

# From ‘not in my backyard’ to ‘not on my planet’

The potential of Blockadia for the climate justice movement: a case study of fossil fuel resistance in Groningen, the Netherlands.

Master of Science in Human Ecology: Culture, Power and Sustainability  
Human Ecology Division  
Department of Human Geography  
Faculty of Social Sciences  
Lund University

Author: Meike Vedder  
Supervisor: Andreas Malm  
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# Abstract

This thesis explores the potential of Blockadia resistance, the resistance of frontline communities against fossil fuel extraction, for the climate justice movement. Driven by the need for alternative forms of climate action that address the root causes of climate change, this study examines if local fossil fuel resistance gives rise to a justice based environmentalism. The analysis is conducted on the basis of a case study of resistance against the extraction of natural gas in Groningen, the Netherlands. The findings of this case study show that there is no linear relation between lived experience of the direct consequences of fossil fuel extraction and climate justice action. Lived experience itself is neither a necessary condition, nor an automatic catalyst of climate action. Different barriers can prevent local fossil fuel resistance from transcending 'Not In My Backyard' concerns, and being a driver of climate justice. By identifying these barriers and uncovering how they have come into existence and function within the context of Groningen, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the relation between local and global fossil fuel resistance. By embedding these findings in political ecology literature and social movement studies, gaps in literature are uncovered, and more insight is added into mechanisms that prevent or induce climate justice action.

**Keywords:** political ecology, climate justice, social movements, just transition, collective action, place attachment, fossil fuels

Doe Grunneger, wor wakker. Blief nait op dien akker. Dou open dien mond, dat holt die gezond.

- Haarm Maaijer (1980)

# Table of Contents

- Introduction..... 1**
  - Aim and Purpose ..... 2
  - Structure of thesis ..... 3
- 1. Theoretical Framework ..... 3**
  - 1.1. Political Ecology and Environmental Justice ..... 4
  - 1.2. Climate justice ..... 5
  - 1.3. Environmental justice and Blockadia ..... 5
- 2. Literature: Strengths and Weaknesses of Blockadia ..... 6**
  - 2.1. The Promise of Blockadia..... 6
  - 2.2. Weaknesses of Blockadia .....10
- 3. Case background: resistance against gas extraction in Groningen .....13**
  - 3.1. Historical context .....13
  - 3.2. Resistance .....15
  - 3.3. Existing research – gas extraction in Groningen .....17
  - 3.4. Case Selection .....17
- 4. Methodology.....18**
  - 4.1. Reflexive Science .....18
  - 4.2. Research design: Extended Case Study Method .....19
  - 4.3 Research Methods:.....20
- 5. Findings .....22**
  - 5.1. Lived experience as a driver of awareness and action .....22
  - 5.2. Barriers to further integration .....28
- 6. Discussion .....35**
  - 6.1. Meaning of findings: promise of Blockadia.....35
  - 6.2. Barriers and previously discussed weaknesses of Blockadia .....36
  - 6.3. Unexpected findings: need for additional literature and explanations .....37

6.4. Implications.....	38
6.5. Limitations: need for additional research .....	39
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>41</b>

**List of Figures**

Figure 1 - Spaces of Blockadia (EJ Atlas) .....	6
Figure 2- Number of earthquakes in Groningen gasfield per year, 1986 – 2018 (NAM 2019b) .....	13
Figure 3 - Earthquakes in the north of the Netherlands 1986 - 2019 (NAM 2019a) .....	14
Figure 4 - Location of the province of Groningen in the Netherlands (Wikimedia Commons 2011) ...	14
Figure 5 - Gasfields in the north of the Netherlands (NAM 2019a) .....	14
Figure 6 - Protest march in the city of Groningen, 'Enough = enough!' (Stokman 2018) .....	16
Figure 7 - Code Rood activists marching to Farmsum to block a NAM location (Boerding 2018) .....	16

# Introduction

On the 28<sup>th</sup> of August 2018, hundreds of people sat down in front of a location of the Dutch Oil Company (NAM) in Groningen, a province in the North-East of the Netherlands. NAM is responsible for extracting gas from the Groningen gas field, the largest natural gas field in Europe (Huisman n.d.).

The activists would sit there for two days and nights to make the statement: ‘leave the gas in the ground!’, and to show solidarity with the inhabitants of Groningen who have been protesting gas extraction for years, because of the damage it causes to their homes (Code Rood, n.d.).

The resistance against gas in Groningen is not an isolated protest movement. All over the world more and more people are standing up against the fossil fuel industry, right there where fossil fuels are extracted and transported (EJ Atlas, n.d.). According to Naomi Klein (2014), these ‘interconnected pockets of resistance’, together make up the climate movement that the world needs right now.

This new wave of action against the fossil fuel industry is not driven by politicians or lobbyists behind closed doors, but by those who locally resist fossil fuels, because their home happens to be next to a pipeline, a fracking location, or an open-pit coal mine. Together these spaces of local resistance form Blockadia: ‘Blockadia is not a specific location on a map but rather a roving transnational conflict zone that is cropping up with increasing frequency and intensity wherever extractive projects are attempting to dig and drill’ (Klein 2014, 294). These communities at the frontlines of fossil fuel extraction are protecting their land and homes from appropriation by the fossil fuel industry, and from the direct threat the industry poses to the safety and health of the local ecosystems and inhabitants. Although this resistance against individual fossil fuel projects is not in the first place motivated by global climate change concerns, but by local livelihood and safety concerns, Klein (2014, 303) argues that these communities see themselves as part of a global movement with a common enemy, the fossil fuel industry, united by the awareness that these projects are contributing to the climate crisis.

Action against the fossil fuel industry is urgent. Climate change is causing heatwaves, extreme weather and rising sea-levels, all resulting in widespread environmental degradation. 2018 was the fourth warmest year on record, after 2016, 2017 and 2015 (Milman 2019). Time is running out for humanity to be able to turn the tide.

The main cause of climate change is the anthropocentric greenhouse effect, which is the result of the burning of fossil fuels (IPCC 2014). A global fossil fuel phase-out and transition to renewable energy is required if we want to keep the destruction that climate change is already causing to a minimum (C. J. Smith et al. 2019). Since 1992, states have addressed this challenge through intergovernmental negotiations under the umbrella of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. However, these negotiations can be best characterized as ‘active inaction’: states have spent a lot of time, energy and resources on joint efforts to reduce emissions, but these efforts have been ineffective

(Ciplet, Roberts, and Khan 2015, 2). Moreover, on an individual level, many people live in a state of denial of climate change (Norgaard 2011). And initiatives that do aim to facilitate an energy transition often face opposition.

Klein and others (Martinez-Alier et al. 2010; Scheidel et al. 2018; Bassey 2012) write about the promise that resistance against local environmental injustice holds as an alternative form of climate action. In contrast to the bureaucracy and inaction that political negotiations and lobbying efforts represent, local resistance against fossil fuel extraction has been able to achieve concrete results, of which the most striking is the rejection of the Keystone XL pipeline by US president Obama (Cheon and Urpelainen 2018; Black, D'Arcy, and Weis 2014). Furthermore, they see these movements as not purely reactive, but proactive forces for climate justice by demanding power to be transferred from the fossil fuel industry to the people, driven by lived experience and a strong connection to place (Klein 2014, 405).

There are however also sceptics, who argue that energy and time to stop climate change should be spent on changing public policy through institutions, that fossil fuel activism only creates polarization, and that the global nature of climate change asks for a global, not local, solution (Cheon and Urpelainen 2018).

## **Aim and Purpose**

In this thesis I explore the potential of Blockadia for the climate movement, and more specifically climate justice. Climate justice is here understood as a lens that draws attention to the injustice that underlies climate change, and the need for mitigation and adaptation strategies that do not increase inequalities and vulnerabilities, but reduce them (Walker 2012).

To answer this research question, I conduct a case study of local fossil fuel resistance in Groningen, the Netherlands, to assess if and how the local resistance contributes to a stronger and broader climate justice movement. This analysis helps me to identify the challenges local resistance faces in becoming a transformational force for climate justice.

I situate myself within political ecology, a field of research which is committed to understanding environmental issues as social-economic problems, as an alternative to apolitical approaches to the environment (Bridge et al. 2018; Robbins 2012).

As a political ecologist, I am not only committed to understanding human-environment relations, but also to transforming them (Bridge et al. 2018). My aim is not simply to verify or falsify Klein's theory about Blockadia, but to further deepen pre-existing theory on movement building and fossil fuel resistance, and to ultimately provide the climate justice movement and grassroots fossil fuel resistance with knowledge that will enable them to more successfully cooperate with allies, and affect change.

On a more theoretical level, this study contributes to the study of scale in political ecology, and the question if the local scale is more capable of providing desired outcomes for the climate movement (Christopher Brown and Purcell 2005).

**My main research question is: What is the potential of Blockadia for the climate justice movement?**

I'm answering this main question by conducting a case study guided by the following subquestions:

- How do different people, action groups and organizations resisting gas extraction in Groningen give meaning to their resistance? How has the lived experience of fossil fuel extraction influenced the type of resistance that exists?
- To what extent is the resistance in Groningen part of a transnational movement against the fossil fuel industry? Is the resistance perceived as a local or a global struggle?
- What are challenges for successful alliances between local activists and the climate justice movement? How can they be overcome?

## **Structure of thesis**

The first chapter of this thesis consists of a theoretical framework that provides an understanding of local fossil fuel resistance as struggles for environmental justice, and will explain why the concept of climate justice should be central to alternative forms of climate action. This framework serves as the basis for the discussion of the potential strengths and weaknesses of Blockadia movements in the second chapter, based on arguments found in literature. The third and fourth chapter respectively provide a background to the case, and an overview of the research design and methods. In the fifth chapter, the findings will be presented, which will be further discussed and related back to the literature and research questions in the sixth chapter. This discussion answers the research questions, points out limitations of this study and offers possibilities for future research.

# **1. Theoretical Framework**

Although the concept of Blockadia is relatively new<sup>1</sup>, resistance against the destruction of local ecosystems is not new at all. In this section I provide a background on the 'environmental justice' movement, to show how Klein's work builds on this school of thought, and on the work of environmental justice scholars like Joan Martinez-Alier.

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'Blockadia' was coined by the direct action group Tar Sands Blockade in 2012 (Klein 2014, 302), and popularized by Naomi Klein in her book 'This Changes Everything' (2014).

Furthermore, I explain why the concepts of environmental justice and climate justice are necessary in order to understand the need for a climate movement that demands system change.

### **1.1. Political Ecology and Environmental Justice**

A political ecology perspective highlights the underlying root causes of environmental problems, and the need for solutions that do not just ensure technological fixes, but also the political and social change that is necessary that address these root causes (Robbins 2012). The notion that system change is essential to effectively address environmental issues, is therefore fundamental to the field of political ecology. Within political ecology, environmental justice has become an integral concept that is used to unveil the unequal power relations at the roots of environmental destruction (Bridge et al. 2018; Martinez-Alier et al. 2010).

The term ‘environmental justice’ emerged in the 1990s. Although unsustainable resource use and its consequences were experienced long before the 1990s, it was around this time that the environmental movement in the United States woke up to the burden of environmental harm that communities living close to industrial sites experienced. Reports that showed that people of colour and people with lower incomes were more likely to be affected by environmental harm led to the formation of the environmental justice movement, committed to contesting the unequal distribution of environmental harm (Scheidel et al. 2018; J. Martinez-Alier et al. 2014).

