

Communities and Citizen Well-being



Member, Football Club
Wilskracht Doet Zegevieren,
Bocholtz, NL

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and their interrelationships
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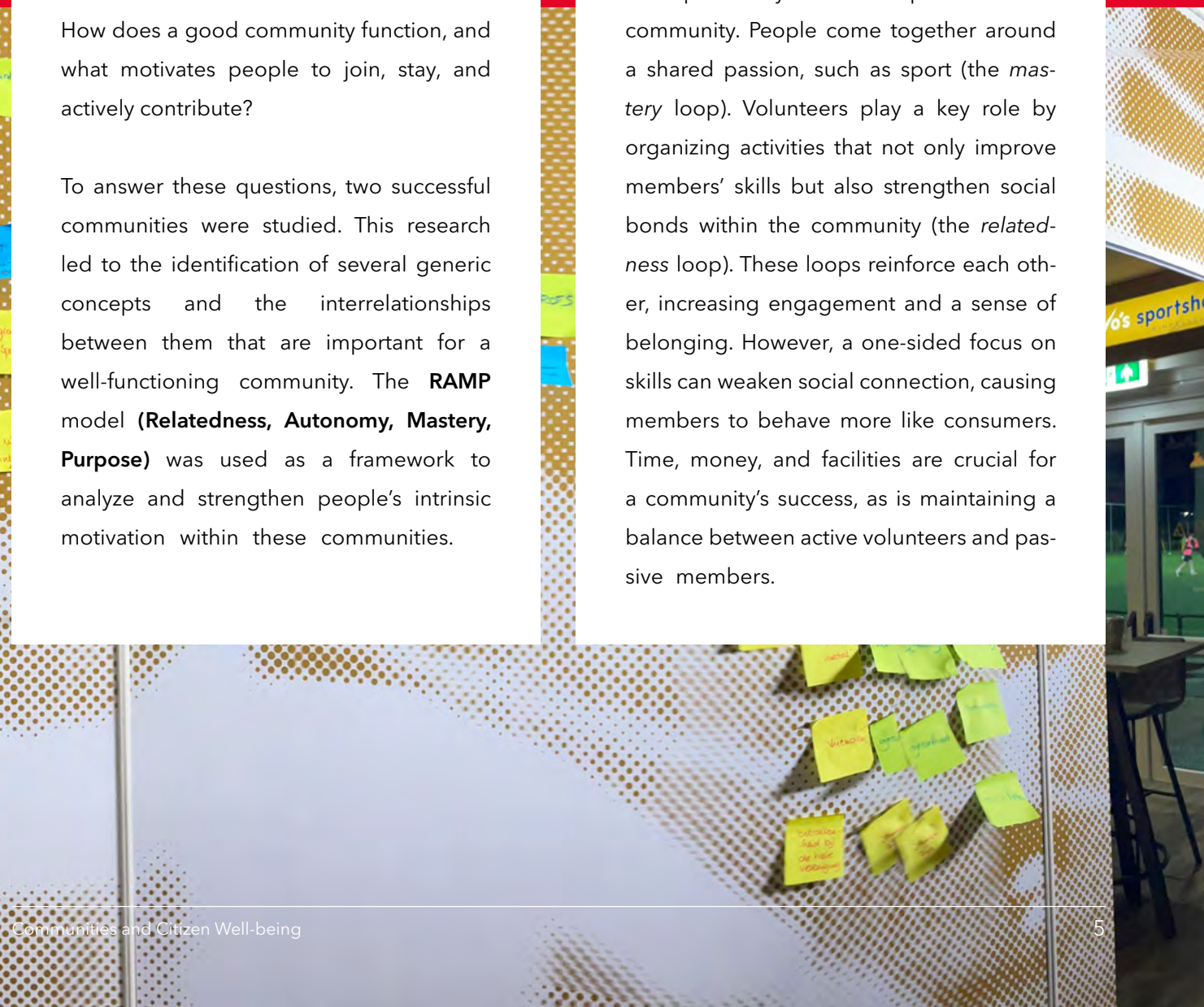
1. Summary

Communities play an increasingly important role in improving citizens' well-being. This is especially relevant in a society facing growing crises, chronic illnesses, and social isolation. Communities such as sports clubs, cooking groups, and gardening initiatives not only contribute to healthier lifestyles but also provide opportunities for social interaction, mutual support, and personal growth. However, little is known about the specific characteristics that make a community successful. What makes communities thrive? How does a good community function, and what motivates people to join, stay, and actively contribute?

To answer these questions, two successful communities were studied. This research led to the identification of several generic concepts and the interrelationships between them that are important for a well-functioning community. The **RAMP** model (**Relatedness, Autonomy, Mastery, Purpose**) was used as a framework to analyze and strengthen people's intrinsic motivation within these communities.

The results of the research are illustrated in a **causal loop** diagram. This diagram shows the key concepts in the community and how they are interconnected through so-called feedback loops. In addition, the influence of structural forces—such as financial resources or volunteer capacity—is visualized in a **stock & flow** diagram.

