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Self-organizing work in practice: the case of community-based flooding initiatives in Scotland

Kirsty Holstead[a] and Merlijn van Hulst[b]

[a]Public Administration and Policy, Wageningen University and Research, Wageningen, the Netherlands; [b]Department of Public Law and Governance, Tilburg University, Tilburg, the Netherlands

ABSTRACT

Public management scholars argue that addressing societal challenges increasingly requires the contribution of citizens, often through Community-based initiatives (CBIs), where citizens self-organize to deliver public services. We have a limited understanding of *how* CBIs work. Using a practice approach and walking interviews with Scottish flood groups, we show that their work involves bringing together activities, understandings, and resources through five practices: generating knowledge, establishing agendas, undertaking shared responses, building rapport and trust, and making counterclaims. We advance understanding of how CBI work is conducted on an everyday basis, showing how practices relate to each other and those of public bodies.

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Introduction

Addressing present-day societal challenges requires the contribution of citizens and communities, evidenced through public management trends and discourses around public-private partnerships, public service budget cuts and community empowerment (Blok, van Buuren, and Fenger 2023; Trischler, Dietrich, and Rundle-Thiele 2019). The public administration and management literature mainly provides insights into citizen participation and how communities can contribute more effectively to government-led, co-productive processes (Loeffler and Bovaird 2016; Nabatchi, Sancino, and Sicilia 2017; Voorberg, Bekkers, and Tummers 2015). Less is known about the self-organizing, co-creative contribution of citizens and communities to public services (Boonstra and Boelens 2011; Edelenbos et al. 2021a, 2021b; Grubb and Frederiksen 2022; Igalla, Edelenbos, and van Meerkerk 2020; Trischler, Dietrich, and Rundle-Thiele 2019; Voorberg, Bekkers, and Tummers 2015). These take the form of community-based initiatives (CBIs), understood as a citizen-led form of self-organization where citizens collectively define and carry out projects to provide public goods or services in their

CONTACT Kirsty Holstead kirsty.holstead@wur.nl
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communities (Blok, van Buuren, and Fenger 2023; Healey 2015; Igalla, Edelenbos, and van Meerkerk 2019). CBIs tend to be volunteer, grassroots groups that lead projects, while civil servants may facilitate or support them (Igalla, Edelenbos, and van Meerkerk 2021; H. L. Mees et al. 2019). Due to their increasing importance in contemporary governance and their contribution to social and environmental improvements, safety, economy, well-being and related public outcomes (Edelenbos, van Meerkerk, and Koppenjan 2017; Igalla, Edelenbos, and van Meerkerk 2019; Seyfang and Haxeltine 2012; Visser et al. 2023), it is pertinent to investigate how CBIs engage in public services (Edelenbos, Molenveld, and van Meerkerk 2021; Hupe 2022).

The literature on CBIs in public administration and management is growing. Recent contributions examine the emergence, impact of and support for CBIs (e.g. Gofen 2021; Igalla, Edelenbos, and van Meerkerk 2019, 2020, 2021) and CBI interactions with public bodies, mostly from the perspectives of the latter (e.g. Duijn et al. 2019; Edelenbos, van Meerkerk, and Koppenjan 2017; Kleinhans et al. 2023; H. L. Mees et al. 2019; Nederhand 2021). While some have studied CBI activities (Edelenbos, Molenveld, and van Meerkerk 2021), most have focused on drivers and barriers surrounding CBI activities without looking in more detail at the way CBIs actually endeavour to make valuable contributions and how these are achieved (Blok, van Buuren, and Fenger 2023). The literature misses fine-grained accounts of the work CBIs do and how its elements are connected and related to the work of others involved in public service provision (Fischer et al. 2017). Practically, extending knowledge of CBI work can help members of CBIs reflect on it and allow frontline workers to engage CBIs more productively.

In this paper, we use practice theory as a theoretical lens (Blijleven and van Hulst 2021; M. S. Feldman and Orlikowski 2011; Sandberg and Tsoukas 2011; Wagenaar 2004). Through practice theory, the work of CBIs can be understood as consisting of a set of practices that members engage in (Wagenaar 2004). Practices consist of activities driven by understandings and supported by resources (Blijleven and van Hulst 2021; Durose et al. 2022). Practice theory is increasingly used to investigate work in public management contexts (e.g. Blijleven and van Hulst 2021; Huijbregts, George, and Bekkers, 2022; Knox and Marin-Cadavid 2022; Trischler, Dietrich, and Rundle-Thiele 2019). Our empirical focus of the study community flood group practice in Scotland. We conducted walking interviews with 23 individuals active in flood groups to understand and analyse their practices through an examination of their activities, understandings and resources and how these are combined in addressing flood related concerns (Blijleven and van Hulst 2021). We use our case to provide an answer to the following research questions: What practices do CBIs engage in and how are these practices connected? How are CBI practices related to the work of public bodies?

With this paper, we contribute, first, to the development of a richer understanding of how CBI work is conducted on an everyday basis (Fischer et al. 2017), demonstrating which elements make up the work, how these are related to one another to form a meaningful whole (Sandberg and Tsoukas 2011). Looking 'over the shoulders' of participants (Geertz 1973, 452), we found that the work of the flood groups under study comprises five related practices: generating knowledge, establishing agendas, developing shared responses, building trust and making counterclaims. Second, we look into the relationship between the work of CBIs and public bodies, as this has been mostly done from the side of public bodies. In line with the contribution of practice theory to relational thinking (Bartels and Turnbull 2020; M. S. Feldman and

Orlikowski 2011), we extend our understanding of how CBI work relates to that of public bodies, arguing that *both* collaborating with and challenging public bodies can be sensible ways that CBIs develop their practices (Henderson, Escobar, and Revell 2021; van Meerkerk, Edelenbos, and Molenveld 2021).

The paper is structured as follows: First, we outline the theoretical background for the paper, focusing on community-based initiatives and practice theory. After presenting the methods and results, our discussion outlines our two contributions in reference to extant literature. We then outline future research and implications for policy and practice.

