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## Multiple Voices of Democracy in a Cosmopolis\*

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**Abstract:** *This article describes an action research process to solve problems of democracy in neighborhoods in a modern European city. A relational constructionist approach has been used as the theoretical basis for this work. The methodological framework is based on action research, survey feedback and search conferences. The article begins by describing the historical and cultural context of democracy in the city. Special attention is paid to the development of the relationship between researchers and members of neighborhood associations on the one hand, and to the building of a mutual consensus on the problems, focus and methodology of action research on the other. Multiple voices of democracy start to make themselves heard in a process of data gathering and feedback. New futures and strategies for the associations were developed at a search conference. After the search conference had taken place new relationships were established in a communal dialogue with neighborhood councils. An evaluation of the process focuses on lessons learned by members of the associations in terms of strategy/formulation; the establishment of relationships during the process; the multiple voices of democracy in a modern city; the effectiveness of the combination of a start up conference, survey feedback and search conference; and the way representative democracy can be improved in a relational process of social construction.*

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### Introduction

This paper describes how members of local community associations and university researchers worked together in an action research process to solve problems of democracy in cosmopolitan neighborhoods. The objective of this paper is to document the relational processes and pluralistic construction of communication and meaning which developed during this process. The paper focuses (a) on the relations between the researchers and members of the community associations in action research, and (b) on the way members of community associations and neighborhood councils differ in their concepts of democracy and relational processes, producing conflicts but also new perspectives for participative democracy. This document aims to contribute to a relational constructionist approach of change in a public context and to show how individuals, organizations and socio-ecological contexts are connected in issues of democracy in modern urban societies.

This introduction elaborates on the theoretical and methodological foundations of the present article. Attention is given to action research, relational construction of meaning, voices on democracy, and search conferences in processes of social renewal. The second section outlines the historical and cultural context of the action research process. In the third section the starting point of the research and the relationship between researchers and research subjects are described. The fourth section summarizes both the data collected during the fieldwork as well as the voices on democracy that became audible. The fifth section aims to give an impression of a search conference with members of community associations and describe the voices that began to articulate themselves during the same event, which opened new perspectives on participative democracy in neighborhoods. In the last section some conclusions and lessons are presented about voices of democracy, relations in action research and the usefulness of dialogue to develop new ways of promoting action, and constructing new perspectives of democracy.

## Action research as a mutual relationship

Action research is a method for studying dynamic processes and actions that are interconnected by time and embedded in context. The research aims to develop descriptive accounts and explanations by looking at patterns of events to gain knowledge of problems and the solving of problems in social reality (Argyris 1983). In action research there is an intimate relationship between theory and practice. Action research contributes to social action and problem solving, and to theoretical and practical knowledge. Oral communication in the form of dialogue is a predominant way of developing and communicating knowledge by participants in action research. By participating in the research, dialogue conferences, strategy forums and arenas for policy making, the members of an action research project have opportunities to communicate their knowledge. Supplementary forms of communicating knowledge are research reports, papers and articles. Research reports and papers, such as research notes, policy documents and notes on strategy, are addressed primarily to the participants in action research. Articles which reflect on the theory and practice of action research are addressed to social scientists and practitioners (Pålshaugen 1996). Such articles are essential in order to distribute practical experience and scientific knowledge.

To be engaged in action research, one requires a logical framework which is based on assumptions about the nature of the relationship between a subject and an object. Van Beinum (1992) stated that in action research the relationship between subject and object is inter-subjective. Both the researcher and subject of study are social actors and beings with a sense of purpose, capability and knowledge. They are both the product and the producers of history. Compared to traditional academic research, this means that action research is based on a mutual relationship. The empirical object has changed: instead of occupying a passive role that merely sanctions research, it embraces active participation. The researcher has changed from a position of objective observer to a position of active involvement based on the principles of constructionism. The relationship between the researcher and subject of study is explicit and collaborative, and is characterized by joint involvement in an event or social action (e.g. Van Beinum *et al.* 1996). In action research, choices have to be made jointly by researchers and subjects of study with regard to the focus of the research, the contextual settings, the methods to be used, and the assumptions and voices which are being used for understanding

reality. These choices are a result of the interaction of researchers and subjects of study in their joint development of the project. The mutual relationship and the choices are related to a situation or specific problems (Van Beinum 1998). Whether or not this situation provides new ways of conceptualizing and framing reality, and stimulates new forms of action, will be greatly influenced by the definition of the situation and the problems inherent in this situation. Most of the time, in defining the situation there are different voices constructing realities and creating options to act and enable problem solving.

