, 1996) The 'self' cannot be constructed without the 'other'. When people are in the process of forming a group, they determine the characteristics they have in common and bind them. These characteristics set the boundaries between 'us' (those who share the characteristics) and 'them' (those who do not share the characteristics). The similarities of the group members and their distinctions from the outsiders, become part of the discourse of the group. (Hague & Jenkins, 2005; Melucci, 1996)

The construction of a collective identity is a learning process and implies a certain self-reflection. (Jenkins, 1996; Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997) According to Melucci (1996), a group can identify itself as a group when it has learned to distinguish itself from its environment. In this perspective, groups can only become self-aware through their relationships with others. To reflect upon the 'self', the 'other' is needed to learn about and understand the differences. But although the construction of identity requires self-reflection, this does not have to mean that the group is fully aware of its own identity. Identity can in part be intentional but at the same time less than fully conscious. (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005)

Identities are about relations and representations. They are relationally constructed in terms of similarity and difference (what separated us from them?), sincerity (who is honest?) and legitimacy (who has authority?). (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005) Identities therefore suggest that there is some kind of dependence or reciprocity between the self and the other. The groups (or individuals) are fighting over the same resources (symbolic or real) and are trying to gain control of them. (Melucci, 1996) Consequentially, the social construction of identity is marked by power relations. (Castells, 1997) This makes a collective identity strategic and a matter of choice. There is a certain goal in constructing a difference between 'us' and 'them', causing the group members to negotiate (and decide) on what is appealing and unifying for the group. (Collins, 1997; Jenkins, 1996) However, there is little point in making a distinction when this is not recognized by the other individuals or groups. A group always has to be acknowledged or denied (as an ultimate form of recognition) by an opposing group for its identity to become/stay meaningful. (Melucci, 1996) Groups therefore try to control how

other groups or individuals see them. They don't keep their identity to themselves, but express it in their relationship with others. This can lead others to challenge the identity, making it contingent on actions and reactions. (Hague & Jenkins, 2005) The relational dimension of identity also shows an inherent paradox: making a distinction between 'us' and 'them' also means a certain recognition of the other. (Melucci, 1996)

Returning to the village, it becomes clear that the villagers construct their collective identities in relation to another group or individual. The municipality, for example, is an important group for villagers. They depend on the municipality for many things, such as spatial plans, taxes, subsidies and regulations. Although the difference between the villagers and the municipality seems apparent, it has to be established by the villagers first, to become 'real'. In their discourse, the villagers can depict the municipality in many different ways, such as 'greedy', 'unwilling' or 'incapable'. At the same time, they try to control how the municipality sees them, for instance as 'cooperative' or 'enterprising'. By doing so, they can try to gain control over the resources they need, such as a subsidy or permit for a local project.

The resources do not have to be real, but can also be symbolic. Villagers can for instance derive their shared identity from a story or a past event, such as winning a soccer match from the neighbouring village. Their victory gives them a sense of belonging and positive energy. If the other village claims that the winning village cheated during the match, the 'control' over the winning (e.g. a cup) is challenged.

2.2.3 Collective identities are constructed in relation to context

A collective identity can be constructed on the basis of anything one can imagine. Groups can identify themselves as a group and construct their discourse based on, for instance, historical events, language, religion, ethnic markers (and anything can be constructed into an ethnic marker), social labels, sets of ideas, practices, objects or places. Through language, the group members attribute meaning to these aspects and derive their identity from them. In principle, the number of identities that can be constructed, is infinite. (Melucci, 1996; Van Assche, 2004) Within these constructions, everything can define everything. (Van Assche, 2004) For instance, a place can get meaning through events that have happened over there or through religious beliefs, social labels can be constructed based on the place where people live, objects can get meaning by the practices that they are used in, and so on.

But although collective identity can be based on everything, not everything carries the same importance. This is because collective identities are always constructed in relation to a certain context. (Brent, 1997; Melucci, 1996) In fact, it is the 'reality' of everyday life that provides the context for identity processes. (Hague & Jenkins, 2005) As Hoggett (1997) explains, the local community in which people live is an important context in which identities are formed. It consists of a multitude of different, interrelated networks which become a source of information, visions and interests. In their everyday conversations within these networks, people can exchange and negotiate meaning about themselves and others, enabling them to construct collective identities. Groups at the local and regional level (such as villages or rural regions) often construct their identity in relation to aspects such as: the characteristics of inhabitants, social relationships, historical events and stories, norms and values, activities, rituals and spatial qualities. (During, 2010; Hague & Jenkins, 2005; Van Assche, 2004)

Places are important in the construction of identity, but they do not necessarily bring forward specific identities. People tend to cluster together in certain places or organizations, giving them a sense of belonging and the possibility to construct collective identities. (Castells, 1997) The idea of 'community' is often connected to a group of people with some kind of shared identity, living within a geographically bound area, such as a village or a region. (Hoggett, 1997) As explained above, groups can base their collective identity on a certain location or

area, forming a community connected to place. Still, communities are socially constructed and are therefore not necessarily linked to a physical locality. (Delanty, 2003) The best example are the Internet-based virtual communities that can stretch out all over the world. In terms of globalization and individualization, the sense of community is increasingly becoming separated from place. (Held *et al.*, 1999)

From the above, it becomes clear that identities are always constructed within complex structures. These structures enable the construction of identity, but also constrain it. (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005) According to Van Assche (2004), a group that distinguishes itself as a group (i.e. a group with a certain discourse) develops a more or less limited and recurrent set of concepts to attribute meaning to itself and its surroundings. However, groups can have multiple discourses, depending on the situation at hand. Furthermore, the discourses that groups use, can overlap. (Van Assche, 2004)

Villagers can identify themselves as a group based on the idea that the village in which they live has an important meaning to them. This way, the group identity of the villagers would be based on the geographically bounded area of the village. However, villagers can develop an identity on a range of other things, such as their relationship with a nearby village (remember the soccer match) or the Municipality (e.g. because of a plan of the Municipality that they resist against). The villagers talk about the issues that connect them over and over in the same way and turn it into a story. Over time, this story becomes true to them, shifting from the second order reality (as value laden) to the first order reality ('the truth').

2.3 Groups want to maintain their collective identity

2.3.1 Collective identities pressure group members towards conformity

To maintain the collective identity, emotional investment is required from the group members. Internal solidarity between the members reinforces the shared identity and guarantees it. (Melucci, 1996) It is this personal emotional investment in the group that gives the group identity significance for the individual members. (Frosh & Baraitser, 2009)

By setting boundaries, a collective identity creates stability and ensures the existence of the group over time. But for this, the group needs to maintain these boundaries and continuously strengthen them. (Melucci, 1996) This is not an easy task. There are no *de facto* boundaries. They have to be negotiated and established, determining who is 'in' and who is 'out'. This is a potential source of conflict. Therefore, the ideal of a collective identity bears the split within itself. (Hoggett, 1997)

The boundaries that the group has set, also determine the room for autonomous action by individual members to deviate from the collective identity within the continuity of that identity. (Melucci, 1996) There is a strong incentive for them not to deviate from the group's norms, values or ideas. This aspect is often referred to as 'groupthink'. According to this perspective, there is a strong pressure for mutual support within the group. Furthermore, there is a desire for the group members to reach consensus in discussions. (Haslam, 2001; Nemeth & Nemeth-Brown, 2003)

Groupthink is more likely to happen when the group is isolated from others and is caused by a situation of homogeneity within the group, strong and direct leadership and a strong internal cohesion. It leads individual members to agree with majority views within the group. It does not matter if these views are true or not. Individuals suppress their own deviating views and experiences and are reluctant to express their doubts on the majority views. (Haslam, 2001; Nemeth & Nemeth-Brown, 2003) This 'self-censorship' comes from a fear of loss of identity and privileged position that group membership provides (Elias & Scotson, 1994) and a pressure to conformity (i.e.: a deviant opinion is felt as an obstacle to reach a goal and as a sign of disloyalty) (Nemeth & Nemeth-Brown, 2003) This pressure for conformity is reinforced by a tendency of individuals with a deviating opinion to try understand why the

majority thinks the way it does. (Nemeth & Nemeth-Brown, 2003) Haslam refers in this respect to *mutual social influence*:

”...individuals who categorize themselves in terms of a common social identity discuss and negotiate their differences with an expectation, and motivational pressure, to reach agreement.”

(Haslam, 2001, p. 163)

Being able to become a member of the ‘superior group’ can actually be the reward for individuals for submitting to the group’s norms. (Elias & Scotson, 1994)

When, for example, a group of villagers protests against the plans of the Municipality to close the local school, there may be little room for individual villagers to agree with the Municipality. Even if these individual villagers have no connection with the school whatsoever, they can still feel pressure not express what they really think. They do not want to deviate from the general thought that the school should stay. They try to understand why the school is important for the other villagers and start believing in the arguments of the supporters, for instance that the school is able to provide good education because it is small. In reality, the school may be financially broke or provide bad education just because it is small.

2.3.2 Collective identities can lead to polarization

Groupthink does not only cause group members to look for consensus within the group, but can also lead to *polarization*. The (perceived) differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’ become bigger because the initial views of members of the ‘us’-group become more extreme during their mutual discussions. Polarization occurs because group members actually compete with each other to express norms and values that are widely shared within the group. They try to ‘outdo’ each other in expressing what they already agree about, leading to extremism and increased confidence in their group perspective. The consensus view that is the outcome of the discussion is actually more extreme than the average views of the individual members. (Haslam, 2001; Nemeth & Nemeth-Brown, 2003)

Polarization also has consequences for the way group members deal with information. When a group becomes polarized, the members are more likely to share information that is in line with or supportive of the constructed identity. This information is given meaning through the collective identity of the group, making the group self-referential. (Morgan, 1997; Nemeth & Nemeth-Brown, 2003) Information that is conflicting with the group identity is withheld by individuals; the group is actively protecting itself against information that challenges the group’s beliefs. (Haslam, 2001) Van Dam *et al.* (2005) refer to these groups as *cognitively closed*. This means that group members do not consider information that is not in line with their own views.

The above shows that a group can actively shield itself from outsiders. The group is more likely to be seen as a common group when the differences between the insiders are smaller than their differences with outsiders. When the group members are making comparisons, they will downplay or ignore their own differences, making the group more uniform. (Haslam, 2001) In their research on ‘the established’ and ‘the outsiders’, Elias and Scotson (1994) show that is actually the exclusion and stigmatization of the outsiders that allows the insiders to maintain their identity.

In the case of the local school, the villagers may polarize their relationship with the Municipality. They become more extreme in their ideas that the Municipality only wants bad things for the village. Information about the financial situation of the school is ignored or seen as proof that the Municipality is using all the means possible to prove its point and close

the school. There internal differences between the villagers, such as personal disagreements about other issues, are downplayed by them to make their identity in relation to the issue of the school more salient.

2.3.3 Outside challenges put pressure on identity

As explained earlier, identity is always constructed in relation to a certain context. Groups attribute meaning to this context through the discourses that they use. The meaning attributed to context is part of the second order reality (see also paragraph 2.2.1). When change occurs in reality, the meaning that is attributed to this reality by the group, is challenged. The discourse that the group uses, and therefore its identity, becomes threatened. How the group experiences and responds to change depends on the second order reality; how the group attributes meaning to that change. (Ford, 1999)

In general, groups can respond to change in two different ways. The first option for the group is to change its own collective identity. This means that it has to adjust its discourse (i.e. how it attribute meaning to itself, others and the world around them) in response to the change in context. (Van Assche, 2004) A second option, that appears more likely to happen, is that the group resists to the change. In case of perceived or actual threats, groups are likely to respond through the mechanisms of groupthink and group polarization. (van Dam *et al.*, 2005)

This becomes especially apparent in conflict situations. In the struggle over scarce resources, the conflicting groups are denying the legitimacy of each other's claims and try to get (back) what they consider theirs. In their struggle, they challenge or deny each other's identities. (Melucci, 1996) The (perceived) threat that is caused by the loss of resources and challenge to the collective identity, makes the group more homogenous. Individual members are less likely to deviate and will turn the opinions of their group more into their own. Through polarization, they will downsize or ignore the differences within the group and enlarge or exaggerate the differences with the opposing group. (Haslam, 2001) Consequently, changes within the context can actually make the identity of the group more salient and stronger. (Melucci, 1996)

Villagers can, for instance, become involved in a conflict with the Municipality or a project developer because of a new housing estate being planned. They can perceive this housing estate as a threat to the historical looks of the village. It is likely that the villagers will resist and try to outdo each other in thinking of examples that support the idea of the historical look.

2.4 Collective identity and collective action cannot do without each other

2.4.1 Shared identity is required for collective action

For people to undertake collective action, they require a collective identity. This collective identity provides them with a common cause and helps them to reach consensus on the course of action. First of all, a collective identity is a *condition* per se for collective action. Consensus within the group is needed on the course of action to enable the members to act together. The collective identity gives a certain 'control' over the individual group members. Trust and consensus established between the group members through strategic conversations and casual encounters ensures that resources can be quickly and effectively mobilized for collective action. (Gilchrist, 2000; Melucci, 1996) But to enable collective action, the collective identity needs to be continuously confirmed and activated. (Melucci, 1996)

Second, the collective identity gives *guidance* to the actions that are undertaken. The discourse of the group points towards a certain action as necessary or appropriate. Through the exchange and negotiation of meaning about the problem, the group develops a problem perception; the groups learns what the problem is about and what can/should be done about it. The negotiations therefore help the group to develop a problem solving capacity, making the

group more independent from its surroundings (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002; Melucci, 1996) Melucci (1996) refers in this respect to groups turning into ‘action systems’.

For the villagers to protest against the plans of the Municipality to close the local school, the villagers need to be sure that everybody who has an interest, joins. If some people ‘give up’ and do not want to protest anymore, the group will lose its resilience and persuasiveness. Their collective identity provides them also with a course of action, such having a protest of visiting other small schools to see how they stay in business.

2.4.2 Shared action confirms collective identity

By the production of symbols and meaning, collective action can also confirm the collective identity of the group. When people undertake action together they can change reality. These changes can become symbols of their collective action. The group members attribute meaning to what they have achieved, making it part of the discourse that they use. (Melucci, 1996; Weenink, 2009)

As Castells (1997) points out, meaning gives sense to action. By attributing meaning to a certain action, people can justify it. It gives a sense of why they are doing what they are doing. Individual group members feel a bond with the other group members not because they have a shared interest, but because they have a shared meaning. This shared meaning allows the individuals to make sense of what they are doing. (Melucci, 1996)

According to Gilchrist:

”Networks of social interaction are constructed and reinforced through the activities of everyday life and cultural rituals, creating inter-personal ties and affirming community boundaries.”

(Gilchrist, 2000, p. 268):

A collective identity is as much about real life experiences as it is about subjective meaning. It needs to be continuously reproduced to keep it intact, resulting in a need for shared experiences within the group. (Hoggett, 1997) Achieving goals is therefore very important for the social cohesion within the group. When the group achieves something, the sense of community is experienced and strengthened. The result of the collective action can become the symbol of the collective identity. (Weenink, 2009)

In the case of the school, the villagers justify their actions by attributing meaning to them. Protesting can, for instance, be seen as proof to the municipality that the villagers feel involved and that each considers the school important. They may also believe that it attracts media attention for their case, helping them to reach their goal. When the villagers achieve to maintain the local school because of their efforts, this achievement can become a symbol of their collective action. It strengthens the social cohesion within their group.

2.5 The research approach to study the collective identities of villagers

From the above, it becomes clear that a group of villagers can only be considered a group when they see themselves as a group. They do not have to be aware of this, however. The villagers can form a group by their shared discourse without actually being aware that they make a distinction between themselves and others.

