Citizen (Dis)Empowerment in Urban Regeneration of Low-Income Neighbourhoods

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Urban decline and restructuring struggles in low-income and minority neighbourhoods have generated great concern among citizens and governments in the Netherlands, and many other West European countries. Since the 1970s a number of urban renewal policies and practices have tried to respond to the effects of socio-economic and political shifts; large scale deindustrialization, decline and decentralisation of employment in major cities, housing provision and welfare changes, as well as the evolution towards a multicultural society.

The approaches undertaken have generated different degrees of power to make decisions at the local level. They have affected the relationship between the state and citizens, and have recently implied greater involvement of the private sector in urban renewal processes.

In response to the opposition of residents, from the mid 1970s autocratic mainstream programmes mainly based on demolition and reconstruction, gave way to new policy based on socialisation and democratisation of housing and neighbourhoods. It was known as building for the neighbourhood\textsuperscript{1}, since it focused mainly on urban improvement of inner city and post-war working class low-income neighbourhoods. The policy aimed to open up exclusionary urban plans to citizens, paying attention to their claims, while providing affordable housing and reducing massive displacement. Through building for the neighbourhood\textsuperscript{2} residents were able to organise themselves and alter some political local arrangements.

It produced changes in hierarchical structures in the city urban development department, giving citizens a share in decision making and control over their neighbourhoods. The policy lasted almost two decades, but by the end of the 1980s urban renewal programmes had already shifted direction from building for the neighbourhood to building for the city (Stouten\textsuperscript{2} 2010).

During the 1980s new measures were taken by central government in response to economic recession and expenditure cuts. Local initiatives advocating social housing weakened and new market oriented approaches of housing provision strengthened. Privatisation, deregulation and decentralisation took place alongside a shift of power from central to local government and housing associations (Stouten\textsuperscript{2} 2010). By the end of the 1990s the outcome of market oriented strategies of urbanisation materialised in spatial and social segregation. While some areas prospered others declined in accordance with market oriented interest and financing. Neighbourhood decline was manifested heavily in low-income and minority areas.

In response to the intensification and concentration of interrelated urban problems, urban policy has evolved and converged over the last two decades around a series of key features. They seek co-ordination and integration of economic, social and urban policies that used to work on an individual basis. There

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\includegraphics[width=0.8\textwidth]{figure1.jpg}
\caption{Klushuizen in Tarnewijk, Rotterdam South.}
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\textsuperscript{1} For more information about Building for the Neighborhood policy and practices, see Paul Stouten 2010.
has also been an increase of area-based approaches, a shift from government to governance, a growing use of local urban contracts as policy regulators, and once again, the recognition and encouragement of residents’ engagement in urban regeneration processes (Andersen and van Kempen 2003). These tendencies to more comprehensive and inclusive approaches are promising. However they have raised some questions in practice, especially in regard to the increased control by residents over neighbourhood decisions on a non-exclusionary basis. Furthermore, in practice neighbourhood planning and regeneration seems to have been transferred to private entities rather than to citizens.

This article is based on this conjecture arising from a research done in Tarwewijk, one of the most distressed and low-income districts of Rotterdam South that has been the target of current urban regeneration policies.

**Urban Policy Towards Citizens**

In the Netherlands the previous policy features are reflected in the Big City Policy (Grootstedebelde), created in 1994 combining a number of ministries and subsidy schemes to revitalise major cities. It focuses on three interrelated so-called pillars – physical, social and economic – with an area-based approach in the four largest cities. One of the focal points of the physical pillar was the improvement of low-income inner city and post-war neighbourhoods tackling social and spatial segregation through the New Urban Regeneration Policy (Wet Stedelijke Vernieuwing). This policy aimed to enforce the diversification of the housing stock through the development of more expensive houses in deprived neighbourhoods stimulating at the same time social mixture (Kruythoff 2003; Musterd and Ostendorf 2003). In year 2000 new arrangements were set increasing the areas from four to thirty large and medium cities. Once again, an area-based approach was used with the aim of ensuring market demands for housing in the long term, reducing social housing and increasing home ownership for middle and high income families (Van Kempen and Priemus 1999; Van Weesp 2000; Priemus 2004).

In 2002, under the provisions of the Major City Policy a district-based programme nominated 56-Wijkenaanpak (56-district approach) was launched. Urban renewal targets, plans and agreements were planned under the coordination of councils and local partners.

