10th EMES International Research Conference on Social Enterprise

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Scaling Through Communities: The role of Social Entrepreneurs and Social Enterprises in Boosting Societal Transitions

Rotterdam School of Management - Erasmus University
Utrecht University
3 - 7 November 2025

ESCP-10EMES-01

How do citizen collectives navigate tensions in scaling for transformative change?

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BEST
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Contents

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HOW DO CITIZEN COLLECTIVES NAVIGATE TENSIONS IN SCALING FOR TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE?

Abstract

Citizen collectives in the Netherlands are increasingly recognized as promising drivers of social cohesion, societal resilience and transformations in areas such as climate, energy, or health. As such, scaling the activities of these collectives is considered desirable. Yet scaling processes present inherent pressures and tensions, such as maintaining a grassroots nature while professionalizing and adapting to established institutional structures, which may compromise collectives' impact on societal transformation. A critical gap remains in understanding how citizen collectives practically navigate scaling processes and resolve the tensions inherent to growth phases.

Building on theoretical distinctions between scaling up, out and deep, we explore how citizen collectives navigate processes of scaling, and particularly the paradox it presents of adapting to institutional requirements - such as professionalization and formalization - to secure funding and legitimacy, while facing risks of losing connection to local communities or diluting the democratic ethos. We draw on a qualitative analysis to examine how citizen collectives experience scaling, what tensions arise through their scaling processes, and how they navigate those tensions.

By offering empirically grounded insights into how citizen collectives experience and navigate scaling processes, our study contributes both to academic debates on the scaling of citizen initiatives as well as provide insights for (networks of) citizen collectives, practitioners and policymakers on how to support and accommodate citizen collectives while ensuring ownership remains with the collectives themselves.

Keywords

1. Introduction

Enhancing citizen collectives in the Netherlands is increasingly recognized as a promising strategy to enhance social cohesion, strengthen societal resilience, restore trust in government, and drive transformative societal change in areas such as climate, energy, safety and health (Bekkers et al., 2023; Berigüete et al., 2023). These grassroots initiatives tend to be characterized by their collaborative governance structures, social missions, and non-profit orientation. Thereby they offer an organizational model distinct from either government or private sector that aligns closely with the principles of a social enterprise (Defourny et al., 2021), but not fully. In particular, the social issues that they address may not be solvable by applying the existing logic and assumptions of markets which for social enterprises act as a scaling mechanism (Riddell and Moore, 2015). This suggests that citizen collectives may require alternative frameworks for support and scaling, and fostering the growth of citizen collectives calls for rethinking such conditions as institutional arrangements, funding mechanisms, and policy approaches to better accommodate their unique logic and potential for systemic transformation.

Governments at the EU, national and local scale have recognized their potential for addressing social and environmental challenges and have introduced supportive measures. In the energy domain, for example, recent EU directives formally recognize both 'citizen energy communities' and 'renewable energy communities' (Lazaroiu et al., 2025). At the national level, examples from the Netherlands include subsidy schemes for collective energy projects, the 'Right to Challenge' amendment in social support law, and goals for 50% local ownership of wind and solar parks by 2030 (De Participatiecoalitie, 2020). These efforts aim to expand the reach and impact of citizen collectives in order to most effectively address societal challenges like the energy transition, as well as to engender overall societal support for sustainable alternatives to the current energy system. This shows an ambition for collectives to increase and consolidate their impact and reach – in other words, to scale and generate transformation.

Yet, scaling citizen collectives presents inherent tensions (Baileche et al., 2024; Jochemsen et al., 2022; Van Lunenburg, 2024). While growth is often necessary to broaden influence and address systemic issues, it risks compromising the grassroots nature and core values that make these initiatives locally embedded and effective in the first place (Baileche et al., 2024). This tension is a critical issue for citizen collectives: as they adapt to institutional requirements - such as professionalization and formalization - to secure funding and legitimacy, they may face risks of losing their connection to local communities or diluting their democratic ethos (Jochemsen et al., 2022). This failure to deliver on original intentions as a consequence of success highlights the delicate balance between expanding impact and preserving foundational values such as authenticity, local embeddedness, social cohesion, shared ownership, and community-driven decision-making.

This paradox raises two crucial questions that require stronger empirical scrutiny. A first question concerns how citizen collectives approach scaling strategies and experience the associated tensions. As will be discussed more below, scaling is often approached from the logic of increasing the size of initiatives or replicating them elsewhere (scaling out) (Bauwens et al., 2020; Moore et al., 2015), whereas impact at the institutional

level (scaling up) or in people's values and worldviews (scaling deep) are just as vital for achieving collectives' social innovation goals. As put to words by Riddell and Moore (2015: 2): *"From a social innovation perspective, large-scale change will necessarily involve changes to rules, resource flows, cultural beliefs and relationships in a social system at multiple spatial or institutional scales. However, in social entrepreneurship and social enterprise studies, the emphasis on "scaling for impact" often reflects a product and consumer orientation, synonymous with diffusion or replication."*

Secondly, we examine not just the tensions as experienced by citizen collectives, but also the strategies they use to navigate them. A critical gap in current scholarship remains in understanding how collectives practically navigate scaling processes and resolve inherent tensions during growth phases (Baileche et al., 2024; Marradi and Mulder, 2022).