Because the collective identities of the villagers are processes, they are best studied by looking at the interactions between villagers. This shows how they exchange meaning and negotiate upon it. In their interactions, the villagers will make a distinction between themselves and others in relation to a certain context. (See Figure 2 on the next page) By studying the exchange of their discourses, it can be learned what the boundaries set by the villagers are based upon; what context is relevant to them and is used to make the distinction. Studying their interaction also allows to see how the villagers are learning to make a

distinction. Over time, they will construct more differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’ because of their reflections on others.

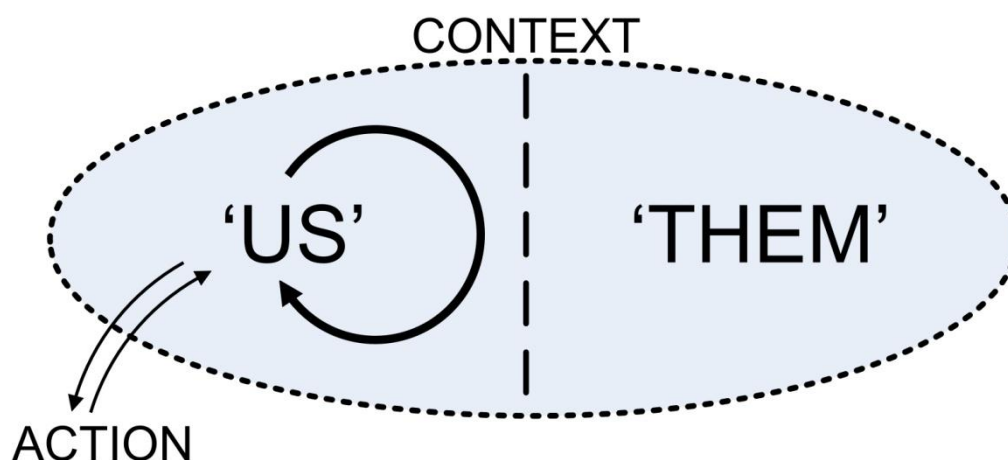


Figure 2: Villagers construct boundaries between themselves and others in relation to a certain context

Another interesting point in studying the mutual relationships between villagers and others is the reciprocity or mutual dependence. The villagers need this for their collective identity to become meaningful. Acknowledgement and especially denial will make their identity stronger. The villagers may not be (fully) aware that they actually depend on someone or some group for their identity to be meaningful, but the dependence can be revealed by looking at how the villagers talk about their relationships with others.

Because a collective identity is continuously challenged and fades over time, the villagers need to invest in the strength of their collective identity. The expressions of the villagers on their identities may show how important these identities are for them. Furthermore, it is interesting to see how the group deals with deviant voices and what they do to reach consensus. By studying the (re-)construction of the discourses during the interactions, it can be learned what the villagers do to maintain their group identity. Part of this interaction may also be ‘outdoing’ each other. In that case, the villagers may try to come up with more and more ideas supportive of their view. Because the participants try to excel each other in their ideas, their overall views will become more extreme.

A lot about the collective identities of the villagers can also be learned by looking at how they responded to threats they perceived in the past. These responses can be expected to be still part of their discourses (since discourses only gradually change over time). From the content and strength (how important they believe it is) of their discourses, it will become clear if they changed their discourse along with the threat or resisted to it.

The discourses of the villagers on the collective actions the undertook in the past, will tell a lot about the importance of these actions for their collective identity. Furthermore, it is expected that ideas about future actions will also tell a lot about the villagers’ collective identities. This, because it shows what problems the villagers perceive (the relevant context), how they see their own role in it and who they think is responsible for solving the problem (thus setting the boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’).

A final point to consider in studying the collective identities of the villagers is the fact that they can be part of several groups within the network of the village. (See Figure 3 on the next page.) A village can be seen as a set of collective identities that continuously develops in relation to the situation at hand. It can be expected that the villagers hold multiple discourses and that these discourses overlap. To make a distinction between the different discourses (if possible), one should become aware of the relevant context in which the discourses are used

and the distinction that is being made within that context (on what characteristics). It is however possible that different ways lead to more or less the same discourse, making it difficult to distinguish between them. In the next chapter it is explained how this research approach is used to study the (re-) construction of the collective identities during the village evenings.

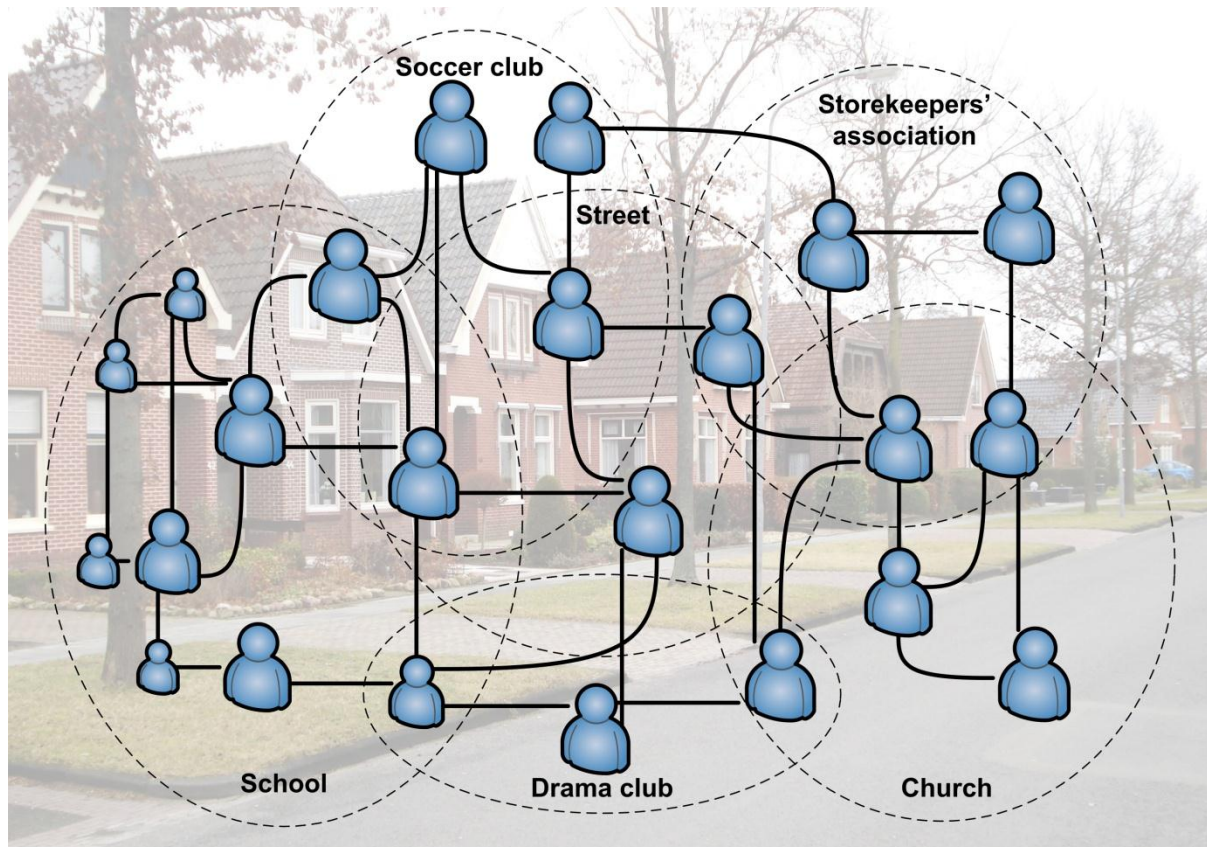


Figure 3: A village consists of a set of interrelated networks

3 Studying the (re-)construction of collective identities: the research methodology

3.1 Introduction

The objective of the research presented in this report is to gain more insight into village visions, village councils and the use of the concept of identity in planning. In this chapter, the methodological design of the research is presented. This connects the theoretical paradigm to the research strategy and methods of data collection and analysis, which together will answer the research questions.

The main focus is on the village evenings that are organized by the village council to obtain the necessary input for the development of their village vision. It is during these evenings that the villagers come together and share their ideas, opinions and wishes about the future of the village. In other words, it is during the village evenings that the interaction between the villagers takes place in which meaning (as part of their discourses or collective identities) is exchanged and negotiated. To understand how the development of the vision influences the construction and reconstruction of collective identities within the village, the involvement of both villagers and village council in the village evenings is studied. The basic assumption is that: (1) the discussions during the village evenings stem from the collective identities of the villagers/village councils that they have formed in the context of their everyday life and (2) that these collective identities may be (re-)constructed during the discussions. The participants ‘bring along’ their collective identities to the village evenings. Their mutual interaction allows them to construct and reconstruct these collective identities. (See also Figure 4)

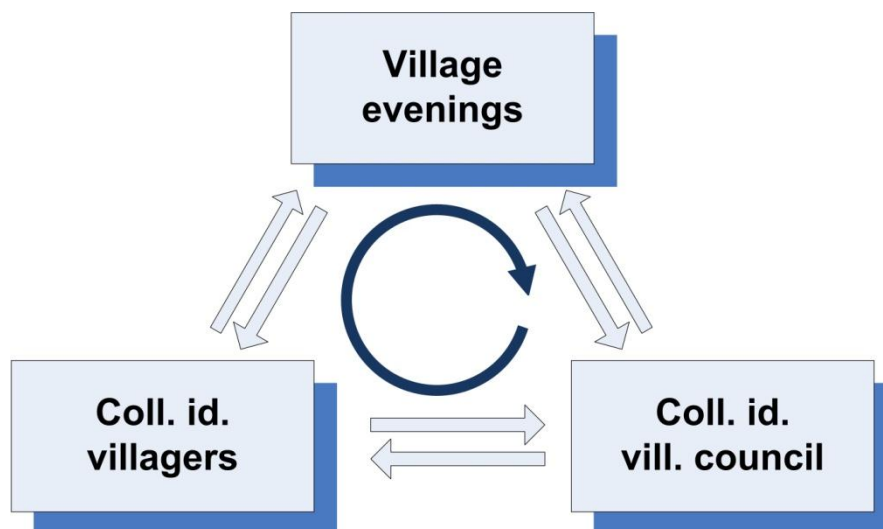


Figure 4: In the interaction during the village evenings, the collective identities influence and are influenced by the discussions amongst the participants

To study the (re-)construction of collective identities by the villagers, three cases were studied in which a village council was developing a village vision. In paragraph 3.2, a short introduction is given on the selection of the three cases and the organization of the village evenings. Because the evenings were organized for the Science Shop project on Village Identity, this had particular implications for the organization of the evenings. In paragraph 3.3 it is described how the role of the village council in organizing the village evenings, is

analyzed. Paragraph 3.4 goes into further detail on the importance of the collective identities the villagers bring along during the village evenings. How the consequences of this are analyzed, is explained in this paragraph. In paragraph 3.5, it will be explained how the interaction between the villagers is studied. Particular attention will be paid to the group processes of consensus and polarization. The evenings do not only effect the collective identities of the villagers, but also of the village council. Paragraph 3.6 shows how the effect of the village evenings on the collective identities of the village councils is studied. Paragraph 3.7 recapitulates the research approach.

3.2 Organizing village evenings for studying discourses and interactions

To study how the development of the village vision influences the collective identities within a village during a village evening, three cases will be studied in which a village vision is being developed. The cases are part of the project on ‘village identity’ carried out by the Science Shop of Wageningen University. Three village councils in the provinces of Groningen, Friesland and Drenthe have agreed to participate in the project because they want to develop their own village vision. Each village has its own village vision project and is supported by the researchers from the Science Shop and the supporting organizations for small villages.

In each village, village evenings are organized in cooperation with the village council. Every villager is invited to participate during these evenings and express his or her ideas and opinions on issues to be addressed in the village vision. The village council can choose between five different methods to obtain the necessary input for the vision.² The methods are:

- The *photo method*: Villagers take pictures of something within the village or the area around it, that they consider important or meaningful for the village. These pictures are used as the basis for group conversations during the evening.
- The *living room discussion*: Objects that have special meaning for the village are used as the basis for group conversations. Villagers can bring these objects themselves and explain what the meaning is for the village, followed by a group talk.
- The *(historical) excursion*: Villagers visit locations in the village that have important historical and/or present value. The villagers can offer suggestions for what locations to visit.
- The *speed date*: Villagers use list of questions to interview each other. The answers are written down by the villagers.
- The *scenario method*: Villagers are invited to express their wishes for the future. Also, they will discuss developments that the village possibly has to deal with in the future.

The village council is free to choose one or more methods. Furthermore, the methods can be adapted to specific wishes of the council, allowing them to obtain the input they need for the vision.

3.3 Analyzing the organization of village evenings

The village evenings are organized by the village councils. The choices they make in this, may have particular consequences for the discussions during the villages evenings and therefore for the (re-)construction of the collective identities by the villagers. Through

² The five methods are developed for the Science Shop project and are specifically aimed at making the discourses of the villagers explicit.

observations and conversations with the village council, data will be gathered about the choices the village council makes. Particular attention will be paid to:

- *The backdrop against which the evenings are organized:* this in part determines the goal of the council for writing the vision. It therefore influences the expectations of the village council about the outcome of the village evenings.
- *The way in which the villagers are invited:* this has an effect on who comes to the evenings and what expectations they have. In turn, this will affect the discourses that are negotiated and exchange during the evenings.
- *The choice of methods for encouraging the discussion between the villagers:* this choice is in part determined by the goal of the village council for organizing the village evenings and by the expectations they have of the methods (what they hope it will deliver them).

Analysis

A comparison will be made between the villages to better understand what consequences the different ways of inviting villagers to the evenings have for the turnout. This will not only be analyzed in terms of numbers, but also in terms of expectations. For this, an analysis and comparison will be made of who visited the evenings and for what reasons they came. This will be linked to the content of the invitations and the methods used to spread these invitations.

Furthermore, the choices each of the councils made on the methods to encourage the debate, will be analyzed. In particular, it will be examined what goals they have for writing the vision and what kind of input they want to obtain.

3.4 Revealing the relevant collective identities

The villagers are part of many networks within the village. It can be expected that they bring along many different discourses to the village evenings. However, not every discourse carries the same importance for them. The (re-)construction of their collective identities is related to the discourses that they discuss during these evenings. To understand why certain collective identities are (re-)constructed, it is important to reveal why the collective identities discussed, are relevant to the villagers in the first place. Through conversations with the supporting organisations and village councils, more will be learned about the issues going on in the villages. During the village evenings, the participants write down their ideas, wishes and opinions expressed in the group discussions on specially designed forms. These forms will be studied afterwards. The main focus is on:

- *The different topics discussed during the village evenings:* the discussion between the villagers is encouraged by the methods, but these do not steer the content of the discussions. The participants can choose from a variety of issues going on in their village, but will find some of them more important to discuss in relation to the village vision.
- *The relevance attributed to these topics by the villagers:* during the village evenings, some issues may become more important than others, during the debate. This may have consequences for discussions on other issues as well.

Analysis

The three cases will be compared by looking at the variety of issues that is being discussed in each of the villages. Furthermore, the outcomes of the different methods are compared within each of the villages to see if some issues become more important during the village evenings. A comparison is made with the backdrop against which the village council wants to develop

the village vision and the expectations of the villagers about the village evenings, in order to see how this relates to the issues discussed by the villagers. This may tell more about why some issues become relevant to the participants and how this relates to the outcome of the village evenings. Also, attention will be paid to the ways villagers make some discourses more salient than others, in their discussions.