This programme was followed by the 40-Krachtwijken (40-empowered districts) action program in 2007 which is to be developed for the next 10 years. The main focus was to make a shift from districts of attention to districts of empowerment (van aanadachtswijk naar krachtwijk). Working with residents, civil organisations and institutions locally active was one of the critical goals to tackle urban problems associated with high unemployment and scarcity of jobs, homogenous populations, rundown housing, deterioration of public spaces, drug nuisance, and illegal practices (vrom 2007). Alongside this initiative the 40+Wijken (40+Districts) program was launched two years later in districts with serious accumulation of problems which were not part of the previous 40 priority districts earmarked by former Minister Vogelaar (VROM 2009).

In order to put policy into practice an Action Plan for Empowered Districts (Actieplan Krachtwijken) was formulated with different charters in cities around the Netherlands. Out of these charters a number of local neighbourhood action plans (wijkactieplanen) have been elaborated in city districts proposing initiatives and plans for urban and housing improvement fostering citizen involvement (vrom 2007). At the neighbourhood level resident organisations and steering groups have been formalised and others created autonomously or in collaboration with the previous local urban contracts.

Local decision making of urban regeneration processes appears to be shared between the state and residents. However, the state is no longer the only entity in charge of urban transformations of low-income and minority neighbourhoods. The private real estate sector is also involved. Housing associations, private development agencies and financial institutions play an important role in planning and renewal operations (Albers 2006). In fact, these private initiatives together with local authorities are in charge of implementing the previous district-based approaches, while working in partnership in market oriented urban renewal and development projects in the same areas. Different strategies have taken place in targeted districts to fight against urban decline and social and spatial segregation, however significant influence and collaboration of residents in these strategies has been difficult to grasp. Disfranchised and deprived citizens, which are supposed to be empowered to transform their living environment have been frequently disempowered through different practices bringing up eviction and displacement (Rendon 2010).

**Urban Practices towards the Real Estate Sector**

Over the last two decades housing has played an important role in the implementation of the previous district approaches, though in different ways and with changes in approach. Social housing has been reduced and home-ownership has been increased. In addition, subsidies have shifted from direct to more indirect ones. For instance, local authorities are provided with a certain budget for housing production according to needs. And citizens
receive individual rent allowances only if warranted. Furthermore, the direction of housing policy has been oriented towards more market, less government (Boelhouwer 2002). Even when the state keeps maintaining a regulative and enabling role in housing provision, the financial and political commitment has been gradually transferred from the public to the private sector (Harloe 1995, Stouten 2010). Public-private partnerships have strengthened, commanding every aspect of housing provision, distribution and allocation today.

Action plans in districts are mainly formulated by public-private partnerships according not only to the previous policies but also to the interest of city visions, housing policy and the real estate sector. For instance, in the city of Rotterdam it is evident that future plans aim to achieve housing and social improvement and heterogeneity not only for the sake of the most needy people, but also for the sake of profit and city image. A shift from a working to a ‘creative class’ is desired to attract new businesses and middle and high income citizens (Gemeente Rotterdam 2007).

Public and private intervention in priority districts tends not only to reactivate mechanisms counteracting deprivation but also reversing property devaluation to reinsert these areas in the real estate market since those areas are generally owned or controlled by housing associations. Different strategies and programmes have been launched in these districts devised and supported by the state and local public-private partnerships. Initiatives as the Aankopen-Verbeteren-Verkopen Aanpak (Purchase-Renovation-Sale Approach), Koop je Huurhuis (Buy your Tenement), and Klushuizen (Job Properties) have successfully improved physical conditions, boosted the private housing sector, stimulated banks to supply mortgages, and provided the middle class with different choices of affordable housing (Figure 1). They have also complied with urban and housing policy agendas advocating heterogeneity (social and housing mix) even though relations between former and new residents, as well as social and ethnic groups, are frequently parallel rather than integrative (Uitermark, et al. 2007). However, these programmes stimulate individual rather than collective-based benefits as well as decisions hardly achieving neighbourhood-based planning with standing resident engagement to reach a common ground. These urban practices barely empower marginalised citizens to achieve significant social and political change or to gain control over neighbourhoods. In fact, in many cases disenfranchised tenants are not taken into account, as in the case of Rotterdam where practices of eviction and exclusion are common to improve priority districts (Verwij 2010, Gemeente Rotterdam 2010).