Theoretical background: community-based initiatives and a practice theory approach

Community-based initiatives and governance

Community-based initiatives are a form of self-organization in which citizens mobilize resources to collectively define and carry out projects to provide public goods or services for their community. CBIs have a range of possible configurations, which all oversee their own decision-making structures (Duijn et al. 2019; Igalla, Edelenbos, and van Meerkerk 2021; Seyfang and Haxeltine 2012). A big part of the literature is devoted to the study of how citizens engage in co-*production*, operating within frameworks and processes set by governments (Trischler, Dietrich, and Rundle-Thiele 2019; Voorberg, Bekkers, and Tummers 2015). CBIs often link to public and private organizations for support. They may also lead on service delivery and typically develop their projects (Edelenbos and van Meerkerk 2016; Edelenbos, Molenveld, and van Meerkerk 2021; Igalla, Edelenbos, and van Meerkerk 2021) and are therefore best seen as a form of co-*creation* (Voorberg, Bekkers, and Tummers 2015).

How community-based initiatives organise

Existing literature on CBIs in public administration and management examines the emergence, survival, and performance of CBIs, as well as their interactions with public bodies, mostly from the perspectives of the latter and in co-productive arrangements. Regarding the first area of study, CBIs typically emerge in reaction to a governmental failure or an unmet community need (Edelenbos, van Meerkerk, and Schenk 2018; Gofen 2021; van Meerkerk, Edelenbos, and Molenveld 2021). Once in operation, CBIs shape public service delivery and, in doing so, have significant room to influence how issues are addressed in their communities. They choose the aims and ambitions of their initiatives and decide how they will deliver them (Fischer et al. 2017; Seyfang and Haxeltine 2012). We also know they establish appropriate contacts for collaborations and create conditions for partnerships with civil servants by sharing information and aligning expectations across public and non-public organizations (e.g. Edelenbos et al. 2021a, 2021b; Nederhand 2021). CBIs often, but not always, choose to work with public bodies, relying on them, for example, for resources (Dinnie and Holstead 2018; Igalla, Edelenbos, and van Meerkerk 2021).

Whilst often successful in reaching their goals, challenges exist in creating the conditions for CBI survival, including supportive government policy and bureaucracy, funding, their ability to deal with internal group dynamics, volunteer retention and skill shortages

(e.g. Fischer et al. 2017; Igalla, Edelenbos, and van Meerkerk 2019, 2021; Kleinhans 2017). CBI capabilities, including abilities and access to resources, capital and leadership, influence their performance (Boonstra et al. 2022; Kleinhans et al. 2023). The factors that influence CBIs identified in the literature focus on why some community-based initiatives succeed more than others in the interest of establishing supportive contexts to foster their activities.

Managing the relationship between civil servants and CBIs from the perspective of public sector workers has also been a central interest (Duijn et al. 2019; Holstead, Russell, and Waylen 2023; Nederhand 2021). Literature explores the tensions between top-down and more collaborative forms of governance and ways to reduce these tensions (Duijn et al. 2019; Holstead, Russell, and Waylen 2023; Nederhand 2021). CBIs are heavily shaped by the institutional context in which they operate; their activities may be out of sync with formal policy and government activities. This should come as no surprise – CBIs often emerge in response to perceived weaknesses in public policy and services, and a lack of alignment might take place between groups and public bodies who each pursue different aims and objectives (Duijn et al. 2019; Edelenbos, van Meerkerk, and Schenk 2018). Although public bodies and CBIs can work together to develop projects so that each receives benefits, they do not always work harmoniously. Even if this can present challenges for policymakers and public managers, as Henderson, Escobar, and Revell (2021) and Gofen (2021) suggest, challenging public bodies might be necessary for CBIs. Finally, interacting with CBIs means that civil servants might shift how they conduct their work towards facilitating CBI activity and, in some cases let CBIs lead (H. L. Mees et al. 2019). The extent to which this occurs in practice is debated (Blijleven and van Hulst 2021; Kleinhans 2017). If public bodies suggest room exists for initiative, but CBIs and their activities are overly bounded or demarcated to operate in a limited space, their ability to make a difference in service delivery is jeopardized (Visser et al. 2023).

Whilst providing rich insight into the drivers and barriers *surrounding* CBI activity and accounts of challenges and tensions in relationships with civil servants and public bodies, less understanding exists of the actual practices of CBIs and how they relate to public bodies through these practices (Healey 2021). In contrast to the approaches currently employed in most research into CBIs, a practice theoretical approach start asking what agents do, in the light of what they find meaningful. It reconstructs the logic of practice (Sandberg and Tsoukas 2011). We reconstruct a view on the inside, looking over the shoulders of CBI members to understand their everyday work (Geertz 1973). While practice theory is increasingly employed to study public administration and management, such a view of CBIs is hard to find. Given the central role of CBIs in the contemporary governance landscape, offering insight into how they do their work can provide government actors with knowledge on how best to organize with CBIs and bring to the fore their contribution to public services. In this paper, we therefore ask: *What practices do CBIs engage in and how are these practices connected?* We also ask: *how are CBI practices related to the work of public bodies?*

Using practice theory to understand community-based initiative practice

We use a practice theoretical approach, a way of looking at organizing that focuses on recurring work and it is achieved (Blijleven and van Hulst 2021; M. S. Feldman and Orlikowski 2011; M. Feldman and Worline 2016; Wagenaar 2004). In doing so,

we build a fine-grained account of CBI work as a meaningful totality (Orlikowski 2010; Sandberg and Tsoukas 2011). We use four main concepts: practices, shared understandings, resources and everyday activities. First, *practices* are sets of everyday activities driven by the shared understandings actors engaging in them have of their work and supported by resources they draw on (Blijleven and van Hulst 2021; Durose et al. 2022; Sandberg and Tsoukas 2011). *Activities* are the concrete doings and sayings actors engage in. Although practices become routinized over time, they also entail improvisations and creative use of resources when, in the face of unexpected events, understandings fall short, or actors experience a breakdown of meaning (Sandberg and Tsoukas 2011). *Shared understandings* are derived from the organizational and broader institutional context in which the work is embedded. Shared understandings help orient actors, giving them a sense of what matters and is meaningful. Members of CBIs, for instance, start from the shared understanding of an unmet need in the community or dissatisfaction with how flood risk planning takes place in their local areas (Edelenbos, van Meerkerk, and Schenk 2018). *Resources* include materials such as buildings, social networks and various kinds of knowledge (Durose et al. 2022). In practice, understandings and resources are brought together in their undertaking through activities that form particular practices. To an important degree, practice theory teaches us that getting work done is always an accomplishment.