3.5 Studying the exchange and negotiation of discourses

The villagers discuss various topics during the village evenings. Based on their collective identities or discourses, they attribute meaning to these topics. In their interaction, they will exchange this meaning (their ideas, wishes, opinions, etc. on these topics) and negotiate about this. But, because the villagers are all part of various networks within the village, it is likely that they share (some of) the same discourses, have multiple discourses as a group and that some of these discourses overlap. However, discourses between groups in the village may also differ to a large extent. Because the villagers are more likely to know each other or have similar ideas about the village, some group processes may play a role in the (re-)construction of their discourses, leading to the construction of either more similarity or more difference. The results captured by the villagers during the various stages of the village evenings, will be studied. Furthermore, observations will be made during the evenings. Particular attention will be paid to the process of groupthink and developing action systems.

- *Reaching consensus:* The villagers may find allies for their views and opinions amongst other participants. This can lead them to reconstruct their discourses to reach agreement, under the influence of self-censorship and/or the motivational pressure to reach agreement. The boundaries groups of villagers set, may also determine to what extent people can express a deviant opinion.
- *Polarizing:* The villagers may construct themselves as a group in relation to another individual or group. There may be a tendency to differentiate from ‘the other’ by making the internal differences smaller. Polarization may also lead the villagers to become more extreme in their views.
- *Action system:* Collective identities fade over time, unless they are continuously strengthened. Past collective actions can be important for current collective identities. Also, the actions the villagers want to undertake, are attributed meaning from their collective identities, giving them guidance and support. The actions expressed during the evenings will therefore tell a lot about the identities constructed.

Analysis

The data gathered in the document and from the observations will be analyzed and compared by looking at how the villagers construct ‘us’-groups. The discourses will be analyzed in order to reveal for what reasons the villagers aimed to reach consensus. Furthermore, attention will be paid to how the villagers respond to deviant views expressed during the evenings.

To understand how the villagers construct themselves as a group, it will also be shown against whom they construct their identity and how they construct the differences. Here, it is particularly interesting to see what information the villagers provide during the evenings; is it supportive of the dominant views or not?

The importance of collective action will be analyzed by looking at the references of the villagers in their discourses to past actions and what meaning they attribute to this in relation to the current situation. Also, an analysis will be made about the actions the villagers formulate in their discourses. This shows what problems they perceive for whom and who they think is responsible for the solution.

3.6 Understanding the effects on collective identity of the village council

The development of the village vision is not only important for the villagers, but also for the village council. They develop the vision with a certain goal in mind, which is part of their collective identity as a council and/or relation to the village. To obtain data on the ideas and goals of the council, conversations are held before and after the village evenings. During the evenings, observations will be made on support expressed by the participants for the village council in organizing the evening. To understand the effect of the village evenings on the collective identities, the issues that are analyzed are:

- *The support of the villagers for the goals of the village council:* Organizing the evenings can be of particular importance for the village council to get ideas from the villagers, but also to get support for their own views. The villagers discuss various topics during the evenings. Their views may be in line with those of the village council, but do not have to be.
- *The importance of organizing the village evenings:* The organization of the village evenings is an important activity for the council because it may give them a sense of support.

Analysis

The three cases will be analyzed by looking at the differences or similarities between the ideas of the council (as part of their goals) and the views expressed during the village evenings. Also attention is paid to the expectations of the villagers about the evenings and the goals of the council. Furthermore, it will be made clear how the council attributes meaning to the organization of the evenings, the outcomes and the vision itself.

3.7 The relationship between council, vision and villagers

The influence of the village vision process on the collective identities within the village, is complex. The vision is not only based upon the collective identities, but the process also has consequences for the construction and reconstruction of these identities. By studying the involvement of the villagers and village councils in the (organisation of) village evenings and comparing the three cases to each other, more can be learned about the discursive work that is performed during the process. This will not only show what the collective identities of the villagers (including the village council) consist of, but also how these identities develop during the process (specifically during the village evenings). The comparison of the three cases will show the different ways in which the discursive work is performed by the villagers and village councils during the village evenings, what aspects might play a role this and with what consequences. In the next chapter, the results of the research are presented and discussed.

4 The organization of the village evenings: the results

4.1 Introduction

To understand how the development of a village vision relates to the collective identities of the villagers, village evenings were organized in cooperation with three village councils. In each village, two or three evenings were organized, during which several methods were used to encourage the discussion about the village. Villagers were invited by the village council and the evenings were held at the local community centre. The number of participants varied between 15 and 45. In small groups, varying between 4 to 6 people, the participating villagers discussed about the village and its surroundings. Some of the evenings were concluded with a plenary discussion. The village councils decided on what methods they wanted to use during the evenings. For each village council, the ultimate goal of organizing the village evenings was to develop a village vision.

In this chapter, the results of the research on the village evenings are presented and discussed by making a comparison between the three villages. Attention is paid not only to the outcomes of the village evenings, but also to the organization of the village evenings by the village councils. The results on the village evenings are based on observations made during these evenings and on the analysis of the documents that were produced by the villagers (i.e. the forms that the villagers used to write down the results of their discussion). Part of the observations was done by fellow students from the Wageningen University. They were invited to participate in the Science Shop project on Village Identity to explain to the villagers what was expected from them during the evenings and to facilitate the conversations if necessary. The data about the role of the village council was obtained through conversations with the village council during the preparation of the village evenings and during the analysis of the results. Furthermore, the members of the village council were observed during the village evenings.

The outline of the chapter is as follows. In paragraph 4.2, the three villages in which the evenings were organized, are introduced. A short description is given on the context in which the vision process is taking place. Furthermore, details are given how the village council involved the villagers. Paragraph 4.3 discusses the input that is provided by the villagers during the evenings and what issues were relevant in particular. Paragraph 4.4 presents how the collective identities are (re-) constructed during the evenings. Attention will be paid to the construction of ‘us’ and ‘them’ by the villagers and the influence of the context on their discourses. Furthermore, it will be shown how groups of villagers develop their ideas in the course of the evenings under the influence of groupthink and the introduction of new concepts. Paragraph 4.5 goes into the goals the village councils have for developing a vision and explains what consequences organizing the village evenings has for the village councils.

4.2 The organization of the village evenings

As part of the Science Shop project on Village Identity, three villages were selected in which the village council wanted to develop a new village vision. They are: *Nietap/Terheijl* in the province of Drenthe, *Wergea* in Friesland and *Zuidbroek* in Groningen. In this paragraph, these villages are introduced. Special attention will be paid on the situation within the village at the start of the vision process, because this sets the backdrop against which the vision is drawn up. Furthermore, it will be explained how many evenings were organized, how the villagers were invited to the village evenings and what methods were chosen by the village council to stimulate the discussion.

4.2.1 The three villages and the backdrop for the village vision

The three villages that were studied for this research differ quite a lot. Not only do they lie in three different provinces, but they also differ in size. Furthermore, the backdrop against which the village council is developing a vision, differs a lot in each village. (Paragraph 4.5 goes into further detail on the goals the village councils have for developing a vision.)

Nietap/Terheijl

Nietap/Terheijl is a small village in the province of Drenthe and is part of the municipality of Noordenveld. The village has about 1.000 inhabitants and has a somewhat peculiar relationship with the nearby village of Leek, which is situated in the neighbouring province of Groningen. This is because the two villages, situated in two separate provinces, are actually grown into each other. The only clear separation between the two villages are the villages' nameplates somewhere along one of the main streets. The border between the two provinces is marked by these nameplates as well. For the Municipalities of Noordenveld and Leek, the situation of the two villages expanding and growing into each other, was reason to develop a municipal vision on behalf of both Municipalities. This plan is called the "IGS", which is the Dutch abbreviation of *Intergemeentelijke Structuurvisie* (Inter-municipal Structure Vision), and contains the spatial plans for the area around the two villages. (Geluk *et al.*, 2009) One of the objectives within this municipal plan was to build more than 800 houses on empty plots adjacent to Nietap/Terheijl and Leek, causing the two villages to become spatially attached even more. The inhabitants of Nietap/Terheijl saw this as a serious threat, believing that 'their social identity would be lost'. Because the protection of the village identity was one of the conditions in the original municipal plan, the villagers and village council set out a course to get a grip on their 'social identity' and develop a village vision based on this. (Dijkhuis, 2010) In their eyes, this would enable them to prevent the implementation of the municipal plans.



Wergea

A stone's throw away from the town of Leeuwarden lies the Friesian village Wergea. The village has 1.600 inhabitants and has an active village council (Pleatslik Belang Wergea). From the three villages within this research it is the only village that had already developed its own village vision under the supervision of the village council. Since this vision was developed in 2003, the village council and the supporting organization for small villages in Friesland (Doarpswurk) thought it was time for an update. This, also in relation to municipal plans that were initiated or already implemented in the past few years. The consequences of these plans, such as a new housing estate and the construction of a new tourist waterway, were about to show. Another reason for the update was the municipal reorganization that was coming. Wergea

was part of the municipality Boarnsterhim, but would become part of the (much wealthier) town of Leeuwarden. Furthermore, recent social developments, such as population decrease and the liveability of the village, should become part of the new vision as well.

Zuidbroek

With 3.800 inhabitants, Zuidbroek is the largest of the three villages in this research. It lies in the province of Groningen and is part of the municipality of Menterwolde. The village is situated around a crossing of two motorways, a railroad and a canal. In 2006, a firm of consulting engineers (Buchel/Hajema-adviseurs) developed a village vision on Zuidbroek for the Municipality. For this, a number of village evenings were organized during which the villagers were invited to think of qualities, particular problems, wishes and opportunities for Zuidbroek. (Buchel/Hajema-adviseurs, 2006) The document that the consultants produced, was never officially approved by the municipal council of Menterwolde. According to the village council, the document is outdated and does not speak on behalf of the village. Because of this, the village council asked the Municipality for a subsidy to develop their own vision. The decision on this was postponed by the municipal council for a long time. This encouraged the village council to look for other ways to develop their vision and ultimately participate in the Science Shop project on Village Identity.



4.2.2 How the villagers were involved by the village council

How the villagers are involved in the development of the village vision has consequences for the outcome. Hence, the choices the village council makes while organizing the village evenings, are very important. The invitations have an effect on who visits the evenings and what their expectations are. The choice of methods³ (to encourage the discussion between the villagers) by the village council depends to a large extent on the expectations about these methods and the outcome the council wants to achieve.

Nietap/Terheijl

To obtain enough input for the vision, two village evenings were organized by the village council. The villagers were invited by a letter that was distributed door-to-door. In this letter, the village council invited the villagers to help the council with thinking about the future of the village: *“How should our village and its surroundings look in order for you to feel at home?”*. It was mentioned that the results were going to be used to develop a village vision and that this vision should provide an answer to future spatial plans that governments would develop.

³ As part of the Science Shop project on Village Identity, the village councils could choose between five methods to enhance discussion: (1) photo method (based on photos taken by the villagers), (2) living room discussions (based on objects brought along by villagers), (3) (historical) excursion (based on visiting places meaningful to the villagers), (4) speed date (face-to-face interviews between villagers) and (5) scenario method (thinking about future wishes and external trends and developments)

The first evening was visited by 30 villagers. Although the invitation did not mention the IGS-plan specifically, the evenings were visited mainly by people that were interested in this municipal plan and/or were involved in the protests against it. Many participants were surprised (and some even a little agitated) that they had to come up with their own ideas about the future of the village. Instead, many of them just wanted to discuss the IGS-plan to come up with ideas on how to respond to it. This disappointment might also explain the lower turnout during the second evening, which was visited by just 15 people.

Overall, the ages of the participants were mixed, but it was noticeable that there was no youth. Furthermore, the group consisted of both newcomers and people who had lived in the village their entire life. In general, there was a lot of variety in the number of years the participants lived in the village. Noticeably, all the villagers that participated, were either club member or board member of the village council.

During the first evening, the participants got to know each other (a little more) during the speed date, interviewing each other in couples. The village council thought that speed date was a nice way to introduce people to each other, but also to 'warm up' the participants for the discussions.

The scenario method was chosen as a follow up, because the council expected that this method would deliver the most results. The chairman of the council wanted to encourage the creativity of the participants and thought that this was the best method to do so. Furthermore, it was known to the council that this method often led people to talk about social issues. Since the council wanted to write the vision especially in relation to the social cohesion in the village (which was perceived as being threatened by the IGS-plan of the Municipality), they believed that the scenario method was most suitable for this.

Following the speed date the first evening, the villagers thought about and discussed their wishes for the future of the village by means of the scenario method. To get inspiration, they used sentences that they could finish in order to formulate a statement. These statements were discussed and rated to determine what the participating villagers considered important. The second evening was used to discuss external developments⁴ that might influence the situation in the village. The participants were asked to decide what developments they considered important and what the possible consequences might be. Based on these possible consequences, the villagers formulated action points.

Wergea

The village council in Wergea aimed at getting a wide variety of people to the evenings. Therefore, they invited villagers in general by an article in a local magazine, but also addressed specific (board) members of associations and organizations within the village. In the invitation in the magazine, it was mentioned that the council wanted the villagers to think about the future of the village. Reference was made to changes to the village that happened in the past. It was stressed that the outcome of the evenings should not only be about wishes and dreams, but that an action plan to achieve them, would also be developed.

As a result of the article in the magazine and the personal invitations, the group of participants was very diverse, ranging from members of the local drama club to local entrepreneurs to 'ordinary' villagers. Wergea was also the only village in which local youth attended the evenings. The participants knew they were going to talk about the future of the village and that the results of the village evenings would be used to update the current vision. Other than that, they had no particular expectations.

⁴The term *external developments* was used during the village evenings to refer to trends or problems (economic, social or spatial) on which the villagers had no direct influence.

Three methods were used by the village council to learn more about the ideas and wishes of the villagers. During the first evening, the speed date was used to get the 36 participants acquainted. This was followed by the first part of the scenario method; the discussion between the participants about their ideas and wishes for the future of the village. The results of the group discussions were written down by the participants. After the discussion, they were asked to summarize their ideas into core values and come up with a motto for their future vision. In a second round during the first evening, the groups were asked to explain their ideas to two new group members (per group two people were asked to move on to another group). There was no room for discussion during this phase. The new group members were only allowed to ask questions for clarification. This would help the other group members to put more detail in the ideas already recorded. The second evening was visited by 32 inhabitants. As in Nietap/Terheijl, this evening was aimed at letting the participants think about future developments that might affect the village. To enable the participants to confront their ideas and wishes for the village with the external developments, the discussion groups were kept the same as the previous evening.

The third method used by the council was the historical excursion. In cooperation with the local historian, Sjoerd Spykstra, a short walking tour through the village was organized. About 15 villagers took part and learned about several historical and special places within the village. The tour was organized as introduction to the general autumn meeting of the village council. During this meeting, the results from the previous evenings were presented, followed by a plenary discussion. The meeting of the village council was visited by approximately 30 villagers. The excursion was mainly visited by people who wanted to learn more about the village and planned to join the meeting afterwards anyway.

Zuidbroek

The village council organized three village evenings. For the first evening, the photo method was used. Unfortunately, there was very little time for the council to prepare. On a very short notice, they had to invite the villagers to take photos that were to be used for the discussion. For this, an article was placed in a local magazine. The article explained that the purpose of the evening was to discuss the future of the village in order to develop a village vision. Furthermore, it was explained that the villagers could decide for themselves what they considered important issues to discuss. Thus, they could take a photo of anything they wanted, allowing them to capture places, people or events that they considered to be of particular importance for the village. To encourage people to take a photo, a digital camera was handed out by the village council. After someone had taken a picture, he or she had to pass on the camera to someone else. This resulted in 22 photos. In total, 20 people were present. The turnout for the first evening was mainly determined by the fact that a single camera was used and passed on by the villagers. The group therefore mainly consisted of people who took a photo. However, not everybody who took a photo was present and some participants did not actually submit a photo. The participants knew that they were going to discuss about the photos and the future of the village, but were not sure what to expect of this and how this would result in ideas for the village vision.