This leads to the following research questions:

- RQ1: How do citizen collectives themselves experience scaling, and what tensions do they experience?
- RQ2: What strategies do collectives use to navigate the tensions that arise during scaling processes?

Drawing on interviews with representatives of diverse Dutch citizen collectives, supplemented by insights from an ongoing case study zooming in on one collective's growth process, our empirical study aims to contribute to answering these questions. Ultimately, our study aims to contribute to developing more nuanced and effective approaches to supporting citizen collectives in their promising role in addressing societal challenges.

The paper is structured as follows. In the next section, we discuss existing insights on citizen collectives, scaling, and its challenges. After an overview of our methodological approach in section 3, our results section tackles three topics: how our informants describe their approaches to scaling, the main tensions they experience, and the strategies they use to deal with them. In the final section, we offer several overarching conclusions and implications for scholarship and practice..

2. Theoretical background: tensions in the scaling of citizen collectives

2.1. The promises of citizen collectives

The Covid crisis in the Netherlands has raised awareness of the value of strong local communities. Increasingly, community building, strengthening 'community spirit', or fostering a 'sense of community' is seen as an important system challenge for Dutch society, often framed as a shift from less 'I' to more 'we' (Cadat-Lampe et al., 2020). This desired shift in cultural orientation as a driver for social change is explicitly mentioned in the vision of an increasing number of citizen collectives and advocates of these collectives (for instance: Afrikaanderwijk Cooperatie, 2016; Collectief Peel Positief, 2025; We Doen Het Samen Coalitie, 2025). Currently, there are around 7.400 citizen collectives in the Netherlands, focused on providing alternatives for the energy system, housing or care (Bekkers et al., 2023).

Citizen collectives are groups of citizens with a shared goal, generally centered around a commonly managed good or service, initiated and led from the bottom up by citizens themselves (De Moor et al., 2025). They are assumed to foster connection, resilience, and social cohesion at the community level. Furthermore, a key quality of citizen collectives is their local embeddedness. Local embeddedness refers to the deep integration of an organization, business, or initiative within the social, cultural, and physical context of a specific place (Sharafizad et al., 2022). It means that an entity is not only located in a community but is also shaped by and actively participates in local social structures - such as relationships, norms, and regulations - while drawing on local resources and contributing to the area's well-being. The rationale for governments to support the scaling (the principle) of citizen collectives is that by scaling these local strengths, their positive effects can be extended to society at large (De Moor et al., 2025).

2.2. A typology of scaling

A common understanding of scaling from which much work (explicitly or implicitly) departs is the notion of scaling out, which refers to the expansion of initiatives in terms of their size (e.g. membership) or their geographic scope (e.g. through expansion towards or replication in other locations). While this form of scaling is usually the starting point for citizen collectives, many of them sooner or later discover that growing, expanding or extending their initiative is hampered by current rules, resource flows, cultural beliefs and relationships in the social system at multiple spatial or institutional scales (De Moor et al., 2025; Riddell and Moore, 2015). Scholars have highlighted how the notion of 'scaling out', particularly in the context of social innovation and citizen initiatives, should be supplemented by (at least) two other forms: scaling up (institutional changes) and scaling deep (cultural transformation) (Lam et al., 2020; Moore et al., 2015). Scaling up pertains to embedding practices within institutional frameworks, e.g. codifying them into policies or legal frameworks, while scaling deep targets the deeper viewpoints and values - such as fostering belonging, resilience, or participatory mindsets - that underpin citizen collectives' missions (Moore et al., 2015). Both scaling up and scaling deep put pressures on a system, varying from benign deblocking activities to destabilization or

even destruction of the old system to make way for a new one (Schulz et al., 2020). Unlike commercial innovations, social innovations often cannot rely on market forces to scale, as they may be tackling market failures or challenging the very assumptions underpinning those markets (Riddell and Moore, 2015).

All these forms of scaling are important to consider when scaling for systemic social change. However, while a combination of these scaling pathways is more likely to advance transformative change goals than any pathway on its own, attention to these pathways appears unequally divided. While scaling out is frequently discussed in work on scaling, and scaling up is sometimes addressed, the topic of scaling deep has received relatively little attention in transitions literature so far (Laurent and Violle, 2024; Moore et al., 2015; Pfotenhauer et al., 2022). The limited attention to scaling up and deep in the literature is a significant limitation in light of the larger challenges that citizen collectives are purported to help tackle. Addressing major social and environmental challenges will require more than technological changes; they require reorienting the policy frameworks and underlying values and relational dynamics that shape how communities and societies function.