Furthermore, practices are relational (M. Feldman and Worline 2016; Bartels and Turnbull 2020; Wagenaar 2004). Understandings, resources and activities that makeup practices form an interconnected whole directed at particular ends (Sandberg and Tsoukas 2011). Actors' practices become meaningful in relation to other actors' practices. For example, M. Feldman and Worline (2016) show that participatory efforts can resource future relations and contribute to a shared understanding of the relationship between the state and citizens. To bring out this aspect of practices, we will zoom in on the way CBI members relate their work to that of public bodies. The relationality of practices does not pre-determine the kind of relations CBIs have and might provide us with reasons to give equal attention to collaborating and challenging activities (Henderson, Escobar, and Revell 2021). The value of practice theoretical approaches is evidenced by growing interest in public administration and management studies, which mainly focus on the practices of government representatives (Blijleven and van Hulst 2021; Wagenaar 2004) and also in relation to public sector actors addressing water challenges (Holstead, Funder, and Upton 2021, 2023). Thus, unpacking CBI practices as they are enacted offers opportunities to develop CBI and practitioner capabilities to assess and even engage in these practices in different settings.

Methodology

This study was based on an interpretive research design (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012), starting with investigating contextual meaning-making and iterating abductively from surprises and puzzles to understanding, common to practice-based approaches (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003; Wagenaar 2011). Since we were seeking an understanding of the practices of community flood groups, we sought to gather empirical evidence from those with in-depth experiences in doing this form of work. As such, we generated data from community flood groups in Scotland using semi-structured walking interviews and analysed them thematically. The empirical focus of

the research is the practices of community-based initiatives involved in sustainability governance, using community flood groups in Scotland as a case study.

The case

The empirical focus of the research is community flood groups in Scotland. Public service delivery, and in this case, how water and flood services are dealt with, has changed significantly in Europe and the UK and is characterized by shifts in debates about the appropriate role and responsibilities of public bodies and citizens (H. Mees et al. 2016; Nye, Tapsell, and Twigger-Ross 2011). The current paradigm of flood risk management in Scotland, like in parts of Europe, evolved from a focus on large-scale technical paradigms towards a more holistic and integrated flood resilience paradigm. The latter is based on the premise that we cannot prevent flooding, but can reduce the impacts by involving a more comprehensive range of organizations to adapt to floods and recover afterwards, bringing flood preparedness and personal protective measures into focus (H. Mees et al. 2016; Nye, Tapsell, and Twigger-Ross 2011).

These ideas are embedded in the legal and policy landscape, most notably in the Risk Management (Scotland) Act 2009, which emphasizes sustainable approaches to flood management, including resilience, engagement and natural flood management techniques, which community groups can promote and support. The policy landscape is evolving to create greater scope for community involvement in flood resilience. At the time of writing, the Scottish Government had opened a consultation process to gather public input on a new Flood Resilience Strategy as part of Scotland's broader National Adaptation Plan to build long-term flood resilience in Scottish communities. Wider public policy reforms relating to community ownership, resilience and engagement are also relevant (e.g. Escobar 2022; Holstead et al. 2018; Lightbody and Escobar 2021).

Community flood groups as CBIs are central to governing water concerns in Scotland and European (Edelenbos and van Meerkerk 2016; Forrest, Trell, and Woltjer 2017). Two hundred thirty-four flood groups are known to operate in England, but the number is unknown for the rest of the UK (Forrest, Trell, and Woltjer 2017). The activities of these groups primarily relate to making the changes the members and their wider communities want to see in local areas, but vary based on localized needs and concerns. Their membership can be broad, and their constitution and make-up differ across groups. Flood groups have limited resources. As voluntary organizations, flood groups rely on contributions from local communities, their members, and private and state funding. Some have successfully applied for small grants from energy companies to buy safety equipment. They run fundraising events (raffles, sales, etc.) to fund their activities. They have very limited power in Scotland's formal legal and policy landscape. These not-for-profit groups often work with local government, other CBIs and businesses to create space for their ideas and deliver their aims.

Scotland is an interesting setting for this study because community involvement in flooding issues has been increasingly encouraged. The country has a history of participatory working and wide-ranging experiences of local-level governance activities in water and flooding, which offer interesting analytical insights (Holstead, Russell, and Waylen 2023; Nye, Tapsell, and Twigger-Ross 2011). Given their relatively well-functioning and advanced set of CBI practices, we can learn from them as

a fundamental mode of citizen involvement and a well-developed form of CBI. In this study, we are interested in understanding general patterns of practice across community-based initiatives and how they are involved in public service provision around flooding.

Fieldwork

This research was part of a wider study that examined the role of community in water governance. Following a practice approach to explore the work of CBIs, data were generated using walking interviews (see, Holstead et al. 2024) with 23 community flood group participants working in ten different CBIs (in total, fourteen interviews took place, sometimes in groups). Generating understanding of practices through interviews has been done frequently (e.g. Wagenaar, 2004; Blijleven and van Hulst 2021). During the walking interviews, participants were invited to walk with the first author around a flood-related area of significance to them (Holstead et al. 2024). The participants decided where to walk, how long to walk, and what they would show the researcher. The interviews lasted between 60 and 240 minutes. Interviews were conducted between September and December 2021, allowing us to understand from those involved the layered nature of CBI work and see how activities connect meaningfully. Interviewees were recruited through an advert released by a national charity in Scotland that supports communities responding to flood events. Those groups interviewed were selected using the principles of *mapping* (groups were mapped and researched to understand what activities they carried out and with whom) and *exposure* (we spoke to people with a range of conflicting views and took steps to fill 'silences') (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). Typically, interviewees were leaders or active members of the group, and all provided informed consent through an information sheet signed before the interview. Appendix 1 contains the list of interviews. All groups have been anonymized, and providing further information could jeopardize their anonymity due to the specific nature of the findings reported in this research.