For the second evening, during which the scenario method was used, the village council wrote an article in the local paper about the results of the previous evening. Also, an invitation was put on a website that was often visited by the inhabitants of Zuidbroek. Special attention was paid to the importance of developing a village vision as an answer to plans of the Municipality. Because of recent development in these plans, the council wanted quick results. By stressing the importance of the current events, they hoped that more people would show up. Despite the effort of the council, with 15 villagers attending, this was the evening with the lowest turnout.

To compensate for this, the village council organized a third evening during which the preliminary results of the first evenings would be presented. The chairman of the council encouraged the participants of the second evening to urge other villagers to come to this meeting. To get a higher turnout, the village council drew villager's attention to the recent developments in the plans of the village council on the reconstruction of the village centre. The council stressed the importance to develop a vision in response to this. The evening was visited by more than 40 villagers.

Compared to the other villages, the attendance in Zuidbroek (being the largest of the three villages in terms of inhabitants) was very low overall. Most of the people that were present during the three evenings, were interested in local politics or were personally or business-wise involved in some of the issues that were going on in the village (i.e. a farmer and some local entrepreneurs). Some of them were a member of a subcommittee of the village council or had closer personal ties with the village council. Also, a number of participants were a member of the municipal council (including the mayor and a few aldermen/-women). The first evening was mainly visited by middle-aged and elderly villagers. An explanation could be the Soccer World Cup that was taking place at the time. The third evening, the villagers were invited to learn about the results of previous evenings, but mainly about the recent plans of the Municipality for the village centre. As a consequence, the main reason for villagers to visit the third evening, was the discussion on these municipal plans.

The village council chose the photo method because they believed that the visual aspect of this method would be attractive to villagers. Also, by handing out a camera, they expected that more people would be encouraged to take a photo. Being handed the camera would encourage the villagers to take a photo and quickly pass it on, it was believed. This should result in a higher turnout, the council hoped, despite the short preparation time.

The scenario method was chosen because this method was believed to be more comprehensive and would provide more results. Because the village council needed quick results, the future wishes and external developments were discussed in one evening, instead of two. Because of the low turnout, the council felt it was necessary to check these ideas with more villagers. A third evening was organized to achieve this. During this evening, the results of the first evenings were presented by the village council and discussed in small groups. The aim of the evening was to let the villagers decide what issues they considered most important for the vision. For this, they could give a mark for each subject discussed. The evening ended with a plenary discussion.

Discussion

The composition of the groups of participants differed quite a lot per village. This is directly related to with the way in which they were invited to the evenings, the personal involvement of the participants in issues going on in the village and the expectations about the goal of the evenings.

In each of the villages, every villager was invited, either by a door-to-door letter or by an article in the local magazine. However, the evenings were mainly visited by people that had a particular interest in the village or were personally or business-wise involved in certain issues. Most villagers expected that they would discuss recent (municipal) plans or developments. The importance of these plans for them, made them decide to come to the evenings.

Many of the participants had a close relationship with the village council, often based on prior involvement in issues regarding the village (such as the protest against the municipal plans in Nietap/Terheijl). In general, it appears difficult for the village council to get people to participate. It seems that the councils rely to a large extent on their personal networks within the village and the good relations with other villagers. In all three villages, the

councils used their personal networks to make people aware of the village evenings. In Wergea and Zuidbroek, these networks were used to a large extent to get a higher turnout. The choice of methods does not determine what topics the participants discuss, since the methods let the participants decide for themselves what they consider important issues.⁵ But the choices made, still have influence on which villagers come to the evenings. For the photo method, the snowball effect of the camera is essential. The more cameras are handed out, the more photos are taken. More importantly, it can be expected that people pass on the camera to someone they know. The fact that a single camera was handed out in Zuidbroek, could mean that a particular group of people (or network) within the village showed up during the evenings. This appeared not to be the case, however. Some participants did not use the camera, but e-mailed a photo to the council. Also, some villagers were present who did not take a photo at all, but wanted to join the discussion.

The use of the scenario method and speed date was not announced in the invitations in any of the villages. The villagers knew they were going to discuss the future of the village and think about their wishes, but they did not know by what means. Both methods therefore had no effect on the turnout.

In the invitation for the excursion it was announced that the local historian would be the guide. People therefore expected the excursion would be about historical places in the village (and this turned to be the case). Perhaps, if it was announced that the excursion would also lead the villagers along places where pressing, current issues were going on, this might have led to other expectations and also a different audience.



Figure 5: A bridge the villagers in Wergea restored themselves

⁵ See also the report for the Science Shop: Dorpsidentiteit: op zoek naar eenheid in verscheidenheid. *Vijf methoden waarmee dorpsbewoners hun dorpsidentiteit expliciet kunnen maken*. (Aalvanger & Beunen, in press)

4.3 The collective identities relevant to the participants

The process of developing a village vision is related to broader processes of identity construction within the village. The villagers 'bring along' their collective identities, that they have constructed in their everyday life, to the village evenings. This paragraph discusses what the basic content of the discussions was. It appears that the current situation in the village plays an important part in the discussions, making some identities more salient than others. This is especially the case when the villagers feel that their collective identities are challenged or threatened. The next paragraph goes into further detail on the (re-)construction of collective identities by the villagers during the village evenings.

4.3.1 The variety of topics discussed during the village evenings

The villagers discussed a wide variety of issues during the evenings. Although the methods were aimed at encouraging the discussion between the participants, they did not determine the content of the discussions. It was up to the villagers to decide what they considered important for the village vision. In each of the villages, different issues were discussed, but some patterns can be found as well.

Nietap/Terheijl

How important the IGS-plan was for the villagers, became clear in the course of the two evenings. Although it was explained to them that the evenings were not organized to talk about the IGS per se, it still was the main topic of the evenings. In relation to this, the two main issues in the group discussions were the size of the village and the social cohesion between the villagers. It was emphasized by many participants that the villagers still knew each other and looked after each other. The social activities, such as the street barbeque or building a wagon for the local parade, were very much appreciated. And despite the small scale of the village, most of the important facilities were nearby in the neighbouring village of Leek. Together with the abundant nature surrounding the village, this was one of the aspects that the participants valued the most. Overall, the main issues that were discussed, considered the good social relations within the village and the atmosphere (in terms of quietness and space). The plans of the Municipality were seen as a threat to these particular qualities. Other issues that were discussed, were: the local school, the local playground that the villagers had given a face-lift and the fact that there was no general place where the villagers could meet each other, such as a local community centre.

Wergea

Recent developments also played a role in the conversations between the villagers of Wergea, but to a lesser extent. Overall, more issues were discussed here, but social and spatial issues were of main consideration to the participants. What stood out, was the fact that the villagers considered themselves to be very tolerant towards each other and thought to have a strong community spirit. Differences in religion were not an obstacle at all, according to them. Furthermore, the villagers discussed the involvement of the local youth and the need to maintain local clubs and associations since they were "*the stepping stones everything depends on*" in the village. These aspects were considered to be of main importance to keep the village liveable and maintain the social cohesion. In relation to this, the villagers expressed that it would be good to have a place where people could meet informally, such as a pub. Also related to the social circumstances in the village was the need for a second bridge across the canal that ran through the village. This bridge would connect the new housing estate with the older part of the village spatially, but also socially. The bridge would allow villagers to go for a regular walk all round the village, allowing them to meet each other more easily for a little chitchat. Among the other spatial issues that were brought up, were the 'Red

Square' and the former dairy factory in the village (to which a lot of villagers felt connected because they had worked there or had family working there before it closed down). Both locations were considered to be the ugliest places in the village and in need for reconstruction. The participants therefore had high hopes of the redivision with the town of Leeuwarden. In the past, wishes of the villagers were often denied because the Municipality of Boarnsterhim was financially bankrupt. Becoming part of a larger town, would provide new opportunities. Other topics during the evenings were the importance of the waterways for local business, the need for good education and (of course...) the Frisian language.

Zuidbroek

In Zuidbroek, one of the main topics was the village centre, or more accurately: the absence of it. The shops in the village were situated mostly along a single street that was jammed with traffic during rush hour or too dangerous to cross at any other time of the day because of speeding cars and agricultural vehicles. Another spatial aspect, that was valued more positively, was the fact that the village was situated at a crossroad of two motorways, a railroad and a canal. According to the villagers, this could provide opportunities for future economic development. In particular, they talked about options to expand the industrial area just outside the village. With plenty of room for new businesses, such as an outlet-store, the upgraded industrial site would attract new villagers and day trippers. In turn, this would help local facilities, such as stores, to stay in business. The central location of the village also made it more attractive to commuters. The participants considered the village to be a "*melting pot*" of people coming from many places. The openness of the villagers allowed newcomers to be accepted more quickly within the community. There was an "*anything goes-mentality*". Although there were plenty vibrant social clubs, the social cohesion with the village was seen as weak. Having places to meet, such as the local community centre and a new supermarket, were seen as crucial for people to meet each other.

Discussion

Looking at the above, it becomes clear that in each of the villages, recent developments played a central role in what was discussed during the village evenings. In Nietap/Terheijl and Zuidbroek, the spatial plans of the municipality were very dominant in the conversations of the villagers. In Wergea, there was no pressing matter, which resulted in a wide variety of issues being discussed. However, spatial plans were important here as well. The village evenings show that there is a wide variety of issues that matter to the villagers. In each of these situations, they develop a certain discourse in order to attribute meaning to what they experience.

4.3.2 The importance of current developments for the collective identities of the participants

The collective identities of the participants are constructed by them in relation to a certain context. From the start of the village evenings, the construction of 'us' and 'them' is determined to a large extent by the recent developments in the village. Even when talking about the past or the future, the present is what matters a lot to the villagers that join.

Nietap/Terheijl

The IGS-plan of the Municipality was an important issue for the inhabitants of Nietap/Terheijl. The construction of 800 houses was seen as a threat for the spatial and social qualities of the village. Although many topics were discussed during the evenings, it was this very issue that the participants used to construct a strong collective identity. The villagers of Nietap/Terheijl were constructed by the participants as a cohesive group ('us') that protested

collectively against the plans of the Municipality ('them'). According to the participants, there was "...*solidarity and unity when it matters.*" All the participants agreed that the plans of the Municipality were outrageous and a threat to their village.

The constructed collective identity revealed mutual dependence in two ways. First, the participants stated that the future of the village depended on the plans of the Municipality. In turn, the Municipality needed the support of the villagers to implement these plans. The villagers felt pretty strong about their ability to resist to the Municipality and referred often to the successful protests against the IGS. The second way in which the villagers expressed mutual dependence was based upon their relationship with the neighbouring village of Leek. The IGS-plan would connect the two villages spatially even more than in the current situation. The participants in Nietap/Terheijl felt threatened by the IGS-plan in the sense that they would become annexed by Leek. In the discussions between the villagers they expressed their dependence on Leek, because the close proximity of the village had many advantages for the inhabitants of Nietap/Terheijl, such as supermarkets, shops and leisure facilities. But becoming annexed by Leek, was a bridge too far for the participants. Discussing the future of the village, they agreed that *"In ten years we will differentiate ourselves from other villagers because we are small-scale and yet are neighbouring a big market town."*

Wergea

The villagers that participated in Wergea, constructed their village as a close community. According to them, there was a lot of unity in the village despite the different religions and various backgrounds of the inhabitants. This was possible because people were very *"tolerant"* in Wergea. People from all different kinds of origin came together in the village, but that didn't cause any problem at all. There were plenty activities organized within the village and these were attended by many inhabitants. This contributed to the strong social cohesion within the village, according to the participants.

At first sight, it seemed that there was no clear 'they'-group for the participants. But giving it a closer look, they constructed their own collective identity by distinguishing themselves from to two groups. First, the participants constructed themselves as active, involved members of the community. They distanced themselves from villagers (mainly newcomers) that didn't participate in the local social activities or felt little involved in issues regarding the village. Their wish for the future was: *"Everybody is involved in what happens in the village."* It was even suggested to organize a course for newcomers on how to become a *"good Wergeaster"*. The second way participants constructed themselves as a group (within the group discussions), was by stressing the importance of being independent: *"We have to do it ourselves because financial possibilities are decreasing everywhere. And we are going to do it ourselves!"* The data obtained in the research don't show a clear construction of a 'they'-group, but it seems that the need for independence comes from the relationship with the Municipality of Boarnsterhim. This Municipality was financially broke and therefore limited funds were available to fulfil the wishes of the villagers in Wergea.

Strikingly, the wish to become independent actually shows the mutual dependence between the villagers and the Municipality. The participants were very much aware that they needed the Municipality for supporting their ideas politically and financially. This was also supported by the idea that the municipal redivision with Leeuwarden wasn't seen as a threat, but more a window of opportunity. However, the villagers did express that they didn't want to become absorbed (spatially) by the growing city. The wish to involve less active/involved villagers, appears to be not so much about the mutual dependence between two separate groups at first sight. But the resources that the 'involved villagers' and 'non-involved villagers' are possibly fighting over, are the investments of time and effort (only by the involved villagers) and the returns from these investments to the village (shared by

everybody). The data obtained, do not show to what extent the two groups acknowledge each other (which is needed for a collective identity to become meaningful for the group members). Perhaps the reluctance to become involved or participate in activities is seen by the involved villagers as a form of denial (as the ultimate form of recognition).

Zuidbroek

In contrast with Wergea, the villagers who participated in Zuidbroek constructed the village as non-cohesive. According to them, this had to do with the fact that the local community was formed by newcomers to a large extent. Because Zuidbroek was a commuter village, consisting of people with various backgrounds, people formed small groups that were loosely connected. They worked elsewhere and were not involved in issues going on in the village. This was possible because of the 'anything goes'-mentality of the villagers. The participants even explicitly mentioned that *"Other villages have a stronger cohesion than villagers in Zuidbroek."*

However, there were at least two occasions in which the villagers *did* organize themselves and formed a cohesive group, according to the participants. In both situations, the Municipality had plans to tear down buildings that were important to the villagers. The threat of losing the local community centre (which was the only place for the villagers to meet) and the planned demolition of the local court house (which was a characteristic building and important in the history of Zuidbroek) united the villagers. The discussion on the two occasions led participants to suggest that *"When there is really something going on, then people are very much united."* According to some, what connected the people in Zuidbroek, was *"The sense of community against the Municipality."*

The struggle of the villagers (us) against the policies of the Municipality (them) was central to many discussions during the evenings. One of the most important topics during all three evenings was the reconstruction of the village centre. According to the participants, reconstruction of this part of the village was very much needed to decrease traffic. Furthermore, they wanted a new supermarket in the centre for quite some time. The Municipality was portrayed as slow and unwilling to help the villagers of Zuidbroek in solving their problems. The lack of information and secrecy around the old village vision, were reason for the participants to question the sincerity of the Municipality.

The discussion on the spatial plans for the village clearly showed the mutual dependence between the villagers and the Municipality of Menterwolde. The villagers were very much aware of the fact that they needed the Municipality to develop and implement plans to improve the situation in the village. The (perceived) reluctance or unwillingness of the Municipality to grant the wishes of the villagers, in effect meant a denial of their collective identity (i.e. how they attributed meaning to the situation in the village centre) and therefore actually strengthened it.