The causal loop diagram demonstrates that intrinsic motivation and a shared sense of responsibility are central pillars within a community. People come together around a shared passion, such as sport (the *mastery* loop). Volunteers play a key role by organizing activities that not only improve members' skills but also strengthen social bonds within the community (the *relatedness* loop). These loops reinforce each other, increasing engagement and a sense of belonging. However, a one-sided focus on skills can weaken social connection, causing members to behave more like consumers. Time, money, and facilities are crucial for a community's success, as is maintaining a balance between active volunteers and passive members.



In the communities studied, four key roles were identified: **board member**, **participant**, **volunteer**, and **committee member**. The board sets the framework, manages finances, and directs the committees. Committee members organize volunteer tasks such as facility management, activity planning, and public relations within set guidelines. Volunteers are free to contribute their own ideas and implement them with committee support. This promotes both their motivation and connection to the community.

Based on insights from the research and literature, this white paper offers five practical recommendations for strengthening communities:

1. Analyze the intrinsic motivation of members.
2. Evaluate the role of volunteers.
3. Focus on strengthening social connections.
4. Ensure balance between mastery and relatedness.
5. Check that certain preconditions, such as sufficient time, money, and facilities, are available for the community to function effectively.

This white paper covers the following topics:

- **Methods for analyzing a community:** How can the architecture and dynamics—including underlying structures—be analyzed and visualized?
- **Identification of concepts and their interrelationships:** Which concepts are important, how are they connected, and how do they influence each other (feedback loops)?
- **The role and motivation of community members:** What motivates people to join and remain part of a community? What encourages them to actively contribute, ensuring the community's continued existence? How are the 'stocks' and 'flows' of volunteers structured, and how does this affect the community's dynamics?
- **Recommendations for optimizing communities:** Which insights from this study are useful for other or future communities?

2. Who is this white paper for?

This white paper is intended for board members of existing communities—such as (sports) associations, citizens' initiatives, gardening groups, senior networks, etc.—who want to gain a deeper understanding of community-specific concepts and the facilitating and inhibiting dynamics and structures that contribute to the functioning of their communities.

It also offers insight into how the roles and responsibilities of volunteers contribute to a community's dynamics. The content may also be of interest to initiators of new communities.



3. The well-being of Dutch citizens

In the Netherlands, around 10 million people live with one or more chronic illnesses. Due to an ageing population and the increasing prevalence of lifestyle-related diseases such as type 2 diabetes or cardiovascular conditions, the demand for healthcare will continue to rise in the coming years. Promoting a healthy lifestyle is an important preventive measure to keep healthcare accessible and sustainable.¹

Various initiatives, as well as several national reports²⁻⁴, emphasize the importance of lifestyle improvement and disease prevention, such as the **Dutch Coalition for Lifestyle in Healthcare** (www.leefstijlcoalitie.nl) and **Lifestyle4Health** (www.lifestyle4health.nl). Many of these initiatives originate from within the healthcare sector itself, such as the lifestyle compass

issued by the **Doctors and Lifestyle association** (www.artsenleefstijl.nl). Municipalities and other organizations also offer a variety of lifestyle-promoting programs.⁵

In addition to initiatives from the healthcare sector promoting lifestyle change, citizens can also take more responsibility for their own well-being and preventive health in daily life. While participation in health-promoting initiatives is increasing, a large segment of the population remains unengaged in lifestyle interventions. This raises the question of the role recreational and sports associations, as well as other local communities, can play in promoting healthy behavior and preventing chronic diseases.



4. The importance of communities for citizen well-being

Since 2013, the Netherlands have been discussing the shift toward a participation society in which citizens are expected to take more responsibility for their own health and well-being. The **World Health Organization (WHO)** also emphasizes the role of citizen participation and social engagement in achieving public health goals, such as those outlined in the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**.⁶

The WHO defines communities as:
*"Groups of people who may or may not be geographically connected, but who share common interests, concerns, or identities. These communities can be local, national, or international and their interests can be specific or broad."*⁶

According to this definition, associations can also be seen as communities. In the Dutch study 'Social Cohesion and Well-being' from the year 2023, 73% of citizens aged 15 and older reported being members of at least one association.^{7,8} In 2020, one-third (34%) were actively involved on a weekly basis, while 44% never actively participated. In 2022, nearly half (47%) of young people aged 15 to 25 were members of a sports club. Other popular memberships included social clubs (over 15%), environmental organizations (almost 6%), and political parties (about 3%). The main reason people join a club or association is due to a shared interest, such as playing soccer or gardening. Research shows that membership in a (sports) association has positive effects on members' well-being, including increased physical activity, social cohesion, and mental well-being.^{9,10}

Despite these benefits, there has been a decline in the number of members registered in traditionally organized (sports) associations in recent years. At the same time, the number of people participating in unorganized or informal activities is growing.¹¹ This means (sports) clubs must become more responsive to the changing needs of their members. Academic literature describes various forms of community engagement and ways for citizens to become actively involved in a community.^{12,13} The interests and needs of individual members must align with the specific characteristics of the community.^{12,14} It is also important to consider how members wish to participate in decision-making, planning, management, and service delivery within the community.

A good balance between top-down support from professionals and bottom-up initiatives from members contributes to the success of a community. By approaching local opportunities with open-mindedness and flexibility, and by monitoring activities and their impact, a community can become more successful. In addition, coordinated management and implementation of activities, along with a clear alignment of roles and responsibilities with the expectations and engagement of members and volunteers, contribute to the effective functioning of a community.^{15,16}



Based on the literature, the following factors are frequently cited as contributing to or hindering the development and sustainability of strong communities. (A full overview is available in appendix 1, pages 22-23.)