## Relational construction of meaning

In social constructivism any social phenomenon is to be considered as a social construct, and thus as an object of possible change and reconstruction. These constructs are shaped in communication, dialogue and sense-making. Sense-making is seen as a process of the creation and reproduction of shared meanings (Weick 1979). In this process shared meanings that were formed previously may be destroyed and alternative and new meanings created. Gergen (1991) addresses this social construction of reality as the basis of forming a psychological standpoint. Social relations are based on rules, habits, institutions, language, communication, use of symbols, and definitions of reality which serve as a foundation. Perceptions of reality and meanings shared by individuals and groups prevent them from seeing alternatives. New alternatives for action can be achieved by critical reflection, thoughtful evaluation of various viewpoints, and arguments in an open dialogue. In dialogue, human consciousness, cognition, and the nature and potential of communication are critical elements for improvement. It is assumed that in dialogue and open discussions consensus can be reached about present and desirable states in the future. The significance of dialogue in effecting change in social systems is attested by Schein (1994). Genuine dialogue offers the possibility for the exchange of ideas and cross-influencing of attitudes and opinions of each other. Dialogue presupposes multiply-voiced communication. Such a process allows the development of both a shared set of norms and values, and shared language to understand events that occur in the process of transformation. Understanding each other's perspectives, interests, and convictions is a prerequisite for developing a common image of a desirable future.

In regard to this issue, Hosking (1999) advocates a relational approach, which allows for social processes to be constructed in joint acts, and for voices to be intermingled in public communicative processes. Relating is seen as a language based and communal process consisting in an act which allows people to continue to relate, and change is a process of social constructionism in a relationship. These relational processes rely upon, and (re-)construct co-ordinated action and local constructions. Relational processes are seen as inherently political; there is always space for multiple voices and perspectives. The expression of multiple voices improves knowledge, enriches perspectives and stimulates development.

#### Dialogue and search conferences

The achievement of dialogue is important for the exchange of ideas and in order to formulate joint action. Search conferences offer a methodology for people searching for the most adaptive relationship between themselves and their environment. The search conference is now a well established and highly reliable method of participative strategic planning. It has the power to produce learning and planning communities that are committed to making their own futures (Emery, M. 1993). An important assumption of the method is that people are conscious of their past, their present, and changes in the environment, and can make judgments and learn to act wisely through exploring possible futures. Search conferences stimulate multiple-voicing, mobilize experience in order to explore problems and exercise capacities towards action in shaping new futures (Emery 1996). A search conference is carefully designed to integrate structure and process and therefore provide a context for reflection and learning. The following description for designing search conferences is based on the ideas of Emery (1994).

Most search conferences start by collecting data on changes that take place in the world around us and on the history of circumstances that influences present action. It is an act which acknowledges learning as an ability to perceive, to exchange, to know and to think. It surveys the significant historical events and changes acquired through a shared appreciation that have made the system what it is today, and forms a important part of the context. This session produces data from which desirable and probable futures may be drawn. In the next step analyses are made of the present state and desirable futures. These analyses are followed by formulations of

strategies and action plans. The process is a form of integrated puzzle-learning and pro-active adaptive planning techniques for action. The process in the search conference is facilitated by conference managers. These facilitators have an important role in creating space for multiple-voicing and in creating conditions for effective communication.

A conference method based on relationships, open communication and learning between organizations in a network is known as democratic dialogue (Gustavsen 1992). It is a dialogue-based interactive approach, focusing both on the creation of inter-organizational learning in networks and on the development of local theories (Nashold *et al.* 1993). One of the aims of the dialogue is to realize the cognitive and emotional reconstruction of subjective realities through the open communication of experiences, ideas and arguments of participants. Project development and conferences based on democratic dialogue are largely built up in the same manner as search conferences. However, they are more focussed on network development, pay more attention to the use of language and construction of meaning, and are more rooted in a social constructionist perspective.