The discussions about the lack of social cohesion within the village and the problematic relationship with the Municipality had a remarkable effect. The participants did not only construct a collective identity in relation to the Municipality, but also in relation to other villagers. The low turnout during the evenings was the main reason for this. According to the participants, other villagers (those who were not present during the evenings) were *"vision tired"*. The discussions about the spatial plans for the village were going on for so long, that people lost interest. Furthermore, it was said that these villagers didn't feel involved in what was going on in the village. For the participants, these two aspects explained the low turnout. Constructing themselves as the active and involved group opposite to the villagers that were not present, they referred to themselves by saying: *"It is always the same group of people that carries the load."*

Discussion

The three cases show that the context is very important in the construction of collective identities. In each of the three villages, recent developments were the main topics in the conversations between the participants and led to certain representations and/or constructions of collective identities. This shows that some identities are more relevant than others to villagers. There are some striking differences between the three villages, however. In Nietap/Terheijl and Zuidbroek, a strong collective identity was constructed by the participants based on the plans of the Municipality. In both cases, the participants constructed the villagers as a cohesive group (us) in opposition to the Municipality (them). What is noticeable however, is the fact that the participants in Nietap/Terheijl constructed themselves (and other villagers) as a community that was cohesive *all the time*. In Zuidbroek, the participants emphasized that the village was heterogeneous and not cohesive at all. Interestingly, they realized themselves that it was the struggle against the Municipality that connected them at *certain moments*. Perhaps, this is also an explanation for the disappointment of the participants about the low turnout. On the one hand, they were aware that the cohesion within the village was low. On the other hand, they expected fellow villagers to be involved in the vision process (and come to the village evenings) because ‘it mattered’, especially because of the topical issue about the village centre plans. Ultimately, this led the participants to construct themselves as a group (of involved villagers) in relation to the other villagers (those who didn’t care). This shows that the process of developing a village vision can itself become a context for developing a collective identity.

The absence of a distinct ‘other’ in Wergea shows the importance of mutual dependence in constructing a strong collective identity. In Nietap/Terheijl and Zuidbroek, the Municipality was a clear, distinguishable opposing group on which the villagers depended. This allowed the participants to construct a strong collective identity in relation to the other, i.e. the Municipality. In both cases, the denial of the Municipality to grant the wishes of the villagers, actually made the participants more determined to achieve their goals, making their collective identities more resilient. The mutual dependence between the inhabitants of Nietap/Terheijl and the neighbouring village of Leek (with its facilities) provided a similar opportunity to construct a strong collective identity. The participants were aware that they depended on Leek, but also made it clear that they did not want to become part of it. They wanted to stay a ‘small-scale village’.

In Wergea, the participants constructed the village as a cohesive community in a similar way as in Nietap/Terheijl. An important difference is that there seemed to be no single opposing group against which a strong collective identity was constructed. Although recent developments played an important role in the discussion between the villagers, they were not threatening or urgent enough and did not provide a distinct ‘other’ in relation to which a strong collective identity could be constructed by the participants. They constructed a collective identity mainly in relation to other villagers. In the discourses of the participants, the boundaries between ‘us’ (active villagers) and ‘them’ (passive villagers) were less clear and the mutual dependence was less obvious. Furthermore, it seemed that there was no clear acknowledgement or denial of the collective identity of the active villagers by the passive villagers. Perhaps this made it more difficult for the participant to construct the boundaries, leading to a less strong sense of unity.

Noticeable is also the fact that the participants in Wergea talked about becoming more independent. By doing so, they actually acknowledged the Municipality of Boarnsterhim as ‘the other’ and admitted dependence. This dependence on the Municipality is further acknowledged by the participants through their construction of their relationship with the Municipality of Leeuwarden. The redivision was seen a window of opportunity to renew the cooperation with the Municipality.

4.4 The (re-)construction of collective identities by the participants

Recent developments affect what topics are discussed by the villagers and set the context to which they construct their collective identities. The discourses that the participants use during the evenings, show how they attribute meaning to themselves and the world around them, constructing boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ based on the situation that is relevant to them at that moment. This paragraph discusses how the participants exchange meaning and negotiate about this under the influences of group processes. Other ideas and discourses are incorporated by them into the relevant collective identity and an action system is developed.

4.4.1 Villagers try to reach consensus in their discussions

The strong collective identities that the participants constructed during the evenings, either on themselves or on the village as a whole, suggest a strong tendency for groupthink. The discussions were lively but there seemed to be a strong need to reach consensus. The differences in views expressed during the face-to-face interviews were less apparent in the results that were captured from the group discussions. In plenary discussions at the end of the evenings, there was also a strong need to come to an agreement.

Nietap/Terheijl

The participants in Nietap/Terheijl constructed their village as a community with a strong social cohesion. This cohesion was also apparent during the village evenings. Many participants knew each other and/or the members of the village council. Furthermore, many explained that they took part in the protests against the Municipality on the IGS-plan. They felt that they, as a village, had to come up with an answer to this plan.

The discussion therefore concentrated around the IGS-plan and its possible spatial and social consequences. Although most of the participants considered the construction of 800 houses a threat for the village’s social cohesion, they also believed that there might be positive outcomes. According to them, the construction of more houses would mean that the level of facilities could be maintained or even increased: *“When a lot of people come to live in the village, the amount of facilities in Leek and Nietap will increase.”* Furthermore, the participants said that there was a need for starter homes. This would mean that at least some of the houses in the original municipal plan needed to be built.

Within the group, there was a strong need to reach consensus about this apparent contradiction. During the discussion, the participants expressed that they were not so much against growth of the village, but it had to be comprehensible and manageable for the villagers that were living in Nietap/Terheijl already. It was especially the quick growth (of 800 houses on top of approximately 300 existing houses) that was feared. The discussions amongst the participants ultimately led to the consensus-view of *“limited growth”*. This would enable the villagers to ‘absorb’ the newcomers into their community. Consensus was also reached on the locations and size of the new houses. Some broken grounds that were considered the *“rotten spots”* of the village, were considered very suitable. Although these places were already empty for years and despite the fact that there were many legal hurdles, *“contraction”* (as the opposite of expansion) was constructed as the best solution. Deviant participants that questioned the social cohesion within the village or the possibilities of ‘contraction’, were silenced or ignored. None of the deviant opinions from the interviews were visible in the results of the group discussions that were noted down.

Wergea

In a similar fashion as in Nietap/Terheijl, the participants in Wergea constructed their village as socially cohesive. During the evenings, there was a friendly atmosphere amongst the villagers and they were enthusiastic about the development of the vision. They appreciated

the fact that the village council had organized the evenings. Furthermore, most of the villagers present, were acquainted with each other and the village council. Whenever possible, they chose to sit with people they knew well. Overall, this suggested a strong solidarity between the participants. However, there were important differences between the first two evenings and the last evening. During the first two evenings, the villagers discussed in small groups of 4 to 6 persons. The last evening was used to present the results from the group discussions and have a plenary discussion. This had a large effect on the need for consensus.

There were many issues discussed by the villagers during both evenings. In most cases, the small groups reached some sort of agreement. Some examples are: (1) the establishment of an umbrella organization for the social clubs to compensate for the lack of board members, (2) the construction of houses for multiple generations under the same roof ('kangaroo-houses') to provide starters with the opportunity to get a house and keep the elderly within the village, (3) the expansion of the village with a new housing estate, (4) providing more opportunities for tourists and water sports enthusiasts to visit the village (over water), (5) not becoming a suburb of Leeuwarden and (6) redeveloping the site of the old dairy factory (Frico-site) and the Red square.

During the plenary discussion of the third evening, it was more problematic to reach consensus. The participants agreed that Wergea should stay separate from Leeuwarden. Furthermore, it was commonly agreed that the Frico-site and the Red square needed to be redeveloped. This would provide opportunities to improve the looks of the village, attract new businesses and make it more appealing for tourists. Agreement was also reached on water and recreation. More tourists would mean more business. The looks of the village should not be compromised, however.

On the issue of the umbrella organization for the social clubs, there was no agreement. The cultures of the various social clubs differed too much, according to some. In the discussion on the starter and senior houses, it was questioned if the kangaroo-houses were the proper solution. No clear consensus was reached here either. The growth of the village proved a difficult subject as well. Although there was some agreement that the growth should be limited and that the houses should be made available for starters, there was no overall consensus on how to achieve this. Building only a few houses would make them too expensive, building too many would threaten the social coherence.

Zuidbroek

Contrary to Nietap/Terheijl and Wergea, the villagers that attended the evenings in Zuidbroek constructed the village as socially non-cohesive. However, during the first two evenings, there was a lot of cohesion between the participants which seemed to become even stronger over time. As explained above, during the course of the evenings, they constructed themselves as a group in opposition to other villagers. Consequently, in both the group and plenary discussions of the first two evenings, there was a strong need amongst them to reach consensus. The third evening was visited by a lot more villagers. Most of them had not been present during the first two evenings and not everybody present during the first evenings showed up the third evening. The cohesion between these participants was much less.

The consequences of the difference in cohesion become clear by looking at some examples of topics that were discussed in Zuidbroek. The participants of the first two evenings agreed that it was necessary to come up with a solution for the increasing traffic through the village. A solution would be to construct a ring road to divert traffic. However, this would lead to loss of business for local entrepreneurs because people would no longer drive through the village and stop to make purchases. The solution that was proposed, was to wait with any measures to solve the problem until one of the nearby motorways is upgraded. Then it could be decided

what measures should be implemented in the village. The participants all agreed to this, although it did not seem to provide a true solution. During the third evening, the concept of shared space⁶ was introduced as a solution for the traffic. No agreement was reached, however, whether this is a solution or not.

Having a supermarket as a place for people to meet, was something the villagers felt very strongly about during the first evenings and the topic therefore led to a lot of discussion. Surprisingly, during the third evening the subject was hardly touched upon, as was any issue that had to do with the social circumstances in the village. Most topics that were discussed during the third evening had to do with spatial problems.

It is therefore not a surprise that the discussion about the central location of Zuidbroek and the junction of motorways, the railroad and canal received a lot of attention during the third evening. The idea that Zuidbroek could become attractive for people in the wider region (e.g. commuters, tourists and shoppers) was actually developed during the first two evenings. At that time, the participants felt very strongly about this as a solution to increase the liveability of the village. During the third evening, the idea of Zuidbroek becoming a 'park and ride'-village (as a location where commuters could transfer between train, bus or car), was picked up by the participants. They agreed that it was a viable solution to improve the attractiveness of the village.

The business/industrial area was discussed during the first two evenings, but not extensively. During the third evening, it became one of the main topics, however. But although many participants agreed that the industrial area was important for Zuidbroek, they were not able to reach an agreement to what extent the area could be expanded and what kind of business should be attracted. The participants agreed that an outlet-store could improve the overall attractiveness of the village for tourists and day trippers.

Discussion

From the discussions during the village evenings, it becomes clear that there are multiple factors that influence the need participants feel to reach consensus. In the small discussion groups (of 4 to 6 people), there seems to be an overall tendency towards consensus. This can be explained by two factors. First of all, the room for autonomous action seems to be limited by a motivational pressure to reach consensus. The participants were encouraged (by the students who facilitated the groups) to express their own opinions. This often led to lively discussions, but in the end, the groups worked towards an agreement. A possible explanation for this is that the villagers in the small groups were more aware that the results were going to be used for the village vision. This triggered them to come to an agreement on what the village should look like in the future and what should be done to achieve this.

The second factor that explains the tendency towards consensus is the set up of the methods that were used to encourage and capture the discussions between the villagers. Because one group member was responsible for writing down the results of the discussion, not everything was written down. Perhaps strategic choices were made or things were simply forgotten, making the result more uniform. Furthermore, the minutes secretary sometimes pushed the group to reach an agreement on what should be written down, leading to (supposed) consensus.

The effect of social coherence becomes especially clear when looking at the plenary discussions. In Zuidbroek, there was a strong collective identity amongst the participants of the first two evenings (as the group who carried the load). During the plenary discussions at

⁶ Shared space is a traffic concept in which pedestrians, cyclists and motorized traffic are not assigned a particular place in the road. There is no separate pavements or bicycle lanes.

the end of these evenings, there was a strong need for consensus. People went along with the majority view. There were some deviant voices, but they were overruled by the majority. The last evenings in Zuidbroek and Wergea show a different picture. The group of villagers in Zuidbroek was much larger and in both villages, many of the people present had not participated during the previous evenings. Therefore, they did not have a strong collective identity and, consequently, less desire to reach consensus on the issues discussed. Not surprisingly, a lot more deviant voices were heard as well. Issues were problematized more and the participants kept questioning each other's ideas and views.

4.4.2 Villagers have a tendency to polarize

Amongst the villagers that participated during the village evenings, there was some tendency towards polarization. This related directly to the strength of the collective identity that they constructed. The information that was shared by the villagers and how meaning was attributed to it within the discussion groups, depended to a large extent on the collective identity the participants considered relevant at that moment.

Nietap/Terheijl

In Nietap/Terheijl many of the participating villagers considered their village to be socially cohesive. However, some of them questioned this, especially in the face-to-face interviews, saying that there were *"clubs of people"* and that *"not everybody knows everybody"*. Furthermore, not everybody felt the same involvement in the village, according to some.

These differences between the villagers were downplayed in the discussions, however. The collective identity that was most relevant to the villagers present, was their protest against the IGS-plans of the Municipality. These plans were seen as a threat to the social cohesion, leading the participants to 'convince' each other that there was indeed a strong social cohesion within the village. Differences within the village were often downplayed by referring to the large number of villagers that signed a petition and participated in the protest against the Municipality: *"People are there when they need to be!"*.

The distinction between the Municipality and the village of Nietap/Terheijl was made more extreme by referring to the devastating outcomes the plan would have for the village. The small-scale character of the village, the fact that people looked after each other, the activities organized, the beautiful nature, the fact that people still knew each other; all was threatened by the plans of the Municipality. And although the protests had already led the Municipality to change their plans, the participants during the evenings still expressed their dismay with the IGS, stressing that there would be *"No IGS!"* in the near future and that *"Nietap should stay Nietap!"* and *"...keep its own identity..."*. A popular proposition amongst the villagers was: *"In 10 years we distinguish ourselves from other villages, because we have maintained a small-scale village and are still situated near a bigger village and are surrounded by nature."*

To support their belief that the village was socially cohesive, the participants came up with many examples that were given meaning in such a way that they supported the belief. For instance, there was a lot of resistance against hi-rise buildings, as this posed a threat to the scale of the village. Furthermore, building houses on empty plots within the village, would provide a solution to prevent expansion of the village. Also, many examples were given where the villagers supported each other (handing out roses to the elderly), organized a collective activity (street barbeque) or achieved something together (the face-lift of the local playground 'Our Field' (*Ons Veldje*)).



Figure 6: "Our Field", a symbol of collective action by the villagers

Wergea

In Wergea, the relevant collective identity for the villagers along the course of the evenings, appeared to be that of having a close community within the village. They mainly constructed the village as a tolerant and cohesive community, in which most people were actively involved. The 'others' were the villagers that didn't feel involved or didn't join the activities organized within village. Here too, the dominant view (of cohesiveness and tolerance) was questioned by some, saying that there were still distinct groups within the village and that *"...as an outsider, you can't get in."*

During the evenings, the differences within the group were downplayed, but to a lesser extent. It was stressed that many people participated in the activities organized within the village. The high turnout during the village evenings was actually seen a proof of this. Although there were different social clubs that did not have a direct relationship, they were connected with each other by its members. It was believed that almost everybody within the village was member of one or more social clubs, showing involvement with and cohesion within the village. The importance of tolerance and involvement was also magnified by the wishes the participants expressed: *"In 10 years we will go together to one school."* (referring to the tolerance between catholic and protestant villagers) and *"The village interest before individual interests, without forgetting the individual."*

Another relevant collective identity was constructed around the relationship with Leeuwarden. During the first evenings, the villagers expressed that they did not want to become a 'suburb of Leeuwarden', but the close proximity of the town was not considered a real threat at the moment. During the last evening, the views became more extreme however. The participants wanted a stronger distinction between the two places. *"The motorway as a natural border..."* should limit the growth of Leeuwarden. Other participants went even further by saying that the green buffer should become *"a green wall"* and someone even suggested to *"put a gate around Leeuwarden"*.