2.3. Scaling tensions

The distinct organizational form of citizen collectives – shaped by collective agency, decentralized governance, and local embeddedness – results in specific challenges that necessitates a tailored analytical lens to elicit and address them (Baileche et al., 2024). Existing literature already sheds some light on several of the conflicts and challenges citizen collectives face as they attempt to scale. For example, growth can strain internal cohesion: what worked well in a small, trust-based group may falter when new members join who do not share the same history or values. Decision-making processes that were once informal and inclusive may become inefficient or contested as the group grows (Dupuits et al., 2020)strategies to protect and secure the local commons such as water resources have been increasingly scaled up. Consequently, local communities have started to engage in transnational mobilisations to defend their rights and express their concerns. This often implies the adoption and institutionalisation of emerging global norms, principles and modes of framing and claiming – such as the Human Right to Water or the Rights of Nature – which will interfere with and may even go against local understandings, meaning, and rooted struggles or initial claims made by grassroots movements. On the one hand, the appropriation of expert knowledge and technical idiom may improve their recognition and access to political and financial support. On the other hand, transnational involvement may (re. Externally, collectives often face resistance from established institutions or regulatory frameworks that are not designed to accommodate grassroots initiatives. Scaling may also bring collectives into closer contact with market forces, which can create pressure to professionalize, commercialize, or compromise on core values in order to secure funding or legitimacy. Moreover, many citizen collectives are formed in response to systemic failures, such as environmental degradation, social exclusion, or economic inequality. As they scale, they may find themselves confronting the systems they aim to change, leading to conflicts with powerful actors or entrenched interests. This can result in anything from bureaucratic pushback to co-optation or outright suppression. These divergent perspectives complicate efforts to define shared goals for scaling.

In summary, we have depicted the expectations of citizen collectives movement (the 'promise') and described how scaling is perceived as the way to fulfill that promise, taking place via three scaling pathways: out, up, and deep. The aforementioned literature illustrates the fundamental tension between self-chosen and/or externally imposed scaling ambitions and the preservation of 'grassroots' principles – the scaling paradox.

3. Methodology

The study followed an abductive approach, in which we iteratively moved between theory and empirical data. An abductive approach does not aim to 'check' the alignment between empirical data and a fully predefined theoretical framework (as in deductive work), nor does it work fully bottom-up from the data (as in inductive approaches). Rather, it involves entering the field with initial theoretical notions and sensitizing concepts, encountering initial empirical surprises, puzzles and doubts, then going back to theory and moving iteratively from there (Van Hulst and Visser, 2025). Therefore, the study relied on existing theoretical frameworks for scaling and its effects (Baileche et al., 2024; Lam et al., 2020; Moore et al., 2015), to arrive at an improved understanding of its practical implications.

3.1. Data Collection

This qualitative study was based on 13 semi-structured in-depth interviews and analysis of the relevant collectives' documents. Additionally, we analyzed our interactions with one initiative in particular, the citizen collective of Peel Positief in the Peel region of the Netherlands, which is a partner ('living lab') in a research program on empowering citizen collectives in which two of the authors are involved. Peel Positief explicitly incorporates scaling goals, as its main way of working is to support other local citizens' initiatives. Guided by values such as cooperation, trust, transparency, and individual responsibility, the collective maintains a strong focus on its mission to make the region *"100% circular"* and *"100% inclusive"* by 2033 (Collectief Peel Positief, 2025).

3.1.1. Interviews

The 13 informants represented 8 citizen collectives and 4 supporting associations, selected for diversity in size, goals, structure, and scaling ambitions. The sample included energy cooperatives, neighborhood initiatives, regional platforms, and national support organizations (see Table 1), differing in their collaboration with municipalities and geographic scope. Hence, the interviews captured a range of voices and perspectives of citizen collectives, allowing us to reveal recurring scaling tensions and mitigation strategies. Names and affiliations were anonymized to protect privacy.

Informant	Organisation	Role
1	A	City-level collective organization – supporting citizens and local initiatives
2	B	Energy collective
3	C	Organization connecting and supporting smaller collectives
4	D	Neighborhood organization
5	E	Region-level collective organization – supporting citizens and local initiatives
6	E	Region-level collective organization – supporting citizens and local initiatives
7	F	Supporting neighborhood organizations
8	G	National-level collective organization – Organizing and supporting other collectives
9	H	Energy collective
10	I	City-level collective organization – supporting citizens and local initiatives
11	J	National-level collective organization – Organizing and supporting other collectives
12	K	Energy collective
13	L	National-level collective organization – Organizing and supporting other collectives

Table 1. List of informants

3.1.2. Reflexive sessions

We held two 4-hour reflexive monitoring sessions (cf. van Mierlo et al., 2015) and several follow-up conversations with the citizen collective of Peel Positief, focusing on their scaling strategies, internal dynamics, and external challenges. Our participatory observations, anonymized with consent, enriched the interview data and offered deeper insight into collective scaling processes.

