

Sticky stories: how civic initiatives connect to regional planning agendas

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Abstract

In this paper we aim to contribute to understanding complex change processes that result from a myriad of social, physical and political processes in which both governmental and non-governmental actors try to achieve ambitions. We focus on the role of self-organizing civic initiatives and how they relate to the construction of regional planning agendas by local and regional governments. How do civic initiatives connect to local and regional governments and how can we understand the consequences?

We addressed these questions by focusing on whether and how civic initiatives enable issues and ideas to spread through social networks and mobilize supporters. Agenda-setting theory and framing theory point to the construction of realities in social interactions. Strategic framing of issues, selecting certain aspects and ignoring others, is considered a powerful agenda-setting strategy. When framing gets the form of 'sticky stories' chances are enhanced that promoted issues reach a tipping point.

The findings of two case studies in the Netherlands suggest that stories become sticky through an interplay between conversations (that enable the construction and travelling of stories), concurring circumstances, and 'connectors' (people who are able to connect people, ideas and informal and formal contexts). Civic initiatives can perform crucial roles in the generation and spreading of 'sticky stories'. They are sometimes better than professional planners and policy makers able to create the right contexts, to connect the right people and storylines. 'Adaptive' attitudes of planners, asked for in debates about dealing with complexity in planning, may involve embracing and enabling forms of self-organization and connecting to unfolding 'sticky stories'.

1. Introduction

Collaborative planning faces dilemmas with respect to the promises of a more democratic practice, more efficiency and effectiveness. Some authors speak of a new crisis in planning in which new ways out are searched to deal with increasing complexity (non-linearity) of socio-spatial changes (for example De Roo, 2010). In such a view, change is viewed as the highly unpredictable and often unintended outcome of a myriad of social, physical and political processes in which both

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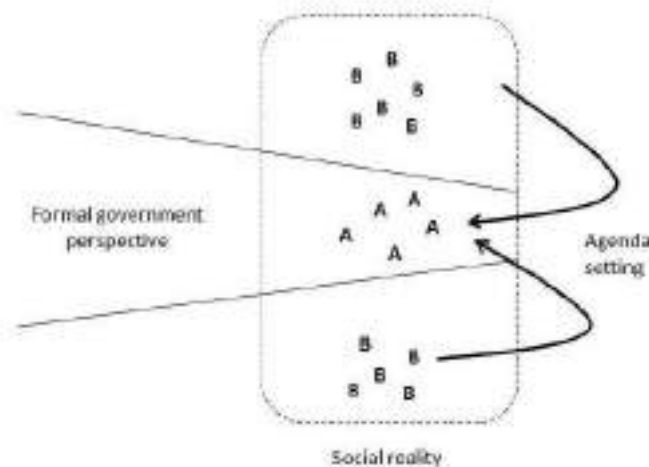
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governmental and non-governmental actors try to achieve ambitions (Innes et al, 2010). The challenges for planning and governance lie in the understanding of complex change processes as well as developing ‘adaptive’ attitudes to deal with complexity.

We aim to contribute to a ‘complexity perspective’ on (collaborative) planning by focusing on understanding socio-spatial change from the perspective of local-regional civic initiatives who engage in local-regional planning practices. Civic initiatives for improving the quality of public space sprout everywhere as potential ‘seeds of change’ in urban and rural planning (for example Horlings, 2010; Boonstra and Boelens, 2011). We assume that they contribute to spatial change and change of planning agendas in more or less subtle ways by their efforts to get (government) support.

Some of these initiatives successfully connect to other (government) initiatives to get access to required resources and regulations. Other initiatives are not so successful and fade away. It is argued that most civic initiatives will at some point need a form of engagement of government actors to achieve goals (Aarts et al, 2007; Horlings, 2010). But getting attention of government actors is often a difficult process (Wagemans, 2002; Turnhout et al, 2010; Jones and Baumgartner, 2005). Government only has eye for that part of social reality that has meaning within the perspective of government. This is illustrated in figure 1. Initiatives B are not part of the perspectives of the government and therefore they are, to the government, irrelevant and meaningless. If initiatives want to be heard, they need knowledge of dominant policy frameworks as well as a great deal of “communicative skills, creativity, and guts” (Turnhout et al, 2010).

Figure 1. Self-referential perspective of government on social reality and effort of civic initiatives to get inside that perspective conceptualized as agenda-setting (adjusted from Wagemans, 2004)



This raises the question of what civic initiatives do to achieve goals. How do they connect to governments and how can we understand the consequences in terms of agenda setting? How do ideas and issues of civic initiatives ‘travel’ to policy arenas (Healey, 2006) sometimes leading to policy and governance change?