Several experiences of search conferences and large scale interventions have been documented, together with reflections on the reasons for their effectiveness (Bunker and Alban 1992). An explicit linkage between past, present and future is seen as essential for creating an extended social field and common ground from which to create the future (Dannemiller and Jacobs 1992; Weisbord 1992; Emery 1994). Working with small group structures within a framework of larger groups allows a sense of identity to develop and prevail. Also, these smaller groups create structures by which individuals can have their voice (Gillmore and Barnett 1992; Klein 1992). Working together in heterogeneous interactive groups stimulates multiple-voicing and helps in understanding other people's perspectives (Weisbord 1992; Emery 1994). Facilitating the process during the search conference through the use of experienced facilitators is a key to success (Owen 1992; Axelrod 1992; Emery 1994). Openness in communication during the conference is one of the most important tasks of the facilitators (Gustavsen 1992; Emery 1994).

#### Democracy

Organizations and their environments are complementary, they influence each other. Development is therefore rooted in the interdependencies between

organizations and their environments. Networks of organizations engaged with a set of problems or a problem area within society constitute a domain of common concern for its members (Engelstad and Gustavsen 1993). In issues of local government and democracy these organizational domains are grounded in culture and history, and are a result of evaluative processes that represent a conglomerate judgement of facts, beliefs and values. Democracy turns out to be a historical, cultural and multiple-voiced construct. Democracy denotes both a set of political institutions and a set of ideals. As a set of ideals it is connected with liberty and equality. As a set of political institutions it is associated with councils, governments, administrations, politicians, citizens and elections (Emery, F. 1993).

Representative democracy as we know it is about two hundred years old and forms the basis of today's democracy. The original idea was that it would give ordinary citizens a greater role in their own governance. The citizen in a representative democracy actively contributes to the election process by voting, but otherwise should not try to interfere in the governing body of representatives. The reality today is that there is a gap between democratic ideals and democracy as it actually exists. Representative systems do not necessarily promote participation. Participative democracy means that everybody is involved in decision making on issues that influence their liberty and equality. This form of direct democracy is usually dismissed with the argument that it is impossible in our complex, interrelated and highly technological society. According to Van Beijnum (1993) it seems apparent that a tension exists between representative and participative democracy and that it will be very difficult to connect participative democracy with representative systems. A question is whether it is possible to change and improve the system of representation as we know it.

### Historical and cultural context

As mentioned earlier, both researchers and subjects of study live in an external environment and a historical and cultural context. For a better understanding of the action research process and the developing relationships in local governance, a description is given of this historical and cultural context. This description is based on conversations between researchers and the subjects of study and additional studies of documents from the records of

the city by the researchers. The results of conversations and desk research were shared and discussed in a start-and-search conference held with participants of the neighborhood associations and the researchers.

For a long time now the city of Amsterdam has been known as a city of freedom and tolerance. It has had a history of democracy since the end of the eighteenth century. In the second half of the nineteenth century the city needed workers, and these workers needed homes. The city expanded and new neighborhoods sprang up with low-cost, rented housing. In this period the neighborhoods of the city created their own specific local culture. With peace restored after World War II there was a housing backlog to be cleared, and the infrastructure had to be re-planned and built up again. The city council was centralized, driven by the need for political and economic reconstruction.

To stimulate the reconstruction of the city, the city council formed and financed local community associations in the neighborhoods. These community associations consisted of voluntary workers who had a close relationship with the citizens in the neighborhood; participative decision-making in the community center was an important basis that underlay the implementation of numerous activities.

Ever since the early sixties two voices in Amsterdam have struggled to compete: business and productivity versus 'livability' (concern for a pleasant habitat) and living space. The business voice wanted Amsterdam to be upgraded, seeing this as a product in its own right, and wanted it to become a center of production. The voice for livability saw the city as a place to live and meet, and as a marketplace for new ideas. People and the community associations in the older neighborhoods opposed the rehousing of around half of the inhabitants to towns outside the city. They were determined to stay in their familiar surroundings. At the same time, the young were discovering a voice of their own, and were using it to challenge the traditional hierarchy of the city government. The voice for business and productivity weakened and the city council opted for the city as a place to live and work in. A much-needed program of urban renewal was underway, and local people and the community associations were involved and consulted on the changes.