Zuidbroek

During the first two evenings, the discussion was focussed mainly on the municipal plans for the village centre and the troubles around the supermarket. In the collective identity that the villagers constructed in relation to the Municipality, their belief that the reconstruction of the village centre and the establishment of a supermarket could solve the lack of social cohesion within the village, became stronger during the course of the evenings: *“Without a village centre, you cannot bond the community”* and *“There isn’t that much that bonds the villagers; daily facilities are lacking.”* (referring to a place for people to meet).

It seemed that the participants made the distinction between the villagers and the Municipality more extreme by showing that they ‘knew better’ than the Municipality and were able to come up with suitable and feasible solutions, contrary to the Municipality. Consequently, many of the ideas and solutions that were posed, were constructed as supportive of the idea to upgrade the village centre. For instance, it was said that the facilities should become more concentrated in the village centre (around the local bridge across the canal). Apartments for the elderly should be build near the centre as well, so they would be close to the facilities. A square and a supermarket would allow people to meet and act as a *“catalyst”*, making the centre more vivid.

Another very important collective identity was constructed around the involvement of the villagers. During the first two evenings, it was expressed that the cohesion within the village was low and that the villagers didn’t feel involved anymore (because of ‘vision tiredness’). But the disappointment of the participants caused by the low turnout during the first evenings, actually led them to polarize between themselves (as an involved group) and the other villagers. Their internal differences were downplayed and the distinction with the other villagers was magnified by suggesting that *“It is always the same group of people that carries the load”*. Although the participants often had different ideas about the proper solutions to the perceived problems, they all agreed that they were the villagers who were involved the most.

Discussion

The discussions during the village evenings show signs of polarization. From the data that was obtained in the research, it cannot be told whether or not the participants withhold information that is conflicting with the group identity. It is clear, however, that most information shared by the villagers was supportive of the constructed collective identity. They tried to outdo each other in expressing what they already agreed about. This was especially the case when the relevant identity was strong. The participants in Nietap/Terheijl and Zuidbroek reached agreement much quicker and the results of the different groups showed a lot of resemblance. In Nietap/Terheijl, the participants tried to outdo each other by giving examples that proved the strong cohesion within the village. In Zuidbroek, the participants seemed to outdo each other in coming up with ideas that supported the need for reconstructing the village centre. In Wergea, the discussions were much more varied as a multitude of topics was discussed. It seemed that some groups had more difficulty to reach agreement because of the variety of perspectives within the group. The main topics where the group members tried to outdo each other, were the perceived cohesiveness of the village and the distinction with Leeuwarden.

From the discussions it becomes clear that the villagers share discourses (on other topics) that are supportive of the dominant view. It seems that the villagers are ‘stacking discourses’ to strengthen the constructed collective identity. The meaning that is attributed in these discourses, is related to the meaning in the dominant discourse and is sometimes reconstructed to become more supportive, showing the self-referentiality within the group. In Nietap/Terheijl, for instance, the broken grounds within the village (the ‘rotten spots’) were connected to the need for constructing new houses. Ignoring the expressed problems of

ownership and permits, it was believed that one problem could solve the other. Furthermore, many topics were given meaning to support the struggle against the IGS-plan. In Zuidbroek, the problem of the village centre was connected to the lack of social cohesion within the village, the need for starter and elderly homes, the need for a supermarket and tourism. In Wergea, examples were given of events and activities that were supportive of the view that the village was a close community. The discourses on the relationship with Boarnsterhim and the lack of subsidies was connected with the discourses on the redivision with Leeuwarden and the growth of this town. The difficulty to reach consensus suggests, however, that there was also a lot of information shared that contradicted the main view. The results at least showed that the participants differed in what they believed to be important issues for the future of the village.

An important issue regarding group think, was the presence of the 'other' during the evenings. In Nietap/Terheijl and Wergea, there were only villagers present. In Zuidbroek, during the first evening the mayor was present, together with some aldermen/-women. The second and third evening, aldermen were present again. During the group discussions they only listened and did not provide any external information. Their presence may have had an effect on the villagers, but it cannot be determined in what way. Perhaps, some villagers felt unsure or threatened to express their ideas and opinions. In the group discussions, their mere presence may have prevented group think to some extent because the villagers were less extreme in their utterances.

In the plenary discussions, however, the mayor and the aldermen did give their opinion on the topics discussed and provided additional information to support it. This led to a fierce discussion between them and the villagers and seemed to lead to more extreme views on both sides. Because the collective identity of the participants was challenged, they seemed to shield themselves from the information of the mayor and aldermen by questioning the information itself and the sincerity of the source. The presence of the 'other' thus led to polarization.

The tendency to shield themselves from alternative views became apparent also through the methods that were used to encourage the discussion between the villagers. In the scenario method, the participants were asked to think about the extremes of external developments⁷. This proved to be difficult for them, because they only thought of one possible course of events. Some even considered it not relevant to think about the extremes, because they were convinced events would take place in a certain way.

4.4.3 The development of the vision becomes an action system itself

The collective actions of the villagers play an important role in the discussions during the evenings. The participants refer to recurring activities that are organized within the village, but also to more specific events in which the villagers organized themselves in order to achieve something. These latter occasions prove to be very important for the construction of collective identities during the village evenings. Furthermore, the discussions about the problems the villagers perceive, are important for determining who is responsible for them and how they should be solved.

Nietap/Terheijl

The protest of the villagers against the IGS-plan of the Municipality played an important role throughout the evenings. The participants referred to this event very often and they were very

⁷ Encouraging the villagers to think about the extremes of external developments was based on the idea that external trends cannot be predicted. They occur within a range between certain boundaries (the extremes). By thinking about the possible boundaries, it should become clear what the possible outcomes of the trend might be. The actual outcome would lie somewhere in-between these boundaries.

pleased with it. The fact that so many villagers participated in the protests and the positive outcome for the village that they achieved (stopping the plans of the Municipality), gave them a strong sense of unity. It was clear that the participants derived a strong sense of collective identity from the protests.

The future actions discussed during the evenings, were mainly constructed in relation to this collective identity based on collective action in the past. According to the participants, the main problem was the threat the IGS posed to the scale of the village and the social cohesion. Besides the solution to build houses on the broken grounds, the villagers also formulated the action point that *"The village should keep a finger on the pulse."* and that there was a need to *"Keep monitoring the Municipality to find out what size and kind of locations for building houses there are available and what the intention of the Municipality is to do with them."*

Although there was a felt need amongst the participants to take collective action, the leading role was for the village council. According to them, the Municipality and the village council should be stimulated *"...to sit around the table with other parties involved to talk with each other."* It was the village council that had to *"...go higher up with the village together."*

The development of the vision was an important form of collective action itself as well, for the participants. An action point that was formulated in relation to this, was: *"...to take care that more people come to these kinds of meetings that are organized by the village council."* According to some participants, the vision was a way to exert influence on the Municipality. By expressing their own ideas and solutions in this document, they believed they could convince the Municipality to reconsider their plans.

Wergea

In Wergea, there was no particular problem or event discussed by the villagers, that had led to the construction of a strong collective identity. Taking part in the activities organized within the village and feeling involved with the village, led them to construct themselves as the involved group in relation to other villagers who were not involved.

The solutions to the perceived problem of the declining involvement in activities within or issues regarding the village, were found in looking for ways to involve the villagers more. For instance, there was a strong need felt to involve the local youth into the development of the village. According to the participants, it was necessary to pass on knowledge about the village and get youth involved in the local community. Through the social clubs, newcomers could be involved. For this, *"new villagers have to be approached by the social clubs."* It was up to the villagers to *"Encourage people to become more active when it comes to the village."*

But there was also the need to involve other organizations. The villagers expressed awareness of reciprocal relationships. When talking about the new housing estate, the participants explained that *"It looks good in the eyes of Municipality when the villagers want to build houses."* Furthermore, the villagers said that they had a shared responsibility to *"...use the facilities within the village."* in order to maintain them. The construction of a second bridge would allow the villagers to walk around the village and come into contact with other people, but this was only considered possible with the support of the Municipality.

The process of developing a village vision became a collective action system in Wergea as well. The participants expressed that it was important and meaningful to organize evenings to discuss the future of the village. They not only contributed to the development of spatial plans but also to the social cohesion within the village, according to one of the participants.

Zuidbroek

The participants in Zuidbroek constructed the situation within the village as non-cohesive. There were, however, some events during which the villagers were very much united. When things really mattered, the villagers were there, they said. Examples of this were the successful protests of the villagers against the demolition of the Broeckhof (the local community centre) and the former court building. It was through the collective action of the villagers that these important buildings were saved.

These passed events, in which there was a lot of cooperation between the villagers, were attributed meaning in relation to the current events of the development of the vision. The first evening, the participants still believed that it was possible to get more villagers involved: *“People still have positive mindset”* and thought they could *“...think of solutions together: then it’s possible.”* After the second evening, the participants were really disappointed about the low turnout. They uttered that the vision mattered in the same way as the protests against the demolition of the two buildings did. Once again, it was necessary for the villagers to come up with an answer to the plans of the Municipality. The solution that was found to involve other citizens, was to address people personally. Each of the visitors of the second evening had to convince whoever they knew within their personal network, to come to the third evening. Others needed to be convinced that there were urgent problems, caused by the plans of the Municipality, and that the village vision therefore mattered.

The participants that were present, however, were able to come up with solutions to the perceived problems the village was faced with. The main problem was the reconstruction of the village centre. In the solution that was found by the participants, discourses on different topics were connected. Spatial problems around the village were connected to the issue of traffic going through the village. The expansion of the nearby business/industrial area would provide opportunities to for economic development, but would also attract day trippers and commuters to the village centre. The redevelopment of the railway station into a ‘park and ride’ would contribute to this even more.

As in Nietap/Terheijl and Wergea, the development of the vision became important to the villagers. The evenings provided the opportunity to come up with an answer to the perceived problems, especially in relation to the problematic relationship with the municipal council. The municipal elections going on at the time, were actually seen as an opportunity, as it was expected that the new council would be more receptive to the ideas of the villagers.

Discussion

The three cases show that past collective actions are important in the construction of a collective identity. In Nietap/Terheijl and Zuidbroek, the past resistance against plans of the Municipality gave the participants the idea that there was a strong cohesion between the villagers. They were there when they needed to be, it was believed. The events in Nietap/Terheijl were much more recent, however. The participants felt very strong about doing something against the plans of the Municipality. They were convinced that the IGS still mattered to most villagers. In Zuidbroek, the protests of the villagers were almost ten years ago. Since then, not a lot had been going on in the village against which the villagers protested. In Wergea, there was also no recent collective action that led to a strong collective identity. It was more ‘scattered’ over different activities within the village. Together, the examples within the villages show the importance of activating and continuously confirming the collective identity. Otherwise, they will wear out over time, making it difficult to get people involved again to undertake collective action.

The discussions between the villagers show the importance of developing a collective identity for undertaking collective action. Discussing the problems within the village together with other villagers, gives a sense of support, trust and consensus. As a result of the shared effort

of the villagers to discuss the problems within the village and find solutions for them, the village evenings and/or vision itself become symbols of collective action. In all three villages, it was mentioned by participants that it was a good thing to organize those kinds of discussion evenings. They felt strong about the solutions they had found for their perceived problems and about the usefulness of the vision.

Through their discussions, the villagers attribute meaning to themselves, the problems they perceive, the solutions to be implemented and who is held responsible to do this. As a consequence, the village evenings become action systems which give guidance to actions by the villagers, providing all kinds of solutions and making them meaningful. The collective identity constructed, therefore provides the basis for collective action. In all three villages, the discourses on different topics were connected to provide solutions to the problems experienced. In Wergea, for example, the social problem of getting villagers involved was not only found in inviting newcomers to social clubs, but also through the development of a new bridge. In Zuidbroek, the struggle against the Municipality on the village centre plans was connected to the lack of social cohesion and involvement of other villagers. And in Nietap/Terheijl, the social cohesion was connected to the construction of houses.

4.5 The effect of the village evenings on the collective identity of village council

The village evenings do not only have consequences for the collective identities of the villagers, but for those of the village councils as well. The councils take the initiative to organize the evenings with certain goals and expectations in mind. This paragraph describes what goals and expectations the village councils have with developing the vision and to what extent the outcomes of the village evenings are supportive of this. Furthermore, it is described how the organization of the village evenings as such, becomes part of the construction of the collective identity of the village council.

4.5.1 The support of the villagers for the goal of the village council

The village councils intend to use the document of the village vision in their relations with other actors (such as the Municipality) to obtain support (e.g. politically or financially) or influence decisions. Consequently, they expect or hope the evenings provide them with certain outcomes that support their position. The village evenings provide the ‘proof’ or ‘falsification’ of the ideas or expectations of the village council and thus have consequences for the collective identities of the council.

Nietap/Terheijl

The village council in Nietap/Terheijl wanted to develop a village vision in response to the IGS-plans of the Municipality. These plans were believed to be a threat to the social cohesion within the village. The council hoped to find proof that there was indeed a lot of social cohesion, as they believed themselves. *“We know what our spatial identity is. Now we are trying to get a grip on our social identity”*, according to the chairman of the village council. (Dijkhuis, 2010) Also, the village council believed it was important to be prepared. At first, it seemed that the IGS-plan was a *fait accompli* for the villagers and the council. They managed to convince the Municipality to change their plans by organizing a large protest, but they wanted to be prepared for the future.

The council especially hoped to learn more about the ideas of the villagers on the current social situation in the village and how to maintain or even improve the social situation. The council itself believed that the incremental growth of the village allowed the inhabitants to ‘absorb’ newcomers into the community. Future growth therefore should also be gradual.

Other issues that the council wanted villagers' opinions on, were the power of project developers, the reconstruction of two roads in the village and a nearby scenic area.

As it turned out, the participants were very eager to discuss the IGS. They expected to get more specific information about the plan to which they could respond. This was not the case however, leading to a lot of disappointment amongst the participants. Still, in their conversations, the IGS was still the most important issue. This led to a lot of discussion about the social and spatial qualities in the village. Plenty of examples were given by the villagers, supporting the idea that there was indeed a lot of social cohesion. Also, a lot of support was given to the idea that the village should grow gradually. This would protect the spatial qualities of the village, such as the beautiful nature surrounding the village, and also the social cohesion. But for the participants it was difficult to come up with other action points to improve the social situation in the village. Most action points were related to maintain and improve the good social relations in the village and involve newcomers. Also, many action points were formulated to keep an eye open for plans of the Municipality.

The ideas and opinions expressed by the villagers during the evenings were very much supportive of the beliefs of the village council, especially in relation to the social cohesion and gradual growth of the village. A lot of issues and examples were connected to this by the participants. However, little information was obtained about the specific issues that the council wanted to address.

Wergea

In Wergea, the council wanted to update the village vision that they had developed in 2003. During that time, a lot of issues were going on with spatial plans developed by the Municipality and the Province, but lately things were quiet in the village, according to the council. (Martens, 2010) The only event in the near future was the redivision of the municipalities. Wergea would become part of the municipality of Leeuwarden. The council believed that this could provide new opportunities for the village because Leeuwarden was much wealthier than their previous municipality of Boarnsterhim. In anticipation of the new situation, the council thought it would be good to come up with ideas and plans in advance. Knowing what the village wanted, would provide a strong negotiation position with the Municipality of Leeuwarden. The goal of organizing the village evenings was to get a lot of ideas from the villagers about the future. The council believed that it was important to think about the social situation in the village and believed that the social cohesion within the village was strong and that people were tolerant. According to them, a lot of activities were organized which were visited by many villagers. But they had no particular expectations about what the villagers' ideas on this were.

The villagers that visited the evenings talked a lot about the social situation in the village, especially in relation to the perceived tolerance and involvement of the villagers. Furthermore, the redivision with Leeuwarden got attention during the conversations. In both issues, the ideas expressed by the villagers were in line with the ideas of the village council. The villagers believed that the social cohesion in the village was strong and that the redivision could provide new opportunities.