2. Theoretical and methodological approach

2.1 Storytelling and framing

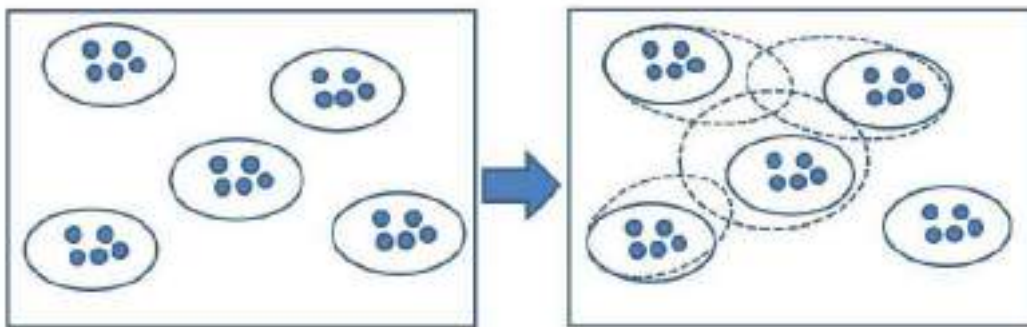
We addressed the questions above by focusing on whether and how civic initiatives enable issues and ideas to spread through social networks and mobilize supporters in a process of agenda-setting. Agenda-setting theory and framing theory point to the construction of realities in interactions. Strategic framing of issues, selecting certain aspects and ignoring others (cf Entman, 1993) is considered a powerful agenda-setting strategy (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005; McCombs and Shaw, 1993). Issue frames are continuously produced, reproduced, transformed and replaced in social interactions (Gray, 2002; Benford and Snow, 2000; Dewulf et al, 2009). Consequentially, a study of agenda-setting should not only focus on the role of trigger events and policy entrepreneurs in the opening of ‘windows of opportunity’ (cf Kingdon, 2003), but should also address a micro-level analysis of framing processes in social interactions.

Through the process of issue-framing a ‘normative-prescriptive’ story may emerge that provides a sense of what the problem is and what should be done about it (Rein and Schön, 1996). Storytelling plays an important role in disseminating a vision or a message and is considered a potential catalyst of change (Throgmorton, 1996; Sandercock, 2003; Baker, 2010). Storytelling is a way of ordering and constructing shared meaning (Hajer and Laws, 2006). Stories contain a plot with a more or less logical course and coherence of events. Such a structure provides an explanation to listeners about ‘what happened’ or ‘what can happen if’ (Baker, 2010). It is a framework for interpretation that invites listeners to attach their own understandings, experiences and emotions (Baker, 2010). This way, storytelling, the interactive framing of issues into plots, enables dealing with ambiguity and coordinating different realities (Throgmorton, 1996; Van Dijk, 2011). Stories also contain moral tension and motivation for action (Sandercock, 2003; Hajer and Laws, 2006). Therefore, the packaging of ambitions into clear stories can mobilize or ‘galvanize’ people into action (Bate, 2004; Rein and Schön, 1996; Hajer and Laws, 2006).

Although stories have various properties that influence policy making and the construction of social realities, they cannot cause change themselves. The concept of storytelling emphasizes that stories emerge in interactions between people and that they are constantly being reshaped in those interactions (Hajer and Laws, 2006). ‘Stories are elastic’ (Baker, 2010: 169) in the sense that listeners and tellers reshape stories while (consciously or unconsciously) interpreting and discussing them in interactions. Listeners are invited to incorporate the story within their own frames

and then pass it on to others in ways that are meaningful and relevant to them. Elasticity enables stories to travel through a wide network. In the context of policy agenda setting, elasticity is a critical condition because novel ideas need to ‘fit’ into current policy ‘stories’ to get inside of the self-referential view of policy makers (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005; Van Dijk, 2011). New stories may need to be stretched to fit into prevailing policy stories. This is visualized in figure 2.

Figure 2. Interactive alignment (‘fitting’) of frames and stories to build supporting coalitions



The activity of ‘fitting’ and ‘stretching’ stories can be understood as frame alignment strategies (Benford and Snow, 2000). The four basic alignment strategies are: bridging (linking ideologically similar frames), amplification (idealization, exaggeration, or reinforcement of frames), extension (including concerns of potential supporters which extend primary frames), and transformation (changing frames into new understandings and meanings). Storytelling can involve each of these strategies depending on the level of receptivity of targeted actors. Sometimes stories do not have to change much to persuade listeners to join in while sometimes the plot needs to be transformed to get the required (political) support.