Walking interviews were incorporated into the research design to create a relaxed atmosphere for discussing the work, allowing participants to reflect more fully on their experiences in the locations in which events took place. The interviewer and interviewee could discuss what they saw, providing helpful prompts for discussion (Holstead et al. 2024; O'Neill and Roberts 2019). We visited various sites, including flooded areas, proposed areas for flood infrastructure development, rivers, drainage ponds, homes, town halls and flood equipment storage areas. In line with 'practice-based interviewing', interviews were conducted with a particular focus on seeking concrete examples and instances of involvement with flooding issues (Blijleven and van Hulst 2021; Soss 2014). For instance, we focused on past flood events and flood groups' activities during the interviews, seeking detailed accounts, and their semi-structured nature gave interviewees ample opportunities to share their experiences. The questions were action-orientated, asking participants to reflect on practical aspects of work (see Appendix 2 for the interview guide). The interviews focused on what CBIs did and how the activities connected, allowing us to get at the practices the CBIs encountered in their work. Visiting sites allowed rich discussion on the events that took place there and illuminated aspects of their work, which we suspect would not have been identified had we not visited the sites (Holstead et al. 2024). Before the research commenced, ethics approval was given by the ethics review board of the

University of St Andrews. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

Data analysis

Data analysis was undertaken thematically using Computer-Aided Qualitative Data Analysis software MAXQDA 2021. Data were coded in several rounds and built into themes (Saldaña 2021). In the first round, we stuck close to the interviewees' words while writing memos with questions about the data. We developed and refined codes further through the iterative, abductive process of moving between theory and literature (Locke, Golden-Biddle, and Feldman 2008; van Hulst and Visser 2024). Coding was a highly iterative process. In the first instance, we coded the activities of CBIs. We then grouped them according to their similarities, resulting in five main practice groupings, discussed below in the findings (see Appendix 3 for further information).

The practice theoretical approach enabled us to ground our findings at a micro-level (everyday activities) and see them in terms of larger, meaning-infused, connected elements in the work of CBIs (practices). While doing so, we continually compared the data, asking in which way the data were similar and different (Strauss and Corbin 1990). We jointly developed the findings and the final themes by analysing and writing the findings, which were grounded in our evolving understandings of the theory and the data. Together, by jointly asking questions about the data and comparing cases, we arrived at the findings presented below. To further ensure the robustness of the findings, the first author reflected and kept track of project developments in a research journal throughout the research and discussed and sense-checked the findings with colleagues. These research practices are central to interpretive methods to ensure high-quality and trustworthy findings (Schwartz-Shea 2014).

Findings: community flood group practices

Based on our analysis, we identify five practices in CBI work: (1) generating knowledge, (2) establishing agendas, (3) developing and undertaking shared responses, (4) building rapport and trust, and (5) making counterclaims. These are explained below.

Generating knowledge

Flood groups seek to address situations that concern them. For that, they generate knowledge about the water issue in question. How do they glean this knowledge? They commonly examine the landscape, often with know-how passed on from local farmers and others who have lived in the areas through previous water issues. Flood groups may talk with local people and farmers to understand historic water issues, infrastructure, and drainage. During high rains, flood groups identify high water levels and distribute members to 'trigger points' to monitor and report to the group. Some groups (Groups 1, 2, 4 and 6) use river level monitors to track water levels remotely, highlighting the material element of the practice. As well as observing riverine behaviour, they monitor current and future weather patterns, including historical data, which allows them to conduct statistical analysis and combine data sources to monitor water patterns in the local area and 'gain a deeper picture of intelligence' (Group 3). Flood groups use this information to assess the physical risks, including vulnerable people or

homes which may require protection. Thus, understanding the situation leads to the development of concrete concerns. Understanding the situation also involves understanding different views in the group and the wider community. CBIs listen and discuss how water issues those living in the local area what they see as possible responses.

How water concerns could be addressed is not immediately apparent and requires knowing the bureaucratic landscape. Flood groups piece this information together through research. They try to discover the interdependencies in the governance of the water environment, as well as the roles and the key individuals they could speak to. Through online searches, groups compile information about roles with related responsibilities and key individuals in the community and public bodies. Organizational charts in public bodies are a central resource for gaining insight into responsibilities but are not always available online. As the following quote demonstrates, organizational charts allow an inroad into public bodies: 'The first thing we do is sit down and – where is the organization chart? [and] who does what? If you don't get to that level, you don't understand how these organizations work; if you don't understand how they work, it's hard to push their buttons' (Group 7). Groups also identify names in public policy documents and reports and contact professionals in public bodies through this route. Groups speak to members of their networks and other groups to gain a wider understanding of an issue. Thus, accessing the bureaucratic landscape and understanding the broader policy and governance landscape is essential.

Understanding the situation also involves compiling insights on public service provision and national water priorities. The members of the flood groups read plans, legislation, organizational strategies, and environmental reports to understand policy landscapes. Organizational plans and priorities change, evolve, and sit across organizations. Some issues, such as upstream measures (e.g. storage retention ponds and natural flood management), which some CBIs flood groups pursue to address the local problems of concern, are particularly challenging because responsibilities are spread, and therefore also need coordinating, across public bodies.

Generating knowledge entails collecting local information, understanding organizations and legislation, and grasping how decision-making processes and water issues are being tackled and thought to be best approached across public bodies. Understanding the bureaucratic landscape, including main actors, the legislation, ownership responsibilities and available resources that could be mobilized to address the concern, enabled groups to think about what could come next, what could be done, and whom they need to work with. Importantly, all this excavation work requires the development and use of bureaucratic knowledge of public services and policy (organizational charts, plans), which allows for and feeds political work undertaken later – we must be able to 'push their [public bodies] buttons' (Group 2).