Martinez-Alier has written extensively about the relation between local environmental injustice as a symptom of larger systemic injustices. With Martin O’Connor (1996) he has coined the term ‘ecological distribution conflicts’ to describe social conflicts over the unequal distribution of environmental benefits and burdens. This systemic unjust distribution of environmental benefits and burdens is, according to him, the result of larger power structures (Scheidel et al. 2018). In *Rethinking Environmental History* (2007), Martinez-Alier, Hornborg and McNeill trace the roots of these unequal power structures back to the origins of the current world system. They do this by building on Wallerstein’s *World-systems analysis* (2004), which posits that the emergence of a global capitalist world economy, which prioritizes the endless accumulation of capital, has been built on and is sustained by the exploitation of impoverished ‘peripheries’ by the richer ‘core’.

Environmental harm is often classified as a negative externality, a side effect of the otherwise successfully functioning capitalist market. The work of these environmental justice scholars demonstrates that the shifting of costs (environmental burdens) by corporations and industries onto those who are already underprivileged should in fact be seen as an inherent part of an economic system that prioritized profit over people (Joan Martinez-Alier et al. 2010; Oulu 2016).

## **1.2. Climate justice**

Although the concept of environmental justice has its roots in grassroots conflicts over environmental health risks caused by toxic pesticides and hazardous waste, it is now used by activists, environmentalists and scholars all over the world to reveal the unequal power relations at the roots of all kinds of environmental destruction, and to advocate systemic changes to address these inequalities.

This new attention for social justice has led to the emergence of activism and scholarship focused on climate justice. Climate justice highlights that climate change is not only a matter of intergenerational justice, but intragenerational justice as well. Poor and marginalized communities are the most vulnerable to the consequences of climate change, even though they are least responsible for causing it (Wright et al. 2018). Twenty years ago, climate change was an abstract threat that scientists warned for, but this is no longer the case. Many communities around the world are now experiencing the destructive effects of climate change, posing no longer an abstract, but very concrete threat to their livelihoods.<sup>2</sup>

A climate justice lens draws attention to the need for mitigation and adaption strategies that do not only work towards a low carbon future, but also ensure that this transition does not increase inequalities and vulnerabilities, but reduces them (Walker 2012, 213).

The realization that the failure of intergovernmental negotiations is already having severe consequences for some communities, predominantly located in the Global South, has led to an upsurge in climate activism and advocacy, and demands for systemic changes that address the inequality between those causing climate change, and those suffering the worst consequences (Goodman, Rosewarne, and Pearse 2013; Bond and Dorsey 2010).

## **1.3. Environmental justice and Blockadia**

Naomi Klein's (2014) work calls attention to the linkages between the global power structures of capitalism and the unequal environmental burden carried by so-called 'frontline communities', and thus fits within environmental justice scholarship.

Although Klein's description of Blockadia is similar to Martinez-Alier's conceptualization of ecological distribution conflicts, her work is different, because she specifically focusses on fossil fuel resistance, and frames it as climate action. Martinez-Alier's focus is on communities in the Global South. This focus makes sense, because for a long time, transnational corporations from the Global North have been increasingly capable of relocating different parts of their supply chains to the Global South, where labour and resources are cheapest. This process also relocated the ecological costs of production to more distant

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<sup>2</sup> For a list of 'climate change hotspots', look at Vidal (2017)

places, onto people who lacked political power. Safely out of sight and out of mind for Western corporations and consumers (Gould, Schnaiberg, and Weinberg 1996; Hornborg 2016; Klein 2014).

What is new, is the rapidly increasing scale of extraction and consumption of fossil fuels, which has pushed the frontlines of the industry into the Global North. Those who have been historically privileged enough to close their eyes are now experiencing what it means for their health and safety to be threatened by the arrival of fossil fuel extraction close to their home (Klein 2014, 311). This expansion, and use of even more destructive extraction techniques, has given rise to a new wave of ecological distribution conflicts. This new wave, according to Klein, deserves specific attention, because it has given rise to a new movement: Blockadia. Blockadia is not simply a collection of what Martinez-Alier would describe as ecological distribution conflicts, but a growing movement, made up of those locally resisting fossil fuels, characterized by an awareness of the interconnectedness of these spaces and a consciousness of being part of a global struggle against the fossil fuel industry and its contribution to both local destruction, and climate change (Klein 2014).

## 2. Literature: Strengths and Weaknesses of Blockadia

In the following section I will give an overview of the different lines of argument put forward in political ecology and social movement literature, that demonstrate why Blockadia movements hold the potential for a stronger and wider climate justice movement. Subsequently, I will discuss different arguments that point to potential limitations of local fossil fuel resistance as a driver of climate justice.

### 2.1. The Promise of Blockadia



*Figure 1 - Spaces of Blockadia (EJ Atlas)*

### *2.1.1. Concrete achievements*

The first argument for Blockadia is not so much a theoretical argument, but proof of its successfulness. Resistance against fossil fuel extraction can be traced back to the Niger Delta, and the fight of the Ogoni people against Shell in the 1990s (EJ Atlas, n.d.; Klein 2014). Oil spills and gas flaring motivated people living in the affected area to rise up against Shell and to demand Shell to leave the oil in the ground. This protest resulted in a Nigerian mass movement, which received support from all over the world, culminating in the withdrawal of Shell from Ogoni land (Bassey 2012; Rivin and Owen 2017).

Another big win by a Blockadia movement was the rejection of the Keystone XL pipeline by US president Obama in 2015. This was a key moment for the resistance against the pipeline that already started when it was proposed in 2008. The Keystone resistance was unprecedented in multiple ways. It brought about an unexpected alliance between indigenous tribes and ranchers, both living on the land that was supposed to make way for the construction of the pipeline. Moreover, there was a clear understanding within the movement that resisting the pipeline was not only a matter of protecting local livelihoods, but also about the protection of the planet against climate change and the need to leave fossil fuels in the ground to this end (Cheon and Urpelainen 2018; Klein 2014). The rejection was thus not only celebrated as a win for those living close to the proposed pipeline, but for humanity as a whole. This is also why the reversal of Obama's rejection by current US president Trump, does not undo the ripple effect that Keystone had for other spaces of resistance around the world. Keystone gave rise to what some have called 'Keystonization', the realization that grassroots resistance against the fossil fuel industry is possible and effective, and 'The Keystone principle', the logic that if we want to prevent even more catastrophic consequences of climate change, we need to do at least the bare minimum: stop making it worse by investing in new fossil fuel infrastructure (Cheon and Urpelainen 2018; McKibben 2019). Moreover, successful organizing by local action groups has shown the environmental movement that this type of bottom-up action is 'more capable of keeping carbon in the ground than lobbying efforts' (Black, D'Arcy, and Weis 2014, 168).

### *2.1.2. Addressing root causes*

The Ogoni and Keystone struggles show that local resistance is about much more than individual grievances. These struggles, and other cases of Blockadia, are ultimately about community control, and citizens standing up against transnational corporations to reclaim control of their land and resources (Klein 2014; Gould, Schnaiberg, and Weinberg 1996, 177). This is exactly why different authors (e.g. Klein 2014; Scheidel et al. 2018; Bassey 2012) note that Blockadia struggles are drivers of both sustainability and social justice. Blockadia struggles repoliticize energy production, by painfully exposing the unequal burden borne by frontline communities, and the fossil fuel industry's wilful disregard of this burden (Scheidel et al. 2018, 595).

These ‘accidental activists’<sup>3</sup> do not only demand that fossil fuels stay in the ground, but also bring attention to the unjust economic system that has allowed the fossil fuel industry to successfully externalize the destructive costs of their practices (Martinez-Alier et al. 2010, 153).

Martinez-Alier (2002) argues that these communities take part in an ‘environmentalism of the poor’, contrasting it to mainstream forms of environmentalism, which focus either on conservation or on technological innovation.

Justice demands are central to Blockadia movements, as a direct consequence of the injustice that motivates the resistance in the first place. By truly being a grassroots and bottom-up environmental movement, Blockadia is an antidote to the appropriation of environmentalism by agenda’s that disregard the injustice component of environmental problems.

### *2.1.3. Critical mass for climate movement*

Moreover, Blockadia movements have the power to counteract climate change denialism and contribute to a broader-based climate justice movement.

First of all, the local impacts of fossil fuel extraction bring the destructive nature of the whole industry close to home. Inaction in the face of climate change can be explained by the distance between those burning fossil fuels, and those suffering its consequences. Nations in the Global North have been better able to protect themselves to the consequences of climate change than most nations in the Global South, and have shifted the costs of climate change to the other side of the world, whilst continuing to cause climate change by consuming fossil fuels (Norgaard 2011, 218–19). So for many people in the Global North climate change has remained an abstract threat in the future (Nixon 2011, 2). But the expanding frontlines of the fossil fuel industry are changing this. Those who have been historically privileged are now experiencing what it means for their health and safety to be threatened by the arrival of fossil fuel extraction close to their home (Klein 2014, 311). The knowledge that something radically needs to change about this exploitative way of doing business, has already been known by those who have historically been exploited, but those in the Global North who have only recently become victims of it, are now waking up to this realisation (Klein 2014, 313). This is promising, because people in the Global North consume on average much more fossil fuels than people in the Global South (Ritchie and Roser 2019), and usually have more social power to make their voice heard and affect change (Klein 2014, 315). People previously unaware of the seriousness of climate change, or at least passive towards it, can thus become important drivers of change through their direct involvement with Blockadia conflicts.

Secondly, Blockadia struggles have the potential to bring people together and generate alliances. The fact that those resisting fossil fuel extraction locally share an experience and enemy, has made alliances

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<sup>3</sup> Term borrowed from Luke et al. (2018)

possible that were previously unthinkable, as proven by the ‘Cowboy and Indian Alliance’ fighting the Keystone pipeline (Klein 2014, 302). On top of this, the resistance against the exploitative business model of the fossil fuel industry by Blockadia activists, does not only unite local communities, but also enables alliances between issue-specific Blockadia activists, and other social movements. Although these different groups all have different goals and backgrounds, they are united in their commitment to combat oppression and exploitation of people and nature (Bond and Dorsey 2010, 289). Scheidel et al (2018, 588) argue that these alliances have the potential to ‘build the basis for larger movements that question the broader structures causing environmental injustices’. This is promising, because it paves the way for a stronger climate justice movement based on the acknowledgement of environmental problems as social problems (Bond 2015). Instead of competing for attention, different single-issue advocates can combine their forces, to demand the radical change that the climate crisis requires (Ibid.). Connecting to other spaces of resistance is not only important in order to reach critical mass, it can also be a great source of solidarity and hope, and the appeal of being part of a larger movement can motivate people to become involved (McKibben 2019; Goodman, Rosewarne, and Pearse 2013).

#### *2.1.4. Decentralisation and Scale*

Those arguing for the potential of Blockadia can be placed within a tradition in environmental thought that prioritizes the local over the global as the optimal scale for environmental action. Although this tradition emerged way before the 1970s, it can be easily summarized by the slogan ‘think globally, act locally’ that became popular during this time. (Heise 2008)

Naomi Klein (2014, 343) argues that Blockadia movements show that connection to place motivates the protection of these places against fossil fuel extraction. She writes ‘if each of us loved our homeplace enough to defend it, there would be no ecological crisis, no place could ever be written off as a sacrifice zone’ (Ibid, 347). Environmental action is thus ultimately motivated by lived experience<sup>4</sup>, instead of ideological and theoretical ideas of the environment and why it should be protected (Ibid.). Klein (2014, 335-36) refers to American writer and environmentalist Wendell Berry (2012), who claims that sympathy for humanity and nature beyond our immediate surroundings is dependent on one’s local experience of belonging in a place and one’s affection for it.

Ursula Heise, author of the book *Sense of place and sense of planet : the environmental imagination of the global* (2008), traces the roots of these ideas back to American environmentalist discourse of place attachment and the idea that morality is tied to proximity, assuming that a sense of responsibility and care arise ‘naturally’ for one’s immediate surroundings, but that attachments beyond the local level can only arise through complex processes and mediation (Heise 2008, 34). Following this argument,

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<sup>4</sup> Experience based on having lived through something (van Manen 2011)

resistance against climate change, an inherently global problem, can also only happen on the basis of place attachment to the local.