In Rotterdam, as in many others cities, the maintain or sell approach (afschrijving) and the housing permit (huisvestingsvergunning) have been enforced by the municipality in order to de-concentrate low-income and minority citizens. The first measure forces owners through a legal order to maintain housing in good condition, otherwise it must be sold. With this measure housing stock is improved and illegal practices of slum landlords are eliminated, such as overcrowding and undocumented migrant accommodation. The housing permit, which is often referred to as Rotterdamwet (Rotterdam Law), constrains the influx of marginalized households to specific areas of the city while seducing the well-off ones to move into these areas, increasing the property values. It was introduced in Rotterdam in 2005 through the Wet Bijzondere Maatregelen Grootstedelijke Problematiek

Figure 2. Housing targeted for renewal in Tarwewijk, Rotterdam South.
(Law for Special Measures of Metropolitan Problems) to later be launched nation-wide to deal with the condition of the so-called priority districts. This licence does not apply to households residing in the city for more than 6 years, the private sector or rental housing above 647,533. It is enforced for specific households and in specific streets and districts, which most of the time have the lowest property values in cities and the highest concentration of interrelated urban problems, as in the west and southern districts of Rotterdam (Gemeente Rotterdam 2006, 2010).

With the enforcement of this law people (mostly newcomers with fewer resources and privileges) are not allowed to move to the most affordable districts.

Urban regeneration in targeted districts has achieved urban improvement through the previous locally-based policies and strategies (Figure 2). Housing has been updated, shifts in ownership have taken place, property values have increased, illegal practices have decreased and public spaces have been restored, unfortunately many times through fencing off and surveillance cameras. However social and economic development have not taken place and problems have moved to another place (Rendon 2011). People get uprooted in the process, as households residing in housing with substandard conditions or the ones not fulfilling the requirements of the Rotterdam Law. The question is where do these people go and therefore: how do these people take action in the transformation and development of their own district?

**Disempowered vs. Empowered Urban Practices**

The previous facts and enquiries bring out a question regarding the recognition of citizen involvement in recent urban policy trends. Who formulates and implements plans and development strategies in the empowered districts (krachtwijken)?

What can be explained from the previous figures is that central government is currently pushing urban and housing regeneration programmes placing citizens at the centre (Boelhouwer 2002). It can be explained also that those initiatives don’t seem to be always feasible and straightforward, but contradictory to interests and policies running side-by-side their objectives and concerns. While area-based programs promote inclusive and tailor-made planning schemes led by citizens to achieve neighbourhood improvement and community development, urban regeneration practices at the local level tend to be set and led by public-private partnerships encouraging gentrification and community dissolution to achieve economic growth and to stabilize social order (Uitermark, et al. 2007). According to a grassroots group advocating tenants’ rights in many districts in Rotterdam, urban interventions are frequently undertaken without any or little consent of households (Verwij 2010). Tenants are usually informed through one-way communication meetings, usually with owning properties in the area. Tenants in rental properties have less legal rights, and therefore have less say in decision making.

This way of consultation has even been recognised by planning authorities in some neighbourhoods in Rotterdam, where urban regeneration programs have been conceptualised and formulated before being presented to residents (Vieter 2009). Central government also stated after evaluations that urban regeneration operations have been authoritarian despite consultation in some of these areas (VROM 2008).

Urban policy addressing low-income and minority districts has certainly had positive effects through residents’ engagement through the democratisation of action plans in neighbourhoods. However the way of taking this into practice has not been progressive, neither has it been contextualised in today’s political and social condition. Consultation through different means has been common since at least 50 years ago in urban renewal regardless its insignificant role in making relevant decisions. Furthermore, it has been acknowledged that unlike real-democracy in districts – the power of people to collectively control the decisions that affect their economic and environmental futures – this sort of instruments pro citizen participation tend to react to official plans and programs rather than encourage people to propose their own goals, policies, and future actions (Arnstein 1969, Davidoff 1965).

It is quite relevant then to recognise that neighbourhood-based plans may make a difference on key issues, but by ‘ignoring difference and diversity these plans will perpetuate inequalities in political power and fail to transform individuals and neighbourhoods’ (Angotti 2008). The interests of public-private partnerships have tended to neglect the value of the marginalised citizens, which due to exclusion and a system of consensus have struggled to be part of decision making processes, and therefore, action. It has been shown that in neighbourhood-based planning, solidarities of race, social and economic status, as well as common claims of social justice are powerful instruments for relatively powerless communities (Angotti 2008). The interests of the state, the real estate sector, residents, activists and advocate urban groups compete. Therefore, it is essential that practitioners understand and are able to manoeuvre between conflicting ideas and processes in urban transformative processes (Angotti 2008).

Neighbourhood-based planning can not be linear and fixed, nor can it be produced and controlled by one group since the city is conformed by multiple interests and disciplines. Thus, urban, social and political change must come...
from transformative processes overcoming the traditional division of practices and disciplines by bringing together housing and urban policy, progressive planning, community development and design with a wide range of experts who engage in the city for and with people.

References