Alignment of stories can thus be enhanced by framing stories into the ‘latitude of acceptance’ of listeners. This is done by providing credible, salient, concrete and emotive stories (Benford and Snow, 2000; Heath and Heath, 2007). Stories are perceived as credible when they are consistent with everyday experiences, and when storytellers are considered credible (cf. Benford and Snow, 2000). Salient, ‘memorable’ stories, connect well to the personal beliefs, values and experiences of listeners as well as the culture with which listeners identify themselves (‘cultural resonance’).

In the context of agenda setting, issue proponents face the challenge of fitting their stories to the existing policy stories by using alignment strategies. The mechanism of ‘strategic fitting’ (Benford and Snow, 2000) implies that stories are continuously reproduced, adjusted and ‘resemiotized’ (Van Herzele and Aarts, forthcoming 2012) through social interactions. Some stories become ‘sticky’ (Heath and Heath, 2007; Gladwell, 2000) in the process of storytelling and frame alignment, while others fade

away. We analysed the process and conditions in which stories become sticky with the help of two case studies about civic initiatives who tried to bring unsolicited proposals for local-regional development to the attention of relevant governments.

2.2 Case-studies: civic initiatives in Heuvelland and Gouda-Krimpenerwaard

As examples of agenda-setting processes in which local-regional civic initiatives bring forth unsolicited proposals that concern agendas for regional development we selected two case studies in the Netherlands: New Markets Heuvelland (Heuvelland) and Landscape Development in the urban-rural Fringe Gouda-Krimpenerwaard (Gouda-Krimpenerwaard). In table 1 we have summarized the characteristics of the two cases.

In the cases we first identified tipping points in the agenda-setting process³. Next, we analyzed what preceded tipping points: 1) the construction of stories around the proposed issues through the interactions between initiatives and potential supporters in the region; 2) the events and contexts that enabled the spreading of stories, and 3) the role of individual agents who connected people, frames, resources, and contexts, and thereby also enabled spreading of stories across a wider network. The analysis of framing processes, and roles of events and individual agents was executed through interviews with key actors and content analyses (policy documents, newspaper articles, reports of meetings of initiatives, and e-mail and letter conversations).

In short the plots of the cases can be summarized as follows: The initiative of citizens in the Gouda-Krimpenerwaard fringe area led to successful agenda-setting of landscape values throughout a period of 20 years. The initiative started when there was only fragmented attention of governments for the area at stake ('tunnel visions') which the initiative perceived as a big threat for natural and historical landscape values. After twenty years attention and support of local and regional governments was mobilized which resulted in the investment of millions of euros in the protection and development of landscape values. The Heuvelland case actually contains two stories that in the end competed with each other for attention and (financial and political) support. Both started with the New Markets initiative to build a community of 'capital rich' entrepreneurs who would invest in landscape qualities through new product-market combinations which were assumed to generate economical returns (improved tourism). However, this initiative could not sufficiently mobilize support of entrepreneurs and relevant governments and stagnated while at the same time a story about Regional Branding emerged around which the participating entrepreneurs self-organized. This latter initiative was very successful in mobilizing support and, like the Gouda-Krimpenerwaard case, resulted in investments of millions of euros into a regional branding campaign.

³ Tipping points, agenda-setting factors and framing processes are described in detail in 'case narratives' in Van der Stoep (doctoral thesis, forthcoming in 2012).

Table 1. Characteristics of the two case studies of civic initiatives

Cases / characteristics	Gouda-Krimpenerwaard	Heuvelland	
Where?	Southern urban-rural fringe of city of Gouda, connecting to polder region Krimpenerwaard Local-regional level	Region South-Limburg Regional level	
Initiative (labels used in this paper)	Citizens: “WGK-initiative”	Experts, entrepreneurs: “New Markets initiative”	Entrepreneurs: “Regional Branding initiative”
Reason for starting initiative	Lack of government vision for urban-rural fringe Gouda-Krimpenerwaard	Lack of government vision on how economical activities can improve landscape quality	Strategy for regional (economical) development should be based on a good marketing (branding) strategy
Ambition	Getting attention and (financial and political) support for the protection of landscape values (nature, historical landscape structure, monumental lock)	Integrated improvement of (tourist and rural) economy and landscape quality: founding of a business community around New Markets	Establishing a regional brand and a ‘branding’ campaign to attract businesses and employees (dealing with shrinking and ‘silvering’ population)
Ambition achieved?	Yes	No	Yes (branding campaign was performed)
Connection to what sort of government agendas?	Local and regional development plans	Regional development plans	Regional economic development visions
Duration of process	1985-2010	2006-2009	2007-2012

In the following we aim to explain these outcomes by analyzing and comparing how and why stories did or did not become sticky over time.