Others emphasize the need for engagement with the local for pragmatic and strategic reasons (Heise 2008). Weick's (1984) psychology of 'small wins' postulates that social problems are generally conceived on a scale that precludes innovative action. The massive scale of problems like climate change incites feelings of helplessness and frustration, because people cannot see concrete steps that will ensure complete, visible results (ibid). By focussing on concrete cases of fossil fuel extraction, climate change is localised, and recasted into different concrete struggles with clear opponents that can be resisted.

Research into social movements and protest by Klandermans (2014) moreover shows that personal grievances play an important role in protest motivations. Goodman et al. (2013) describe that motivation to act within the climate movement is dependent on emotional experience. For many people, climate change is still perceived as an abstract threat in the future, a threat that is difficult to imagine, not capable of evoking the emotional experience necessary to urge them into action (Norgaard 2011).

So although grievances and emotional experiences do not necessarily stem from lived experiences in one's immediate surroundings, it is not difficult to connect this research to the earlier mentioned argument that experiencing the injustice perpetrated by the fossil fuel industry on a local scale can be an effective pathway to becoming aware of similar injustices on a global scale (Klein 2014).

## **2.2. Weaknesses of Blockadia**

Different arguments can be distinguished that point to potential limitations of Blockadia resistance as a driver of climate justice :

### *2.2.1. Need for top-down policy change at international level*

The first argument is that the global nature of climate change demands action on an international level. Locally resisting individual fossil fuel projects is, according to some, an ineffective strategy to address climate change. They argue that real change can only happen through changes in public policy, achieved by international agreements. Time and energy should thus be more effectively spend on directly trying to affect international negotiations. (Cheon and Urpelainen 2018, 3, 14)

Others argue that local environmental struggles can only affect change beyond the local, when local struggles are supported by an external actor who can coordinate the forming of coalitions between different social movements. Only then can these different movement combine their power to influence agenda-setting and legislation (Gould, Schnaiberg, and Weinberg 1996, 182).

Not all authors thus recognize the interconnectedness of local spaces of resistance, as described by Klein. Bond (2015, 17) states that climate justice activism has so far failed to achieve wins on a global-scale, because of the ‘extremely atomistic nature of climate justice activism’.

### *2.2.2. Blockadia conflicts not necessarily about climate justice*

Klein’s emphasis on Blockadia as a climate movement is not recognized by everyone. According to Scheidel et al. (2018) not all ‘ecological distribution conflicts’ go beyond ‘Not In My Backyard’ (NIMBY) concerns. Resistance in those cases is solely motivated by the negative effects of a project on an individual level, not by a questioning of the underlying systemic root causes. Resistance against a specific local fossil fuel project, according to them, is not always motivated by the recognition of the structural injustice perpetrated by the fossil fuel industry, and its role in causing climate change. Resistance in these cases is therefore unlikely to lead to change beyond the local project.

From another perspective, it can be questioned if one should expect those who are already struggling, to also be the new leaders of the climate movement. As I said before, climate change is still often perceived as a hobby of the elite (Aldana Cohen 2017). It is an issue not necessarily of relevance to people whose livelihood and safety are in danger (Bond 2015).

### *2.2.3. Us vs them: polarization and identity*

The ‘us-them’ discourse of the climate movement versus the fossil fuel industry has been useful for creating unity within the movement, but it can also be viewed as having a polarizing effect on the debate (Cheon and Urpelainen 2018, 5). Bosworth (2018) argues that local fossil fuel resistance movements take part in ‘environmental populism<sup>5</sup>’ by using grassroots political organizing to demand power is returned to ‘the people’. His study of pipeline opposition movements in the US show that environmental populism runs the risk of reproducing exclusionary politics when ‘the people’ is interpreted to only apply to a certain group of people.

Moreover, this ‘us-them’ framing legitimizes the use of direct action and civil disobedience against the industry. Cheon and Urpelainen (2018, 60) argue that the use of these tactics can deter local citizens from engaging with activism, and thus counteract the building of a broad-based movement.

Research by Luke et al. (2018) on the perceptions of climate activism by local communities that resist gas extraction developments, shows that there is often an unwillingness to resist these developments through traditional activist tactics, i.e. civil disobedience and marches. Locals see themselves as ‘accidental activists’, but do not want to be associated with ‘real activists’, because their idea of activism

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<sup>5</sup> Bosworth uses populism here as developed by Laclau (2005)

does not fit with their own social identity. Environmental activists are often seen as the social other or outsider. This is reinforced by the fact that activism sometimes originates outside of the community. In these case studies undertaken by Luke et al. (2018, 5) this led to local residents not feeling ownership over strategies, and a questioning of the interests of the external activists.

This shows that coalitions between climate activists and local communities do not always arise naturally, and that locals resisting fossil fuel extraction projects, do not necessarily see themselves as climate activists.

#### *2.2.4. Resistance not dependent on lived experience and place attachment*

The argument that the successful mobilization of environmental action is motivated by place attachment and lived experiences in the local, is according to eco-critic Ursula Heise (2008) based on a misplaced essentialist idea of rootedness and identity and its relation to environmental conscious and sustainable behaviour. Attachment to your immediate surroundings is not ‘natural’ or ‘fixed’, but the result of social production or cultural construction (Ibid, 45). This does not mean that place attachment cannot have real effects. However, these effects can go in different directions.

Feelings of rootedness and local identity, and lived experiences in a place, can possibly be a valuable gateway to increased environmental conscious. But a strong ‘sense of place’ does not necessarily lead to progressive, sustainable behaviour, as demonstrated by different (extremist) far-right movements who base their exclusionary arguments on claims of local belonging to the natural environment (Ibid, 47). Devine-Wright (2009) argues the disruption of place attachment motivates place-protective action, but this disruption could just as much be caused by renewable energy projects as fossil fuel extraction.

Brown and Purcell (2005, 608) notice a trend within the field of political ecology to assume ‘that the key to environmental sustainability, social justice, and democracy is devolution of power to local-scale actors and organizations’, they call this the ‘local trap’. Just like Heise, they argue that there is nothing inherent about the local scale. What we define as ‘the local’ and how we relate to it, is a matter of social production and political struggle, and thus fluid (Christopher Brown and Purcell 2005, 609).

To summarize, this chapter provided different reasons to believe that Blockadia struggles present an alternative form of climate action, that can make the climate justice movement stronger and broader. Subsequently, different arguments were discussed that reveal potential weaknesses of these arguments and limitations to the potential of local resistance against fossil fuel extraction, that could limit its potential to the wider climate justice movement. The case study of Groningen uncovers if the reality of fossil fuel resistance confirms these strengths and weaknesses, and will serve to deepen the existing theory and literature.

# 3. Case background: resistance against gas extraction in Groningen

## 3.1. Historical context

In 1959 the biggest natural gas field of Europe was discovered in Groningen, a province in the north of the Netherlands<sup>6</sup>. This discovery was initially heralded as a treasure. The expectation was that the gas was going to bring a lot of wealth to the province. The opposite turned out to be true. A mining law from 1810 made it possible for the state to claim the gas field. In 1963, NAM, the Dutch Oil Company, a joint venture of the Royal Dutch Shell and American ExxonMobil, entered into an agreement with the Dutch state and started extracting natural gas from the Groningen gas field (Brandsma et al. 2016, 41). The construction of the agreement between the state and the joint venture of Shell and Exxon Mobile is complicated, but all three parties have the same aim: to produce as much gas, and thus income as possible (van der Voort and Vanclay 2015, 4). The state profits from the extraction through involvement in the sale of gas, its share in the profits of NAM, and income from royalties, taxes, fees and dividends (ibid). However, less than one percent of the billions of national gas revenues has, since extraction started, been invested in Groningen (Huisman n.d.). Moreover, gas extraction turned out to have severe consequences for Groningen by causing seismic activity (Boffey 2018; Corder 2018; Reed 2015). The first gas-induced earthquake was registered in 1986. Seismic activity increased after 2001, amounting in more than 1000 earthquakes in total by 2019. The seismic activity is caused by the compaction of subsurface rock after gas is extracted. The earthquakes are minor, but their repetitive occurrence has destabilized buildings, sometimes even to the point that inhabitants need to be evacuated for their homes to be either made earthquake resistant or to be torn down (Reed 2015; Vlek 2018).

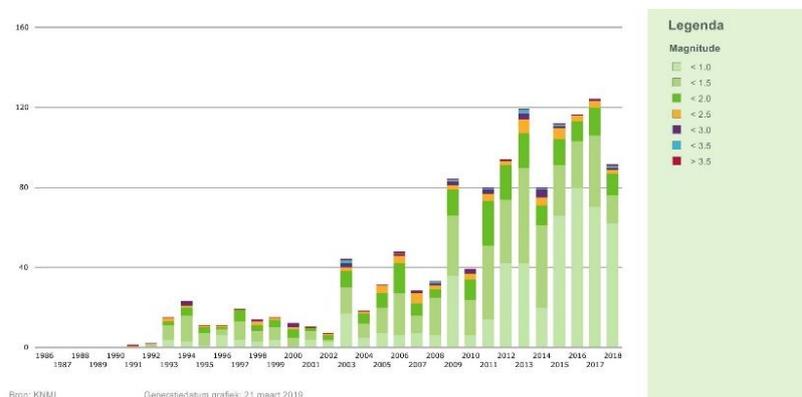


Figure 2- Number of earthquakes in Groningen gasfield per year, 1986 – 2018 (NAM 2019b)

<sup>6</sup> It is important to notice that Groningen is both the name of the province and the name of the capital of the province.



Figure 4 - Location of the province of Groningen in the Netherlands (Wikimedia Commons 2011)



Figure 5 - Gasfields in the north of the Netherlands (NAM 2019a)

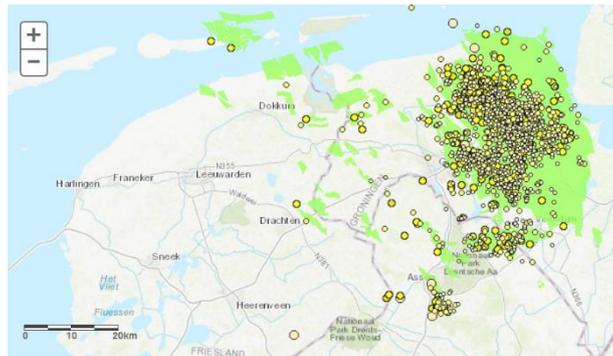


Figure 3 - Earthquakes in the north of the Netherlands 1986 - 2019 (NAM 2019a)

Initially, when citizens started to notice cracks in their walls, the connection to subsidence and repetitive earthquake occurrence was denied by the parties involved in the extraction (Shell, Exxon Mobile and the Dutch State), despite warnings from scientists (Brandsma et al. 2016). In 1993, it was recognized that the seismic activity was indeed caused by gas extraction. However, it was not until August 2012, when the strongest earthquake up until then<sup>7</sup> caused 1900 inhabitants to report damages that earthquakes were acknowledged to pose a threat to the safety of the inhabitants of the affected area (Ibid, 13,117). Inhabitants began to organize themselves in groups, demanding compensation for damages and a halt in gas extraction in the affected areas. In march 2018, the Dutch government announced to gradually phase-out gas extraction and to fully terminate extraction by 2030. Nevertheless, earthquakes are still occurring, and much is still unclear concerning liability for damages, compensation that the victims in the affected areas are entitled to and the strengthening and reparation of buildings.