3.1.3. Desk study

Interview findings were triangulated with documents from the collectives, such as websites, reports, and policy papers, providing context and validation for the analysis.

3.2. Analysis

We focused our analysis on the following dimensions:

- Growth intentions: understanding whether collectives aspire to grow and their motivations for doing so.

- Scaling conceptualisations: views on scaling and how it is operationalized in practice; the practical strategies they employ to achieve growth.

- Impacts of scaling: examining how scaling processes transform the collective, its members, characteristics and key relationships.

- Challenges/tensions and mitigation strategies: identifying the challenges collectives encounter as they scale and the approaches used to address these.

This framework structured the analysis of interviews to 1) conceptualize how collectives approach scaling, 2) identify the tensions and challenges inherent in scaling, and 3) analyze how collectives adapt and respond to these challenges.

The interviews were thematically analysed using Atlas.ti. Initial results were collaboratively reviewed by the author team in two subsequent sessions. During these sessions, themes were refined, and connections were drawn between different experiences and interpretations of tensions, their implications, and the strategies employed by collectives in response.

4. Results

We set out to explore how scaling is experienced and approached by citizen collectives and which strategies they used in addressing the tensions that (tend to) come with scaling.

4.1. Approaches to scaling

The research explored, first, the various approaches to scaling discussed by our informants, which we categorized into scaling out (expanding reach), scaling up (institutional change), and scaling deep (transforming mindsets and values). These forms are often deeply interconnected. For example, many informants perceive expanding reach (scaling out) as a pathway to deeper societal change (scaling deep). Informant 5, for instance, mentioned that growth is about *"the number of people who are in the community, but also, within the community, how people know each other and how they can work together"*, signaling both scaling out and scaling deep.

Most of the activities of the collectives focused on scaling out, such as increasing membership, acquiring funding, or increasing the number of activities, possibly because these are more tangible, operationalizable, visible or required by external stakeholders. As Informant 8 explains: *"You need to have activities, projects that people like; [...] with a mobility collective you need to have cars to share, or you need to have a bus service that goes to the rural areas, goes to the very small villages to pick up children to go to school. You need to have these activities. I think the leverage for scaling is activity."*

Concrete examples of scaling up are less abundant, perhaps because this is not always explicitly stated as a goal, making such activities less visible. Examples include activities focused on persuading local councilors, aiming to increasing a collective's or region's visibility, and recognizing that alternative organizational approaches, similar to those used in neighboring regions and larger adjacent cities, could be more effective. Such efforts are aimed at gaining greater political and policy influence.

The interviews demonstrated that this desire for deep scaling was nearly universal among the collectives surveyed. Their objectives consistently included social innovation goals such as fostering inclusion, community involvement and social support, alongside technical goals such as the adoption of renewable energy. This was reflected in some of their activities. For instance, collectives could prioritize activities that influence socialization, inclusion, or social transformation in the local environment, such as by creating educational projects, or developing community centers. However, in many cases scaling deep was mostly prominent in the collectives' ambitions, while their actions focused more on scaling out - focusing on increasing the number of people involved, rather than the activities' social and cultural influence.

4.2. Key scaling tensions

We have distinguished two main strands of tensions. First, a more externally focused tension - between remaining autonomous and staying true to your goals and decisions as a collective on the one hand; and a dependency on external resources and recognition

of external institutions, mainly, the (local) government - on the other. Second, an internally focused tension - between remaining inclusive and prioritizing bottom-up decision-making, local norms, issues and people, and professionalizing, centralizing your organization structure and focusing on governance models that prioritize the collective's success within the wider regime. We unpack these tensions and their implications below.

4.2.1. External tensions - Autonomy versus dependency

Citizen collectives often face a trade-off between autonomy and access to external resources. Collectives often rely on long-term commitments from local governments to sustain their activities, especially when it comes to funding and sharing mandates. The tension inherent in this dynamic is rooted in the fact that collectives often require access to resources – including financial capital, expertise, and networks – to achieve growth. Yet such resources are frequently contingent upon maintaining positive relationships with governmental actors or other institutional parties. While collectives may seek to benefit from these relationships to facilitate their expansion, this reliance introduces a critical trade-off: increased dependence on external sources can compromise the autonomy of the collective. For example, as they scale and rely on external funding, collectives may find their goals increasingly aligned with those of funders, sometimes at the expense of their own mission or values. Informant 1, for instance, referred to this by saying that *"because we get a subsidy, there are all kinds of rules behind this when we want to scale"*. The informant then described a case where as they got more municipal funding, they also adapted to prioritize the regions of their local area that their municipality prioritized, rather than the farther and less well-off regions they initially prioritized.