After the reconstruction and the program of urban renewal the community associations became critics of the centralized and hierarchical way that the city council made its decisions. They voiced the problems of the division of policy making, leading to *ad hoc* policy formulation, and the hierarchical,

bureaucratic administration, which made the process of policy making slow and ineffective. The municipal services made increasing contacts with the community associations, and kept in close touch with them, since the associations had a great deal of information about the neighborhoods — information that the services needed for policy making but did not have themselves. The associations were accepted by the city council as open organizations of citizens and interested parties in a neighborhood that stimulates and gives active support to all people and groups interested in improving livability in their neighborhood, and creates optimum conditions for democratic decision making.

At the end of the seventies, the Dutch Labor Party launched a public debate on the decentralization of governance and administration of the city into neighborhood councils. The rationale underlying their decentralizing objective was to narrow the gap between the inhabitants and the city council. A proposal for a stronger position and financial support for the community associations was part of this voice for democracy and governance. Neighborhood councils were seen as representative democracies based on elections along political lines of thought. The neighborhood associations were regarded as a participative democracy and were as a result considered to be an essential part of the democratic disposition. The formation of neighborhood councils was implemented at the beginning of the eighties. These councils have the same responsibilities as smaller towns: local government and administration, public safety, public development and infrastructure, social development, sports, education, art and culture, local authority, public housing, the public services, sanitation department and public works. Furthermore, the councils are responsible for the policy on grants to neighborhood associations.

The decentralization of governance and administration were related to the changing relationships between the decentralized administrations and the associations in the neighborhoods. First, the members of the representative councils had to be elected, and a part of the first councils consisted of people who were previously active in a voluntary capacity within the associations. For the associations this meant an important drain of active and qualified members. Second, the councils organized their own civil services in the neighborhoods as a way to narrow the gap between inhabitants and administration. Consequently, the information held by the associations was seen as less relevant by the civil services, because they focused more on the in- and-outs

of the politics in the neighborhood. Third, the subsidizing of the associations became the responsibility of the neighborhood councils and they had to incorporate the additional burden of the associations in their fiscal budget.

### **The start of the project: Action research**

Representatives of a joint forum of twenty-four neighborhood associations in the city of Amsterdam approached the Department of Public Administration at the University of Amsterdam to conduct research into the question: "What is the usefulness and what are the functions of the community associations in the nineties in relation to the city of Amsterdam and their neighborhoods?" The representatives had taken the initiative and integrated the associations in co-operating on a project about the present problems and the desirable future of the associations. As researchers, we decided to co-operate with the associations because the tradition of the University of Amsterdam is closely related to the development of the city and questions of governance of the city. The university has a tradition of conducting action research with organizations without financial means. The research was facilitated by an interdisciplinary team of researchers and students in organizational psychology, social psychology and public administration. From the beginning, we realized that the forum of neighborhood associations consisted of a varied group of organizations. From our perspective of action research, and because of the diversity of associations, we suggested a start-up conference between members of all associations and the researchers to explore and specify the problem, the method and the assumptions of this action research project.

### **Start up conference**

The developments in the governance of the city created a context for the associations to reconsider their tasks and whether these were being discharged in a satisfactory way. But it was not clear how these developments were perceived and assessed by the different associations and how the associations viewed their own tasks and ways of dealing with them. The start-up conference was designed to build a mutual relationship between the associates and researchers, to realize a common understanding about the tasks and functioning of the associations, and to develop a framework for

research. The conference was prepared by the representatives of the associations and the researchers. It was scheduled for one day in a conference center outside the city. All 24 associations were invited to participate. In actual fact, 23 members of 13 associations participated in the start conference.

The conference started with the questions "What has made us?", "What is our present state?" and "What questions have to be answered during the research?" These questions were elaborated in small groups and discussed in plenary session. Relevant historical and cultural aspects were discussed and recognized by all participants. The most obvious questions on the present set up, which sought an answer in the research process, were focusing on the right to exist: "Do we have the right to exist?", "Prove our necessity!", "How do we cope with the problems in our environment?", "Are we doing the right things?", "Must we stay independent in our activities?". Other questions were related to the relationships in the transactional environment: "How do we relate to the neighborhood councils?", "How must we handle the requirements of the council and the citizens of our neighborhood?". "How do we have to co-operate with the professional welfare institutes?". A third group of questions concentrates on the functioning of the associations themselves: "How can we improve our functioning, organization, methods of working, and how effective are we?".