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<sup>7</sup> The earthquake in Huizinge in 2012 had a magnitude of 3.6 on the Richter scale, but because of the induced nature of the earthquakes, this scale does not accurately describe earthquakes in Groningen. Gas is extracted at three kilometres below the surface, so movement in the soil that causes subsidence and earthquakes is much closer to the surface than movement that causes natural seismic activity. Relatively 'weak' earthquakes on the Richter scale cause a lot of damage to buildings in Groningen, because the movement originates so close to the surface (Huisman n.d.).

Research conducted by the University of Groningen, in cooperation with the municipality and local public health service (Postmes et al. 2018), painfully exposes the social and economic consequences of gas extraction for the inhabitants of Groningen. Earthquakes have significantly decreased the perceived safety of inhabitants, and those inhabitants whose homes have sustained damage suffer more stress-related health problems. Distrust and lack of confidence in authorities is high. (Postmes et al. 2018)

### **3.2. Resistance**

As said, it was not until 2012 that the seriousness of the threats posed by gas extraction were acknowledged. Before the earthquake of Huizinge in August 2012, also most inhabitants of Groningen did not see seismic activity as a serious problem (van der Voort and Vanclay 2015, 1). But the widespread damage that the Huizinge earthquake caused, led inhabitants to increasingly resist the extraction, and demand compensation for- and reparation of sustained damages.

However, already in 2009, the ‘Groninger Bodem Beweging’ (GBB) was founded by a group of citizens who thought not enough critical attention was paid to the consequences of gas extraction. The interest group structured itself as a membership-based organization, with a board, whose goal is to advocate for the interests of inhabitants who suffer damages from the earthquakes. Until 2012 the group was a small grassroots organization with a couple of hundred members, but after the earthquake in Huizinge in August 2012, the number of members rapidly grew. In the years that followed, the organization professionalized. The organization is now the biggest organization lobbying for the interests of inhabitants of Groningen. Besides lobbying, the GBB pursues collective lawsuits and organizes demonstrations (Groninger Bodem Beweging n.d.).

From 2012 onwards, more interest- and action groups emerged, all using different tactics and motivated by different aims, but united by a concern about the consequences of gas extraction and the discontent with the way NAM and the Dutch state respond to this crisis. The biggest demonstration so far was a march in the city of Groningen on January 19, 2018, organized by GBB and Milieudefensie (Friends of the Earth Netherlands). About 10.000 people participated in this march to protest gas extraction.

Environmental organizations and climate activists have also become engaged in the movement against gas in Groningen. Natural gas is often perceived as a ‘clean fossil fuel’, because of the lower levels of CO<sub>2</sub> that are emitted when gas is burnt in comparison to other fossil fuels. However, in the process of extracting, and processing natural gas, methane leakages can occur. Methane is a much stronger greenhouse gas than CO<sub>2</sub>. Moreover, continued investment in gas infrastructure means that citizens are forced into continued fossil-fuel dependence, whilst these funds could also be invested in a transition towards a fossil-free future. (Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung 2017)



Figure 6 - Protest march in the city of Groningen, 'Enough = enough!' (Stokman 2018)

In the summer of 2018, an action camp was organized in the village of Leermens by Code Rood (Code Red), a group of climate activists whose aim is to directly target the fossil fuel industry and its power. The group organized a week of workshops and discussions about gas extraction and a fossil free world (Code Rood, n.d.), that ended with a mass sit-in at the gascondensate storage facility of NAM in Farmsum (Groningen), to block the entrance to the facility and disrupt the gas extraction.



Figure 7 - Code Rood activists marching to Farmsum to block a NAM location (Boerding 2018)

410.000 people in Groningen live in the area where the consequences of earthquakes have been recognized (Postmes et al. 2018, 112). At the end of 2016, 134.363 adults had suffered damage caused by the consequences of gas extraction (ibid). It is difficult to say how many people are actively resisting gas extraction and its consequences. People are angry and feel unjustly treated, but it is complicated to trace if and how this exactly changes behaviour (Postmes et al. 2018, 64).

Research on collective action in Groningen conducted by Postmes and Greijdanus (2018, 169) shows that a relatively small percentage of people living in Groningen takes part in ‘traditional’ forms of collective action like marches and demonstrations. However, this is also a matter of perspective. In 2016, 2017, and 2018 protest marches were organized in the city of Groningen, in 2016 several hundred people participated, in 2017 about 5000 and in 2018 about 10.000 (ibid, 167). The motivation to act thus grew rapidly in the past years. 22% of participants (inhabitants of Groningen) in the study said to have participated in a demonstration related to the gas extraction. Although 1 in 5 might seem little, only 2.2% of Dutch citizens in 2016 said to have participated in a demonstration in the last year (ibid, 169).

### **3.3. Existing research – gas extraction in Groningen**

Existing research on the Groningen case mainly focuses on the geophysics of gas extraction, the legal dispute over compensation and liability, and the psychosocial effects the earthquakes and conflicts over compensation claims have (Postmes et al. 2018; Greijdanus and Postmes 2018; van der Voort and Vanclay 2015; Vlek 2018; Metze 2014; Mulder and Perey 2018; Boelhouwer and van der Heijden 2018; Bröring 2018). What is missing in the debate is the connection to the global context of fossil fuel extraction as a cause of climate change, and the global environmental movement fighting environmental destruction and environmental and social injustice.

### **3.4. Case Selection**

The case of Groningen is an interesting and relevant case of local resistance against fossil fuel extraction for different reasons. Firstly, because it involves inhabitants of the Global North who experience the negative effects of fossil fuel extraction really close to home (in fact, it causes the destruction of their homes). But just like any other place in the world, Groningen is not simply defined by its position on one of the sides of the Global North-South divide.

The province of Groningen is largely made up of smaller villages and agricultural land, with one bigger city (also named Groningen) located in the south of the province. The earthquakes are predominantly taking place in the rural north-east of the province, and only had limited effects on inhabitants of the city of Groningen. The city of Groningen is a rapidly growing student-city, whilst the province is struggling with population decline, and ageing of the population (Sociaal Planbureau Groningen n.d.).

Moreover, on a national scale, the province of Groningen is located in the periphery. The economic core is located in the ‘Randstad’, the urban conglomerate made up of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht, in the mid-west of the Netherlands. The problems caused by gas extraction, and the fact that the profit from extraction has not been invested in Groningen, has reinforced the feeling in Groningen that the interest of Groningen is not of relevance to those living in the core (van Es 2014).

So although Groningen is located in the Global North, the unequal distribution of the advantages and disadvantages of extraction between the core and periphery, and exploitation of already (relatively) disadvantaged communities, makes Groningen a typical case of an ecological distribution conflict.

Moreover, the direct involvement of climate activists through Code Rood and the cooperation between local interest groups and Milieudefensie create interesting opportunities to study the dynamics between local action groups and environmental activists.

## **4. Methodology**

### **4.1. Reflexive Science**

My methodology is in the first place motivated by a desire to be reflexive and critical throughout the research process. Reflexive science is a model of science that embraces not detachment but engagement as the road to knowledge, deploying dialogues to reach explanations of empirical phenomena (Burawoy 1998, 5). Reflexive science presents an alternative to traditional positivistic methodological dualism (Ibid, 10), which aims at finding an 'objective truth' by distancing the observer from the object of study. In contrast, reflexive science is based on the conviction that knowledge can best be gained by immersing ourselves in this context we study, instead of trying to distance ourselves from this context (Ibid, 14). Adopting a reflexive science stance also means being critical. Being critical of the world you study, by looking beyond surface appearances, and bringing to light underlying and obscure operations of power and control. Being critical also means being critical of yourself, your research methods and your position as a researcher. (Madison 2012)

#### *4.1.1 Positionality*

I am born and raised in Groningen. This gives me a large degree of familiarity with the context in which the resistance against gas extraction is situated, the culture, and the local norms and values. Being Dutch and from the province of Groningen, makes me an insider in the research context. Being an insider is beneficial has been beneficial for the research process. I did not have to spend much time familiarizing myself with the context and, as an insider, I had relatively easy access to people and information in the field, and was maybe more likely to be trusted than an outsider would have been.

But although I could be considered an insider to some extent, I am an outsider at the same time. I am from the city of Groningen, and not the rural areas of the province affected by earthquakes. Although I understand the regional dialect, I do not speak it. I have not experienced any of the material or emotional damage caused by the earthquakes and at the time of my field work I had not lived in the Netherlands

for one and a half year. This points to a potential risk: to write about others, without fully being able to understand their experience. I therefore chose to conduct interviews with insiders, and I hope that by listening and talking to them, and telling their stories, I have minimized the possibility of misinterpretation.

However, being an outsider also had advantages: because I have not been an active participant in either the local resistance in Groningen, or in climate activism, I approached both topics with relatively little preconceptions and judgements.

#### *4.1.2. Ethics*

All my participants were informed about the topic and aim of the study before consenting to participation. They were asked permission for recording the interview and were offered the option to stay anonymous.

### **4.2. Research design: Extended Case Study Method**

I use ‘the extended case study method’, as developed by Burawoy (1998), which applies a reflexive view of science to ethnographic case studies. The extended case study method uses ethnographic methods to study the specifics of the selected case. ‘Extended’, stands for a commitment to relate the patterns that can be traced by studying the local context, to macro structures and theory (Burawoy 1998). This fits my aim of studying the local context of Groningen in relation to the larger global context of environmental activism and Blockadia. Moreover, this method allows a dialogue between theory and practice, and is thus both inductive and deductive in nature. The selection of the case and the collection of data is guided by theory, and in the analysis the findings are related to this theoretical framework and additional literature, if the findings ask for this (ibid). As stated by Wadham and Warren (2013, 6), ‘the link between the macro-level context and micro-level action is established via preexisting theory’. For this study, this means that the global context of Blockadia and climate change is linked to the context of Groningen via the theory and concepts discussed in chapter 2 and 3.

There are however different pitfalls and limitations associated with this research design. Conducting a literature review and building a theoretical framework before entering the field, helps to determine the focus of the field work and to interpret the findings directly in light of macro structures (Madison 2012; Burawoy 1998). Caution should however be paid to the pitfall of predetermining what is significant or important to the extent that the researcher is no longer open to unexpected findings in the field (Wadham and Warren 2013, 16). To counteract this pitfall, I decided to conduct two interviews at the very early stages of the research process. These interviews served as ‘pilots’ and helped me to guide the focus of this research, and to point out gaps in my knowledge or in theory that needed attention.

A limitation of the extended case study method is the transferability of research findings to other cases (ibid). Science in this model is viewed as existing in a state of continual revision. The in-depth study of the case of Groningen does not directly lead to generalizable conclusions, but the anomalies that the collected data present to existing theory, enables me to deepen theory (Burawoy 1998, 16). Flyvbjerg (2006) also argues that the in-depth study of one case allows the researcher to trace the causes of outcomes that are different than predicted by theory (ibid.). So although the study of this case does not lead to conclusions that can be directly applied to different contexts, it does facilitate the generation of theory that extends beyond the boundaries of the context (ibid.).

### **4.3 Research Methods:**

#### *4.3.1. Semi-structured interviews*

Interviews are my main method of data collection, because of the rich, in depth knowledge they provide of the mechanisms that determine the phenomena under study. Semi-structured interviews give insight into people's lived realities, by allowing participants to respond to questions according to their own perspective, making interviews a useful method to understanding participants' experiences and opinions (Kvale, 2007). The use of an interview guide provided focus, but also allowed for flexibility to adapt the interview to what the participant would bring up. (Bryman, 2012, Chapter 20)

To determine who I wanted to interview, I was guided by my research questions. This type of sampling is called 'purposive sampling'. I chose to conduct expert interviews. For this study, I considered experts to be people who, based on either their work or personal involvement in the local resistance, were able to not only provide me of in-depth knowledge of their own experience, but would also be able to reflect on the resistance as a whole.

