Implementing Social Sustainability in Area Development Projects in the Netherlands

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During recent decades, urbanization processes and changing population compositions in European cities have underlined the relevance of social sustainability for urban development. Despite a growing amount of research on the social sphere of sustainability, the actual implementation of social sustainability in area development projects remains problematic. In the Netherlands, as in most other European countries, area development is understood as an interdisciplinary practice that strives to integrate strategies, activities and interests of public and private actors into perceived sustainable projects. If area development projects are considered as acts of policy implementation, two questions rise: 1) How are social sustainability dimensions planned, operationalized and implemented through area development projects? and 2) How are they related to governance configurations and mechanisms that relate to decision-making and interventions in these area development projects? The main aim of this paper is to construct a theoretically informed analytical approach to be further developed and applied in PhD research about the implementation of perceived "social sustainability" in area development projects in the Netherlands. We conclude that the implementation of social sustainability in area development projects is a governance process that requires political interventions in a market-driven society and hypothesize that the outcomes of social sustainability in area development are dependent on various aspects of this governance process.

Keywords: area development; social sustainability; implementation; urban governance

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Introduction: a changing demography, housing shortage and a call for inclusive cities

During the recent decades, urbanization processes and changing population compositions in European cities have underlined the relevance of social sustainability for urban development. While sustainability has gained grounds in the fields of urban policy, planning and development, an increasing attraction of urbanized areas for people, as well as for industries to locate themselves in inner-city areas puts space in cities under pressure. Many West-European cities are experiencing rising land prices and shortages in the housing stock (Knight Frank Research, 2018), increasing immigrant inflows (Goodson et al., 2017) and increasing socio-economic segregation (Musterd et al., 2017). These trends particularly emphasize the need to pay attention to social sustainability in urban development.

In the Netherlands, demographic prognoses show that the population is changing (Kooiman et al., 2016). Three main trends are observed: 1) the Dutch population ages and the percentage of single households grows; 2) the interest in collaborative housing grows, along with the risk for segregation between population groups; 3) the amount of immigration increases more than emigration, resulting in an increase of diversity of origin among the population. These demographic trends call for a transformation of the housing stock in a way that it will provide more space for one-person households, more variety in housing typologies and will stimulate social cohesion (Daamen & Janssen, 2019).

At the same time in the Netherlands, a housing shortage of 1 - 3 % is faced in most of the regions of the country (Lennartz, 2018). The national government has expressed its ambition to build 1 million new homes by 2030 and to create spaces that are available for 'everyone'. Also on the local level, an explicit call for 'building for everyone' – or 'inclusive cities' as used in the spatial planning debate – has been made in the coalition agreements of the four largest cities of the Netherlands. Within the policy objectives of these agreements, several aspects of social sustainability are emphasized, such as quality of life (Gemeente Den Haag, 2018), affordable housing (Gemeente Amsterdam, 2018), safety (Gemeente Rotterdam, 2018) and healthy environments (Gemeente Utrecht, 2018).

Despite the above-mentioned ambitions, the national government has not provided distinct spatial visions or spatial planning tools on how to achieve the ambition to build 1 million new homes. As agreements in national investments funds for infrastructure do not seem to correspond with the locations available for housing in the Netherlands, practical hindrances are foreseen in the realization of the 1 million new homes by 2030 (BNR Webredactie, 2019; Redactie Gebiedsontwikkeling.nu, 2019).

In this research, we assume that there is a discrepancy between policy ambitions for socially sustainable cities from a political perspective and the operational outcomes in urban areas, which we connect with a dearth of understanding about the governance of area development projects. Therefore, this PhD research aims to identify governance aspects that are related to the way that social sustainability is implemented in area development projects. This paper builds an analytical approach from a governance perspective that will be applied in further research about social sustainability in area development projects in the Netherlands. The next section elaborates on the definition of social sustainability in urban areas and defines the normative approach of this research. Section 3 addresses the implementation process of social sustainability in area development projects. Section 4 is concerned with governance issues of area development projects and results in the analytical approach to perceive the implementation of social sustainability from an urban governance point of view.

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Social sustainability in urban areas

In the Netherlands, the significance of sustainability in area development is underlined in the professional debate: every next area development should be sustainable (Daamen, 2019). Definitions of sustainability often refer to the definition of sustainable development by the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) in the Brundtland Report: "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". This definition implies that sustainability is something positive that should be pursued, as emphasized by Davidson (2010, p. 872): "Sustainability, it seems, has now become a prefix for almost anything…for example, 'sustainable hair' is better than the 'old hair'." From this broad, normative notion of sustainability, we question in this section what it is that social sustainability in urban areas should pursue.