The problems experienced by the associations were complex and comprehensive. After an extensive dialogue, the problems focused on the unclear vision of the future, the right to exist, and the relationship with the local authorities. During the dialogue a common ground gradually arose on the focus of the research: What is our reason for existing?

The questions raised by the members of the associations led to deep discussions being held between the subjects of the study and the researchers with regard to the objectives and methods of the fieldwork. The conference heard different voices. To us, these voices seem to be related to assumptions about the way local communities are functioning, and the way in which changes in society could be achieved.

Some of the associations asked for a research project that would stress the obvious usefulness of their work. They felt that they could then use the results of the research to strengthen their position to the neighborhood councils in a dispute about finance and legitimacy. In our view this voice seem to be based on a radical perspective and the assumption that there is an opposition in the neighborhoods, having a contradictory interest between

councils and citizens. Democracy is viewed as a battleground where rival forces strive for the achievement of largely incompatible ends. Power relations are viewed as closely linked to wider processes of social control, and councils are regarded as an oligarchy of bureaucrats striving for their own interests and positions.

Other associations asked for facilitation in developing a perspective for the future and support in formulating a new policy for the association. To us this voice seems to be related to a unitary view which stresses the achievement of common objectives. Conflicts are seen as a transient phenomenon that can be removed through appropriate action. We were able to recognize ourselves from a pluralist and constructionist point of view and consequently emphasized the diversity of perspectives and interests present. Conflicts are regarded as an inherent characteristic of acting and as a potential force to construct new realities and actions. Communication, multi-voicing and dialogue are seen as essential in creating new futures.

During the start-up conference we explained the logic of action research as a mutual relationship, and an opportunity to rearrange relationships with groups in the environment and to reconstruct realities on democracy in neighborhoods. After an intense dialogue, the research objective was reformulated as: creating perspectives on the future of neighborhoods associations and contributing to strategies for bridging the gap between local government and local residents.

The research methodology was developed in dialogue with all the participants. To develop a more thorough view of the position of the associations and to involve more associations in the action research, it was decided to gather data in conversations with committee members, volunteers and professional members of the associations. The researchers would initiate the conversations and ensure that written data feedback was made in a brief document and oral feedback in a search conference. The search conference was seen as a significant event to search for the most adaptive relationship between the associates and their neighborhood and to achieve active adaptive planning for the future.

An important discussion that took place dealt with the involvement of groups in the research bodies and specifically with the involvement of members of the neighborhood councils in a search conference on the future of the community associations. Important, since some participants, including ourselves, voiced the importance of the relationship with the neighborhoods

and the councils as an important group engaged in a domain of common concern. Other participants voiced the problematic relationship with the councils, which did not take them seriously and denied their ability and willingness to contribute to democracy. For these participants it was not acceptable that councils should be involved in the search conference. We experienced this viewpoint as problematic, because the associations saw the relationship between the associations and councils as part of problems, connected with the questions about the right to exist and the relationship with the environment. In our opinion, bringing the councils into the search conference enhanced multi-voiced communication, and gave the associations and councils opportunities for negotiating and reconstructing their mutual relationship through dialogue.

After an intense discussion it was decided not to involve the local councils in the search conference, but to involve them in the necessary data gathering prior to the conference. The search conference would focus on the development of local policies, strategies and action plans by the associations. In these action plans the associations could include local search conferences in their neighborhood, together with the councils and other related organizations, such as welfare institutions, housing corporations, community centers, churches, federations of the aged, migrant councils and health organizations.

#### **Data gathering: Multi-voiced democracy**

The data gathering was organized by the researchers and the representatives of the joint forum, and was executed by seven students as part of their studies in public administration. The students visited 24 community associations and communicated with committee members, volunteers and professional members. They also studied many documents, such as policy plans, annual reports, budgets, activity reports, neighborhood newsletters and correspondence between the community association and the neighborhood council. Additionally, the students interviewed members of the neighborhood councils and City Hall, and some welfare organizations. The data were summarized in research notes for each community association and discussed with members of the association. An overall research note was written as input for the search conference.