Enabling Factors

- 1. Active member participation:** Enabling regular involvement in activities and providing leadership roles for members increases engagement and a sense of responsibility.
- 2. Inclusion and accessibility:** Creating inclusive environments where everyone, regardless of background or resources, feels welcome and respected.
- 3. Community events and meaningful activities:** Offering activities that are engaging and relevant to members' interests and adaptable to local contexts increases the chances of long-term success.

Inhibiting Factors

- 1. Lack of motivation:** Failure to account for time constraints and other pressures that members face can lead to declining motivation and undermine sustained engagement and community continuity.
- 2. Weak sense of community:** Failure to address members' needs or over-reliance on a small group of leaders can lead to disengagement and limited support within the community.
- 3. Social, cultural, and physical barriers:** Socio-economic disparities and language barriers can limit participation and mutual understanding within the community.

In summary, communities—places where people with shared interests meet regularly—can have a demonstrably positive effect on members' well-being. Communities such as sports clubs not only encourage healthier lifestyles and prevent lifestyle-related diseases but also help reduce the burden on the healthcare system.

The **aim** of this white paper is to provide insights into the key concepts and dynamics that underpin successful communities. *How are thriving communities structured? What makes them work? And what motivates people to join, stay, and take responsibility for their community?*

To find answers to these questions, two well-functioning communities in the province of South Limburg, the Netherlands were studied. The research focused on the structure (i.e., the architecture) of the communities and on the dynamic interaction between various concepts (the so-called *feedback loops*). In addition, an in-depth analysis was conducted of the underlying structures, such as the *stocks and flows* within the communities—for example, the number of volunteers who actively contribute and take on responsibilities.

The following two communities in the Netherlands were systematically analyzed: **Football club Wilskracht Doet Zegevieren (WDZ)** in Bocholtz (www.vvwdz.nl) and the **Social Centre in Eijsden (SCE)** (www.sceijsden.nl). WDZ has more than 600 members, with football as the main activity. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, other activities were also introduced, leading to the formation of subgroups such as running, walking, and bootcamp groups. The SCE is a citizen initiative run by and for the residents of Eijsden, located in a former Green Cross health centre building. A variety of activities are organized there, including morning exercises, a repair café, communal meals, yoga, and many more offerings (see figure 1).



Figure 1. Social Centre Eijsden: a colorful variety of activities by and for the residents of Eijsden.

5. Methods to analyze a community

In both communities studied, the researchers used concept mapping to understand their complexity.¹⁷ Concept mapping helps to visualize a system by identifying and organizing key ideas and showing how they relate to one another. This was done in close collaboration with community members.

Participants were first asked to respond individually and silently to the following questions using sticky notes:

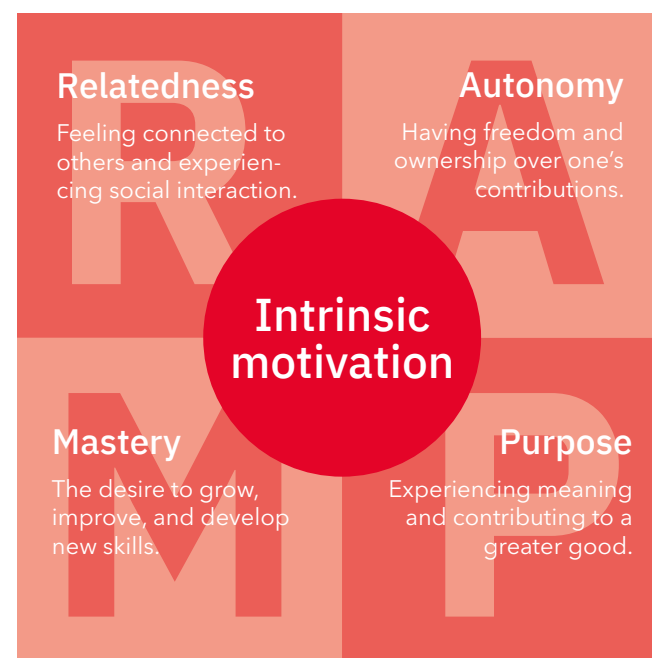
- How long have you been part of this community, and what makes it enjoyable for you?
- Are there times when it's hard to show up? Why?
- What motivates you to keep coming regularly?
- Which roles exist in your community, and which responsibilities go with them?

These notes were then grouped and clustered into higher-level concepts on a board, followed by a group discussion. Participants explained how the concepts were connected, whether positively or negatively, and which influences they observed between them. This process resulted in an initial *concept map*.

After these concept mapping sessions, the researchers further developed the concept maps into so-called **causal connection circle maps**.¹⁸ This visualization helps identify key concepts and their interrelationships within complex systems, such as a community. The researchers then analyzed these maps in two ways: first, by identifying the primary concepts based on the number of connections, and second, by examining the feedback loops, which revealed the circular nature of the relationships. These feedback loops can have either positive or negative effects on the system.

The results were then further refined into a **causal loop diagram (CLD)**,^{18,19} clearly visualizing the system and dynamics within the community.