3. Case study findings

3.1 Stories and ambitions that ‘fit’

In the theoretical part we suggested that clear ambitions are an important part of bringing across messages and constructing a strong plot of a story. In the Gouda-Krimpenerwaard case this condition was met very well. Initiatives in Gouda-Krimpenerwaard had a clear and stable ambition throughout the 20 years of campaigning. Even though the story shifted to an emphasis on the advantages of landscape protection for economical and nature development, the original ambitions,

that is the plot of the story (renovation historical lock and nature-oriented recreational development) remained the same. Many of the ideas that were developed in the 1980s were achieved throughout the 2000s without serious alterations.

The New Markets initiative in the Heuvelland-case however had many difficulties in establishing a clear ambition. And as there were no stable ambitions, no sticky story emerged from the interactions between the participants. There was continuous discussion and disagreement between entrepreneurs and experts about the organization of the project which deviated attention from constructing an ambition for development of landscape qualities and economical activities. No storyline or plot emerged from the discussions. Finally, entrepreneurs self-organized around another storyline: that of regional branding of the region. The regional branding story became very sticky and not only the initiating entrepreneurs, but also other entrepreneurs and local and regional governments clustered around it. Once the regional branding story had ‘tipped’, many resources and supporters flowed to it from all kinds of budgets for regional development. The story, with the motto “Zuid-Limburg: Bright site of life”, became a million-euro-story.

It was suggested earlier that to get inside the self-referential perspective of governments, stories have to be fitted to existing policy stories. This idea was confirmed in both cases. In both cases initiatives connected their ambitions and stories to governmental agendas for regional economic development. Strategies of initiatives were aimed at stretching ‘the latitude of acceptance’ of relevant government actors. Initiatives did not present their stories as alternative ideas, but as something that fitted into existing policy frames. So initiatives focused on ‘bridging’, ‘extending’ (Benford and Snow, 2000), or in other words ‘re-semiotizing’ (Van Herzele and Aarts, forthcoming 2012) their stories and frames to connect to existing policy frames. New ideas and stories were connected with and fitted to ‘existing stories’ (cf. Van Dijk, 2011). Through this process, existing policy stories were reconfirmed and reproduced. Existing policy stories only became a bit ‘wider’ to include new ideas as part of the story.

Besides having ‘clear ambitions’ and ‘a fit’ with current (policy) stories, another condition for a successful story was assumed to be found in the qualitative properties of the story. It was suggested that stories, in order to be attractive, should be experienced as clear and concrete, credible, salient and emotive. These conditions were not met for the New Markets-initiative in the Heuvelland case, but they could be recognized in the Regional Branding initiative and the Gouda-Krimpenerwaard case. The regional branding story won at the cost of the Transforum-story because it was considered more attractive by entrepreneurs. The message of Regional Branding connected well to their personal concerns and ideas about what the regional economy needed. Moreover, the Regional Branding initiative and the civic initiatives in Gouda-Krimpenerwaard used many symbols that spoke to the imagination of the listeners. For example for the Regional Branding initiative, the regional products (beer, sirop etc), culture (gastronomy, festivals, art) and the name of the group of entrepreneurs (Black Riders, after the local beer brewery and pub where they met

each other). For the Veenvaren-initiative in the Gouda-Krimpenerwaard case, a strong emotive symbol was the historical boat in which one of the initiators sailed the waters of the polder Krimpenerwaard representing the ambition of reintroducing boating in the polder.

These examples show the relevance of using symbols to construct strong appealing stories to connect to the personal life experiences of targeted audiences. The active construction and shaping of stories shows that credibility, salience, emotion etcetera are never inherent qualities of stories. A story is not sticky in itself. A story becomes sticky because of what people do with it. When we want to trace how a story becomes sticky, we should ask ‘who is telling what to whom, why and in which context?’ In the following we focus attention on interactions and other conditions in which stories become sticky.

3.2 Conversations that trigger change

The case findings suggest that stories are made sticky by creating and using various opportunities for conversation which enables learning about different ‘life worlds’ and frames. Reframing and re-semiotization (Van Herzele and Aarts, forthcoming 2012) in conversations increase the chances that frames are aligned and that stories become sticky.