#### **Positions of the community associations**

The data gathering and feedback gave the researchers and subjects of the study more insight into the activities and functioning of the community associations. The associations see their most important task as encouraging and supporting the emancipation and social involvement of the citizens in a neighborhood and to contribute to greater livability. The target group consisted of all residents in the neighborhood, with special attention for people with less opportunity to shape and influence their own living conditions. Fields of activities are housing, living conditions, welfare and safety, environment, infrastructure, traffic and transport, migrants and minorities, and the support of specific interest groups. Most associations work in close relationship with the residents and have a good feel for the problems and issues in the neighborhood.

The associations considered several threats to and opportunities arising from their existence and way they perform their tasks. The threats are seen as mostly related to government in the city and neighborhoods. The associations were concerned that they would receive less financial support from the councils and lose their independence, simply to become a 'Group of Yes Men' for the councils. Other threats reside in the diminished interests of residents in becoming active volunteers, and an increasing unfamiliarity with the objectives and activities of the associations by residents and members of the councils. The most clear opportunities appear to reside in the forms of participative democracy espoused by the associations, their knowledge of problems in the neighborhood, the co-ordination of activities to contribute to livability, and the need to bridge the gap between citizens and councils.

Most of the time, the associations experience their relations with the councils as a field of tension, but the picture is more complicated. The relationships between the community associations and the local councils seemed to be very different in the different neighborhoods. Most of the associations seemed to feel they were fobbed off and belittled. Some associations complained that their policy plans were not read, the councils refusing to discuss them. Others incline to the opinion that working groups of the association are not invited to participate in public discussions about measures affecting the neighborhood, or that working groups are not taken seriously when residents' complaints are presented in bulk to the council. In some cases the civil servants are not willing to listen to the associations



because they themselves know what is happening in their district. In other neighborhoods the critical position of the association gives rise to resentment among the public servants and the politicians in the neighborhood. But there are other experiences, too. In some neighborhoods there is a stimulating relationship. The critical attitude of the association is respected, accepted and seen as a contribution to good governance. The politicians are more amenable to being approached, and the civil servants are willing to co-operate.

#### Multi-voiced democracy

Based on our data gathering, our conclusions were that moves toward decentralization of governance set up to bridge the gap between the inhabitants and the city council and to achieve more democracy had put pressure on the political and financial position of the community associations. After the formation of neighborhood councils, the position of the community associations changed considerably. Some councils saw no added value in the associations. Since the council was organized in the neighborhoods, there was felt to be no need for specific organizations that try to bridge the gap between the local community and the council. Other district councils decided to professionalize the voluntary work into welfare organizations, controlled by the council. Some other district councils saw the community associations as inconvenient and hard to handle because of their critical attitude towards the councils.

At the same time, the central city council decided to devolve the financial decision making on welfare issues to the district councils. The argument was that the district councils were better informed and could thus better decide on what had to receive priority in the neighborhoods. We recognized several voices on the decentralization of democracy in the city. All these voices saw the gap between citizens and governance as problematic, but they differed in terms of the actions to be taken.

The city's central government considered the gap between citizens and governance as problematic. Its voice beat out a uniform message:

We have taken the initiative to decentralize the governance and administration of the central city into neighborhood councils and we saw this as an important contribution to bridging the gap [between governors and governed]. In the process of decentralization we have laid down three tasks for the associations: forming a community in the neighborhoods and creating

conditions that encourage interest groups to contribute to the livability of the neighborhood; co-ordination of activities that contribute to the livability of the neighborhood, and supporting conditions for democratic decision making. We have explicitly stated that the community associations are an essential part of our new democratic order because they are based on participative democracy, alongside to the representative democracy in the neighborhoods. One of the problems of our democracy was the fragmentation of policy making, the hierarchy in a massive administration, and the central mechanisms for control and co-ordination. It is impossible for us to intervene in problems on the local level without undermining our values of decentralized democracy and the objectives of decentralization. We have no desire to intervene in the relations between associations and neighborhood councils, because the councils have their own responsibilities in this issue.