During this process, Marczewski's **RAMP model**²⁰ was integrated. This model describes four fundamental drivers that influence human motivation:



The RAMP model is often used in the gaming world and helps to understand what motivates people to engage in and remain involved with an activity. By integrating these drivers into the causal loop diagram, it became clear which aspects of the community's architecture and dynamics were specifically related to which underlying motivations of members to stay engaged with the community.

The similarities and differences between the CLDs of the two studied communities were mapped out and then presented to representatives of the participating communities for feedback and verification.

Stock & flow – understanding the structural forces of a community

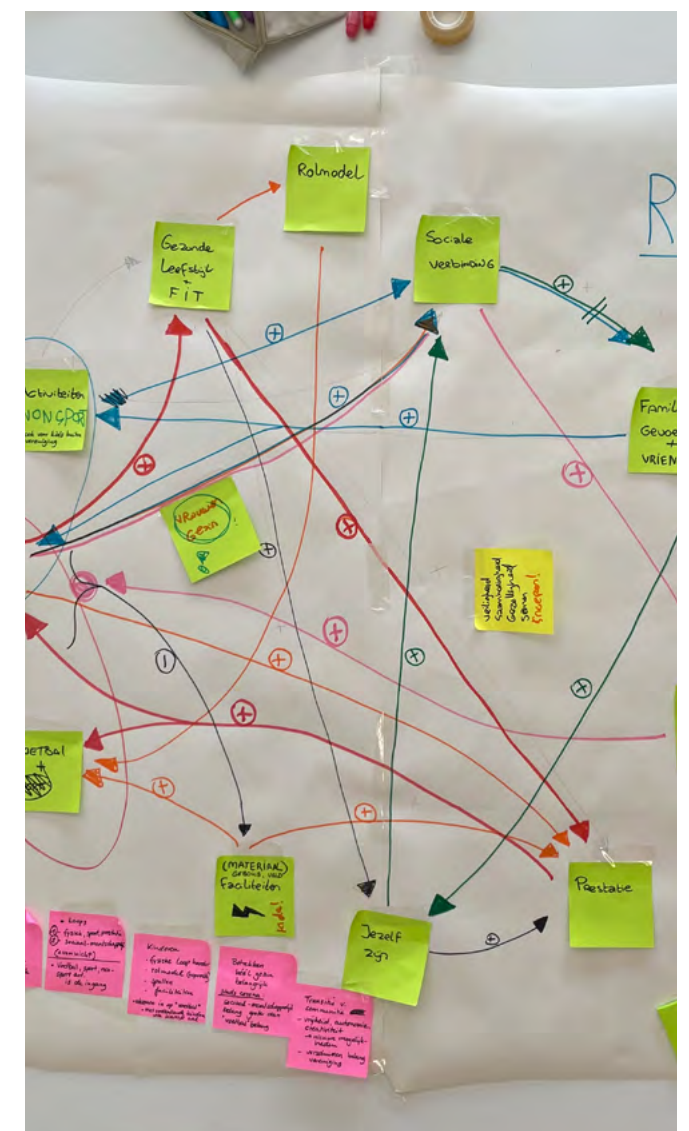
In addition to analyzing dynamics and feedback loops within the communities, the concept of '**stock & flow**' was applied to the various feedback loops in the CLD to better understand the underlying structural forces that influence the dynamics within a community. This method, derived from systems thinking, is used to evaluate how quantities accumulate or deplete over time. In a community setting, 'stocks' might include e.g. the number of active volunteers whereas 'flows' are the elements that add to or reduce these stocks, e.g. new volunteers joining or loss of resources.

The development of the stock & flow diagram followed a structured step-by-step approach²¹:

1. Specify the units of all CLD concepts.*
2. Identify and create the stocks.
3. Identify and create the flows.
4. Connect flows to stocks and stocks to flows (if needed).
5. Add remaining CLD concepts and link them.
6. Define stocks and flows and check the units.
7. Create and connect any additional concepts.

* CLD concepts include, for example, 'volunteers' and 'social connection'.

A well-functioning community has sufficient stocks that are regularly replenished through flows. Stocks can be tangible and measurable, such as financial resources or the number of members, but also more abstract, such as a sense of connectedness or autonomy. The various flows that regulate these stocks can include both inflows and outflows. A decrease in inflow does not necessarily lead to a reduction in the stock, but it may result in slower growth. These nuances are important for understanding a complex system like a community.



6. Identifying concepts and their inter-relationships within a community

The generic causal loop diagram (figure 2) was developed based on the analysis of the two communities and provides insights into key concepts within these communities (the architecture) and how these concepts influence one another through feedback loops (the dynamics).