Zuidbroek

In Zuidbroek, the council wanted to develop the village vision to come up with an answer to the plans of the Municipality to reconstruct the village centre. The village council felt ignored by the Municipal council in this matter because they were not informed about the recent developments. The Municipal council decided to update the old vision (that was never approved) and use this to support the recent plans for the village centre. The village council believed that the old vision was outdated because many villagers no longer agreed (or never

agreed at all) with the ideas expressed in it. “*The vision of the Municipality is not the vision of the villagers*”, they claimed. (Keesom, 2010) Recent requests of the village council to get subsidies for developing their own vision, were denied by the Municipality. Therefore, the council was even more determined to develop a vision itself, without the help of the Municipality.

The topics discussed during the village evenings were in line with the expectations of the village council. The participants discussed the reconstruction of the village centre extensively and connected other issues to this as well. However, there was no particular solution agreed upon by the villagers.

The low turnout was a disappointment for the council. They felt that they needed more villagers to express their opinions to determine what was really important. The council used a third evening to invite as many people as possible and let them discuss the ideas developed during the previous evenings. Also, the village council added their own, new ideas about specific issues to the list of ideas. By asking the participants to give a mark to each idea or solution, the council wanted to find out what ideas were supported.

Discussion

In Nietap/Terheijl and Zuidbroek, the village councils had very specific goals for developing a vision. They had specific ideas about what the vision should be about. In Nietap/Terheijl, the expectations of the council and the villagers about the goal of the evening differed. Still, the ideas of the council were confirmed by the villagers during the evenings. In Zuidbroek, the council found support for many of its views as well. Its ideas on the redevelopment of the village centre were not clearly supported however. The village council in Wergea had no specific ideas about what should be in the vision, but it was indeed supported in its belief that there was a lot of cohesion in the village. Furthermore, a lot of different issues were discussed in Wergea. This gave the council a lot of information for updating their earlier vision.

4.5.2 The importance of organizing the village evenings

The village evenings are not only important for the council to learn about the support for their ideas. The activity of organizing the village evenings and letting the villagers express their ideas and wishes, is important for the village councils as such.

Nietap/Terheijl

The village council in Nietap/Terheijl believed that it was important to learn about the wishes of the villagers. Although the council got a lot of support for their ideas about the social cohesion and scale of the village, they had hoped to get more ideas on other issues as well. The council believed that the low turnout was partially caused by the disappointment of the villagers that the evenings were not about the IGS per se. In the eyes of the village council, this proved that the subject was very important for the villagers. The council was therefore determined to find other ways to get more ideas from the villagers and ultimately write the vision as an answer to the plans of the municipality.

Referring to the *fait accompli* of the IGS, the chairman of the council explained that it was important to help other villages “*to prevent happening what happened to Nietap/Terheijl*”. (Dijkhuis, 2010) This was one of the reasons for the council to participate in the Science Shop project on Village Identity. This showed that the development of a village vision was something considered very important by the council

Wergea

For the village council in Wergea, the high turnout served as a proof for the activeness, creativeness and sense of involvement of the villagers. The lively discussions were

appreciated by the villagers, but also by the council. They did not only provide ideas about the future of the village, but caused social cohesion as well, according to the chairman of council. (Martens, 2010) It was considered a good thing to organize such village evenings on a regular basis to exchange ideas and meet with fellow villagers.

Zuidbroek

In Zuidbroek, the development of the vision became an important issue for the council members in response to their relationship with the Municipality. They were denied the subsidy for developing their own vision and also felt ignored by the Municipality in the recent developments on the village centre, for which the Municipality wanted to use its own vision. For the village council, this was reason to put in a lot of effort to come up with its own vision. As a result, the village evenings became very important to the council members. The evenings would not only provide ideas for the vision, but also could be used to prove that the village stood behind the ideas of the council. This would help them to get their point across in the discussion with the Municipality. This explains why the council was disappointed about the low turnout during the first two evenings and wanted as many villagers as possible to come to the third evening. A high turnout could provide more support of their ideas and serve as a proof that the village stood behind their ideas.

This became especially clear during the public presentation of the plans for the village centre by the Municipality. The village council used this as an opportunity to confront the Municipality with its vision. The chairman of the council enforced his arguments by referring to the fact that they had organized village evenings themselves to learn about the ideas and wishes of the villagers; something the Municipality had not bothered to do. To add even more weight to the value of their village vision, the chairman mentioned that the village evenings were organized in cooperation with someone from the Wageningen University.

Discussion

In each of the villages, the village councils construct a collective identity in relation to the process of developing a village vision. Organizing the village evenings becomes meaningful for them because it provides them not only with ideas about what the villagers want, but also because they consider it valuable to get support from the villagers. This is especially important in Zuidbroek, where the village council was very keen to have a high turnout the last evening. This would provide them with the support for their claims against the Municipality. To the council in Wergea, the turnout itself became a proof of the sense of involvement of the villagers. This may also have served as a confirmation of their role and position as a village council, but this is not shown in the data from the research. In Nietap/Terheijl the organization of the evenings became meaningful as well, but served mainly as a proof of how important the IGS was for the villagers. This made the council even more determined to find other ways to develop the vision as an answer to this plan.

In all three villages, the village councils construct their identity also in relation to the village vision: in Nietap/Terheijl it serves as an answer to the IGS-plan of the Municipality, in Zuidbroek it serves as an answer to the plans of the Municipality for the village centre and in Wergea it serves as a way to proactively get political and/or financial support for the Municipality. Thus, having such a document becomes meaningful for them because it can be used in their relationship with other actors (either as 'carrot' or 'stick'), giving them a strong sense of identity.



Figure 7: The local community centre in Zuidbroek

5 Village visions, village councils and collective identities: the conclusions

In this chapter, the conclusions of the research are presented. Village visions and village councils are becoming increasingly important in matters of spatial planning. Through the establishment of village councils and the development of village visions, villagers can organize themselves. The village vision helps them to express who they are and what they want. The vision document can be used by the villagers in their relationships with other individuals or groups, such as the Municipality, in order to achieve certain goals for the village. Because little is known about village councils and village visions, the overall objective of the research is to provide more insight in these phenomena. Furthermore, the research aims to provide a better understanding of how the concept of identity plays a role in spatial planning.

The term ‘village vision’ suggests that it is a vision that speaks on behalf of all the villagers. To obtain ideas, views and opinions from the villagers, the village council organizes so-called village evenings. During these evenings, the villagers discuss the future of the village and what should be in the village vision. However, the organization of the village evenings has particular consequences for the collective identities of the villagers. To understand what mechanisms are at play during the development of the vision and in particular during the village evenings, the main research question at the start of this research was stated as follows:

In what ways and with what effects does the development of a village vision relate to the (re-)construction of collective identities within a village during village evenings?

To answer this main research question, four sub-questions were formulated to learn more about the consequences of (1) the organization of the village evenings by the village council, (2) the issues discussed by the villagers during the evenings and how they become relevant to them, (3) the exchange and negotiation of the collective identities of the villagers by themselves during the evenings, and (4) the effect of the village evenings on the (re-)construction of the council’s collective identity by its members.

To study their exchange and negotiation during the village evenings, the collective identities of the villagers are perceived as discourses. Through these discourses, the villagers attribute meaning to themselves and others within a relevant context. The differences that are constructed by them, based on certain characteristics, become part of their discourse. Under the influences of group processes, such as the felt motivation to reach consensus and tendency to polarize, the villagers may try to maintain the boundaries between themselves (‘us’) and others (‘them’).

To gather data on the relationship between the collective identities of the villagers and the development of the village vision, eight village evenings were organized in cooperation with the three village councils of Nietap/Terheijl, Wergea and Zuidbroek. During these evenings, observations were made on the interaction between villagers. Attention was paid to the group processes of consensus and polarization. Furthermore, the discussions were captured by the villagers themselves by using specially designed forms. Together with the observations, these documents were analyzed to understand how the discourses developed along the course of the evenings and with what effect.

After analyzing the data obtained from the village evenings and comparing the three different cases with each other, the following conclusions can be drawn in answer to the main research question:

The choices of the village council in the organization of the village evenings, determine who participates and therefore determine what discourses are exchanged and negotiated.

The turnout during the evenings depends to a large extent on how the villagers are invited to the evenings. In each of the three villages, general invitations were sent to the villagers, either by door-to-door letters or advertisements in the local magazine. In each of these invitations it was mentioned what the goal of the evenings was. The people joining the evenings therefore had particular expectations about what the evenings would be about. The invitations determined what 'members' of the wider village network were present and therefore influenced what discourses (as part of that same village network) were represented.

In each of the three villages, the village councils also used their personal network to invite villagers to the evenings. It was clear that many of the participants had close ties with council members or were involved in past activities organized by the council. The use of personal networks therefore had an effect on who participated and therefore on the discourses that were represented, exchanged and negotiated. It seemed that regular groups of people were visiting the village evenings, suggesting that it was a particular group or network within the village that was present. The data from the research is inconclusive on this, however. Although many participants belonged to the social network of the council members, it is not clear if they formed a particular group within the village or were actually a mirror image.

Current events determine what collective identities are relevant to the participants during the village evenings.

Many topics were discussed during the village evenings. However, it turned out that some issues were more important for the villagers to discuss than others. This became particularly clear in the cases of Nietap/Terheijl and Zuidbroek. In both villages, current issues formed the main topics of the evenings. In each case, the topics concerned plans of the Municipality and were perceived as an important change or even as a threat to the villagers. Since these issues formed the main discussion topics, the collective identities the participants exchanged and negotiated, were related to these topics as well. In Nietap/Terheijl, specific reference was made to prior actions the villagers had undertaken in relation to the dominant topic. They derived their shared identity from this and used it in their constructions about the social cohesiveness of the village.

The current events determine what collective identity is relevant in the discussion between the participants and therefore determine who is perceived as the 'other'. The mutual dependence is important in this respect. For the participants to develop a strong collective identity, a distinct 'other' was needed. In Nietap/Terheijl and Zuidbroek, this was the Municipality, as this was considered the main opponent in the struggle around the plans the villages were faced with. In Wergea, there was no particular 'other' since there was no particular event going on. However, there was a need amongst the villagers to construct themselves as a group in a certain way. Consequently, they compared themselves as 'active villagers' with 'non-active villagers'. From this, it seems that they were in fact looking for a particular group to construct difference to enable themselves to construct a collective identity. The data from the research are not conclusive on this. The participants did not make specific remarks to some kind of mutual dependence (as a fight over resources) between the two groups, other than their belief that everybody should feel involved in the village and participate in activities.

An important consequence of the dominance of certain collective identities is that other discourses are linked to the discourse on the dominant or current issue. Other issues discussed between the villagers, are attributed meaning based upon the dominant issue. In their attempts to 'outdo' each other in agreeing, they use other issues to support their view. They seem to reconstruct the discourse related to the dominant topic to support their view.

Partaking in the village evenings, provides the participants and the village council with a reason for constructing similarity and difference.

The village evenings become the context itself against which collective identities are formed by the villagers and the village council. They become a reason to look for similarities and differences with others, also within the village. In Zuidbroek, for example, the low turnout was a reason for the participants to construct themselves as a group in relation to the villagers not present. They believed that they were the 'group who carried the load' when it came to issues going on in the village. In Wergea, the lack of involvement or participation of some villagers may not have been that important at all. However, in the discussions between the participants the difference was made more salient. In Nietap/Terheijl, the evenings were especially used by the participants to express what they did not want to become, i.e. part of the village of Leek. Although they most likely had already constructed this difference, they used the village evenings to strengthen this view.

Both the village councils and the villagers attribute meaning to the organization of the evenings as such. In all three villages, participants stressed that it was important to organize these kinds of discussions and that people should come to the meetings. For the village council in Nietap/Terheijl, the village evenings were a means to get a grip on what they called their 'social identity'. They wanted support and proof of their belief that there was a strong social cohesion within the village. In Wergea, the evenings themselves were given meaning in this respect. For the village council, the high turnout was in itself a proof of the social cohesiveness and involvement of the villagers. In Zuidbroek, the organisation of the evenings was attributed meaning from the discussion with the Municipality about the plans for the redevelopment of the village centre. In their discussion with the Municipality, the village council used the fact that they had organized village evenings in cooperation with students from the Wageningen University as a 'stick' against the Municipality. For them it was proof that they were more able to come up with good ideas that had more legitimacy than the ideas of the Municipality (which organized evenings many years ago).

The village evenings become action systems themselves.

During the village evenings, the participants discuss various issues and exchange their ideas, wishes and opinions about them. They negotiate on what the problem is, how it should be solved and who is responsible for solving it. Through their interaction, they develop a certain problem solving capacity. In Zuidbroek, the participants constructed together a solution for the problem with the traffic in the village. They developed ideas on the role the village could perform because of the crossroad of the motorway, railway and canal. They constructed their solution as 'Park and Ride'. Connected to this was the local business area that the villagers wanted to upgrade. Ideas were brought to the fore on how to do it, but no agreement was reached, showing also the limitations of the problem solving capacity. In Wergea and Nietap/Terheijl, action points were formulated to involve newcomers more with the village. This was seen as the solution to the (perceived) decrease in social cohesion. In

Nietap/Terheijl, solutions also were found to protect the village from growing too fast. Besides the solution to build houses on broken grounds, they also constructed a solution rhetorically ('limited growth') which everybody agreed to. The pressure towards consensus apparently can also lead villagers to construct a solution that is vague (enough) so that everybody can agree with it.

Furthermore, it seems that the participants develop mutual trust during the evenings. Most participants stressed that they enjoyed partaking in the discussions. And although the discussions were lively, people remained friendly and supportive of each other. In Wergea, it was often stressed that the villagers should act together in order to achieve their goals. In Zuidbroek, a strong bond developed between the participants especially because they saw themselves as a group. For the participants, the village evenings become symbolic for their collective action. The activity of organizing and participating in these evenings, becomes meaningful for the participants. In their view, the evenings are useful because they help to achieve something as a village or have a response to the plans of others.

To conclude

Returning to the main research question on the influence of the village vision on the (re-) construction of collective identities of the villagers, it becomes clear that the village evenings can have a large impact on these collective identities. Under the influence of group processes, such as the need to reach consensus and the tendency to polarize, the participants exchange meaning and negotiate about this. In doing so, they construct similarity and difference in relation to other groups or individuals outside, but also within the village. On the one hand, the (development of the) village vision stems from the discourses of villagers, used as input for drawing up the vision. On the other hand, the organisation of the village evenings used to obtain this input, has consequences for the exchange and negotiation of these discourses. In turn, this may have consequences for the construction of collective identities in everyday life within the village. The next chapter puts the development of a village vision within a wider context and gives suggestions for further research.



Figure 8: The local community centre in Wergea

6 The results of the research in a wider perspective: a discussion

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the outcome of the research will be discussed. A reflection is given upon the theoretical framework that is used for the research and the way the research is conducted. Furthermore, the process of developing a village vision, is put in a wider perspective. The role of village visions and village councils will become more important in the near future as ways for villagers to organize themselves. This poses new kinds of problems. Paragraph 6.2 presents a reflection on the theoretical framework that is used to conduct this research. The limitations to the research are explained and suggestions are made for further research to overcome these limitations. In paragraph 6.3, the possible consequences of developing a village vision, for the mutual relations within the village, are discussed. Paragraph 6.4 gives an idea about what role village visions might play in issues of spatial planning.