Social sustainability: an ambiguous concept with various dimensions

Despite a growing amount of research on the social sphere of sustainability, the actual implementation of social sustainability in area development projects remains problematic. Although the Netherlands has a long tradition in socio-spatial policies, evaluators are critical about the positive effects that previous social policy programmes for urban development have had (Engbersen et al., 2007; Permentier et al., 2013). Social sustainability is an ambiguous concept with various conceptual definitions and normative dimensions (see Table 1 and Table 2), which may explain why no consensus on its definition has been reached yet and why implementation efforts are challenging. As McKenzie (2004, p. 30) argues, comprehensive definitions are often too vague and don't clarify the aspects and interconnection between the aspects that are suggested. Obviously, one single definition of social sustainability does not represent the complexity of the concept and so efforts to define it are futile (Rashidfarokhi et al., 2018, p. 1272).

Table 1. Conceptual definitions of social sustainability*.*

	Conceptual definitions
(McKenzie, 2004)	as a positive condition within communities, and a process within communities that can achieve that condition
(Gressgård, 2015)	as a way to mobilize people under a future vision
(Boström, 2012)	as a frame that can assists in discussions about social policies, rather than a concept with a ready-to-use definition
(Missimer, Robèrt, & Broman, 2016)	as the lack of hindrances in society for health, influence, competence, impartiality and meaning-making
(Chiu, 2003)	as the social conditions necessary to support environmental sustainability
(Chiu, 2003)	as the maintenance of social structures during activities for social change
(Chiu, 2003)	as the maintenance and improvement of the well-being of people in this and future generations

Table 2. Normative dimensions of social sustainability, based on (Boström, 2012; Bramley et al., 2006; Chiu, 2003; Dempsey et al., 2012; Dixon & Woodcraft, 2013; Eizenberg & Jabareen, 2017; McKenzie, 2004; Polèse & Stren, 2000; Rashidfarokhi et al., 2018; Shirazi & Keivani, 2019; Vallance et al., 2009)

Social equity	**Sense of community**
Quality of life	Social cohesion
Democracy	Social capital
Diversity	Social inclusion
Individual well-being	Collective well-being

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The pursuit of improved quality of life

Among the various definitions, social sustainability is in this paper conceptually interpreted as the pursuit of maintaining people's well-being, now and in the future (Chiu, 2003) (see Table 1). This interpretation emphasizes the normative dimension of social sustainability, arguing that the essence of social sustainability is about the aspiration of 'better' social conditions for all people. Yet within this broad normative interpretation of social sustainability, numerous fundamental values are mentioned in literature that are associated with social sustainability. Whereas some authors point out an elaborative number of values, such as social equity, social inclusion, social cohesion, social capital, community participation and safety (Rashidfarokhi et al., 2018) other authors are more distinct in pointing out that social sustainability is in essence about social equity and a sense of community (Dempsey et al., 2012). In Table 2, the fundamental values of social sustainability found in literature are listed.

Social equity and sense of community

The various values distinguish between 'social equity' and 'sense of community'. The difference between them is that values related to the former one address all individuals within society, whereas values related to the latter one can apply merely to a specific group in a society. In area development, this distinction between equity-related and community-related values appears when projects that include forms of co-creation or community participation are claimed to be socially sustainable, while societal issues on a larger scale level, such as the duplication of the number of homeless people in the Netherlands during the recent decade (CBS, 2019), remain. It is argued by Davidson (2010) and Maloutas (2003) that a majority of work in the social sustainability discussion passes over its normative content; a trend that these authors relate to a withdrawal of social objectives in urban policies as politically necessary under neoliberalism. Similarly, Rashidfaroskhi et al. (2018) claim that social sustainability is too often translated as community participation. In the same vein, Woodcraft (2016) criticizes housebuilders in the United Kingdom who legitimize their involvement in social sustainability by the efforts put in quality of place and social capital, but tend to neglect concerns about social equity.

In an attempt to capture both radical and less radical social values within social sustainability, we consider 'quality of life' including collective well-being and individual well-being, suggested by Dixon and Woodcraft (2013) as the most accurate description of the core value of social sustainability. Social sustainability is not just about a community feeling or a socially pleasant environment for a certain group, and not just about social justice for all inhabitants in one place – it is about the combination of both that contributes to an overall quality of life for all inhabitants locally, nationally and world-wide.