In the Gouda-Krimpenerwaard case many opportunities for conversation were used and created. The strategy of civic initiatives was aimed at conversing at all times everywhere and in every way. Throughout 20 years of campaigning, proponents of the initiative to protect landscape values in the fringe attended many meetings in the region about related topics, they talked informally on the street, they wrote letters to governmental representatives and potential supporters, contributed to newspaper coverage, held informal meetings, used channels of formal public participation, and more. This resulted very slowly in resonance of the story in a large network of regional stakeholders. In Heuvelland, one of the problems for the initiative of the experts to advance a sticky story about area development was a lack of opportunity to discuss it in formal or informal conversations. There were some formal meetings, but process managers were not able to create conditions for informal conversations with entrepreneurs in which decisions in formal meetings could be prepared. In fact, they were excluded from informal conversations between the engaged entrepreneurs. As a result, stories of the experts and entrepreneurs developed separately and competed with each other. Ambitions did not become clear so a story could not emerge from the interactions that did take place.

The spreading of a story through a network on the one hand requires a quantity and variety of conversations, but also asks for certain connecting qualities of conversations. Through framing processes alignments are established between stories and frames of issue proponents and the ‘life-worlds’ and stories of targeted audiences. In conversations reframing takes place as the intended or unintended result of framings of conversation partners. This is how stories can shift subtly.

Baker (2010) argues that conversations can ‘catalyze change’ when they provide a context of trust, respect, curiosity and hope. Other conditions are acceptance of differences and patience with respect to the process. Such properties of conversations are supposed to create an advantageous situation for people to open up their minds, become receptive and come out of their comfort zone. The case study findings confirm that acceptance and curiosity towards differences as well as patience were important in frame alignment and coalition building. It requires from conversation partners to take time to ask questions, listen to responses, share experiences and share stories to illustrate ideas, and access intuitive and tacit knowledge.

We found in Gouda-Krimpenerwaard case that frame alignment was achieved when conversations provided room not only for telling stories, but also listening. Connecting to personal ‘life-worlds’ of targeted listeners requires a certain amount of empathy and ability to ‘listen’. Successful storytellers were very empathetic with prospected supporters and could relate to their everyday lives very well. By listening tellers became knowledgeable about the frames with which they had to align their own story. Storytelling requires a great deal of listening. Or in other words, strong sticky stories are told by great listeners.

In contrast, the analysis of Heuvelland suggests that the process managers, the experts, were focusing too much attention on building the right coalition according to their own beliefs, and were unable to create a situation in which they could ‘listen’ and ‘empathize’. Although meetings and an interactive website were set up to organize joint fact finding and to provide a platform for the articulation of concerns, interests and ideas, this did not give enough opportunity for listening and storytelling. In Heuvelland, informal ‘one-on-one’ conversations were an essential vehicle for creating sticky stories and connecting different ‘worlds’ and networks. The process managers did have the intention to carefully listen to concerns of entrepreneurs, but they were excluded from those informal conversations with entrepreneurs. The findings suggests that the closedness of the community of entrepreneurs and government executives was hindering ‘outsider’ actors to ‘listen’ and ‘empathize’. This way ‘outsider’ participants were unable to align frames and start a ‘sticky story’.

These conclusions about conversations show parallels with a growing body of literature on the role of conversations in organization management (Ford, 1999; Baker, 2010; Van Herzele and Aarts, forthcoming 2012). The activity of conversation is viewed as the key process through which forms of organizing are reproduced and changed. We can conclude that conversations are needed to start, shape and spread a story. Conversations have to provide room for both telling, listening and empathizing to achieve frame alignment. It depends on the context what type of conversation works best and whether and how one will be considered a good conversation partner. Building on the empirical findings as well as literature we argue that stories are made sticky in human interactions through ‘catalytic conversations’ (Baker, 2010). That is, conversations in which people are open to new perspectives for several reasons and take time to listen and ‘empathize’.

3.3 Concurring circumstances

The cases showed that specific circumstances and contexts played decisive roles in enhancing the stickiness of stories. For example, the opportunity of the ‘crisis law’ in the Gouda-Krimpenerwaard case, enabled the attachment of emotion and urgency to the story of the civic initiative by stressing that ‘it was now or never’, a unique opportunity which could not be missed. This enhanced the perceived urgency of the issue (to local and regional governments) to such an extent that the story about renovation of the monumental lock became sticky and ‘tipped’. In Heuvelland triggering events could also be recognized. In the case of Regional Branding changes in political circumstances were used to make the story more sticky. The story aligned well with the existing policy story about the regional economy that was faced with the threat of young people leaving to other parts of the country.