The local governments in the neighborhoods derive their existence from the gap between citizens and governance. There are more voices here, but their most clear voice is:

We are the solution to the gap between citizens and government because we operate at a local level and know what is going on in this neighborhood. We are not like the old hierarchical bureaucracy of the city hall, but organized in small units and responsible for our own co-ordination of tasks and control. Because we are part of the neighborhood, we organize our own relationships with the residents in political parties, public meetings and through information. We are not a bureaucratic, but a professional organization and we encourage this attitude of professionalism in other organizations, like the welfare institutions with their highly educated, professional staff. We demand professionalism from other organizations in the neighborhood, such as the community associations. They have an important task in creating a habitable environment and the execution of specific tasks, such as urban renewal, the integration of migrants and facilitating groups with meeting rooms and photocopyers. As in every professional relationship, we provide financial aid for specific activities and projects of the associations, but will decrease the general subsidy of the associations.

Before the decentralization, the community associations had an important task, bridging the gap between residents in the neighborhood and the central city government. They were consulted about problems in their neighborhood, and were seen as an important part of democracy in the city. There are more voices here, too, but the clearest one is:



We have an important task in bridging the gap between citizens and the bureaucratic politicians and civil servants. It is possible to fulfil this task because we are rooted in participative democracy and we know what is going on in the neighborhood. We contribute to policy making by pointing out problems, developing solutions and mobilizing residents to become active in policy making. It is our duty to be critical of the politicians and civil servants, because we are the voice of the citizens. Besides this task we are here to support democratic decision making, and are also active in contributing to an improved quality of life in the neighborhood and in coordinating activities in the environmental, housing, and welfare areas.

A closer look at these three voices teaches us more about the relational perspective on the problems of democracy in a modern city. First of all, there is common ground for the problematic relationship between citizens and government in a city with a centralized form of government and a hierarchical bureaucratic administration. The voices offer views of groups as active sense makers, imposing ideas of democracy and ways of imposing action. The voices are embedded in context, constructed in joint acts, and they intermingle with each other. The voice of central government distinguishes between representative and participative democracy. This point of view corresponds with the associations' view of participative democracy. The central government's statements strengthen the voice of the associations, in that they have to contribute to democratization by mobilizing residents. The relationship between the central and local governments is a delicate balance between autonomy and interdependence. The voice of the local councils emphasizes professionalism in contradistinction to bureaucratic governance.

The downsides of dealing bureaucratically with issues of organization are also felt by the associations, but they differ in their interpretation of democracy. For the local councils, good governance is embedded in a professional way of organizing, whereas the associations emphasize the understanding of problems in the neighborhoods and the interaction with interest groups to solve these problems. Both define their relationship with each other from another frame of reference. The councils see it as a professional relationship and emphasize the achievement of common objectives. The associations see the relationship as a loose coalition with a critical role and a specific contribution to democracy.

This process of relating consists of acts which are endorsed in a way that allows the groups to continue to relate. The social practices of the associations and local councils come to be relatively fixed when the councils

reinforce their demands for professionalism when introducing project financing, and the associations stress their independence and critical contribution to democracy. This interlocking of the two voices is such that each voice supplements the other so as to restrict subsequent co-ordination.

As a result of this analytical consideration we felt rather unhappy with the decision that members of the councils should not be invited to the search conference. Conversations with the representatives of the joint forum could not change this decision, illustrating the interlocking voices all the more vividly.

#### **Search conference**

The processes of data gathering and feedback were able to offer the associations new perspectives on relating to their environment. The written research note stimulated the associations to discuss the data within their own organization and participate in the search conference. According to the principles of search conferences, the objective of this search was to explore objectives for the future and to formulate policies, action plans and strategies. The conference was prepared by the representatives of the joint forum of associations and the researchers. It was scheduled for two days in a conference center outside the city. The search conference was attended by 32 representatives of 17 associations. The researchers facilitated the conference and the plenary sessions. Students who were involved in data gathering facilitated dialogues in small groups.