Implementing social sustainability in area development

From planning to operationalization

The discussion on social sustainability in urban development and its underlying values covers several 'stages' of urban development: ranging from how social sustainability can be planned to how social sustainability can be operationalized through specific programmes or projects. In this paper, urban development projects are seen as 'processes of implementation' that include several stages such as planning and operationalization. During the recent decades, the principle of equity has received increasing attention in planning theory. Following Harvey's (2003) plea for social justice as a normative concept for contemporary cities in democratic

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societies, Fainstein posits the just city as the appropriate object of planning (Fainstein, 2005, p. 126). The 'just city' models proclaims that in a neo-liberal societal context, incomes and public resources have become more unequally distributed in cities and that inequality must be overcome by an active role of urban planners (Fainstein & DeFilippis, 2015, p.8). While a theoretical debate on a conceptual and normative level can lead to initial planning principles built on values such as equality, diversity and democracy, the discussion of social sustainability at a further 'stage' of urban development is concerned with the operationalization of social sustainability in urban areas through urban development programmes (Elander & Gustavsson, 2019; Vranken et al., 2003) or urban development projects (Dixon & Woodcraft, 2013; Langergaard, 2019).

In this research, we turn our perspective towards area development projects and ask ourselves how through such a project social sustainability in urban areas can be advanced. We build on Social Life's social sustainability framework that integrates different dimensions and provides a framework for practical action to build new communities that are successful and sustainable in the long term (Woodcraft et al., 2012). It subdivides social sustainability into four dimensions: 1) amenities and infrastructure, 2) social and cultural life, 3) voice and influence and 4) space to grow. Complementary, there are overarching dimensions which goes and relate (i) to the way the area is connected to local and regional economy, and (ii) to environmental objectives (see Figure 1).
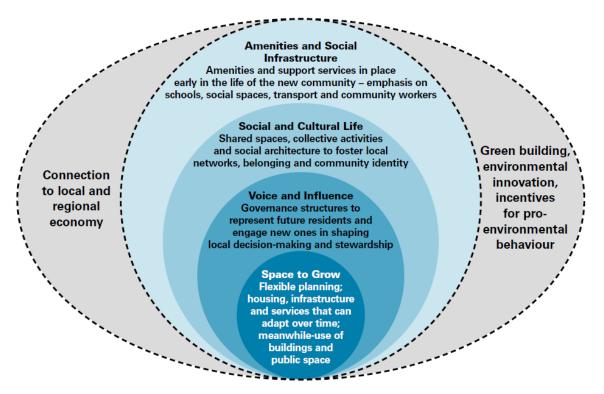

Figure 1. Social Life's social sustainability framework (Woodcraft et al., 2012, p. 22).

Yet, it has to be taken into account that physical space in urban areas is typically limited and that in all projects, decisions have to be made about what operational indicators are actually implemented and which ones are not, leading to unique outcomes in each area development project. In this research, we are especially interested in the reason why outcomes of social

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sustainability in projects become the way that they are. Therefore, we focus on the implementation processes of moving from normative, conceptual definitions to operationalization in area development projects. By taking pragmatic concerns into account and by focusing on the operational side of area development projects, it can be understood in a better way how decisions on interventions and investments in real estate are made and how the concept of social sustainability is translated by different actors (Woodcraft, 2012, p. 30).

Area development: the Dutch practice

In the Netherlands, area development is understood as an interdisciplinary practice that strives to integrate strategies, activities and interests of public and private actors into projects that concern the sustainable development of a specific area within a town or city or the expansion of a town or city. Interaction among a wide variety of actors is key for the practice of area development, as Franzen et al. (2011) describe: "Area development, - 'gebiedsontwikkeling' in Dutch - is part of a broad range of activities involving government intervention at various levels, from local (municipal), regional or provincial to national or even international level, and in interaction with the activities of private organisations such as property developers (which these days are also often international players)" (p. 9). The multiplicity of actors involved in area development projects becomes more complicated when dealing with a fuzzy topic such as social sustainability. Integrating social sustainability in the built environment is not a task of the government alone, but a shared contribution of politicians, lobby groups, property owners, developers and citizens. When it is not clear among those various actors who are responsible for the implementation, this risks the consequence that social policy objectives are omitted (Weingartner & Moberg, 2014, p. 124). Managing activities, responsibilities and influences of those various actors is therefore essential for implementing social sustainability into practice.

