

Groningen as a participatory municipality. The art of joining, letting go and being supportive

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1 Mind the gap

In Groningen, by far the biggest city (200,000 inhabitants) in the northern part of the Netherlands, we experiment with new ways of working together with the community. More people as well as different people participate in networks on a city and neighbourhood level. That makes me proud. And that is why I find my job as a civil servant so important. But is it the municipality itself that should involve citizens with their own environment? Or is it, in the end, the community itself that should participate and build the community? We are used to thinking in a citizen-government relationship and conclude that there is a gap between those two worlds. Step by step, piece by piece, we try to bridge this gap. However, using the word 'gap' means that we think in terms of two different worlds and stresses a static 'us' versus 'them'. This gap leaves no room for 'me' and 'you'. I believe the real task lies in building bridges among citizens themselves. Because that is where the real gap arises. We all live in our own safe bubble and surround ourselves with familiar faces. Highly educated and well-paid people rarely meet with people who are less well-off.

2 Connections don't come easy

This brings us to a vulnerable reality, in which connecting with one another doesn't come easily. We see that it is hard to mobilise people who are less well-off. There are groups which are disconnected from society, distrusting the government and other institutions. And, to be honest, sometimes it seems that the government distrusts citizens just as much as citizens distrust the government. This can be explained by the exclusive appropriation of the public good by the government, something we all, as citizens, let happen. This citizen-government relationship, or 'us' versus 'them', is quite a comfortable contradiction in which we don't ask ourselves: 'why am I not participating?' Just as government struggles with its role, wondering how to put itself in the position of its citizens, citizens have also 'forgotten' what citizenship consists of and how to shape society together. We have forgotten how to really listen to each other and familiarise ourselves with the world the other lives in. For this, we need to leave behind suspicion, competition and ignorance, and enter into dialogue with one another. Undoubtedly, this will bring discomfort and conflict. In the end, however, we will understand each other and will have new perspectives on society. For many issues we look to the government for solutions when in many cases we have to resolve them amongst ourselves. Elected representatives, executives and civil servants can play an important part in connecting different groups. Moreover, a

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lot of citizens' initiatives are doing exactly that, and better, and more enjoyably. For governments, and municipalities in particular, that means they really need to participate in the worlds of their citizens and have to be part of what is happening in their neighbourhoods.

3 A vital democracy needs permanent attention

A vital local democracy needs permanent attention and investment. Our executive office, represented by our mayor and aldermen, wants to be in the midst of its citizens and defines its role from that place. Renewal of the role of our local government and cooperation with our city is a top priority. We are giving our citizens more influence and ownership over their own environment. This commitment goes a lot further than voting at the ballot box. This commitment asks for a right to speak, as well as a right to vote. We notice people have an urge to contribute to their way of living together, to make their city together, to organise solidarity and to shape our local democracy. Here and in the rest of the Netherlands we notice people are asking for a different government. In Groningen we are working hard on that.

Vitalising democracy is not easy and adapting a democratic system that has been around for ages isn't either. It takes time. We need more than new methods or a different toolbox. We experiment by developing building blocks for new methods and, if necessary, learn about the

structures of our democratic system. Our local executives focus on a coherent approach, including our system, methods and behaviour. For this, we need intensive and innovative cooperation between citizens, representatives, executives and civil servants.

4 Experiments in Groningen

In Groningen we started a number of experiments in local democracy and our area-based programmes. Some of these experiments are based on co-creation: together with local residents and stakeholders analysing the neighbourhood, describing its challenges, translating these to an agenda, and carrying out the plans together. Other experiments are about giving influence to neighbourhoods, with participatory budgeting for example. We also experiment with random selection, digital panels and the right to challenge. The most far-reaching experiment is the cooperative council.