In both cases we found that ‘trigger events’ could only trigger because they were interpreted by people as triggers (windows of opportunity). Trigger events are given meaning as triggers in light of previous events and interactions. They can trigger change when they concur with past events in the eyes of people who frame a particular event as a trigger event, a window of opportunity. To other people, the same events may have no meaning at all. This means that a triggering events are preceded by a large number of events and interactions that happened in the past. It is a matter of ‘filling the cup’, or in the words of Kingdon (2003), a matter of ‘softening up’ prospective adherents. When the cup is filled, it only takes a small drop more to make the cup run over. This is in line with a complexity perspective on change. Small and seemingly irrelevant or unimportant changes can have large effects (Morgan, 1986).

In the case of Gouda-Krimpenerwaard the initiators used various opportunities to bring alternative plans for the fringe area to the attention. Over a period of 20 years they used design competitions, formal participation procedures around government plans for the region, the project Masterplan Stolwijkersluis, as well as their own yearly ‘dawn walk’ to suggest alternative plans and many other occasions. The variety of contexts in which they prompted their ideas enabled a slow ‘softening up’ of the policy system. The only thing required to actually implement the ideas was resources that had to flow from the provincial government. That happened when the province realized they needed just a few hectares more to achieve their ambitions for nature development. To solve that ‘problem’ the provincial government could use the ‘solution’ that had already been floated by the civic initiative in the fringe area. The province’s sudden interest in the area was the small drop that was needed to make the cup run over and implement the ideas for a nature-recreational development of the fringe area. But it was preceded by a filling of the cup with many small drops. This was achieved by introducing small novelties in many different places and moments which could then reinforce each other. The right context was created to make the story stick.

The analysis of Gouda-Krimpenerwaard provides many examples about changing circumstances and events, also the more subtler and smaller circumstances that could still trigger change. One of these is the role of the discussions and heavy debates about the construction of the bypass around Gouda in the tipping of ideas about renovation of the historical lock and reintroducing boating in the polder Krimpenerwaard to give an economic stimulus. The passionate engagement of the citizens group “Werkgroep Gouda-Krimpenerwaard” led them in a coalition with stakeholders from the polder Krimpenerwaard. These contacts remained and helped the “Werkgroep Gouda-Krimpenerwaard” to know a lot about the beliefs, concerns, interests and values of people in the Krimpenerwaard. They understood through ongoing conversations with Krimpenerwaardians over a longer period of time that the nature-agriculture controversy was the major concern also for the province who were responsible for solving the conflicts. So they knew exactly how to deal carefully with the political culture in the Krimpenerwaard and how to use that to get to the province. Their engagements in the Krimpenerwaard led them to contact and alignment with the “Veenveren”-initiative. A sticky story was created out of it in which renovation of landscape values in the fringe (such as the monumental lock) and recreational possibilities were connected to a story about the economical opportunities of introducing boating in the polder Krimpenerwaard. At first glance, the conflicts and discussions about the bypass by the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the zeros seem to have little to do with the story about “Veenveren” and the restoration of the lock. However, the story of Veenveren and the role of the lock in that story could only become sticky as a result of the previous engagements of the “Werkgroep Gouda-Krimpenerwaard” with Krimpenerwaardians around the issue of the bypass. Often little things matter a lot!

3.4 Connecting stories, people, events and resources

In the case of Gouda-Krimpenerwaard we found that special individuals, who we call ‘connectors’, are able to connect ambitions, storylines, people, resources, and events and contexts. Those ‘special individuals’ resemble ‘innovation brokers’ (for example Klerkx, 2009) and policy entrepreneurs (cf Kingdon, 2003), but as we emphasize ‘connecting’ qualities we prefer to use the term ‘connectors’ (after Gladwell, 2000). By these connecting activities they enable the emergence, strengthening, spreading, adapting and fitting of stories. In other words, connectors can make stories ‘sticky’ in a number of ways.

First, the cases contained connectors that had central positions in networks and could therefore connect different networks and groups. Examples in the Heuvelland case are the ‘leading’ entrepreneurs who used their informal executive networks effectively. They were able to bridge the entrepreneurial network and the relevant policy networks. In the Gouda-Krimpenerwaard case we found that connectors can also be people who just like to spread and share knowledge with many others and this way make ideas spread rapidly through a wider network (similar to Gladwells ‘mavens’, 2000).