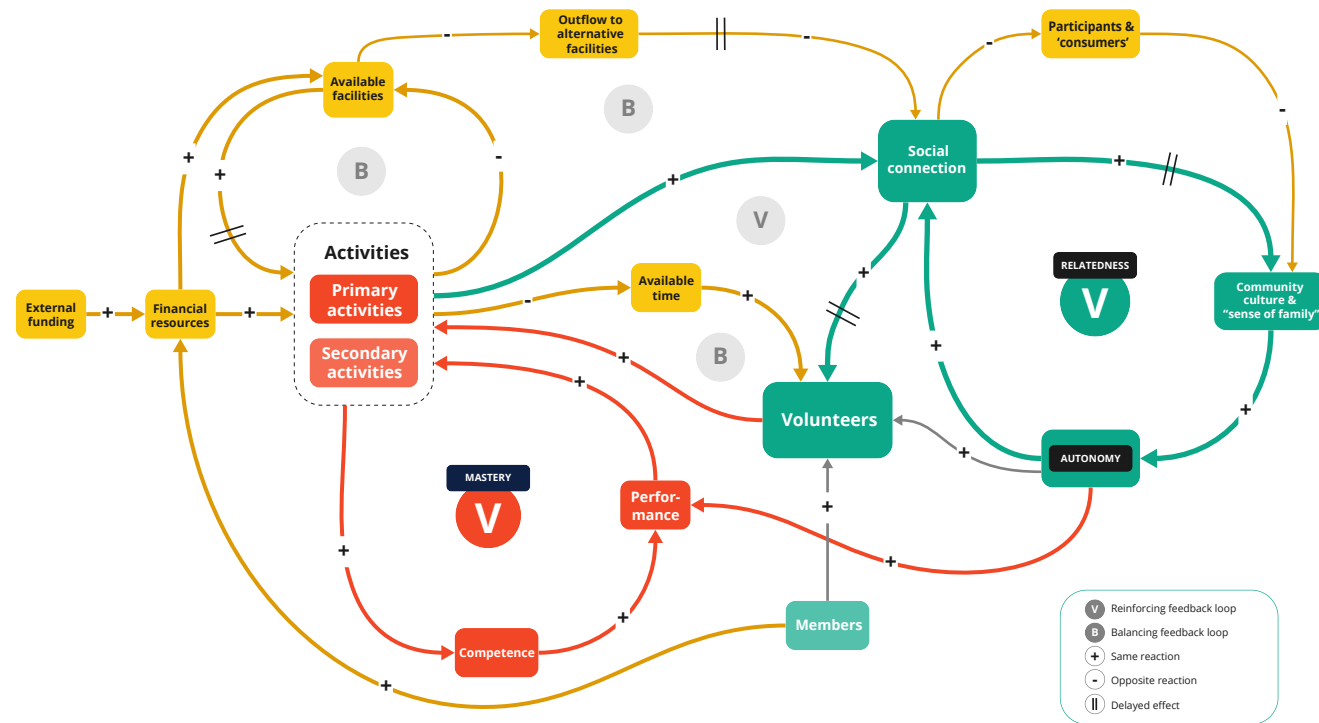


Figure 2. Causal loop diagram (CLD): insights into general community concepts, their interrelationships, and feedback loops

The CLD reveals the following insights:

- 1. The value of intrinsic motivation and a sense of responsibility:** People form a community around a shared passion or interest, such as football (mastery). Some members only participate in these activities – this is the *mastery loop* (red arrows). More active members take on organizational or supportive roles, making existing and new activities possible, such as organizing a bootcamp or taking on roles as a trainer or board member.
- 2. Activities and the *mastery loop* (red arrows):** Volunteers play a crucial role in strengthening

the *mastery loop* by organizing activities that help members develop their skills. This leads to improved performance and encourages members to stay involved and take on new challenges.

- 3. Activities and the *relatedness loop* (green arrows):** Joint activities foster social connection. In addition to the primary activities within the community, secondary events—such as outings or game nights—strengthen the *relatedness loop*. Even taking on volunteer tasks like bar shifts or cleaning duties enhances the sense of connection and the “family feeling” within the community.

- 4. Mutual reinforcement of loops:** When social connections are strong, the *relatedness loop* is optimized, which further enhances the sense of community. This increases members’ willingness to volunteer, which in turn strengthens the mastery loop. This mutual reinforcement between the *mastery* and *relatedness* loops forms the ‘two chambers of the beating heart’ of a community.

- 5. Risk of a one-sided focus:** If too much emphasis is placed on mastery and too little on social connection, members may start to feel less like part of the community and more like consumers. It is crucial to maintain a balance between having enough volunteers and fostering engagement in order to prevent this dynamic.

- 6. Preconditions for a well-functioning community:** Time, money, and facilities are essential preconditions for a healthy community. A lack of facilities can restrict the *mastery loop* and eventually weakens social connections. This could trigger a negative spiral in the *relatedness loop*, undermining the ‘family feeling’ within the group.



7. The roles of community members

Stock & flow

Within a community system, there is a tension between the total number of members, the number of volunteers (active members), and the number of consumers (members who only participate in the community’s primary activities within the *mastery loop*). To ensure a community functions well, it is important to have a sufficient number of volunteers. This helps prevent members from slipping into a passive role, where they only take what they need without actively contributing. The **stock & flow diagram** (figure 3) provides insights into this dynamic interaction of stocks and flows and forms a valuable complement to the CLD.



During the concept mapping sessions held within the two communities, four distinct roles were identified—each with its own responsibilities that contribute to the functioning of the community:

- Board member
- Committee member
- Volunteer
- Participant

The board sets the framework, manages finances, formulates policy, and provides guidance to subgroups and committees. Participants are all individuals who actively take part in the community’s activities. Com-

mittee members are participants who take on specific volunteer tasks—for example, within a facilities committee, an activities committee, or a PR committee. They organize specific activities within the established framework of the community.