The interviewees were strategically selected to ensure variety in my sample, in order to be able to draw from different perspectives and provide a comprehensive understanding of the resistance in Groningen. Because of my interest in understanding the relation between the climate movement and the local resistance, I interviewed both key figures within the local resistance, and key figures within climate action groups and environmental organizations that have been involved in resisting gas in Groningen. To have both a grassroots, and an organizational perspective, I made sure to talk to different people who only participated in actions, and organizers of these actions.

A disadvantage of conducting interviews is that they are time-consuming and resource intensive. I therefore relied on thirteen experts, and their combined knowledge and experience, to understand the whole reality of resistance. However, it is possible that my sample, although strategically selected, does not represent all perspectives and actors within the movement. In order to strengthen my findings, and account for this potential gap, I collected additional secondary data from local newspapers and existing

research on the case for my analysis. Both newspaper articles and other studies conducted in Groningen, gave me access to voices not included (or underrepresented) in my research, and served to triangulate the findings that emerged from my primary data.

#### 4.3.2 Analysis: transcription and coding

The analysis stage of my research did not start once I exited the field, but by entering the field. I already structured my interview data according to the themes that had come up in my earlier literature review. Due to my semi-structured approach, and relatively open and informal approach to my interviews, there was also space for the interviewees to bring up what they thought would be interesting and relevant, which led to the emergence of additional themes. I transcribed all my interviews, and analysed the texts by means of thematic coding, looking both for the themes that had come up in my conceptual framework (deductive coding), and themes that emerged from the data itself (inductive coding) (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2014, 81). I subsequently used these codes to structure my findings, and relate my findings to theory and additional secondary data.

#### 4.3.3. List of Interviewees

Erik	Inhabitant of the province, actively engaged in a communal action group that wants to stop extraction from one of the smaller gas fields in Groningen.
Sandra	Member of Parliament for the Socialist Party (SP), lives in the city of Groningen, key political figure in the local resistance.
Chris	Climate activist, played an important role in organizing the Code Rood blockade and action camp in Groningen, lives in the city of Groningen, but originally from the UK
Trudy	Inhabitant of the province, active in different action groups, hosted the Code Rood action camp on her farm.
Ruurd	Inhabitant of the province, has participated in several marches against gas extraction.
Susan	Board member of 'het Groninger Gasberaad', an organization that promotes the interests of different sectors in Groningen in relation to the consequences of gas extraction. Their members are representatives of different interest groups (agriculture, industries, local businesses, cultural heritage and more). The organization tries to influence public policy, mainly through a dialogue with different institutions and political organs, and advises and helps individual inhabitants.
Coert	Board member of 'de Groninger Bodem Beweging' (GBB), the biggest organization lobbying for the interests of inhabitants of Groningen. Besides lobbying, the GBB pursues collective lawsuits and organizes demonstrations.
Freek	Spokesperson for Economy at 'Milieudedefensie' (Friends of the Earth Netherlands), leads different campaigns against Shell.
Peter	Organizer at Milieudedefensie and climate activist, actively involved in the organization of different actions in Groningen, among which the Code Rood action.
Kees	Inhabitant of the province, actively involved in community politics and the setting up of an energy cooperative.

Anna*	Spanish climate activist, participated in the Code Rood action in Groningen.
Lavinia	Economic justice researcher at the Transnational Institute and political activist, spoke on a panel during the Code Rood action camp.
Nils*	Swedish climate activist who mobilized a group of Swedish and Danish activists to participate in the Code Rood action.

\*These names have been changed, to meet the interviewees' wish to remain anonymous.

## 5. Findings

In the first part of this chapter I will give an overview of individual and collective motivations for collective action against gas in Groningen, and the meaning those active in the resistance attach to their activism. The first section focuses on the question if the lived experience of being confronted with the destructive effects of gas extraction has indeed created a heightened awareness of unequal power relations and structural injustice perpetrated by the fossil fuel industry. The second section is about the question if the local resistance against gas is driven by concerns about the climate crisis. In the third section I will give an overview of the alliances that exist between the local resistance and the climate justice movement, and how these have developed over time. The aim of this last section is to provide an understanding of the extent to which Groningen is part of transnational movement against fossil fuels.

The understanding these sections provide of the resistance in Groningen, build the basis for an analysis of the mechanisms that influence the transformative potential of the local resistance as a force for climate justice, which will be presented in the second part of this chapter.

### 5.1. Lived experience as a driver of awareness and action

#### 5.1.1. Increased awareness: social (in)justice

All interviewees that are locally active in the resistance recognize the existence of a strong sense of injustice in Groningen. They tell me this injustice is not only experienced because of the consequences of gas extraction, but more so as a result of governmental mismanagement.

Although the state and industry have acknowledged that seismic activity caused by gas extraction has led to damages to buildings, they are very reluctant to spend money on reparations of damages and strengthening of buildings. Instead of automatically assuming liability for the thousands of claims that exist, the complicated system that has been set up, judges every claim on a case-by-case basis. This system is time consuming and resource intensive, because every claim needs to be analysed by an expert to judge if the claimed damage is the result of gas extraction and how much compensation the claimant

‘deserves’. International scientists specialised in seismic activity, have judged this process to be based on faulty assumptions: it is not possible to look at cracks in walls and know if they are caused by seismic activity or not (de Veer 2019). Instead, they recommend government and industry to replace the whole bureaucracy by unconditional compensation (ibid.).

My interviewees who are active in local organizations, acknowledge that the biggest problem the region faces is no longer gas extraction and compensation itself, but ‘the fundamental erosion of a sense of fairness and justice’, because of the malfunctioning of this bureaucracy. Inhabitants have the impression that instead of working on solutions, both the state and industry have only made things worse for inhabitants.

Different interviewees tell me that the general impression in Groningen is that public policy is driven by the interests of NAM, i.e. Shell and Exxon Mobile. According to Susan Top, who lobbies for the interests of Groningen in The Hague, NAM determines the framework within public policy is determined.

The fact that, even after having recognized the existence of the problem, economic interests are prioritized over the safety and well-being of people in Groningen, has further convinced inhabitants of the province that they are not just the victim of an unforeseen problem, but the victim of deliberate and structural exploitation. Lavinia Steinfort, an economic justice researcher and activist who participated in Code Rood, observes that the role of the state in gas extraction has even resulted in a disbelief that the state could play a transformative role in the conflict. However, Lavinia is convinced that to design and implement an environmental and socially just transition plan for the whole of Groningen and for the affected people to receive reparations, a pro-active and democratically accountable government is absolutely crucial.

Interest groups actively struggle for community control, and the right for inhabitants of Groningen to have a say about their future. However, not all interest groups and citizens connect this demand to the need to fundamentally change the power structures at the root of the problem.

For those in leading position in the social movement it is clear that the struggle for Groningen is about an imbalance of power that does not only exist in the context of Groningen, but a symptom of a system that prioritizes the pursuit of profit at the expense of people. However, because of the intimate relation between the fossil fuel industry and the state in Groningen, the struggle is mainly experienced as one against NAM and the state, and not necessarily as part of a global struggle against the fossil fuel industry.

Research conducted by Greijdanus and Postmes (2018), also concludes that although there is a general sense of injustice in Groningen, people have different perceptions of this injustice. For some, the injustice is directly, and only, related to their own experience of damage, for others the injustice is broader, and related to the close relation between NAM and the state (ibid, 10, 47).

### *5.1.2. Increased awareness: climate crisis*

The question if the resistance in Groningen is motivated by a concern about climate change and the destructive effects of fossil fuels extraction on a global scale is complex. Different people actively involved in the struggle tell me different stories:

Organizers at Milieudefensie I spoke to, tell me that they are involved in the struggle against gas in Groningen as part of their fight against fossil fuels, and struggle for climate justice. They see the local resistance as an opportunity to break the power of the gas industry, to promote the transition from gas to renewable forms of energy. Moreover, they argue that the local movement will have a bigger chance of winning their battle against the gas industry when their struggle is not just about the local consequences of extraction, but also about the need to stop extracting gas because of climate change. They see their involvement thus as mutually beneficial for their own environmental goals and the interests of local inhabitants.

The same applies to climate activist collective 'Code Rood', which organized a blockade in Groningen in August 2018. Their aim is to take collective action to stop global warming and the damages caused by the fossil fuel industry (Code Rood, n.d.). Nils, a Swedish climate activist, says that for him, Code Rood presented an opportunity to take action against the infrastructural expansion of gas, and the idea that gas can be used as a 'transition fuel'. Anna, a Spanish climate activist who participated in the action, tells me that for her the action also presented an opportunity to learn more about the harmful effects of gas extraction and to make a statement: 'not here, not anywhere'.

Also for the current Dutch government, there is a clear connection between the need to end gas extraction in Groningen and the need to move away from fossil fuels. Groningen is part of 'an ambitious climate agenda', in which the problems in Groningen are envisioned as being a catalyst for an accelerated regional energy transition (Kabinet Rutte III 2017, 43). Moreover, one of the ways the government has decided to compensate the region, is by offering inhabitants a subsidy to install sustainable energy-saving or energy-producing elements in their homes.

Peter, who works at Milieudefensie, says that in a lot of cases, 'the resistance is not only about 'not in my backyard', but also 'not on my planet'. However, for local groups and inhabitants I speak to, these connections are not as obvious. Susan Top and Coert Fossen, both on the board of leading interest groups in Groningen, tell me that for their organizations climate change is not a motivation, and stopping climate change is not a goal in itself. Gasberaad, the organization Susan represents, is against gas extraction in Groningen, because of the consequences extraction has there, but they are not against gas in general. They are open to transitioning to imported gas. She supports the energy transition, but does not see it as something Groningen specifically needs to contribute to.

Coert, representing GBB, also says that GBB has been created to help those affected by gas extraction, and that combatting climate change is therefore not part of their core mission. At the same time, GBB

recognizes that their aim to stop gas extraction is shared by the climate movement, and that cooperation can thus be beneficial. The board believes that people from Groningen have a special interest in climate action, because they know what it is like to be exploited by the fossil fuel industry. Therefore, GBB cooperates with Milieudefensie and supported Code Rood.

However, these alliances are not unanimously supported by GBB members. Several members terminated their membership when GBB called upon its member to collectively participate in a climate march. This seems to reflect a general trend: some people active in the movement see a clear parallel between the local struggle and the global struggle for climate justice, but this awareness is not widely shared by the broader public. The interviews paint the picture that for some, the confrontation with the effects of gas extraction has driven a commitment to be independent from fossil fuels, but this is not the case for everyone affected by gas extraction in Groningen. According to Coert, people have as widely varying attitudes towards climate change in Groningen as in other parts of the Netherlands.

My interviews with local inhabitants about engagement in their villages confirm that it is mostly people who are actively involved in local politics and community organizing who have started to propose collective ways to shift to renewable sources of energy in their community, as a way to deal with the consequences of gas extraction. An inhabitant of Westeremden, a small village affected by earthquakes, says that there are plans to collectively organize an alternative form of energy by the local village association, but that the board is also hesitant to push this through, because of the knowledge that this plan could run into opposition. For most locals, the main issue is their own damage, and lack of compensation, not issues of energy and sustainability.

Others also recognize that for most inhabitants of the province, the reason they resist gas extraction, is the damage it has caused to their own home. In contrast to environmental activists, who chose to engage with the issue out of their own beliefs and concern for humanity, local inhabitants do not see their participation in the resistance as a conscious choice, but as a necessity. They do not resist gas out of moral considerations, or because they see the struggle as a vehicle to achieve a larger aim, for those affected, gas extraction needs to stop, because extraction destabilizes their homes, and thus their lives.