Establishing agendas

A central part of the work of the CBIs we studied is establishing agendas around water concerns. This practice is associated with aligning perspectives to create support and garner resources. Establishing agendas again involves working with both communities and civil servants, often to create courses of action and garner resources and commitment to them. Communities sometimes have differing views on a course of action, and frontline workers have limited time and resources. Doing so requires craft to get

communities on board and civil servants to work on the community concerns. CBIs must persuade frontline workers to feel compelled by their argumentation and agenda. First, the flood groups create interest and share understanding and knowledge with the broader community to bring issues to their attention. Flood groups write community flood and resilience plans, deliver lectures about biodiversity, conservation, and heritage, and write newsletters to 'try and put information into the public domain so that people can form an informed view' (Group 7). They discussed options for flood protection equipment, organized bulk buying options, and offered advice and sources of information. Meeting people face-to-face in the local community allows the flood groups to create a shared feeling of interest. It brings concerns into focus so that communities can buy into the issue and possible response. This is particularly important because flooding is a temporal issue, as one flood group stated – no one thinks of flooding until it happens. This means that agendas must be mobilized and sustained in the long term and beyond flood events.

The sustaining of agendas is made possible through gathering information, creating rapport and trust with CBIs and public bodies, and creating an overview of flooding for local areas in the context of resilience reporting. Naturally, there are different views on the best course of action or how an issue should be addressed, meaning that negotiating possible outcomes is required. Groups explained how they did this – often being flexible with the outcomes, as the following quote shows: 'It's being open to what is you want and how you'll get there [. . .] your team is kind of negotiating your way through that to the collective endpoints' (Group 2). At times, bringing together and aligning views was also necessary to create a course of action. Groups have different ways of doing this. Some organize their activities around the interests of their members so that each volunteer can be involved in their area of interest. Along with maintaining volunteers' interests, this aligns perspectives. However, in all instances, establishing agendas includes managing what one group called 'vocal objectors' (Group 5), involving conversations, presenting evidence and showing how the course of action was in the interest of the wider community, as the participant explained 'You've got to deal with the objectors within the community as well because they're not all compliant, and not all happy to see things done. [. . . .] it takes time and effort' (Group 5).

Developing and undertaking shared responses

Groups know their work cannot be done alone and require cooperation from the broader community and public bodies. Therefore, another practice of the CBIs we studied is developing shared responses in the context of their voluntary status, limited resources, and the bureaucratic parameters of water governance. Often, shared responses are pieced together – for instance, applying to various funding sources, borrowing flood kits from another local body and receiving donations from local community members. Groups also create shared solutions in collaboration with frontline workers, supporting work practically in their localities. Since there was little formal institutional role for flood groups, CBIs had to carve out a role for themselves. From the perspective of public bodies, flood groups could be 'the eyes and ears on the ground' and report potential flood risks. Group 3 made detailed records of their activities, including who was involved, photos of work completed, and past communications to show that they had been acting under the provision and remit of the body that held the insurance, requiring skills

in record keeping and a database with records of activities. In other instances, groups take the lead in resolving concerns, sometimes deciding to undertake the physical work collaboratively within the community. Using tools and expertise from within the group, groups undertook some remedial work, such as removing trees from small rivers, which could potentially prevent water flow and lead to flooding.

Maintaining momentum of activity within communities and with frontline workers is a key aspect of developing shared solutions. This involves linking with frontline workers by writing letters and emails requesting meetings and sitting on boards of other organizations. Meeting notes are an essential resource in establishing agendas with public bodies. Groups circulated meeting notes before and after meetings and up on action points, providing a material trail of previous interactions. As Group 1 argued: 'We take meeting minutes action points, and we push on them. We keep on them'. Others suggested that ensuring promises are delivered could be frustrating and drawn out over the years, meaning that patience and perseverance are also necessary. To this end, CBIs use knowledge of the political system gleaned when they generate knowledge and approach political actors at higher levels to gather support. While some groups are willing to email for months or longer (e.g. Group 1), others resign due to frustration from the perceived lack of action (e.g. Group 10). Asserting pressure on civil servants is a delicate issue – applying too much pressure can be detrimental to relationship-building and fostering reciprocity, arguably the strength of working with frontline workers.

Managing the framing of the issue of concern and how it is communicated is a central aspect of this practice. To this end, CBIs curate the conversation with public officials. Group 7, for instance, expressed concern that a local landowner may alienate the local authority by being 'unconstructive' during interactions. This made them reflect: 'We haven't always done ourselves favours, and we've had multiple people speaking to the same authority and not necessarily saying the same thing' (Group 7). Such interactions can strain relationships with public bodies and send mixed messages about desired actions. Flood groups seek to control the narrative by channelling communication with authorities through key individuals who are particularly apt at working with public bodies or have developed a good rapport over time. This 'venue shopping' supports shared responses and ensures the salience of outcomes, which is also achieved through formalizing activities with frontline workers and writing community resilience plans (see practice 2).

Building rapport and trust

Addressing water concerns requires wide support. For instance, civil servants can provide resources and support or advocate on behalf of CBIs inside public organizations, and community support is required to develop workable solutions. Thus, creating rapport and trust is associated with garnering the backing to drive local change, requiring bureaucratic work and work within local communities. Doing so becomes an activity in itself. First, groups seek to build and embed community initiatives by creating opportunities for people to get to know each other. They organize events and interactions in informal settings, often indirectly related to water concerns, such as board game evenings. Groups hope to foster social cohesion in the wider community by bringing community members

together and creating forums for people to meet. They may also plan to bring their communities around a common goal and then implement the plans, drawing different groups together, including organizing volunteering and skill share events (Group 6).