Within the committees, volunteers have the autonomy to work independently within agreed boundaries. This means that members or volunteers can propose new activities, which are then evaluated against the community’s existing guidelines. If the proposal is feasible, volunteers can organize and carry out the activity with the support of the committee. This process fosters the motivation, autonomy, and engagement of volunteers, with their sense of responsibility being closely tied to the sense of community within the group.

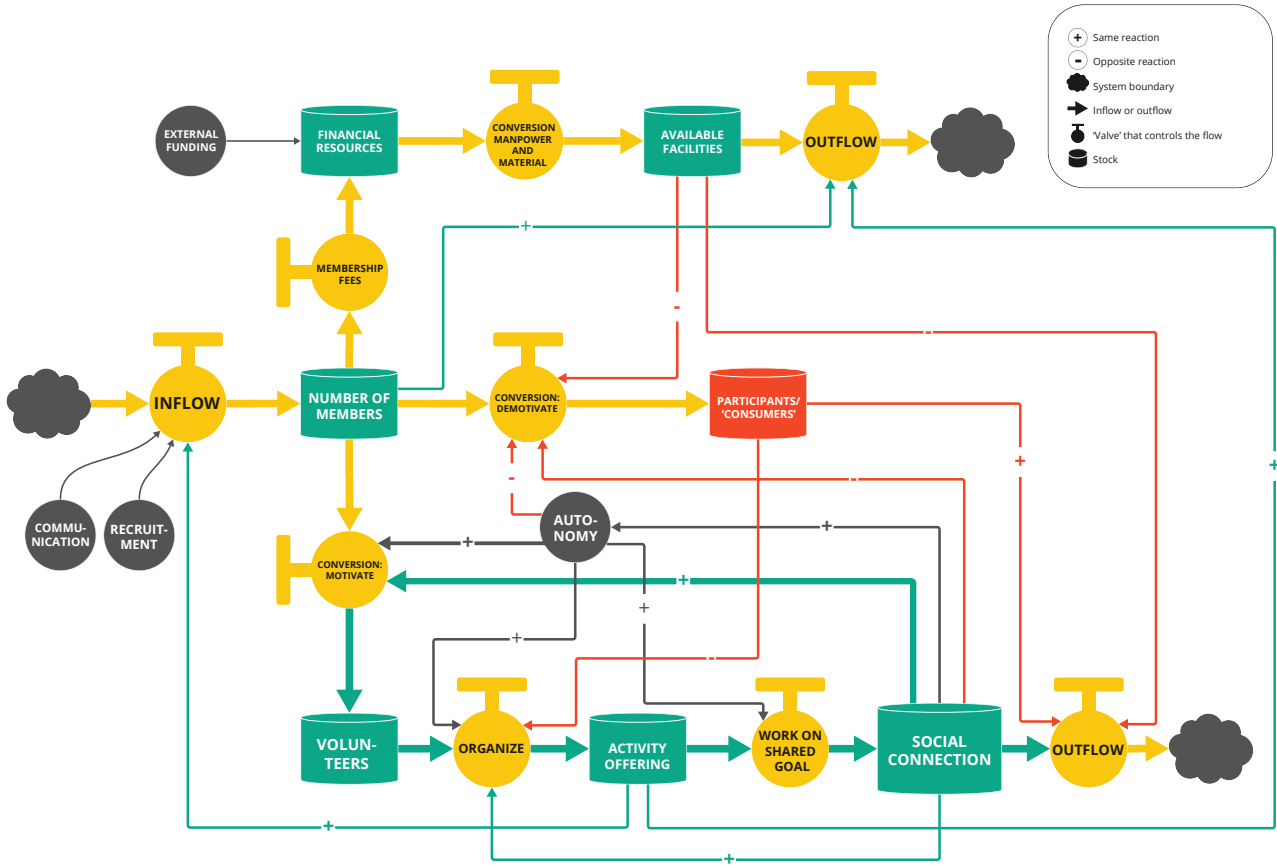


Figure 3. The stock & flow diagram focuses primarily on the conversion of members into a stock of volunteers (active members) and a stock of ‘consumers’.



8. Recommendations for optimizing communities

The power of communities is increasingly recognized as an important factor in promoting citizen well-being. Communities not only provide facilities and structure for practicing a shared passion, hobby, or sport, but also create opportunities for social connection and personal development. Based on insights from the two communities studied and the existing literature, this white paper offers five practical recommendations for evaluating and strengthening communities:

1. **Analyze the intrinsic motivation of members:** Explore what drives members and assess how well the community responds to these motivations. Ask questions such as: What makes it enjoyable for you to keep coming back?
2. **Evaluate the role of volunteers:** Examine the level of volunteer engagement and their contribution to the *mastery loop*. Ask questions such as: How many volunteers help sustain the *mastery loop*, and in what ways?

3. **Focus on social connections:** Assess the strength of social bonds within the community. Identify activities that fit the character of the community, such as outings or social events. Encourage members to contribute actively—e.g., by taking bar shifts or supporting organizational activities—to strengthen social cohesion.
4. **Assess the balance between *mastery* and *relatedness*:** Ensure there is a healthy balance between activities centered around a shared passion (*mastery*) and those that foster social bonding (*relatedness*).
5. **Review the preconditions:** Evaluate whether the community has enough time, money, and facilities to function effectively. Make sure the *mastery* and *relatedness loops* continue to reinforce each other. Identify possible deficiencies and develop strategies to address them before launching new activities.