Hence, collectives may feel (or be) forced to prioritize different goals or activities to benefit their relationship with local authorities. Informants highlighted how legal frameworks, such as competitive tendering laws, reinforce these pressures. For example, Dutch procurement laws require collectives to compete with large corporations for funding, often based on criteria like return on investment or energy output. These criteria overlook the unique strengths of collectives - such as community engagement and democratic governance - forcing them to adopt business-like models to remain competitive.

Further, the collectives informing us which were more dependent on municipal funding also tended to exhibit higher levels of formalization and structured procedures; a relationship suggesting that external funding requirements may drive internal organizational changes. Such partnerships come with increased expectations of accountability, as collectives must demonstrate that their efforts are effective and justify how public resources are used. Municipalities, however, frequently condition subsidies on observable growth indicators, such as increases in membership, economic output, or the number of activities undertaken. These quantifiable metrics prioritize scaling out and can marginalize less tangible forms of growth, such as cultural impact or community cohesion (scaling deep). Informant 10 described this issue by saying that *"the big risk [is] that you transform more into a project organization instead of an organization of citizens"* showing their fear of losing the social embeddedness of their collective. However, the same informant also acknowledged that *"you know, if you receive money from the city then they also want to know what you're going to do with it"*, exemplifying the careful balancing of both aspects.

Yet the quantification and accountability logic every so often thwarts scaling attempts. Collective A provides an example: this collective aimed to engage young people by organizing events such as pop concerts or bike rides but faced the challenge of explaining the value of these activities to municipal stakeholders questioning their direct impact. While it is crucial for collectives to reach diverse groups to enhance their legitimacy - including harder-to-engage groups - this also highlights the tension around the demand for clear, quantifiable, evidence-based accountability.

4.2.2. Internal tensions - Informalisation versus formalisation

Scaling often necessitates changes in organizational structure, including the introduction of formal governance roles and increased reliance on experts, as a way to manage the growth process. This shift can lead to a centralization of decision-making power, potentially at the expense of grassroots, bottom-up participation, and inclusivity (Simcock, 2016; van Bommel and Höffken, 2021). For instance, energy communities face significant risks when developing large-scale projects such as heat grids, which can require investments of 30 million euros or more. To finance these projects, collectives often need to take out substantial loans and partner with commercial companies, which increases the risk of losing control over the initiative. As a result, collectives with a large technical element to their projects because of being linked to critical infrastructures are especially vulnerable to losing their community-driven character as they scale up and seek external funding.

Role shifts as a result of the pressure or wish to professionalize may also lead to tension. As collectives grow, founding members may be replaced by individuals with more technical backgrounds, altering the collective's character and potentially leading to alienation among original members and the broader community. Informant 13 described this shift, explaining how *"from a scale up gradually you see a shift in type of management. You can see first more the 'pioneers' and later on more the 'managers.'"* He further described that *"if a cooperative is not willing to scale [out], let's say, to professionalize, they are marginalized"*. Informant 2 further described how most board members in their collective joined relatively recently and with more 'technical' knowledge, and this pattern was a recurring theme. In practice, this meant that growing collectives tend to become more of an amalgam of citizens and other (professional) roles, e.g. partnerships between government, business and citizens, resulting in a rebalancing of decision-making power that highlights the role of the professional. As Informant 8 said, *"[when you] have these meetings with the members and professionals [then] the agency is of course with the professionals"*.

The shift toward more professionalized roles within collectives can thus reduce the influence of volunteers, creating a significant tension between viability and collective spirit. While relying too heavily on a small group of volunteers risks burnout and threatens organizational continuity, introducing paid positions can demotivate those who previously contributed unpaid time, leading them to question the value of their own efforts - as highlighted by Informant 1: *"The moment we got money to pay certain people... it changed our organization. Because the volunteers got motivational problems."*

This dynamic is further complicated by instability in membership and leadership. A neighbourhood collective representative noted that in their collective, frequent turnover

and conflicting interests make it difficult to maintain a stable, unified vision or to follow through on agreements with local authorities. The lack of stability not only undermines internal cohesion but also weakens the collective's credibility and effectiveness within the broader ecosystem, making it challenging to build a clear, shared agenda and sustain meaningful engagement

A related challenge lies in ensuring inclusivity within community collectives. Representativeness remains difficult to reach, not only due to the amount of time and energy needed to reach out and actively involve all citizens in a neighbourhood or district, but also because not all citizens want to be included. Collectives also struggle with the question of who should be responsible for this vital but demanding task. While it is unrealistic to expect volunteers to sustain efforts toward inclusive representation year after year, hiring a professional to address the issue is not always effective either. Communities may not trust an external professional, which can limit their impact and undermine the intended outcomes. Informant 8 illustrates: *"[Citizen collectives] might not trust the professional unless they see this professional really as someone working for other citizens, then it's still citizen to citizen […] you actually have two very successful civic enterprises in Rotterdam […] and they are only successful because people in those neighborhoods recognize those enterprises as of their own […] they are trustworthy because they're from the neighborhood."* This tension highlights the need for thoughtful approaches that balance professional support with genuine community engagement.

