Reasons behind neighbourhood activism over loss of open space

New Dutch research has investigated the composition and strategies of local activist groups who oppose changes to land use. The results indicated that activists tend to have a higher level of education and live in densely populated areas. They most frequently use awareness-raising strategies, especially when fighting new housing projects.

Although the effect of local activism is prominent in the public eye, it is an underexplored aspect of planning. Previous research has studied the motives behind activism and explored how politics might overcome local obstruction but little has been done on the nature of local opposition groups (LOGs) themselves or their strategies.

The study designed a self-administered survey to investigate the organisational form of LOGs and how this relates to the nature of the project they contest. It was distributed to Dutch LOGs that specifically fight the loss of open space. 51 responses were obtained from the main actors in the groups.

The main concerns of LOGs are losses of natural resources (73 per cent), identity of the place (65 per cent) and quality of life (61 per cent). The researchers noted that these concerns tended to be more abstract which might be in anticipation of political language, i.e. they refrain from expressing their concern too concretely because politics is primarily concerned with bigger issues.

In 83 per cent of cases the most important actor in the LOG lived adjacent to the project site. 39 per cent of respondents had a master’s degree, which is significantly greater than the national average of 11 per cent.

The types of land use that were most contested were housing sites (47 per cent) and commercial sites (28 per cent), which included office parks and manufacturing developments. There was a greater likelihood that an LOG would exist in areas with dense population, such as urban fringes, probably because an existing lack of open space increases concern about further loss.

The strategies used the most by LOGs (reported by over 50 per cent) were collecting signatures, distributing flyers, placing items in newspapers and websites. The most costly strategies were applied the least, such as installing equipment for recreational use, commissioning research on effects and suing. Interestingly, procedures and law suits were cited by many respondents as strategies they plan or expect to apply. A large number of respondents reported that they attended municipal council meetings and debates, but indicated this strategy had little success.

Further analysis into the link between LOGs and the nature of the project indicated that LOGs that protest against housing projects have a significant bias towards using awareness-raising strategies. Strategies based around law suits on nature protection legislation and environmental legislation were used more frequently for projects put forward at the provincial level compared with projects initiated by the municipality.

The research has provided previously unknown insights into LOGs but many questions still remain. One of the most important is: can the effectiveness of LOGs be measured and/or the final effects of LOG efforts quantified? What is clear is that LOGs are highly present in local planning processes and need a more careful and intelligent evaluation than merely considering them as ‘irritating’ activists.


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