This corresponds to a study by Greijdanus and Postmes (2018, 82, 85), who, on the basis of 31 in-depth interviews with inhabitants who have participated in different forms of collective action, conclude that this participation is often very reluctant, but motivated by the feeling that there is no other way.

It can thus be concluded that in Groningen, the lived experience of being negatively affected by gas extraction has not directly transformed those who are affected in 'accidental climate activists'. However, engagement with larger questions of power, exploitation, and energy production have spurred local initiatives to reclaim power, democratize energy production, and have fostered cooperation between the local resistance and the climate movement.

### *5.1.3. Existing alliances: Groningen increasingly part of network*

As described in the previous section, GBB, an interest group formed by inhabitants of the affected area, does cooperate with different actors in the climate movement. Milieudefensie and GBB jointly organized several protest marches in Groningen. For Milieudefensie, the struggle in Groningen is part of their case against Shell that they are fighting with other Friends of the Earth organizations in different places around the world. In 2018, Milieudefensie organized a visit of Ugandan, Congolese and Nigerian anti-Shell activists to Groningen.

According to Milieudefensie organizers Freek and Peter, this visit showed the local resistance that the problems they face are not incidental, but part of a strategy that the fossil fuel industry implements worldwide. Coert, GBB board-member, tells me that the visit was an eyeopener for him, because it made him realize that Groningen is not unique in its exploitation by the fossil fuel industry. The visit motivated GBB to start thinking about how they can connect to other spaces of resistance, which set in motion a process of exchanging experiences and knowledge between Groningen and other spaces in the Netherlands and abroad.

Although the visit acted as a catalyst for movement building between different spaces of resistance, it seems like the direct effect on the wider population was limited. Kees, inhabitant of the village that was visited, says the visit did not leave a lasting impression on local inhabitants.

A new impulse to the integration of the local resistance within the climate justice movement came with the decision of climate activist collective Code Rood to do their next action in Groningen. The collective is largely based in Amsterdam and Rotterdam, but they reached out to climate action groups in the city of Groningen to help with local organizing. Peter, Milieudefensie organizer, but also a committed climate activist, played an important role in the organization of the Code Rood action in Groningen. The network and connections he built over the years as an organizer and activist in Groningen, contributed to bringing on board locals who supported the mission of Code Rood. The GBB, and several other smaller local action groups, got involved to help with local mobilization.

Besides the direct effects of the action itself, Code Rood seems to have had a significant effect in terms of movement building. Chris, one of the main organizers, says that the organization of the action brought about (previously non-existing) cooperation between climate activists from the city and anti-gas groups in the province. Moreover, other directly affected European communities were invited to the action camp, which further facilitated the building of a network between different spaces of resistance.

This cooperation and the building of global connections had multiple positive effects for both the climate movement, and the local resistance:

First of all, for the locals who were actively involved in Code Rood, the experience of the action camp gave the local struggle a new global dimension. Learning about other struggles and the scale on which

the fossil fuel industry causes destruction beyond Groningen, gave local activists a new, politicized, perspective on their own situation.

Moreover, learning about others fighting the same enemy, and experiencing their solidarity and support, gave locals who participated in Code Rood new hope and motivation (Sorgdrager 2018; van Loon 2018), ‘a lot of people from Groningen suddenly realized they weren’t alone’(interview Chris).

Lastly, the biggest takeaway from witnessing and participating in the successful execution of direct action, according to Coert, was the lesson that you can achieve a lot by collectively taking action.

These outcomes are positive in itself, but even more so, because they functioned as a catalyst for further movement building and climate action:

In October 2018, people from Groningen, inspired by their participation in Code Rood, took part in *Ende Gelände*, a mass action of civil disobedience against coal mining in Germany. In March 2019, hundreds of people from Groningen collectively travelled to the climate march in Amsterdam, to protest the fossil fuel industry. According to Coert, the foundation for the broad coalition of groups (a mix of political, environmental and anti-gas groups in Groningen) that was responsible for this mobilization, was laid during the organisation of Code Rood.

From these accounts, it can be concluded that coalitions exist between the local resistance in Groningen and other spaces of resistance, environmental organizations, and climate justice activists. The Code Rood action camp and involvement of Milieudefensie in the resistance, have acted as a catalyst for cooperation, both through a shift in awareness and framing of the local issue as a global one, and the facilitation of a space for networking, sharing and learning.

However, although the involvement of the local resistance in climate justice activism is growing, it is limited to specific groups and individuals. As said before, the lived experience of being negatively affected by gas extraction has not directly transformed those who are affected in climate activists.

The alliances that exist do not seem to have arisen spontaneously, as a result of broad-based grassroots support for climate justice activism by the local resistance movement. On the contrary, on the basis of my interviews, these cooperation seem to be the result of organizing done by a small group of individuals who see these alliances as beneficial for the groups they represent. The results of the cooperation acted as a self-perpetuating force, contributing to a climate justice conscious and willingness to act. This heightened conscious was thus a result of cooperation and not a pre-existing driver of the cooperation between the local resistance and the climate movement.

#### *5.1.4 The role of place attachment*

It is difficult to draw conclusions on the influence of place attachment on the basis of my interviews. Secondary sources are however useful here. Research recently conducted by I&O Research shows that

in Groningen, people feel generally more connected to the province than in most other provinces in the Netherlands (Kanne and van Engeland 2019, 9). This study also shows that inhabitants who are born in the province, feel on average more connected to Groningen, than inhabitants who moved there (Ibid, 15).

The latter is interesting in combination with the observation of different interviewees, and also made by Brandsma et al. (2016, 158), that it is mostly people who moved to Groningen who are active in the local resistance. Moreover, the previous sections reveal that it is mostly external actors like Milieudefensie and climate action groups from the city of Groningen who have driven the engagement with climate and the wider impact of the fossil fuel industry.

These findings show that awareness of environmental problems is not necessarily driven by place attachment and the disruption of this attachment on the basis of lived experience in the local environment. The relations between both lived experience and place attachment to action seem to be more complicated. Other factors need to be taken into account to explain why a strong sense of injustice, and a strong sense of place, have not led to more grassroots collective action against the fossil fuel industry.

## **5.2. Barriers to further integration**

The conducted interviews and secondary data reveal that several factors play an important role in determining whether or not individuals and groups in Groningen connect the local struggle to broader issues of justice and the climate crisis. In the following sections I will give an account of these factors, and how they act as barriers to mutual integration of the local resistance and the climate movement.

### *5.2.1. Individualization of grievances and solutions*

As mentioned before, the bureaucratic system set up by NAM and the state to deal with the consequences of gas extraction, has become a cause of frustration itself. The system has turned the damage, collectively experienced by inhabitants of the gas region, in individual problems. The process of seeking compensation puts a large burden on the victims: it is complicated and requires a lot of time and energy. Erik tells me that this individualizing of the problem has prevented communities from seeing it as a shared problem. He realized this when he found out that in his village, most people do not even talk to their neighbours about the damage to their homes and the procedures they are in.

Furthermore, a series of 100 interviews with victims by *Dagblad van het Noorden* (a regional newspaper) and stories recounted by my interviews reveal that many people get stuck in the bureaucracy and live with a lot of stress and insecurity. Therefore, Peter, Milieudefensie organizer, understands that locals do not have the headspace to think about environmental issues, or have the energy to participate

in climate action. Other interviewees also have the impression that the bureaucratic approach by the state and NAM has overburdened citizens to the point that they do not want to engage with the issue anymore than is strictly necessary for their own case. Especially since it is already very hard to escape the situation: people live in homes they do not feel safe in, but they can not sell either. ‘As long as you don’t talk about your problems, you can pretend they don’t exist’ (interview Coert). Both Coert and Susan mention that this tendency is reinforced by the already existing local cultural norm that you should not complain, and that you should not talk about your problems too much.

A theme that also recurs in the interviews, is that local organizers are hesitant to make the struggle against gas about climate change and the need to shift to renewable sources of energy, because they are afraid that this will put another burden on Groningen. Different interviewees express that it is not clear yet who will have to pay for the energy transition in Groningen, and that they feel like Groningen is used as an experiment to introduce new techniques, which both negatively affect those who already suffered the negative consequences of gas extraction.

Although these kind of worries could also motivate calls for a just transition, and demands to make those pay who caused the problems in the first place, it does not seem like this is the case, it rather seems to cause hesitance to frame the struggle in terms of climate and energy.

The fact that the government and NAM have been, and still are, very slow in their recognition and response to the problems, both on an individual and on a structural level, has moreover increased distrust against the state and NAM. Several interviewees compare the situation to ‘the battle of David against Goliath’: citizens feel powerless in the face of the alliance between the state and industry and do not want to waste their energy on fighting this monster.

These findings are moreover relevant from a movement building perspective. First of all, the framing of the issue as an individual one, depoliticizes it, and ignores the structural power imbalance between citizens and the state/NAM. The fact that affected citizens are forced to fight an individual battle to be compensated, has transformed the conflict into one over compensation claims, diverting attention away from the root causes of the issue. Moreover, the energy and time spend on these individual cases, seem to have exhausted and frustrated citizens. This corresponds to research by Greijdanus and Postmes (2018, 172), which concludes that those who are hit the hardest by earthquakes in Groningen are not necessarily those who turn to collective action, because they are overburdened by their personal troubles. Depoliticisation, individualisation, and feelings of distrust, exhaustion and hopelessness, act as barriers to communication between affected citizens, and thus the recognition of a shared burden. This in turn, has hindered the development of a politicised social identity.

Interestingly enough, different interviewees also mention that collective organizing and solution building work as antidotes to feelings of distrust, exhaustion and hopelessness. The feeling that you are

not alone and that together you can make a difference, is empowering. However, you do need the energy and time to be able to engage in these kind of activities.

### *5.2.2. Climate activism: distrust and social identity*

Different articles and op-eds that covered the blockade in August, describe it as an invasion of international activists that contributed little to the cause of local inhabitants (Sorgdrager 2018; van den Berg 2018; van Hofslot 2018). Although the majority of activists was indeed not from Groningen, this framing completely disregarded the hundreds of locals that did participate in the action, and the involvement of GBB and other local action groups in the organization of the action.

But, although this negative frame seems to be based on negligence by journalists to do in-depth research, it does point to the negative perception of outsiders that seems to exist independently of media coverage in Groningen. Different interviewees talk about the existence of distrust against climate activists within the local population. According to them, this distrust is the result of the (perceived) differences between the two groups.

Firstly, most climate activists who participated in Code Rood, were outsiders in a literal sense, because they did not live in the area affected by earthquakes. Although locals from the affected areas participated in the action, most participants were from the city of Groningen, other parts of the Netherlands, and different European countries.

Although all my interviewees agreed that international attention and support should be celebrated by the local resistance, they recognized that this opinion was not unanimously shared by all locals. The fact that climate activists clearly had a different primary motivation for resistance, the climate crisis, and not their own experience of exploitation and living in insecurity, made locals wary of their intentions.

Peter, climate activist and organizer himself, and Sandra, a politician actively engaged in the local struggle, explain this distrust as a natural response to intervention by unknown outsiders in the context of Groningen. The local population has been exploited by outsiders for years, and are still living with a lot of stress and insecurity. This seems to have not only resulted in distrust against the perpetrators of the injustice, but also a general sense of distrust against anyone whose primary motivation for engagement with the region is different from that of the local resistance. According to Sandra, one of the main aims of the local resistance is to reclaim community control and power to decide over the future of the region, locals are therefore hesitant to cooperate with outsiders who claim to fight a struggle in their name.