4.3. Key strategies to navigate tensions

We analyzed which strategies collectives deployed to address the tensions described above and categorized them along the same lines: strategies that aimed to address 1) the autonomy versus dependency tensions, and 2) the tensions of informalisation versus formalisation.

4.3.1. Strategies that mitigate autonomy versus dependency tensions

- *Explicitly targeting institutional structures/frameworks (scaling up)*

Informants indicated that citizen collectives could become more autonomous and experience less scaling tensions if the existing institutional frameworks would be adapted to fit their unique structures. In practice, this can involve allowing collectives to not compete in the same tenders for funding as commercial companies (Informant 10), or having a dedicated municipal representative for collectives to work with (Informant 4). By having rules and regulations, as well as a governmental organisation structure, that enable and support collective organization, citizen collectives could experience less external pressure to work differently than they wish to and allow for more autonomy, potentially benefitting their capacity (and time, energy) to focus on their own priorities. Recognizing that municipalities often focus on setting boundaries and frameworks while collectives are driven by action and implementation, collectives can use these channels to clarify what is possible within current structures and advocate for necessary flexibility. Informant 9, for example, referred to this by saying that to mitigate tensions you must *"drink a cup of tea face to face [with the municipality]"* and *"make sure that there are a lot of contacts between the residents, your employees, and the employees of the municipality"*.

Targeting institutional structures was identified especially by informants from groups supporting citizen collectives, who, for example through lobbying, aimed to change higher-order institutional structures. While the collectives themselves highlighted the impacts of changing institutional frameworks, they focused less on it in their activities.

- *External communication (combining scaling up and deep)*

To foster effective collaboration and sustainable growth, collectives attempted to proactively establish and maintain open communication channels with municipalities and other stakeholders, especially where strong existing relationships could serve as a foundation for dialogue and partnership. Related to the previous strategy, Informant 12 described how they resolve their tensions not only with the municipality but also other organisations by *"sitting at the table together to discuss all these issues with each other"*. Improving external representation and communication, therefore, was seen as a way to reduce the tensions collectives experience from their funders or other stakeholders as they scale, which could then allow them to scale in more sustainable ways. Representative organisations can further play an important supporting role, by lobbying on behalf of collectives and acting as mediators within the broader system, helping to resolve conflicts and align interests. By developing a network of communication, leveraging associations for advocacy and mediation, and clarifying the scope for action, collectives can hence navigate external pressures, maintain their community-driven character, and achieve meaningful impact.

4.3.2. Strategies that mitigate informalisation versus formalisation tensions

- *Balancing centralized coordination with decentralized autonomy (combining scaling out and deep)*

Scaling an initiative does not necessarily result in a loss of social cohesion. In fact, scaling – if done deliberately – can actually strengthen social ties, improve connectivity, and enhance accessibility for communities. Particularly centralization of decision-making and coordination is sometimes seen as a threat to the core values or cohesion of an initiative, especially when it happens reactively or under pressure. However, when used intentionally and strategically as part of the scaling process, a more nuanced approach to centralization can also help initiatives grow effectively without necessarily eroding their foundational values. The main mitigation strategy is not to rigidly adhere to either decentralization or centralization, but rather to consciously select a scaling strategy that fits the values and needs of the movement. This balanced approach ensures that growth does not come at the cost of identity or social connectedness.

Indeed, several informants referred to forms of a hybrid governance model that balances centralized strategic oversight and coordination with decentralized action. In such models, collectives organize as a federation wherein overarching governance provides representation, facilitates networking, and centralizes knowledge sharing and standardization efforts, such as the development of shared software platforms or dashboards. At the same time, the core functions of implementation and community engagement remain rooted within local collectives, which retain decision-making autonomy and the capacity to tailor initiatives to their specific contexts. Informant 13

referred to this by stating that *"the negative effects on social cohesion, you can counter that by organizing yourself on a smaller scale… let's say, by creating sub-cooperatives or by creating local initiatives"*. This dual structure not only ensures coherence and alignment across the network but also fosters ownership at the grassroots level, thereby enabling citizen collectives to achieve both scalability and meaningful local impact. According to Moore et al. (2015), a hybrid model combining elements of 'scaling out' (spreading to more locations) and 'scaling deep' (strengthening values and relationships) could for instance involve setting up a national knowledge platform or learning network. Such a structure allows individual initiatives to access shared resources and expertise while retaining their local identity.