5 Democracy on a neighbourhood level

We believe our area-based approach is very important to strengthen involvement of our citizens with local democracy. The municipality changed its working methods adapting to the complex dynamics of every single neighbourhood. Every alderman was appointed a specific area of the city, working together with an area-team consisting of civil servants: nearby and approachable. This new approach brings us to questions about the design of democratic processes on a neighbourhood-level and the role of the city council during these processes (representative, policy-making, controlling or connecting). Also, citizens make their own decision of which role to play in these processes: informing, consulting, advising, co-producing, co-executing, deciding or executing. Every neighbourhood or situation demands different roles.

6 Cooperative council

In Oosterparkwijk, a gentrified former working-class neighbourhood, we are setting up a cooperative council. Together, people can feel a renewed ownership over their street



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and neighbourhood and make decisions about it. The council is not an end in itself. It is a means to have significant conversations between residents, making decisions about their neighbourhood. Both residents and city councillors sit on the cooperative council. They are randomly selected. We believe that with random selection more people will join who are not eager to voice their opinion or people who think that they have always been denied a voice. This way, the cooperative council will become a more balanced representation of the neighbourhood. Members will rotate after a few years, so everyone has a chance to sit on the cooperative council.

For this, we consider the neighbourhood as a cooperation and every inhabitant as a member of this cooperation. The cooperative council decides on (parts of) the neighbourhood agenda and its budgets. Beforehand, topics will be chosen by the cooperative council itself. Decisions about these topics won't be made at City Hall, but in the neighbourhood. Hence, as a resident you decide on your own neighbourhood. We hope this will create more dialogue between residents in this neighbourhood. With consultations, meetings, brainstorming-sessions, panels and polls – offline and online – the cooperative council will involve as many residents as possible. We will pay particular attention to the turnout of vulnerable and infrequently heard residents. City councillors will work together with residents on an equal footing. This way, we connect participatory democracy (active citizens) with our representative democracy (elected representatives).



7 G1000

In 2015, an active group of citizens organised a G1000, a citizens' summit. On a sunny day in June, one thousand residents of Groningen made an agenda for the city. In groups of ten, they translated this agenda into concrete ideas. They experienced 'dialogue' and 'working together'. Mutual trust starts with little steps, getting to know one another again, and continuous dialogue. Looking for subjects that bind us and finding agreement. However, you don't have to agree on what you find interesting and fun. That was what the G1000 was all about: dreaming and sharing ideas. Your own preferred topic did not always resonate with the other nine participants in your group. Sometimes that hurts. Because making decisions together also brings disappointment. And in the groups where new things were created together it brought joy.



8 The beauty of learning to compromise

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Recently, a former politician called this ‘the beauty of compromise’. Not standing on the side with a clear conscience, but making concessions and getting dirt under your nails. Setting aside your own interests for the collective interest, because compromise is the very foundation of our democracy. Too often, we blame politicians for not keeping their promises and making compromises. David van Reybrouck, a Belgian author and founder of G1000 in Belgium, once said: ‘Democracy is not about making everybody happy. But about letting all people live with their little piece of unhappiness’. One of the participants of the G1000 in Groningen concluded afterwards: ‘I never realised democracy was so complicated’. The G1000 concluded the day with a choice of ten plans which people could join. Remarkably ambitious plans, like a basic income.

During the follow-up it became clear that self-organisation asks for working together pleasantly and in a practicable way, for perseverance, for not leaning on civil servants who will do the job, for making strides. A few pioneers who keep the process going are quite convenient and, sometimes, so is the municipality. How nice, and rightly so, it can be to grumble at them sometimes. To be honest, it wasn't easy for the municipality either. Sitting on its hands, not taking over all these ideas. Not immediately judging an initiative on feasibility within established policies.

9 Lessons learned

The citizens' summit demanded something of our expectations. We are used to coming up with clear cut plans. To measure results. To be efficient and effective. However, establishing dialogue is hard to measure. Civil servants as well as citizens exposed themselves to a vulnerable position and were allowed to make mistakes. They shared the fact that they were nervous and didn't know where conversations were heading to. Nonetheless, it brought a valuable democratic experience for everyone. There's 'a long way to go' but we'll make it an inspiring journey! ■