Additionally, the distrust against climate activism can be explained as a clash between different social identities. Susan, who participated in a protest march to support Code Rood, observed that many locals felt hesitant to join the protest because of the way activists behaved. Climate activists were shouting,

dancing and singing together; activities that conflict with the collective identity of the local resistance. Activism, as practiced by climate activists, is not part of the set of strategies that locals normally use to make their voice heard. Especially not in Groningen, where being down to earth, calm, and introverted are celebrated as part of the local identity (Kanne and van Engeland 2019).

Susan therefore argues that the local identity has acted as a barrier to collective action, and that it makes sense that people who moved to Groningen are more active in the resistance, because they do not share this local identity and feel more comfortable making their voice heard.

According to Peter, it is a myth that people in Groningen do not resist because of their local culture. Both him, and Nils, an experienced Swedish climate activist, acknowledge that this phenomenon is not exclusive to Groningen. During their mobilization activities they often encounter a general dislike of the term 'activism' and the identity that is associated with being an activist. Nils thinks people are often afraid to join actions that are framed as 'activist', because of the expectation of what activism is: radical and violent. Climate activism is therefore perceived as something that others do. Susan confirms that in Groningen, being an activist means being 'contaminated', 'once you are labelled an activist, nobody needs to take you serious anymore, so people are really apprehensive about being framed this way'.

Research by Greijdanus and Postmes (2018, 7) also finds that within the local resistance, people are hesitant to describe themselves as activists, even when they regularly participate in demonstrations. Greijdanus and Postmes label these local activists 'reactivists', because they frame their activism as a necessary reaction against the injustice that they experience. They do not want to participate in activism, but see no other option.

Different interviewees also note that climate activists are often young, university-educated, inhabitants of cities. The local population lives in a rural area and is predominantly older and lower educated. These differences are another sign that the two groups live in different lifeworlds, described by one interviewee as 'the activist world' and 'the real world'.

The interviews reveal that people involved in the organization of collective action in Groningen are aware of the existence of these different identities, and how it prevents engagement with climate action. At Milieudefensie they actively think about perception and framing in their communication, framing activism as something positive and accessible, to mobilize a broad-based movement. According to Susan, and Sandra, both key figures in the local resistance, efforts to bridge the gap between locals and the climate movement were too minimal in the case of Code Rood. Despite joint efforts by climate action groups, and local action groups to mobilize the local population, they deemed the action not sufficiently rooted in the local movement to overcome the pre-existing distrust and give locals a sense of ownership over the action. At the same time, Susan acknowledges that locals who did participate, quickly replaced their initial distrust with appreciation for the displayed support and solidarity.

Apparently one positive experience or conversation can already facilitate a change in perception of climate activists, from an outsider that should be distrusted to an appreciated ally, that ultimately shares the same concerns.

However, only a limited number of locals showed up to the action. Peter argues, based on his experience as organizer and mobilizer for climate action, that in order to mobilize larger segments of the population, you need a conscious long-term strategy to build relations and trust. 'It's literally whether or not you talk to people which determines if they become active or not. If you only rely on posters and media communication, it remains very easy for people to think 'you are a different kind of person, I don't want to join you'. But when you actually speak to people, this barrier ceases to exist.' Peter is actively working on this in Groningen, and acknowledges that it took him at least a year to become an insider in the local resistance, and convince local (re)activists that he did not try to appropriate their struggle for his own gain. Chris, one of the main organizers of the Code Rood action, realizes that this type of long-term movement building is important, but also mentions that initiatives like Code Rood completely rely on volunteers, with limited time, energy and resources. This points to a trade-off which will be discussed in the last section of this chapter.

### *5.2.3. Ingroup competition and conflict*

Differing strategies and motivations do not only prevent cooperation between the local resistance and the climate movement, but also between the different groups in the local resistance itself. Although action- and interest groups are united by their resistance against gas extraction from the Groningen gas field, and their shared aim of serving the interests of inhabitants affected by extraction, different groups have different ideas on how to go about this. Some groups, like Gasberaad, try to work within the political system to make their voice heard and influence policy-making. Others take a more confrontational approach, because they do not believe you can change the system from within.

Different interviewees bring up that these differences are a source of conflict within the local movement. According to Chris, 'there is not much solidarity between groups in Groningen', because some groups see their approach and strategies as the best and only way to affect change. Trudy, active in different local action groups, also sees that different groups interpret the diversity of the movement as a threat instead of a strength. Instead of looking for cooperation on the basis of what unites them, groups look for competition on the basis of what divides them.

Furthermore, the way the government has responded to the crisis, has only further prevented solidarity between groups and individuals in Groningen. The government seems to apply different standards for different people within the same community. Some people get compensated much more than others, and even within neighbourhoods, there are stark differences in how appointed 'experts' assess their situation. Different other studies conducted in Groningen confirm that this perceived arbitrariness and inequality

has resulted in a sense of injustice within the local population (Postmes et al. 2018; Greijdanus and Postmes 2018). Most of my interviewees suspect that this differentiated individual approach is a deliberate tactic of the state and NAM to divide the locals, and prevent organized resistance.

If people are occupied with inequality among themselves, and conflicts over strategies and motivations, it is less likely they will recognize their burden as a collective one, and thus have a reason to act collectively. People like Susan and Peter actively resist this kind of ingroup competition and try to build alliances across different sectors and actors. They believe that every social movement benefits from a wide variety of strategies and actors, and that when you are fighting such a powerful enemy like the fossil fuel industry, you need to accept that not everybody has the same motivations, and look for common grounds instead. Susan is proud that Gasberaad succeeded in bringing together a diverse group of actors in their organization. Although these different organization often have very different opinions and interests, there is strong sense of solidarity among them. Susan has noticed though that this solidarity is at risk, because lately, the government has only consulted different member-organizations separately instead of using the platform Gasberaad has created. According to her this is a general trend: different local grassroots initiatives and coalitions have arisen that foster cohesion and solidarity among citizen and communities, but the government does not provide a framework for them to be heard.

It is difficult to say if this is another deliberate move by the government to prevent movement building. However, the Dutch intelligence and security services have classified the resistance in Groningen as a potential threat, and closely follow the activities of activists (Olmer 2018). Chris even claims that secret service agents have infiltrated in his meetings with climate activists in Groningen, and tried to start conflict within the group to prevent solidarity. This claim cannot be verified, but it is clear that in general, the state sees the resistance as a problem, not as an opportunity for citizen participation and democracy.

Conflict and competition within the movement act as a barrier to further engagement with structural injustice and climate change, because the attention of individuals, and interest- and action groups is turned inwards instead of outwards.

#### *5.2.4. Movement building: an aim in itself?*

The previous barriers point out the need for long-term movement building strategies, and individuals who have the time, energy and capacities to dedicate themselves to building bridges and facilitating cooperation between the local resistance and the climate movement. The desire to build a broad-based movement is however not the primary motivation for collective action for both the local resistance and climate activists organizing actions in Groningen. Although achieving more widespread support for one's aims can become an goal in itself for a social movement, the underlying motivation is to affect change.

The limited participation of people from Groningen in climate action is problematic for the action's credibility if it claims to represent locals and fight for their cause, but it is especially problematic from a movement-building perspective. However, my interviewees have different perspectives on this matter. Sandra and Susan, important figures within the local resistance, are critical of Code Rood's local mobilization efforts and outreach to the local population. Sandra, who was one of the speakers at the action camp, was disappointed by how much of the events and communication were in English. According to her this was one of the signs that showed the action was inclusive towards international climate activists, but not the local population.

Other interviewees mention that the action deterred local inhabitants. The confrontational approach against both the state and the industry was according to Susan 'too radical' for some people within the local resistance to be associated with. Moreover, images of activists who covered their faces during the action, moreover reinforced the expectation of locals that activism is aggressive and violent. The large presence of police, and their use of violence during the action, further increased this perception, and prevented locals from participating in the action, and possibly future actions.

The question is however, if it should be expected of the climate movement itself to actively work on being more inclusive, and to put more effort in communication and movement-building. Climate activists and locals who were part of the organization, say that in terms of local mobilization and outreach a lot of steps were already taken that should not be discounted. Foreign activists I talk to, who participated in the action in Groningen, explicitly mention how positively surprised they were with the level of local engagement. Anna, a Spanish climate activist who regularly participates in direct climate actions across Europe, even says that she has never seen locals being so happy with the support of climate activists. In comparison to other actions across Europe, the police was relatively non-violent, and the blockade was even given a legal permit.

Interestingly enough, some climate activists were disappointed with this permit, because it meant that the action was no longer considered to be an act of civil disobedience. It is exactly this disappointment that clearly shows that the primary motivation of direct action is not to the building of a broader movement, but to directly affect change. Their message is that the climate crisis is here, so the time to act is now. This is a confrontational strategy, but legitimate in the face of the destruction that fossil fuel extraction causes.

Considering that making this statement and blocking fossil fuel extraction is the aim, it makes sense for climate activists to focus their mobilization efforts on their already existing network. People who have already participated in action, are easier to mobilize than people outside of the climate movement. Especially considering the limited time, energy and resources of climate action organizers, who often do this organizing work without being paid for it.

## 6. Discussion

In this chapter I will discuss the findings in light of the earlier presented literature in order to answer the question ‘What is the potential of Blockadia for the climate justice movement?’. I will first compare the reality of Groningen with the literature that has been discussed under ‘the Promise of Blockadia’. In the second section I will relate my findings to the earlier discussed weaknesses of local fossil fuel resistance as a force for climate justice. Subsequently I will highlight unexpected findings and potential explanations. Lastly, the limitations of this study will be discussed, as well as the need for future research.

### 6.1. Meaning of findings: promise of Blockadia

The findings reveal that there are clear differences between the reality of local fossil fuel resistance I have encountered in Groningen and the portrayal of local fossil fuel resistance in the literature that argues for the promise that Blockadia presents for climate justice.

The first argument, that local fossil fuel resistance is an effective force for keeping carbon in the ground (Black, D’Arcy, and Weis 2014; Cheon and Urpelainen 2018), holds up well: persistent resistance against gas has resulted in the phasing out of extraction in Groningen.

The second argument, that Blockadia struggles successfully address the root causes of conflicts over fossil fuel extraction, because they draw attention to the exploitation of frontline communities, and thus bring about a justice-based environmentalism, (Martinez-Alier 2002; Scheidel et al. 2018), is not fully applicable to Groningen. Although the resistance in Groningen is driven by a sense of fundamental injustice, and the feeling that people in Groningen are structurally and deliberately exploited, disagreement exists over who should be held responsible. Most people do not frame the injustice in environmental and global terms, but see the Dutch state and NAM as the main culprits.

The third argument, that Blockadia struggles facilitate the building of a broader climate movement, seems to be partly true in the context of Groningen, but not for exactly the same reasons as found in the literature. Klein (2014, 310–13) argues that experiencing the destructive effects of the fossil fuel industry close to your home, confronts those who were previously able to look away, with the exploitation of people and nature that fossil fuel extraction entails. This realization would lead people to become aware of the threat that fossil fuel represents for humanity as a whole. As said, there is a growing awareness in Groningen of the need to connect environmental concerns to the local resistance, but this awareness is not directly driven by lived experience, as posited by Klein, but by external actors who have added this dimension to the debate. Additionally, Klein writes that Blockadia struggles facilitate the formation of unexpected alliances, both locally, and through global networks. This is indeed the case in Groningen:

very diverse groups have formed coalitions, and the local resistance is increasingly connected to other spaces of resistance and the global climate justice movement. However, these alliances are not self-evident, in the sense that they emerged spontaneously and instantly. The existing alliances are the result of committed movement building efforts by different individuals, and organizations. Moreover, the solidarity they are built on, is threatened by competition within the local resistance, and individualisation of the conflict.