For members of the overarching governing group, this implies the ability to delegate responsibilities. Some informants address the challenge of remaining true to their original intentions while adapting to new contexts and onboarding new members by establishing a set of non-negotiable values to guide decision-making and inclusion of new initiatives. Informant 5, for example, highlighted a set of values guiding their collective, aligning with their collective's main goal. All participants and projects must, in some way, align with these values. Through these, the informant believed that they can ensure that their collective does not stray too far from its purpose as it grows, even if decision-making autonomy is dispersed.

- *Considering social goals (and explicitly planning for them) (scaling deep)*

To maintain local embeddedness, an effective strategy appears to be prioritising social goals, such as community cohesion, alongside technical objectives like enabling circular economy. Both Informants 1 and 5 highlight that achieving broader societal aims depends on organizing people at the neighborhood level, building trust, and encouraging active participation. As articulated by Informant 1: *"To reach this goal, we need to go into the neighborhoods and organize people in their streets, in their neighborhood. You can only reach this circular society when people are organized in communities."* Social cohesion should be seen not as a mere byproduct, but as a crucial factor for success, especially in initiatives like district heating networks where high participation rates are needed and trust is key. By maintaining social goals as a core aspect of the collective's contributions, collectives were less prone to compromise the communal nature of the collective in favour of economic or environmental goals.

Still, the importance of prioritizing broad engagement may vary depending on the collective's mission: for energy projects that require either large investments or a set minimum acceptance rate, broad neighborhood buy-in is essential, while local health collectives may allow for more voluntary participation.

- *Internal communication and reflection (scaling deep)*

Effective communication within collectives proved essential for navigating the challenges of remaining inclusive while professionalising. Internal exchange and collective reflection were considered crucial for building trust, sharing knowledge, and maintaining a sense of shared purpose among members, especially as collectives grow and welcome new informants with diverse values and perspectives. Informant 1 highlighted the ongoing challenge of onboarding new members: *"When you grow and all the time, you have new people. You have to tell them what's the history, why things are organized like they are.*

Communication is a topic and I think that 50% of what we do is communication." Collectives also emphasized the need to adapt communication styles to diverse audiences and to maintain open channels for dialogue and feedback. One very tangible way to achieve more internal exchange was the availability and accessibility of physical meeting spaces.

5. Conclusion

This study set out to understand how citizen collectives experience the process of scaling and the tensions that arise from it, as well as the strategies they employ to navigate these challenges. The findings reveal that collectives perceive scaling as a multifaceted process, encompassing not only expansion in size and reach ('scaling out') and increased institutionalization ('scaling up'), but also deeper transformation in community values and relationships ('scaling deep'). While many collectives aspire to achieve broad societal change and foster inclusion, they often find their day-to-day activities shaped by more tangible, externally driven goals, such as increasing membership or delivering visible projects. This practical focus is frequently influenced by the expectations of external stakeholders, particularly local governments and other funders, who tend to prioritize measurable outcomes and accountability.

Two central tensions emerged from these experiences of scaling. Firstly, externally, collectives face a trade-off between maintaining their autonomy and accessing the resources necessary for growth and sustainability. Dependence on municipal funding, legal frameworks, and institutional recognition often leads to increased formalization and professionalization, pushing collectives to align their goals and practices with those of external actors. This can dilute the collective's original mission and grassroots character, especially when accountability mechanisms prioritize quantifiable results over deeper social or cultural impacts. Secondly, internally, collectives grapple with the tension between informalisation and formalisation. As they grow and take on more complex projects, the need for formal governance roles and technical expertise can centralize decision-making and marginalize volunteers, potentially eroding community engagement and representativeness.

To address these tensions, collectives employ a range of strategies. Externally, they advocate for institutional frameworks that better accommodate their unique structures and values (scaling up), and seek to maintain open, strategic communication with stakeholders to negotiate flexibility and recognition (combining scaling up and deep). Internally, collectives emphasize the importance of hybrid governance models, where certain functions are centralised – such as lobbying, grant acquisition, strategic oversight – and others decentralised – decision-making on priority issues for instance (combining scaling out and deep). In addition, collectives put social goals on par with more technical goals (scaling deep). Prioritizing reflexive, inclusive dialogue is also a key tactic for maintaining local embeddedness and trust (scaling deep).

The study shows how many of the pressures that citizen collectives face as they scale are connected to their need to scale out, either due to their internal wishes or external pressures. For instance, the pressure to have more funding or do more activities causes tensions by increasing the dependency on funders and the need to professionalize. To reduce tensions in scaling, collectives appear prioritize strategies of scaling deep, or to combine scaling up or out with scaling deep. This suggests that sustainable scaling is less about expansion for its own sake, and more about cultivating resilience, cohesion, and rootedness as collectives grow. The study therefore demonstrates the importance of integrating scaling up and deep, in addition to scaling out, within frameworks of scaling citizen collectives.