In a similar vein, groups manage conflicts and fragmentation. Groups 6 and 7, for instance, seek to unite historically divided areas and people in local areas (i.e. farming and nonfarming groups, incomers and people who have lived there all their lives). Group 2 tightly manages its social media accounts to prevent people from using the group as a 'moaning shop' (a place to vent their frustrations). One of the flood groups turned off the possibility of commenting on other people's social media posts to avoid conflict and escalation within the community. Avoiding conflict keeps the volunteers' spirits and encouraged others to join CBIs. If someone takes issue with the work of the flood group or the public body, CBI representatives speak to that individual to resolve the issue offline rather than publicly. Managing social media in this way has the secondary benefit of preventing critique of local government, which may create what CBI members see as unproductive antagonism.

The CBIs we studied prize and nurture relationships with frontline workers; much effort is employed to develop trust and rapport. Creating reciprocity with frontline workers is a concrete activity. As a member of Group 2 stated, 'The council doesn't have any spare money, and we have volunteer time, so now we're equal. We've got something they want in addition to them having something we want'. Group 6 is particularly active in this regard – they encourage community members to participate in public consultations and, in some cases, support community members with consultation paperwork. In other instances, group members offer to speak at events to show good practice in how community flood groups and local authorities work together (e.g. Group 1). This allows them to foster cooperation with specific front line workers and enables them to demonstrate their close working relationship with community flood groups to their peers. Relationships are built over extended periods and have a clear purpose.

Making counterclaims

When knowledge is disputed, and shared responses are not possible, counterclaiming is used to establish and provide evidence to change public practice. Making counterclaims of evidence is contentious and thus points towards the political dimension of CBI practices. Counterclaiming first involves examining assessments made by public bodies and comparing these with local understandings of water concerns. To do so, flood groups may use their research within their communities (practice 1), and compile data to challenge official reporting and framing of issues of concern. In one instance, a local authority conducted a survey to assess flood damages by recording how many homes had been affected during a flood event. Group 4 identified that some households in the village did not report their homes as flooded in the survey due to the perception that their home would be 'listed as a flooded home', with implications for property resale and insurance. The group used this evidence to challenge the local authority's flood risk assessments, ultimately leading to a change in the cost-benefit ratio and subsequent development of a flooding culvert by the local authority. In another instance, Group 5 complied evidence to show that the modelling conducted on behalf of the local authority had not identified water ingress points correctly. The

group wrote a report documenting the water ingress and failure to account for these ingresses in the consultant report and presented the information to public bodies.

In addition to local issues, groups work strategically to challenge how the Scottish government and local bodies generally approach flooding issues. For instance, groups supported natural flood measures, which they argued were not sufficiently being undertaken and supported in Scotland. They prepare reports and circulate evidence about the benefits of undertaking this form of flood management. There were few counterclaims of evidence and expertise because the volume of work and expertise required sophisticated knowledge in engineering and geomorphology, and was not always perceived favourably by street-level bureaucrats. Counterclaiming is easier when the knowledge and skills exist in groups to undertake such an endeavour, which is why group leaders are often retired and highly educated. Where necessary skills did not exist, groups located them. Groups 7 and 4, for instance, hired consultants to challenge public body assessments and official decisions. Having discussed the five practices, we move on to the discussion and conclusion of this research.

Discussion

Community-based initiatives have a central role in contemporary public service delivery. Existing studies of CBIs examine the drivers that support and maintain them and their achievements, as well as barriers to productive collaboration from the perspective of governments (Edelenbos et al. 2021; Igalla, Edelenbos, and van Meerkerk 2019, 2020). There is a lack of understanding of *how the work of community-based initiatives is actually done, that is, what practices their work entails and how the practices are connected*. Also it is unclear *how CBI practices relate to the work of public bodies*. This led us to use practice theory as a theoretical lens (Blijleven and van Hulst 2021; M. S. Feldman and Orlikowski 2011; Sandberg and Tsoukas 2011; Wagenaar 2004) to investigate the everyday work of CBIs with a specific focus on their relation to public bodies when it comes to delivering public services. In doing so, we first contribute to developing a richer understanding of how CBI work is conducted on an everyday basis, demonstrating which elements make up the work and how these are related to one another to form a meaningful whole. Secondly, we develop a renewed understanding of how CBI work relates to public bodies, arguing that collaborating with and challenging public bodies are sensible ways CBIs might develop their practices. We elaborate on and discuss these two contributions below, and bring them together to offer our novel conceptualization of how CBIs enhance impact when working with public bodies in public services.

Community-based initiative practice

Using a practice-based approach, our study identifies five distinctive practices through which CBIs shape local service provision and create value (Blok, van Buuren, and Fenger 2023) – bringing together activities, understandings and resources (Durose et al. 2022). CBIs (1) generate knowledge, (2) establish agendas, (3) develop and undertake shared responses, (4) build rapport and trust, and (5) make counterclaims (see Table 1).

Table 1. Community-based initiative practices.

Practices	Activities	Understandings	Resources
1. Generating knowledge	Compiling data, researching public bodies and key practitioners, reading policy reports and legislation, emailing, listening	We need to read the landscape to understand concerns.	Bureaucratic knowledge, weather data, river data, organisational charts, policy documents
2. Establishing agendas	Create interest, share knowledge and understanding, lobby public bodies, link to other political actors	We must bring others with us.	Social skills, bureaucratic knowledge, emails, social media records of meetings and meeting notes
3. Developing and undertaking shared responses	planning, coordinating and doing physical work, locating and linking people and resources, managing objectors	We have limited resources but can coordinate local response.	Mediation skills, emails, organisational knowledge, database, perseverance, machinery, and labour
4. Building rapport and trust	Organising events, creating opportunities for dialogue, fostering agreement, creating reciprocity, managing social media,	To address our concerns, we need long-term relationships.	Local knowledge, social skills, negotiation, organisational knowledge, board games
5. Making counterclaims	Contracting experts, writing reports, explaining, presenting	If our understandings diverge, we must develop alternative knowledge.	Technical knowledge, diplomacy

These practices, mainly the first four, are similar to the activities of Van Meerkerk and Edelenbos' (2018) boundary spanners and the practices of Blijleven and van Hulst's (2021) civil servants. This similarity should come as no surprise, as these actors all, in a cyclical fashion, need to find out what is going on and what should be done and then get others involved in doing it (the first three practices). They need to work on their relationships with those others (the fourth practice). The fifth practice we encountered, groups making counterclaims evidence expertise, might be quite specific to the context of Scottish flood groups, and not all flood groups we researched engage in it.