The last argument discussed in the literature review, is not so much an argument but an assumption that seems to underlie the other arguments: that resistance against climate change, an inherently global problem, happens on the basis of place attachment and lived experience in the local (Heise 2008). The study of resistance in Groningen shows that this premise seems too simplistic. People with lower levels of place attachment and no own experiences and grievances to base their motivation on, have driven the engagement with climate and the wider impact of the fossil fuel industry in Groningen.

## **6.2. Barriers and previously discussed weaknesses of Blockadia**

My findings correspond to, and add additional insight into, the weaknesses of Blockadia already pointed out by different authors:

First of all, the observation made by Scheidel et al. (2018) that not all *ecological distribution conflicts* go beyond NIMBY concerns, is supported by my finding that in Groningen, the conflict is mainly about compensation claims, and the struggle that inhabitants face to get damage acknowledged and repaired. Although this struggle is experienced as a collective one, it is not often framed as part of a global struggle against the fossil fuel industry. However, as the barriers that I have uncovered show, this preoccupation with the specifics of the local struggle, should not be discounted as ‘selfish, materialistic, naïve and unc cosmopolitan’ (Gould, Schnaiberg, and Weinberg 1996, 3), as the NIMBY label is often meant to imply. As demonstrated by my findings, the individualisation of grievances has overburdened individuals, depoliticised the conflict, and increased feelings of powerlessness. The lived experience of being exploited by the fossil fuel industry, and subsequently being treated as a ‘second-class’ citizen by the government, has increased feelings of distrust, against the state, the fossil fuel industry, and outsiders in general. Feelings of unfairness and competition within the local resistance, moreover hinder solidarity. These barriers explain why locals in Groningen have primarily focused on their own grievances and have turned their attention inwards instead of outwards. My findings thus add more insight into the mechanisms that explain the observation made by Scheidel et al (2018).

This study furthermore confirms the finding of Luke et al. (2018), that locals resisting gas extraction see themselves as ‘accidental activists’, but do not want to be associated with ‘real activists’, because their idea of activism does not fit with their own social identity. My interviews show that this dynamic can also be recognized in Groningen. Just like in the cases of gas resistance studied by Luke et al, in

Groningen, environmental activists and organizations are also perceived as the social other or outsider, and the interests of external activists are distrusted, limiting successful cooperation between the two groups.

The deterring effect of the confrontational tactics used by the climate movement, as described by Cheon and Urpelainen (2018) also emerges from my interviews. However, this effect seems to more to be based on ideas of activism, than the reality of it in Groningen. Moreover, the deterring effect of civil disobedience was in Groningen more the result of the use of violence against activists by the police than the peaceful action itself.

When it comes to ideas about place attachment, my study shows that Heise (2008) is correct in her argument that a strong ‘sense of place’ is not a precondition for environmental action. Inhabitants who moved to Groningen, who on average are less attached to the province (Kanne and van Engeland 2019), are even more active within the resistance. Moreover, the environmental dimension of the resistance is the result of coordination and involvement by ‘outsiders’, and thus not purely rooted in local experience, as envisioned by Wendell Berry, who Klein quotes to support her vision of Blockadia (Berry 2012; Klein 2014, 335–36).

### **6.3. Unexpected findings: need for additional literature and explanations**

Some of my findings uncover dynamics that ask for additional research and different explanations than the ones offered by the already discussed literature:

First of all, whereas most literature frames Blockadia struggles as a conflict between citizens and the fossil fuel industry, the conflict in Groningen is just as much a struggle between the inhabitants of the province and the Dutch state. The state is not only (partly) responsible for extraction itself, but also plays an important role in creating and upholding the barriers to further integration of the local resistance and the climate justice movement. Instead of promoting grassroots initiatives, that are aimed at creating future that is sustainable and more socially just, the state actively (and seemingly deliberately) hinders these initiatives or even prevents them from emerging in the first place. Instead of protecting its citizens, the state seems committed to protect the gas industry. To better understand this role, more research into different spaces of Blockadia, embedded in more social movement, will be needed to understand the role that states play in shaping local fossil fuel resistance.

Another surprising finding is that the lived experience of being affected by the direct consequences of fossil fuel extraction can even prevent environmental action from emerging. In the case of Groningen, some inhabitants feel overburdened, have lost faith in democracy, and distrust outsiders, as a result of the struggle against both NAM and the state. This points to an important point, that it cannot be assumed that people who have been, and maybe still are, exploited, have the headspace, time, energy and

resources to become actively involved in collective action. Rather, it might be exactly because of these reasons that they do not become involved.

This finding, in combination with the fact that external actors play an important role in driving the local resistance's engagement with climate justice, shows that lived experience and place attachment are neither necessary conditions, nor automatic catalysts of climate action. Although this finding contradicts the earlier mentioned popular idea in environmental thought that caring for and protecting the environment is preceded by place-based experiences in one's direct environment, it is in accordance with research on predictors of collective action. Social psychological research shows that perception of injustice is a cause of participation in collective action (van Zomeren, Postmes, and Spears 2008). However, this perception does not have to be rooted in personal lived experience of injustice, but can be the result of experiencing group-based injustice (H. J. Smith et al. 2011, 220). One can experience group-based injustice 'on behalf of' a group that is unfairly treated, without considering oneself a member of that group, on the basis of identification with that group (Postmes, van Bezouw, and Kutlaca 2014, 28). This is furthermore in line with Heise's (2008, 55, 59) argument that being environmentally conscious, and acting accordingly, is not the result of a strong sense of place, but a strong 'sense of planet', which is driven by an eco-cosmopolitan awareness of connections between places, instead of connection to a specific place.

#### **6.4. Implications**

The first implication of these findings is that both scholars and climate justice advocates need to be cautious not to overestimate the effect that lived experience can have as a catalyst for climate justice action. Local experience can act as a catalyst for environmental thinking and action, as proven by the resistance in Groningen and other cases of Blockadia, but it is problematic to assume that frontline communities hold the key to climate justice.

The findings of this study show that the relations between lived experience of the direct consequences of fossil fuel extraction, place attachment and climate justice action are not linear. Different barriers can prevent local resistance from transcending NIMBY concerns. It is therefore important not to underestimate the existence and influence of barriers that explain why local fossil fuel resistance is not always transformed into global fossil fuel resistance. However, the reality of Groningen also shows that these barriers are not fixed or natural, but the result of dynamics that are fluid, and can be changed.

As stated before, the different barriers found in Groningen all point to the need for long-term movement building strategies, and individuals who have the time, energy and capacities to dedicate themselves to building bridges. Organizers are important, because they can look beyond inhabitants' individual struggles, and thus recognize the shared burden of these individuals, and the structural and political root-causes that underlie them. By offering this frame, facilitating spaces for communication and cooperation

between local groups, and connecting the local resistance to potential allies and other spaces of resistance, the barrier of individualisation can be overcome. Furthermore, by framing environmentalism in justice terms, climate justice action can be identified as a necessary part of the local struggle, that is a source of solidarity and hope, in contrast to the other types of environmentalism that are perceived as a threat. Moreover, when movement builders are aware of the different social identities of different groups that pursue the same aim, they can help build trust between these groups, and prevent that they see each other as unwanted intruders or competition. This helps to counteract distrust of climate activists or other ‘outsiders’ by local activists, and conflict within the local movement, ultimately enabling locals to turn their attention outwards.

However, as already discussed in the previous chapter, movement building is usually not an aim for interest- and action groups in itself. Even when they do see it as beneficial, limited time, energy and resources, can prevent the development and execution of long-term movement building strategies that are necessary to overcome the barriers encountered in Groningen.

Moreover, the realization that different barriers potentially need to be overcome before the potential of local fossil fuel resistance for climate justice can be realized, creates tension between the need to act now, and the need for long-term movement building strategies, that take time and energy.

## **6.5. Limitations: need for additional research**

The main limitation of this research project is that I attempt to uncover dynamics that apply to fossil fuel resistance in general on the basis of one case. The literature on Blockadia focuses on what unites the different spaces of local fossil fuel resistance, but each case of local fossil fuel resistance has specific characteristics that set it apart from other cases. Which parts of my findings are specific for Groningen, and what is likely to be applicable to Blockadia in general? This study reveals that at least not in all cases of local fossil fuel resistance, engagement with climate justice can be assumed to arise instantly and spontaneously. Moreover, by grounding the findings in social movement literature, political ecology theory, and previous research, this study ‘extends out’ and connects the specifics of Groningen to structures and dynamics that exist beyond the case. However, a comparative study of different cases of local fossil fuel resistance will need to be conducted to find out if the barriers that exist in Groningen can also be found in other spaces of Blockadia. Why did the Keystone resistance in the U.S. seem to be more rooted in climate justice thought than the resistance in Groningen? Future research needs to look into variables that differ from place to place. For example, employment within the industry, the role of the state, local social identity, and the historical context are all factors that could influence the resistance that arises against fossil fuel extraction.

Another limitation of this study is that I rely on experts to speak for the whole movement. Although I have used secondary data to capture underrepresented voices and to triangulate the primary data, additional research needs to use a wider sample that includes more local inhabitants.

## Conclusion

This study was driven by the need for alternative forms of climate action, considering the urgency of the climate crisis we are in, and the failure of politicians and civil society to effectively address this crisis. By embedding my research in political ecology and environmental justice scholarship, I demonstrated the need for a climate movement that is justice-based and addresses the need for system change in order to successfully address the root causes of climate change.

I proposed Blockadia, the global movement of frontline communities that resist fossil fuel extraction, as an alternative form of climate action, and explored its potential for the climate justice. I conducted a case study of local fossil fuel resistance in Groningen, the Netherlands, to assess if and how local fossil fuel resistance can contribute to a stronger and broader climate justice movement.

The findings reveal that there are clear differences between the reality of local fossil fuel resistance I have encountered in Groningen and the portrayal of local fossil fuel resistance in the literature that argues for the promise that Blockadia presents for climate justice.

These differences do not mean that local struggles against fossil fuel resistance do not harbour any potential for a stronger, broader climate justice movement. The lived experience in Groningen of the destruction that fossil fuel extraction can result in, has driven the formation of a movement against gas extraction, whose resistance has resulted in a phase-out of extraction, and an acceleration of the search for renewable alternatives. And though this lived experience of being exploited by the fossil fuel industry, might not have directly resulted in calls for justice beyond the scope of the local conflict, alliances with 'outsiders' have led local action groups to frame their struggle more and more in climate justice terms.

This case study therefore does not disqualify the arguments that Blockadia movements can keep carbon in the ground, bring about a justice-based environmentalism and contribute to achieving critical mass for the climate movement. All these three elements are to some extent demonstrated in Groningen. However, the case study uncovers a complex dynamic between lived experience of the direct effects of extraction and the emergence of a justice-based environmentalism. The findings of this study show that the relations between lived experience, place attachment and climate justice action are not linear. Different barriers are identified that can prevent local resistance from transcending NIMBY concerns: individualisation of the problem, distrust towards outsiders and the climate movement, and ingroup

competition has prevented inhabitants in Groningen from seeing their struggle as a collective, and global one.

These different barriers point to potential limitations that can prevent Blockadia struggles from being drivers of climate justice, and show that lived experience itself is neither a necessary condition, nor an automatic catalyst of climate action. By demonstrating how these barriers have come into existence, and act as a barrier to further integration of the local resistance and the climate justice movement, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of local fossil fuel resistance. By embedding these findings in political ecology literature and social movement studies, I point out gaps in literature, and add more insight into mechanisms that prevent or induce climate action. However, future research is necessary to compare the results of this study to other cases of fossil fuel resistance.

Ultimately, I hope that by having drawn attention to barriers that prevent further integration of the climate justice movement and grassroots fossil fuel resistance, and having demonstrated how these barriers hinder them from making meaningful change, I am able to provide both groups with knowledge that will enable them to more successfully work together, and affect the change we need.

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