An individual can also operate as a connector when he or she is considered a credible storyteller by other people or when they are able to mobilize credible storytellers ('frame articulators'). In Gouda-Krimpenerwaard we identified a number of credible frame articulators who had status or were considered experts in the field and as such were able to persuade influential actors in their network. However, credibility of storytellers was not only exclusive to people who were considered to be authorities. Sometimes, storytellers had a good claim to a hearing because they were considered genuine as their background and knowledge was consistent with the culture and concerns of people living and working in the region. The Gouda-Krimpenerwaard case provides the example of the initiator of "Veenvaren" who was considered as a credible conversation partner by crucial political actors in the Krimpenerwaard. This way the Veenvaren-initiative enabled an effective connection between decision makers in the Krimpenerwaard and the civic initiative in the Gouda-Krimpenerwaard fringe area.

In Heuvelland credible frame articulators were people that were assigned with authority. This worked out positively for the Regional Branding initiative. For the New Markets initiative this was a delimiting factor as the experts themselves were not part of the select club of individuals who were considered to have authority. Here, they would have needed other connectors that did have the right cultural background and position and that could reinforce the story and pass it on.

A third 'connecting' quality is being able to empathize and listen to stories of conversation partners (see also section 3.2). In Gouda-Krimpenerwaard we see that also regular citizens, who were not part of a powerful managerial network, could operate as connectors. Crucial connectors were people who could empathize with and listen carefully to potential supporters. Moreover, key players were connectors who liked to share information and knowledge to help other people. And by being very knowledgeable about different contexts they could bridge different networks and reach other connectors whose connecting qualities lay more in 'selling' and 'networking' the story.

A fourth 'connecting' quality is being sensitive to circumstances and contexts that provide opportunity to connect and align stories and people. For example, the self-organizing entrepreneurs in the Regional Branding initiative were continually scanning the context and looking for the right circumstances. They built an informal network and provided for a suitable context for informal conversations. They seized political opportunities and tried to create ('nudge') the right context. The same happened in the Gouda-Krimpenerwaard case in which initiatives continually searched for contexts to promote their messages and tell their story. Awaiting, searching and creating the right (conversational) context required a great deal of knowledge and sensitivity about various contexts as well as patience and perseverance. Connectors know how to 'nudge' contexts, that is signal, use and create context to a certain extent. This way, connectors are critical agents in the construction of a sticky story or the other way around, they may also weaken a competing story. That said, connectors are always dependent on the interactions in

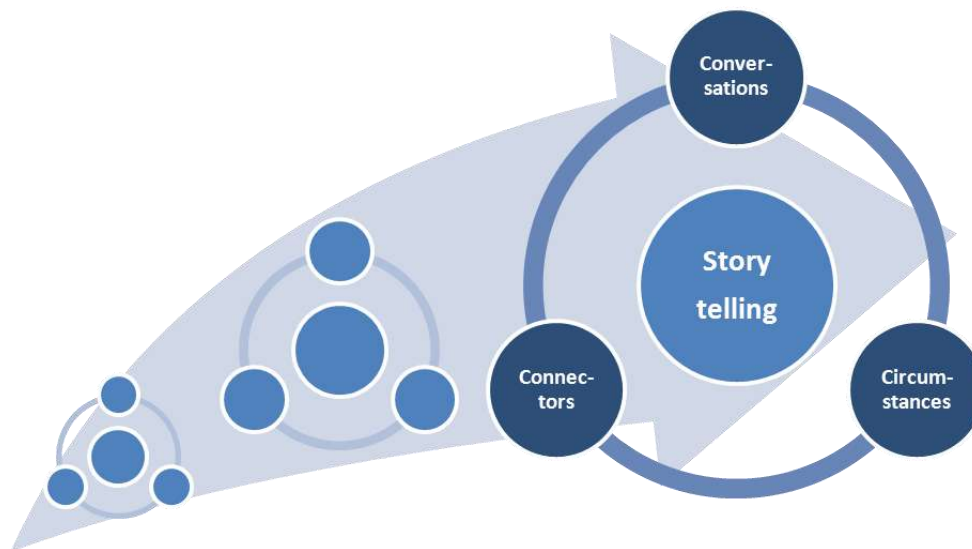
the wider network of which they are part, so ‘nudging’ is all they can do. Still, ‘nudging’ may be all that is required to ‘tip’ a story.