We take this work further by not only identifying practices, but pointing out how the practices of the CBIs under study connect. *Generating knowledge*, starting from the need to form a picture of the landscape(s), allows CBIs to make informed decisions and ensure that various voices are heard. Doing so enables creativity and lays the foundation for establishing shared agendas. Generating knowledge involves understanding the local knowledge of the water issues, potential solutions and a reading of the bureaucratic and wider governance landscape. Some CBIs we studied became versed in bureaucratic language and understanding – a 'bilingual' skill (Yanow, 2004) that helps to engage civil servants. *Establishing agendas* works from generating knowledge to putting concerns on the agenda while bringing community members together to see the importance of concerns. In *developing and undertaking shared responses*, that start from an understanding of the limits of what CBIs can do, members make good use of the positions and resources of others – they engage, divide tasks, and ensure the effective use of resources to align interests and create outcomes which benefit the community. Moreover, by creating a common language and plans, flood groups can modify ideas and pool resources.

Building rapport and trust allows CBIs to get to know each other, their community, and civil servants. They create a sense of reciprocity, avoiding unproductive conflict. The rapport and trust built also help to lobby public bodies and formal politics. CBI members value rapport and trust, mainly to establish agendas and develop responses, not as much as an end (Blok, van Buuren, and Fenger 2023). Finally, *making counterclaims of evidence and expertise*, again building on their own assessment of situations, allows CBIs to challenge public bodies openly. This fifth practice might be seen as an 'advanced', perhaps a-typical, practice since flood groups engage in it when their own knowledge generating does not suffice in steering agendas and responses. In conclusion, a range of interconnected practices are undertaken *in situ*, each drawing together different doings, understandings and resources to skilfully fit the larger purpose of CBI work. Seeing the five practices as connected in this way allows us to understand CBIs work as a meaningful whole that is accomplished on a daily basis (Wagenaar, 2004). That is to say, CBIs do not just engage in specific practices that they are requested to and that otherwise will not be undertaken. Rather, they have developed specific practices in the light of certain understandings of what is valuable, *and* as these practices developed they became a whole in which each practice constantly contributes to other ones in attaining value.

Community-based initiative and public body relations

Second, our practice perspective can extend our understanding of how CBI work relates to that of public bodies (Igalla, Edelenbos, and van Meerkerk 2019; Van Meerkerk and Edelenbos 2018; Visser et al. 2023). With this, we advance relational insights that a practice approach can offer (Bartels and Turnbull 2020). From a CBI perspective, work is directed towards communities and public bodies. Generating knowledge, establishing agendas, developing shared responses and building trust (practices one to three) all have a community and a public body side. These both need to be worked on in concert because the CBIs we studied intermediated between those two sides.

Concerning the relation to public bodies, this brings us back to the need to both collaborate and challenge public bodies in service delivery, which Gofen (2021) and Henderson, Escobar, and Revell (2021) recently argued is necessary. Even if each flood group we spoke to during our research has a specific way of relating, our study suggests that in their contribution to dealing with societal challenges, CBIs neither strictly collaborate nor challenge. Interactions and relationships with public bodies and civil servants are often collaborative, whilst at other times 'political': pushing buttons, managing conflict, contacting politicians, negotiating solutions, and reconfiguring responses. Both *establishing agendas* and *developing shared responses* can involve implementing public services in place, while they might also include developing services in a different direction or even resisting them. In that case, it is not so much a matter of co-*creation* (Voorberg, Bekkers, and Tummers 2015) as it is of co-*destruction* (Edelenbos, van Meerkerk, and Koppenjan 2017). *Making counterclaims*, the last practice we encountered, is the clearest way to challenge formal bodies and resist their public services to develop alternatives.

Delving into this issue reveals the relational side of practices (Bartels and Turnbull 2020; M. Feldman and Worline 2016). Relating does not just entail aiming for *good*

relationships (as is most evident in the practice of building rapport and trust, and more specifically in the need to build long-term relationships). Relating also entails contrast. The practices of CBIs are meaningful and make a difference, largely *because* they contrast. As said, CBIs are often born from a failure or a need that is not fulfilled (Gofen 2021). That is how members of CBIs at least initially *relate* to public bodies, even if CBIs have not developed an initiative long before they have a *relationship* with public bodies. The flood groups we studied understand water issues differently than public bodies and bring different resources to the table. They generate different knowledge, establish different agendas and develop different solutions. That is central to their identity. Interesting in that regard is our finding that CBIs invest in exploring the bureaucratic landscape – a fundamental step in relating.

CBIs do not work as 'tools' for government policy (Visser et al. 2023). At the same time, even if their practices might involve fighting political battles, we found that members of CBIs under study often strive to interact politely and constructively with frontline workers. CBIs cannot do their work alone and require cooperation from both communities and public bodies. CBI work can also grow into co-creative and co-productive forms that complement or even sometimes take over the work of public bodies. Whether the forms are more co-creative or more challenging seems to depend, for the most part, on the capacities of the public bodies and the development of the CBIs working in their area. What we learn from this is that for the practices of CBIs to be meaningful for their members, they have to relate to those of public bodies, but how they relate develops over time.

A framework for studying practices of community-based initiatives

Coming to the end of our discussion, we offer a visualization of our main findings that provides an overview of the patterns we encountered, showing how CBIs impact public service provision through practice (Figure 1). CBIs generate various forms of knowledge (1) that their members use for setting agendas (2). In turn, the agendas are input for developing and undertaking shared responses (3). Groups build on rapport and trust with communities and public bodies (4) in a longitudinal, ongoing fashion, which develops over time and supports their work. At times, knowledge is missing or shared responses are not possible, CBIs may invest in developing counterclaims (5) (with the help of others) that are used for establishing agendas. Over time, success in this cycle creates momentum for further work, and groups move on to address other, often related, issues in their local areas, where they undertake the first practice again to gather more knowledge about the issue and the associated bureaucratic landscape. In practice theoretical terms (Blijleven and van Hulst 2021; Sandberg and Tsoukas 2011), we show that the self-organizing CBI practices can be defined as *a set of connected, knowledge-generating, agenda-setting and responsive activities fueled by present understandings which lead to new resources for further development*. This process is relational through and through: others (communities, public bodies) are engaged to make it work; it is the work of both communities and civil servants that creates this dynamic process because CBIs develop their resources and identity in the process.