6.2 Reflecting on the theoretical perspectives on the construction of collective identities

The conclusions presented in this report are based upon the results obtained during the village evenings organized for the Science Shop project. Because the data was originally gathered with a different goal in mind, this provided some limitations. Despite these limitations, the outcomes of the research confirm many of the theoretical insights on the construction of collective identities, but also shed some new light on them. This paragraph discusses the outcomes of the research in relation to the theoretical perspectives on the construction of collective identities and the limitations to the research approach.

6.2.1 Learning about the 'self' and the 'other' may be as much about perception as it is about reality

A collective identity can be seen as the discourse group members use in order to attribute meaning to themselves and (their relationship) within the world around them. According to Melucci (1996), Hague & Jenkins (2005) and others, a group cannot construct itself (i.e. construct its own discourse(s)) without considering its relation with others. The 'other' is needed to reflect upon the 'self'. Groups need to learn about the differences in order to construct their identity.

The results presented in this report, support this view. In each of the three villages, the participants constructed their discourses as a group in relation to other individuals or groups, such as the Municipality. What is striking, however, is the fact that the participants in Wergea seemed to be *searching* for the 'other'. There were no recent events that provided a context and 'opposing' group against which a strong collective identity was/could be constructed. In order to construct themselves as a group, the participants needed to find some other group (i.e. other villagers) to construct their collective identity in relation to. The results from this research suggest that this group identity was already established to some extent. During the village evenings, this view became more extreme because of the process of groupthink.

This outcome of the research suggests that an 'artificially' created group situation, such as the village evenings, may encourage the group members to create a group identity. The participants in Wergea were all from the same village and a lot of them already knew each other, but there was no obvious collective identity beforehand. However, the whole context of the village evenings somehow created a need to (re-)construct or represent a collective identity. For this, some other group or individual was needed. The village vision provided the context, but what led the participants to construct themselves as a group in relation to other villagers, remains unclear. To establish whether this is just a matter of choice or if there was

some dominant (yet implicit) discourse already in place (e.g. because of the village vision process), the villagers would have to be followed over a longer period of time. A comparison with other similar cases may also show how the 'other' is chosen, even when there is no current event that provides the 'other'.

The cases presented in this report also lead to question the idea of *learning*, which is needed to construct one's own identity as a group, according to Melucci (1996). Learning suggests the group acquires knowledge about the 'self' and the 'other', which helps them to establish the boundaries. However, one should keep in mind that identity is also strategic. The boundaries are actively constructed by the participants with a certain goal in mind. The 'knowledge' that is presented during the village evenings may therefore be very value-laden and carry a lot of assumptions that fit the dominant discourse. This is reinforced by the process of groupthink, over time turning second order reality into first order reality (at least, for the participants). It may be in the interest of the group to make other individuals or groups to look bad in order to make itself look better. It would therefore be interesting to learn more about what the villagers (expect to) gain by constructing their collective identities in a certain way and also how they represent or (re-)construct these discourses in their interactions with other groups.

The above also calls for more research on the idea of *mutual dependence*, which is said to be needed to maintain a collective identity. (Melucci, 1996) In the discourses of the participants of the village evenings, this mutual dependence is not always made explicit. This makes it difficult to determine whether or not there is indeed a mutual dependence. The results obtained in this research are not conclusive on this, as the case in Wergea shows. Whether a group is acknowledged by the 'other' – or denied, as the ultimate form of acknowledgment –, is a matter of perception and construction. The group members may actually have little or no information on how the other group or individual looks at them. Possibly, a lack of communication with or response from the 'other' may be constructed by the group as denial of the group identity. The mutual dependence could therefore be a matter of construction as well (based on certain beliefs, values and assumptions) and become part of the discourse of the group. Over time, this second order reality could turn into a first order reality for the group. In turn, this could have consequences for the future relationship/interaction with the other group or individual. And even when there is some mutual dependence expressed by the participants, this remains a matter of constant negotiation within the group. The group has to constantly reconsider the relationship with the other – and therefore the (perceived) mutual dependence –, depending on the situation at hand.

6.2.2 Reaching consensus may not only come from groupthink, but also from the particular context of the village evenings

An important aspect in this research is the process of groupthink. When there is homogeneity within the group, strong and direct leadership and a strong internal cohesion, individual members tend to agree with the majority view. The group members feel a need to reach consensus. Furthermore, groupthink can lead to polarization. This means that the members try to 'outdo' each other in their utterances about the boundaries between 'us' and 'them'. This leads to more extreme views and increased confidence in the group's perspective. (Haslam, 2001; Nemeth & Nemeth-Brown, 2003)

The research presented in this report shows the participants indeed have a tendency to polarize and are looking to reach consensus during the village evenings. They are looking for examples that support the majority view. This also causes the participants to shift subjects during the conversations. It therefore appears that they are not only making the differences more extreme, but are also 'stacking discourses' on top of each other that fit a certain view. It is not entirely clear if they reconstruct these discourses to match the particular majority view.

For this, insight in these particular discourses would be needed before the start of the village evenings. An important limitation to the research, here, is the way the data is gathered. The process of polarization is sometimes very subtle and gradual. Because a lot of data was obtained through observation, it is difficult to exactly determine and describe how the process of polarization took place. The results of the discussions written down by the participants only show the situation at a certain point in time and may be biased by the person who took the minutes. To fully understand and describe the process of polarization during village evenings, more research is needed. Then, groups could be observed in particular on the aspect of polarization and the whole course of the discussion could be captured by an external observer.

The research also shows the participants feel a need to reach consensus. Although the methods (for making the 'village identity' explicit) do not steer the discourses of the participants, they may cause the participants to feel some pressure to reach consensus. More research is needed to determine to what extent the methods contribute to the felt need of reaching consensus and what part can be attributed to the process of groupthink.

According to Haslam (2001) and Nemeth & Nemeth-Brown (2003), individuals tend to suppress their deviating opinions and try to understand the majority view in fear of loss of identity. From the observations used to gather the data for this research, it is difficult to determine whether the participants indeed suppress deviating opinions and withhold contradictory information. It may in fact be the case that the participants have limited information/knowledge. An interesting topic for further research is to look at what information participants gather, how they obtain it and how they use it during village evenings. Furthermore, it would be interesting to learn more about how the participating villagers *themselves* deal with conflicting discourses (as a form of internal, cognitive negotiation) and their position within the group.

An interesting outcome of this research is that the participants sometimes reach consensus through the use of 'vague' terms, such as 'limited growth'. It appears that they use these terms to deal with complexity, conflicting discourses and/or a lack of information. Further research could be conducted on how and why these kind of consensus views are constructed by participants of village evenings.

The role of the village council in the setup of the evenings and especially the way the villagers were invited, determined to a large extent who turned up. In turn, this had direct consequences for the discourses that were exchanged and negotiated upon during the evenings. Other methods for inviting villagers may have led to a different turnout and therefore different outcomes of the evenings. Further research is needed to provide more insight in the relationship between the invitations, turnout and outcomes of the village evenings. It is also important to realize that the research presented in this report only focuses on the village evenings and not the village as a whole. Here too, further research could be conducted, for instance on how processes of identity construction take place at the village level and what the role of groupthink is in these processes.

6.2.3 Context is of particular importance in the construction of collective identities

According to Van Assche (2004), within a discourse, everything can define everything. However, not everything carries the same importance because collective identities are always constructed in relation to a certain context. (Brent, 1997; Melucci, 1996) The outcome of this research supports this view. The discourses differ per village, but also show some similarities. In line with the view of Van Assche (2004), villagers seem to use a limited and recurrent set of concepts to give meaning to themselves and their relationship with the world around them. These sets of concepts differ per village. For instance, in each of the villages, the relationship

with the Municipality plays a role. But the concepts used and the discourses constructed with these concepts, depend on the specific context and differ per village.

From the research it becomes clear the *context* is extremely important for the construction of collective identities. Current issues are discussed to a large extent during the village evenings and provide a strong context against which collective identities are constructed. In all, the results of the research show the local community plays an important role in the formation of collective identities of villagers. This is in accordance with the view of Hoggett (1997). The participants appeared to have a lot of knowledge about the issues going on in their village and they seemed to have strong opinions about them. Many issues going on in the village, explained by the village councils during the meetings prior to the village evenings, were also brought up by the participants during the evenings. This suggests that these issues are considered important by them as well. Whether this is the case for all the villagers, whether or not they participated during the village evenings, is not entirely clear. The expectations of the villagers about the content of the evenings were not captured beforehand, because the data collection was aimed at the Science Shop project. Information about the expectations was only obtained through observations and some conversations with the participants. In subsequent research, more attention could be paid to this aspect in order to learn more about how issues become more or less important during the village evenings.

What is interesting to see, is the connection that the participants often lay between social and spatial issues. Although everything can define everything, spatial and social aspects seem to be important interrelated aspects for villagers. Although the village vision is about both these aspects, the villagers themselves connect these two aspects. For instance in Wergea, the second bridge over the canal could improve the social situation in the village, they claimed. In Nietap/Terheijl, the construction of 800 houses was seen as a threat to the social cohesion within the village. And in Zuidbroek, the establishment of a supermarket and the construction of a town square were seen as a solution to the lack of social cohesion. Further research could reveal what the consequences of these (constructed) connections are for the planning practice, especially since they are constructed by the villagers themselves.

6.2.4 Politics, plans and changes regarding places provide a starting point for the construction of a collective identity

The supporting organizations for small villages are looking for new ways to develop village visions. Therefore, they commissioned the Science Shop to do research on 'village identity', expecting 'the village', as a place, would result in a particular identity. The outcome of the Science Shop project and this research on village evenings gives a different view however, in line with Castells. According to him, places are important in the construction of identity, but they do not necessarily bring forward specific identities. (Castells, 1997)

The research presented in this report suggests that place still is an important aspect in relation to which people construct their collective identities. However, it is not the particular place, but the politics, plans and changes regarding this place that the villagers construct their collective identities in relation to. What goes on in the village is important to the villagers and therefore to their identity.

In relation to place and the search of people for their identity, it would be interesting to learn about if and how the village councils and village visions become new bases for people to develop their identity upon. The research in this report shows that people can construct their collective identity indeed in relation to the development of the vision. It is unclear, however, how lasting and resilient this identity is.

From the research, it becomes clear *change* is an important aspect when it comes to identity. A group's response to change may be to change its own discourse or resist by making its discourse stronger, more extreme under the influence of groupthink. (van Dam *et al.*, 2005)

From the examples in this research, however, it appears that change can also be a starting point for the construction of a collective identity. Change can bring people with similar views, ideas and values together, leading to the construction of a certain shared discourse (e.g. as a form of resistance) through their mutual interaction. Not surprisingly, undertaking collective action confirms the shared identity. The cases of Zuidbroek and Nietap are clear examples of this. Trying to stop government plans together, as a group of villagers, gives them a sense of connection. In accordance with the findings of Weenink (2009), the outcomes of these collective actions become symbols (such as the courthouse that is prevented from being demolished). This research shows that these symbols are/become part of the discourses used by the villagers during the village evenings. Mostly, they serve as proof of the (perceived) social cohesion within the village.

An important limitation within this research, regarding the aspect of change, is the focus on the village evenings. The results provide limited insights in the formation of new discourses or the shifts in discourses over time. Only in Zuidbroek, village evenings were organized with a longer period (approximately 4 months) in-between. No particular shifts in discourses were found here, however. To learn more about the shifts in discourses and the construction of new ones, the village and the villagers' discourses should be studied over a longer period of time. A more thorough research over a longer period of time would also allow to capture smaller shifts in discourses.

6.3 The consequences of developing a village vision for relationships within a village

The research in this report focussed on the construction and reconstruction of collective identities during the village evenings. Although not the entire villages were involved in the research, it became clear that the development of a vision can have large consequences for the relationships within a village. The main reason for this is that the vision process itself becomes the context against which the participants developed a collective identity. The process led them to look for similarity and difference. Under the circumstances, they constructed their identity not only in relation to an 'outside actor', but also in relation to other villagers. This shows that the ideal of a community with a shared identity bears the split within itself. The villagers involved, set the boundaries to determine who is 'in' and who is 'out'. In Zuidbroek, this actually led to a boundary constructed between people who were participating and those who were not participating in the evenings. In Wergea, the process was more subtle, but therefore perhaps even more 'dangerous'. In absence of a clear enemy, the villagers started to look for differences within the village.

For village councils aiming to develop a village vision, it is important to take into account the situation in the village and think about what consequences the development process may have. The aim of the council for developing a vision may be to look for unity or even a shared identity. However, the process may actually lead to the opposite; a split within the village.

Furthermore, the council should be aware of how they intend to involve the villagers. From the research on the village evenings, it became clear that the village councils depended to a large extent on their own network. This network may not be representative for the village, however. As a consequence, the vision that is being developed, based on the results of the village evenings, may not be the 'vision of the village'. Other villagers may reject this vision, leading to a split. Also, this would challenge the legitimacy of the village council as taking the lead in developing a vision.

Further research into the relationship between the village councils and the villagers may provide more insight in the consequences the development of the vision might have. It would also be particularly interesting to see where the village council derives its legitimacy from.

Perhaps the village vision is one of the sources, making the development of it (and the possible split it might cause) more problematic. Also, it would be interesting to see who joins the village evenings and who does not. A comparison could be made between the discourses of the two groups to see to what extent their views differ.

6.4 The use of the village vision in spatial planning issues

Village visions are becoming increasingly important in planning issues, especially in relation to the shift from government to governance. This shift suggests that responsibility for developing and implementing policies is becoming increasingly a shared responsibility of state, market and civil society. (van Leeuwen & van Tatenhove, 2010) According to Beck, there is a growing opportunity to get involved in decision-making. Any private actor, varying from companies to individual citizens, can be involved. This is what he calls 'subpolitics'. (van Dam *et al.*, 2005; Holzer & Sørensen, 2003)

The research presented in this report focuses only on the development of the vision as such. Little is known about the role of the vision in issues of spatial planning. For instance, it is not clear how the municipalities use the village visions of the small villages under their administration. This is particularly interesting because of the seemingly contradictory relationship. The village vision is funded (partially) by the Municipality. By granting a village (council) to develop their own vision, in effect they create their own opposition. The villagers can learn about what they want for their village. This can give them an advantage in their negotiations with the Municipality. However, Municipalities may also be very receptive of the idea that villagers take matters into their own hands. After all, this could save expenses and reduce their responsibilities.

Another issue that might be addressed in further research on the role of the vision document is the empowerment it provides in terms of social cohesion. It is through the action system that is developed during the village evenings that meaning and importance is attributed to collective actions by the villagers. They develop ideas on what the problem is, what should be done about it and by whom. The processes of polarization and consensus may actually make the internal cohesion of the group of villagers stronger, making it easier for them to act collectively. Whether this is indeed the case, could be looked into.

What is interesting about the whole idea of the village vision is that it aims to 'capture' the collective identity of the villagers. Knowing identity is in fact a process and is therefore continuously changing, may lead to question the whole idea of capturing it. Writing down the 'identity of the village' in a vision may actually lead to less flexibility. The villagers themselves may have difficulty relating their changing identity to a 'stable' identity captured in the vision. Furthermore, if the document is used by, for instance, the Municipality, it could become difficult for the villagers to (re-)construct their identity flexibly in relation to the relevant situation. The Municipality can make claims about the identity of the villagers because it is in the village vision of the villagers. If the views of the villagers have changed in the meantime or because the relevant situation leads them to do so, they will have a lot of explaining to do. Further research on the role of village visions could therefore be aimed at finding out how the villagers use the vision themselves and what consequences this may have for their flexibility in responding to outside plans or developing their own ideas.

To conclude

Altogether, the development of village visions and the establishment of village councils provide an abundant source of new research. The construction of collective identities by the villagers plays an important role in this, since this is as much about *strategy* as it is about *meaning*. In studying planning issues, both these aspects should be taken into account.



Figure 9: The local pub (in the background) is used as a local community centre in Nietap/Terheijl

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