9. Conclusion

Establishing, maintaining, and strengthening communities is essential for promoting the well-being of community members. In times of crisis, lifestyle-related diseases, and loneliness, communities offer a place where people come together around a shared passion or hobby. They strengthen social ties, encourage responsibility, and contribute to a healthier lifestyle. Well-functioning communities create an environment in which people remain physically and mentally healthy and engaged—even into older age.

The methods used in this study provide valuable insights into community structure and dynamics:

- **Concept mapping** helps to identify key factors for the continuity of a community
- **Causal loop diagrams (CLDs)** visualize the dynamics and feedback loops within a community
- **Stock & flow diagrams** complement CLDs by making the balance between stocks and flows visible

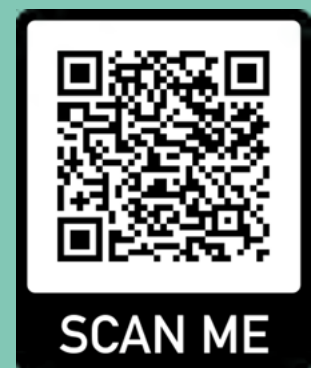
The methods and visualizations used in this research offer a strong foundation for understanding the architecture and dynamics of a community.

Four key insights from this white paper:

1. ***Mastery* and *relatedness* form the core:** These two loops are the beating heart of a community and drive motivation, autonomy, and a shared sense of purpose.
2. **Volunteers are indispensable:** A healthy balance between active volunteers and other members is necessary to keep the community stable and sustainable.
3. **Risk of a one-sided focus on *mastery*:** Too much emphasis on *mastery* without attention to social connection can lead members to act more like consumers rather than active contributors.
4. **Resources and facilities matter:** More activities require more facilities, resources, and time from members. Overburdening can lead to a drop in volunteer participation and social engagement.

Want to learn more about these methods?

Scan the QR code (or use this [LINK](#)), and/or email to: andreas.rothgangel@zuyd.nl or gaston.jamin@zuyd.nl.