In terms of weaknesses to our study, we point to the the broader transferability of the findings. This paper, even if embedded in a larger study, was based on a sample of 23 individuals across ten flood groups in Scotland. Other researchers and practitioners must judge how and in which ways research findings are meaningful in the contexts

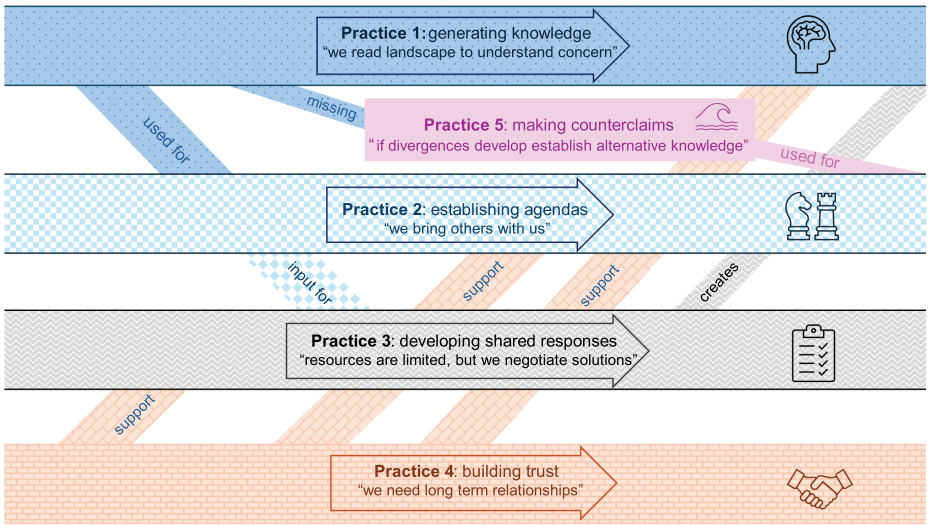

Figure 1. Patterns of practice in self-organising work: this figure shows how CBIs impact public service provision through practice, illustrating what they do as a meaningful totality. Each practice is outlined in the figure, with the underpinning understanding identified in this research.

they study or work in (Lincoln and Guba 1985). We estimate that four of the five practices would travel well, and the fifth (making counterclaims) might be tied to the specific CBI (flood groups) or context (Scotland), even if it fits with a more generic way of relating to public bodies (challenging).

Implications for policy and practice

Regarding relevance for policy and practice, the findings provide members of CBIs insight into their work as a meaningful, relational totality, in which the different parts cohere and can strengthen each other. Those working for public bodies can see why engaging CBIs and recognizing their role in governance would be wise. For CBIs, both collaborating and challenging are legitimate forms their practices can take over time and at different moments, depending on their own understandings of what is lacking in the knowledge, agendas and actions of public bodies. Public bodies, in turn, should understand how the practices that CBIs develop often start from observed failure and overlooked community needs; and that the more collaborative side of CBIs can become part of CBI purposes (or not), largely depending on how CBIs come to see public bodies as they engage them. Interactions with CBIs resource further interactions and can seed further collaborations in other policy domains (M. Feldman and Worline 2016).

Finally, challenging the findings of Edelenbos, van Meerkerk, and Schenk (2018), we found that most of the flood groups we studied are skilful in their engagement of formal bodies. While CBI contributions may appear limited, at times, their role in public service provision is increasing, and they can offer a significant source of innovation (Trischler, Dietrich, and Rundle-Thiele 2019). The findings point to the need to recognize and enable the capabilities of *both* communities and public officials working with CBIs to navigate relationships and develop resilience to respond to the unexpected nature of present-day societal challenges. Our work

suggests caution against the over-reliance on formal guidance for community engagement for civil servants. CBIs develop their practices while engaging in them, and relationships between CBI and public bodies is emergent. Advice in early stages may help promote reflexivity by civil servants and communities but does not deal with change, contingency and how others, including communities and civil servants, deliver public services in specific moments. Both sides should be conscious of this and equipped to do so.

Conclusion

Community-based initiatives have an increasingly central role in the governance landscape to support and deliver public policy that addresses societal challenges. We know less about their self-organizing practice, and how their practices relate to civil services. We show how CBIs develop coordinated solutions to address issues that arise when dealing with complex societal challenges, for example, demonstrated in how they bring together community members and frame possible responses to form a shared voice. By making these linkages and bringing together doings, understandings and resources through practices, CBIs support and drive solutions to local water concerns with and through civil servants.

As noted, future research could usefully focus on a range of topics. First, research may usefully study how CBIs could better engage their communities, as they risk becoming exclusionary groups that ignore those they work for (Healey 2015). Further research on the self-organizing practices, including 'the dark side' of CBIs, would also help us understand how societal challenges can be addressed in contemporary societies, further developing an understanding of citizens' roles and how CBIs relate to civil servants in this process. Second, research might explore close-up interactions between communities and public bodies. Although practice theory (Wagenaar 2004) and literature on CBIs (Edelenbos, van Meerkerk, and Schenk 2018) point to the importance of interactions, we should also look at relational trajectories and dynamics in terms of identity. Finally, future research may develop on how these findings translate into different settings and sectors for example to understand the overlap and contrast between their activities, scope and effects. The study of CBIs could have an international comparison component with, for example, the Netherlands, where similar community organizations exist and offer rich opportunities for comparisons, but also examine how these findings may sit with other CBIs in other contexts (Edelenbos et al. 2021a, 2021b). We hope our analytical approach will encourage this further research using a practice lens to understand CBIs and what they do to shape governing on the ground.

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