6. Discussion

Collectives often set out with ambitious goals of broader societal transformation, yet as they grow, such ambitions must be reconciled with the practical realities of organizational development and external expectations. This research highlights two primary dimensions of tension that collectives encounter: those arising from their relationships with external stakeholders – particularly municipalities and funders – and those emerging from internal dynamics as collectives professionalize and expand.

Our findings support those found in previous literature. Firstly, as also found by Riddell and Moore (2015), all collectives engage in scaling out; as they grow, they quickly develop a need for more resources, both financially and in terms of capacity. Secondly, they then tend to focus on scaling up, deep, or mixed strategies. While this was also observed by Riddell and Moore (2015), our findings detail how this shift in attention appears to result from experienced tensions with, in particular, local governments and other funders. Furthermore, our findings show that the majority of collectives aim to deploy strategies for scaling deep, yet find it hard to operationalise this pathway. And while they consider strategies for scaling up equally important, deploying these lies mainly with representative umbrella organisations than with individual collectives.

The strategy of opting for hybrid forms of governance, where certain functions become centralized while others remain decentralized as collectives scale, makes a strong case for developing a framework that encourages 'scaling-aware' (Kersten, 2021) and 'system-aware' decision-making, so that organizations can choose and adapt their scaling strategies in alignment with their underlying mission and social fabric.

Generally, our findings support the previously articulated need for a social innovation perspective on scaling. In the words of Moore et al. (2015): *"scaling social innovations to effect larger-scale change involves a more complex and diverse process than simply 'diffusing' or spreading a product or model. It is important to learn about the process of how social systems and institutions can be deliberately impacted through the work of organizations, foundations, and other agents of change."* With this research, we have aimed to contribute to this learning process.

6.1. Implications: Scaling for societal transformation

In addition to contributing to academic debates on the scaling of citizen collectives, these results may provide insights for social innovation agents on how to support and accommodate citizen collectives. Yet this will entail careful reconsideration of terminology. In our experience, collectives themselves rarely use the word 'scaling', even though they use strategies that can be considered as such. Scaling deep, for instance, may translate more accurately to - and closer to the collectives' intrinsic motivation - 'alteration' or 'evolution'. The changes required for scaling often involve not only accumulation but also loss, meaning that the original form of the collective is not simply preserved or enlarged, but fundamentally altered. From the perspective of transformative change, the process of building up and breaking down, which marks systems transitions, also takes place within citizen collectives. In a certain sense, and to a certain extent, the experiment can be seen as the *"microcosmos of the regime"* (Schulz et al., 2020: 60).

This raises a question. Suppose that the regime responds supportively to collectives, making way for societal transformation by taking reforming and unblocking measures. At what point, then, does the scaling process end? We contribute three reflections and related avenues for future research.

Firstly, at what point does a group of citizens united around a societal goal stop being a citizen collective? In the past, cooperative initiatives have grown into businesses, mainly by professionalizing, for example the Rabobank or FrieslandCampina cooperatives which are now multinationals (De Moor, 2023). Increasingly, hybrid forms are emerging, where groups of citizens work together with, for instance, energy suppliers – or even professional developing companies designing their activities to fit the formal label of community energy projects (Bauwens et al., 2022). These are extreme examples, but where exactly does this boundary lie – and what does this mean for societal (funding, policy, legal (e.g. procurement) or other) support?

Secondly, and related, some informants have mentioned that their ultimate goal is to make their collective redundant - to achieve its mission means they can dissolve. Yet in practice they rarely actually plan for this as an end state; perhaps such a reframing would lead to different kinds of concrete activities and strategies for scaling?

Of course, there is a difference between the scaling of a single collective and the growth of a movement of collectives. Indeed, most collectives are expected to remain small, as was indicated by a few informants. But citizen collectives essentially serve as frontrunners of the 'citizen movement' - entrepreneurial citizens seeking to shape their own living environments. If collectives become central providers of social functions, will society truly become more resilient and inclusive – or might some groups be left out? Crucially, collectives' practical inclusivity doesn't equate to full representativeness, and they cannot wholly replace the government's role in representing the entire community. This raises important questions about their legitimacy, the standards by which they are evaluated, and the extent of their influence over public decision-making. Ultimately, this challenges the government to both support collectives and address the gaps they cannot fill, rather than seeing them as substitutes for state action. As Mattijssen (2022) argues, the government's strategy should balance support for citizen initiatives with a clear definition of its own ongoing responsibilities.

Despite transformative ambitions, there is a need for greater reflexivity regarding how growth affects both collectives and the wider community. Encouraging collectives to critically assess the implications of their scaling strategies – particularly in terms of inclusivity, autonomy, and societal change – may enhance their effectiveness and legitimacy. We advocate that findings from this and previous studies be used to develop and test methods to support collectives in this process.

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How do citizen collectives navigate tensions in scaling for transformative change?

ESCP-10EMES-01

27

Acknowledgements