Whereas strategic processes in area development used to be managed mainly by governmental bodies, they are nowadays part of organisational and decision-making processes from multiple actors that have different interests, visions and opinions (Franzen et al., 2011, p. 47). In a governance structure rather than a government structure alone, governmental actors are more dependent on private parties and are forced to collaborate with various actors. Torfing et al. (2012, p. 14) define governance as "the process of steering society and the economy through collective action and in accordance with common goals". The increasing focus on governance structures instead of government structures alone has emerged out of the belief that acts of governing also take place outside the boundaries of the state or local governments and emerge from an interaction between public and private actors (Ansell & Torfing, 2016). As a result of this shift towards governance that also took place in area development, Franzen et al. (2011) argue that policy objectives that are originally grounded in principles, such as equality, durability and prosperity, have made room for objectives in market efficiency and yield requirements. This implies that more emphasis on relation management is required, which deals with the dualities and tensions between public and private actors that occur in area development. Besides, it implies that economic forces have an influence on the way that social sustainability policy objectives are implemented in area development projects.

In addition, area development projects contain a political dimension. Despite the delay and disturbance that accidental political decisions or coalition changes occasionally may cause in ongoing projects, it is argued that including the political debate and acknowledging conflicts – for example between social needs and market-driven developments -, are essential parts of development projects (Woodcraft, 2012).

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The governance process of social sustainability: seeing area development projects as a way of policy implementation

So far, we have argued that the implementation of social sustainability in area development projects is concerned with the management of the various interests of actors, political decision-making and tensions between public and private actors. From here, we consider area development as a governance process in which economic and political dimensions come together. Elander and Gustavsson (2019) have analysed a Swedish national policy programme for sustainable cities and showed that integration of social objectives in policy programmes does not unquestionably lead to corresponding outcomes in area developments. In 2008, the 'Delegation for Sustainable Cities' programme was launched by the Swedish government: a national institution on the meso-level that invested in renovation and new construction housing projects with an ambition for sustainable urban development. It was analysed how the actors involved in this programme approached the ambition of the programme and what strategies they applied in order to relate their actions to social sustainability. It was observed that, in a context where the housing sector had moved towards a market-driven format during the recent decades, the DSC programme had a fragmented implementation structure in which the central government governed from a distance with financial measures, regulatory power and soft steering measures, but local authorities played a leading role in constructing policy actions for social sustainability. This type of governance process had led to a plurality of ways that social sustainability was interpreted. Elander and Gustavsson labelled the different interpretations under three aspects: social inclusion and integration, participation and place identity. The researchers are critical against the social content that was realized by the programme and conclude that "despite socially sustainability labelled programmes and projects, socio-spatial inequalities and segregation have continued to increase in Sweden" (Elander & Gustavsson, 2019, p. 16). The case shows that there is a tension between a normative meaning of social sustainability, deriving from political convictions, and an operational interpretation of social sustainability, stemming from executing actors in the market society and that this tension is related to the manner of governance.

Balancing public and private interests

In practice, the operationalization of normative goals such as sustainability is challenged by the disparity between public and private interests and the allurement to decide on pragmatic solutions that stray off overarching ambitions. Dualities in public-private partnerships and its relation to sustainability are discussed from a perspective on urban infrastructures by Koppenjan and Enserink (2009). In theory, a combination of features of the private sector on the one hand, such as innovation, financial capacity and entrepreneurial spirit, and features of the public sector on the other hand, such as social concern and environmental awareness, is seen as a solution for both market and government failure in urban problems. However, Koppenjan and Enserink raise the question whether it is conceivable that short-term interests of private actors concerning investment returns are compatible with long-term targets of sustainability. They address three issues: 1) Since governments often "go to great lengths to convince private parties to invest in public infrastructures", private monopolies must be avoided and a balance between private investors' willingness to invest on the one hand, and long-term sustainability objectives on the other hand must be guarded by public authorities (Koppenjan & Enserink, 2009, p. 288); 2) since inadequate contracts may result in undesired outcomes, that "may not meet the demands of local users and may create affordability problems", an incentive structure must be developed that wardens both economic and sustainability objectives (Koppenjan & Enserink, 2009, p. 291); 3) since existing regulatory capacity is often mainly focused on economic dimensions, new regulation frameworks that concentrate on

social, environmental and long-term financial sustainability should be integrated within existing economic regulation systems (Koppenjan & Enserink, 2009, p. 293).

Many of nowadays' policy issues that concern safety, health or the environment are complex issues - so-called 'wicked problems' - and have to be dealt with under a high level of uncertainties (Van Bueren et al., 2003, p. 193). These uncertainties are sorted as 1) cognitive uncertainty of not knowing much about the causes and effects of the problem; 2) a strategic uncertainty of not knowing to where exactly the actions of a high number of actors involved will lead; and 3) an institutional uncertainty of not being able to oversee the relations between all interventions taken at many different institutions, on various levels. It is argued by Van Bueren et al. (2014) that this uncertainty in addition to inherent trade-offs between actors and ambiguity of responsibility for the policy objective among individual actors can block problem-solving in wicked problems.