It is impossible for a single person to have or perform all qualities discussed above. Connecting qualities in the Gouda-Krimpenerwaard case varied from person to person but together they created a strong spreading effect for the story about landscape values in the fringe. Therefore we conclude that the label ‘connector’ is not exclusive to a particular person but depends on the context (time and place). Persons can perform as connectors at certain moments while at other moments leaving others to this task. There can be several connectors at one time. There is no single change agent that can be identified. Individual people can perform as connectors at different moments depending on the specific context and the qualities that are needed at a certain moment.

3.5 Sticky stories: conversations, circumstances and connectors

Sticky stories that are remembered and that connect people and ideas to each other in coalitions become sticky through human interactions. Our empirical findings demonstrates that stickiness is influenced by an interplay between (everyday) *conversations* that enable the construction and travelling of stories, concurring *circumstances*, and *connectors* who are able to connect people, ideas, events and various conversational contexts. This interplay is schematized in figure 3.

Figure 3. The process through which a story becomes sticky



The previous sections demonstrated that social interactions in the form of conversations matter a great deal in the mobilization of support. Conversations form the vehicle for framing ambitions into stories. Conversations provide means to listen, empathize and tell and thereby to connect stories to the emotions and frames of

conversation partners. Therefore, conversations are an essential condition in the unfolding of a sticky story. Creating opportunities for conversations in which knowledge and information are shared can enhance innovation and self-organization of people around stories that link various ambitions. Conversations open up windows to new possibilities in particular situations and contexts which can be created to a certain extent.

Conversations can bring forth sticky stories in particular circumstances. Many conversations together build up a momentum, they 'fill the cup', and when this concurs with a triggering event the cup will run over, or in other words the story becomes so sticky that it 'tips' and leads to change. 'Connectors bring together people, ambitions, resources and meaningful events through conversations in specific (concurring) circumstances. Connectors do not only connect people and ambitions, but they also connect 'events' and construe them as 'windows of opportunity'. Moreover, connectors develop an antenna for creating a conversational context that enables collective storytelling and coalition-building, or in the words of Baker (2010), that 'can catalyze change'.

4. Conclusion: storytelling and adaptivity

In this paper we discussed how we can understand the process and outcomes of attempts of civic initiatives to connect to local and regional governments to achieve goals. The comparison of two case studies resulted in an analytic model in which successful agenda setting and mobilization was defined in terms of storytelling. A successful story is a story that can self-multiply and travel rapidly through a wider social network, or in other words a story that is 'made to stick'. Stories become sticky in a process of ongoing social interactions in which (interplaying) conversations, concurring circumstances and connectors are critical conditions.

Successful initiatives in the cases were able to achieve goals and change planning agendas by navigating on the self-referentiality of governments. They managed to get inside the self-referential view of governments on social reality, while governments embraced ideas as part of prevailing policy stories. Beneath the surface new coalitions between government actors and civic initiatives emerged out of interactions, and stories shifted slightly. Initiatives and formal plans of governments were 'enriched' with ideas of civic initiatives. Change happened, but it was subtle and non-linear.

Apparently the 'world out there' about which government has a self-referential view provides opportunities for change and innovation. The case findings confirm that it is not a static world that can be mended to governments 'will'. Civic initiatives try to achieve goals and try to be noticed by governments. The interactions that flow from these efforts leads to generation of new stories and reproduction or adjustment of existing stories that guide action. So what can we learn about planning in complex change processes from the findings and the proposed model for analyzing agenda-

setting and storytelling? What starting points were found for more ‘adaptive attitudes’ of planners called for in the planning debate?

Planners may try to develop an antenna for self-organization of people (public and private actors) around emerging stories and make use of these self-organizing movements to connect own ambitions to them. If planners also look for stories that will ‘stick’ and guide change, then the conditions for stickiness may be helpful in deciding on actions. That means that planners, like civic initiatives, could try to create and engage in ‘catalytic’ conversations in which there is room for differences, diversity, and for ‘listening’ and ‘empathizing’. They could try to signal events that provide momentum for action or try to create the right context for constructing a story and making it sticky in conversation with other actors (‘nudging contexts’). And related to ‘creating the right circumstances’ and ‘engaging in catalytic conversations’ planners could identify and make use of ‘connectors’ that can link stories from different social networks and ‘life worlds’. The research suggests that connectors, may be people with authority (in line with studies about policy entrepreneurs) but just as important are ‘local’ people who are very knowledgeable about various relevant contexts (historical, policy, political, social, geographical) in the area and who like to share knowledge with other people.

Creating and engaging in catalytic conversations, looking for and using connectors and ‘nudging contexts’ are adaptive attitudes that can contribute to a form of planning in which complexity is not considered a problem but an opportunity for innovation.

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