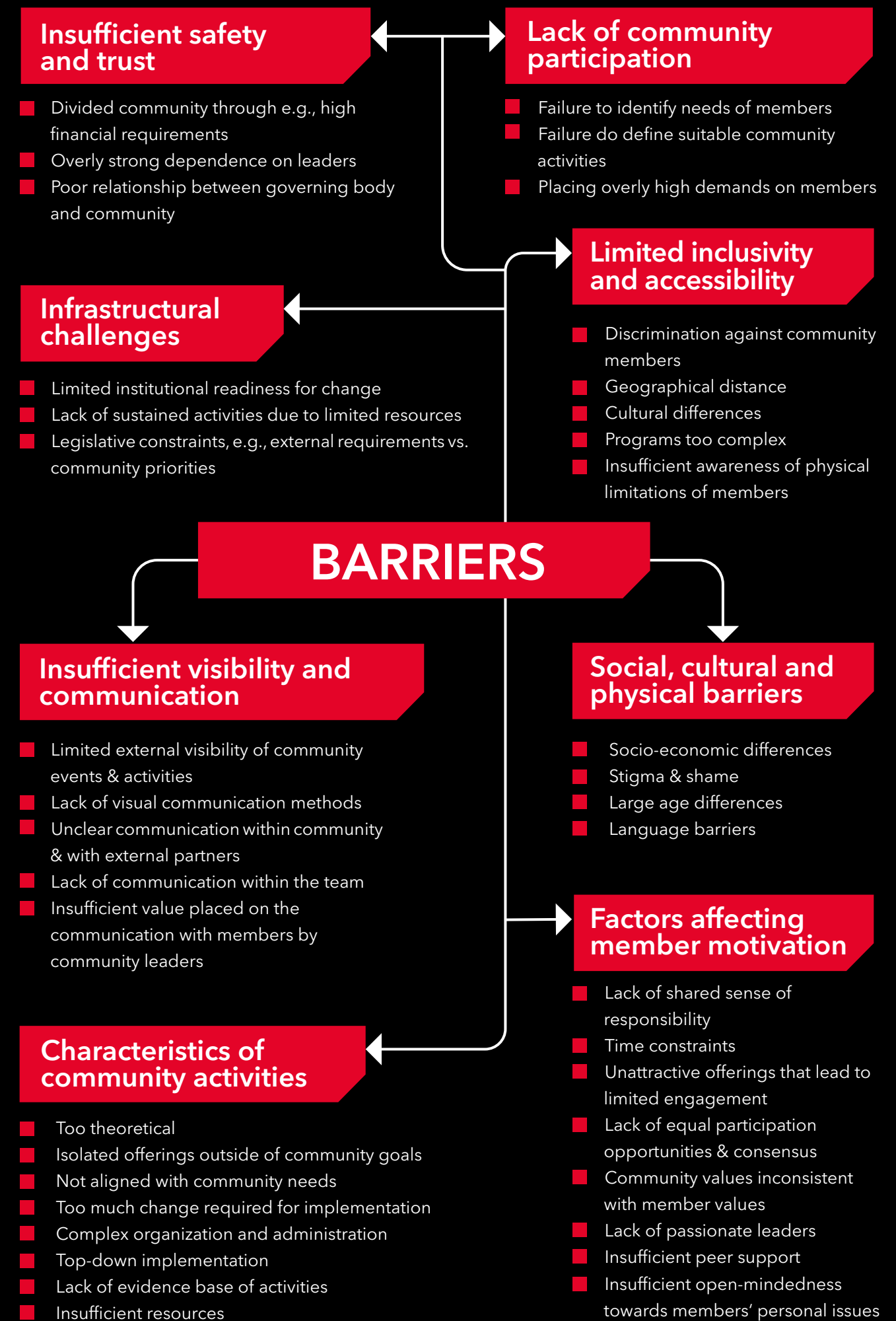


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Appendix 1

List of facilitators and barriers to community building



Imprint

This white paper was created by the Research Centre for Personalized Lifestyle and Movement-Based Care, commissioned by Zuyd University of Applied Sciences (Regional Transition and Innovation theme 'Healthy Society'), and the Centre of Expertise for a Healthy and Just Society.

Knowledge and science are constantly evolving. Therefore, the information provided in this white paper is a snapshot in time. This white paper has been compiled with the utmost care using knowledge available up to July 2024.

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Roman Catholic Football Association

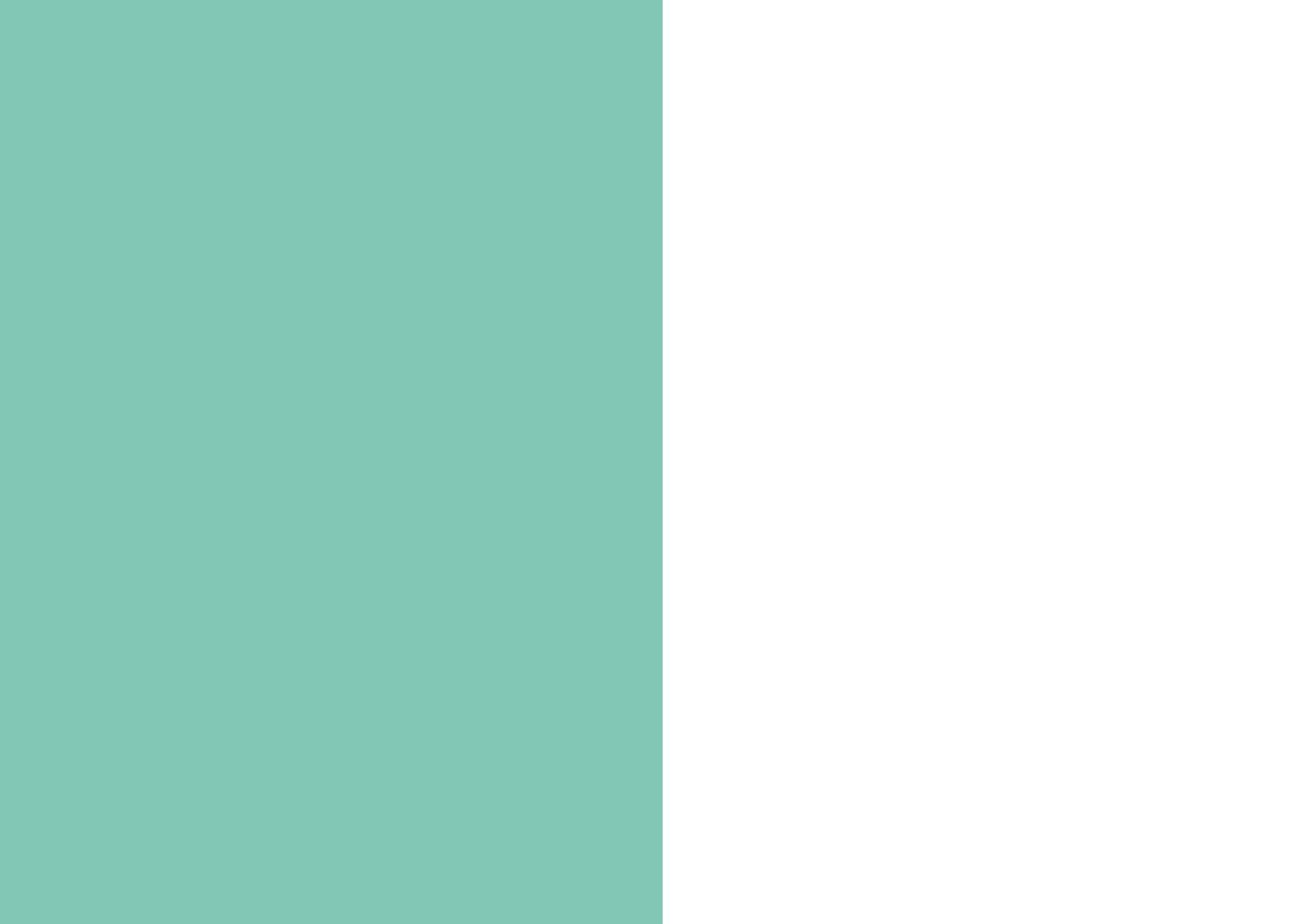
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