Social sustainability as a dynamic concept

If we consider the implementation of social sustainability in area development as a wicked problem because of the multiplicity of interpretations of social sustainability and because of the high number of public and private actors and disciplines involved in area development projects, we must be aware of the cognitive, strategic and institutional uncertainties during the implementation process (Van Bueren et al., 2014). In area development projects, tensions between short-term and long-term, and between economic and environmental or social objectives affect the way that social objectives are translated into operational outcomes in projects. Market-driven incentives and political episodes are part of area development projects and leave a mark on the way that social sustainability is operationalized. As has been warned by researchers (Davidson, 2010; Woodcraft, 2012), fundamental values such as social equity are vulnerable to be forgotten or to be replaced by less radical values such as social cohesion in situations of conflict.

However, it must be taken into account that social sustainability objectives are often in essence too conceptual to be operationalized in perfect accordance with an ideal situation, left aside what this ideal situation would be. As area development projects are multi-actor governance processes including interaction through networks and partnerships, policy implementation through those projects always involves multiple perspectives and interests. During this process of policy implementation, social objectives and the ways that they are operationalized are shaped by the interaction between various public and private actors in area development projects. From this respect, social sustainability can be considered as a dynamic concept that evolves from conceptual definitions and normative dimensions to operational indicators during area development projects.

Analytical approach: urban governance of social sustainability

In this research, we aim to identify variables that affect the implementation of social sustainability in area development projects. Therefore, we will apply an analytical approach that addresses the relations between institutions, actors and their activities from an urban governance point of view. Urban governance is concerned with the way that strategic resources are mobilized by leading actors in cities, which are not considered to be merely the local state but also to be corporate or societal actors (Ansell & Torfing, 2016, p. 479). If we consider a neoliberal society that is based on free choices, a market-economy and limited political power for social and economic interventions as our societal context, adequate forms of urban governance are needed to warrant social values (Jessop, 2002, p. 470).

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When concentrating on the various public and private actors that are involved in area development projects, an urban governance perspective is supportive to the analysis of the implementation process by identifying social partnerships, negotiated agreements and ways of coordinations among actors (Ansell & Torfing 2016, p. 479). While an urban governance setting in which several public, private and societal actors collaborate raises expectations for higher efficiency, effectiveness and legitimacy, this type of governance also raises some severe normative issues concerning accountability, inclusion and throughout legitimacy (Ansell & Torfing, 2016, p. 402). When referring to the operational framework of Dixon and Woodcraft (2013), it inevitable that normative issues mentioned will play a central role in the analysis of the implementation of social sustainability. As the perceived dimension of social sustainability, - 'social and cultural life' - is difficult to quantify and risky to invest in for market parties, the question raises to what extent market parties are accountable for its operationalization in a governance setting. In addition, 'voice and influence' is a dimension that concerns the inclusion of inhabitants as actors in decision-making processes, so the question raises to what extent inhabitants are represented by the actors involved in the governance setting.

Conclusion: Need for empirical research on governance performance in area development projects

Concluding, the implementation of social sustainability in area development projects is a governance process that is affected by the tension between political decisions from the public side and economic forces from the private side. If we consider social sustainability as an issue that requires political decisions in a market-driven society, we must be aware that its implementation is affected in several ways. Social sustainability is a dynamic concept that evolves from conceptual definitions and normative dimensions to operational indicators during area development projects. When brought into practice, fundamental values of social sustainability as a promotion of quality of life, as a democratic, equal and diverse condition or as a just city are translated into operational forms during a governance process in which interventions and investments are decided upon by various public and private actors.

Therefore, it is hypothesized that the outcomes of social sustainability in area development are dependent on various aspects of this governance process. In this PhD research, we are especially interested in getting to know the variables that affect this governance process and in understanding how they are related to social sustainability. Further research will focus on the governance performance as the main variable which influences the extent that objectives for social sustainability are eventually realized in practice.

By reviewing the variables that affect the governance process, this research will contribute to a better understanding of how different actors translate the concept of social sustainability and how decisions on interventions in area development project are made. We acknowledge that there is a discrepancy between policy and practice and aim to develop an insight in the processes that explains this observation. Based on the findings, we will better understand the steering possibilities to implement social sustainability in practice, in order to advise city planners, real estate developers and other actors of area development on how to contribute to socially sustainable environments.

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