#### **Futures for associations**

The first day of the conference focused on the reason-to-exist issue. This issue included future fields of activity, ways of programming and working, and positions adopted by the neighborhoods in their dealings with the local councils. A nominal group method was used to generate ideas about the field of activities in the future. Every participant was asked to write down the five most important fields of activities on small cards. These cards were re-assembled and distributed again to small groups of five participants. The groups were then asked to cluster the ideas in specific fields, to make a list of priorities and to present this list in the plenary session.

The most important fields of activity were living conditions, housing,

environment, safety, transport, employability, the position of minorities, and welfare. During the plenary dialogue, the fields of activity and priorities were voiced in terms of livability. In the plenary session it was concluded that the community associations have an important role in realizing livability of the neighborhood, and also have a very important role in relation to local politicians in pointing out problems in the neighborhood and in suggesting solutions for a better livability. Contributing to livability means that the associations focus their activities on collective problems and solutions in the neighborhood, rather than on the individual problems of residents. The individual problems were seen as the primary concern of the professional welfare institutions, as part of the local councils.

Livability can have a different meaning for different inhabitants and the inhabitants can have different expectations of livability. During the conference the associations created common ground by affirming that they could bring together different voices in the local community because they have a close relationship with the inhabitants and are organized out of the inhabitants. They are, more than the local authorities, capable of bringing people together in order to know and understand problems in the neighborhood, and to translate problems into realistic action plans or programmatic development.

One example may illustrate this: an association gets complaints from residents about the way garbage is collected. The council then decides to split garbage collection into domestic and green garbage. The result was less frequent collection of garbage and more litter on the streets. The association organizes public meetings in the neighborhood to establish whether more residents have complaints about garbage collection. During these meetings relevant problems are worked out and alternatives formulated. The list of problems and the new ideas and alternatives are presented to the local council. The council rejected the list of problems and did not take the ideas seriously because the civil servants had already held a survey on garbage collection in the neighborhood and concluded that the decision to split the garbage was seen as a good alternative by the residents.

This illustration clearly shows the differences between the council and the association in terms of knowledge and expertise. The knowledge of the council is based on answers of residents to questions formulated by the council itself. The public servants do not know anything about any issues that were not on the questionnaire. The association bases its standpoint on

concrete experience and opinions of residents who assessed the situation as negative and undesirable. The knowledge of the council is wide, but superficial and focused on the opinions of residents about a specific decision. The knowledge of the association is less wide, but more in-depth and open. This knowledge is based on the perspectives of the residents and encourages thinking in terms of alternatives.

These kinds of illustrations and experiences were exchanged during the conference and helped the participants to reflect on their own position and their relationship with the councils. In the plenary session, the reason to exist was formulated as: as a way of contributing to livability in the neighborhoods in the future, from the perspective of the residents. Working from the perspective of the residents is seen as an essential value and way of taking action. The residents have the knowledge to make livability concrete and to construct new alternatives and realities in livability.

The second day of the conference focused on action plans and strategies. We used scripts to uncover the dominant logic in decision making on priorities and actions by the associations. Compact scripts of realistic problem situations in neighborhoods were discussed in small groups. Based on the discussions, the participants formulated rules for policy making and taking action:

- Collective problems, more than individual problems;
- Initiating tasks, more than the implementation of tasks;
- Knowledge based on experience, more than professional knowledge;
- Interest of residents, more than the specific interest of volunteers;
- Perspectives of residents, more than the perspectives of institutions;
- Own identity and independence, more than co-operation with institutions;
- Own objectives, more than objectives of the councils;
- Critical attitude towards councils, more than facilitating tasks assigned by councils;
- Participative democracy, more than representative democracy.

These guidelines for actions were helpful in formulating policies, action plans and strategies. During the conference, homogeneous groups of participants working in the same neighborhood drew up action plans and formulated strategies to realize these plans. The outlines of action plans and strategies were discussed in plenary sessions.

## Voices on action plans and strategies

The focus on livability and embedding in the neighborhood encourages the development of policies and action plans, and infuses new meaning into the relationship with local councils. In defining their relationship with the councils, the associations differed on the issue of co-operation and the strategy they themselves should follow.

In regard to the development of policies and action plans, we found more ideological and more instrumentally oriented policies. Examples of ideological policies are: "The policy of our association aims at [achieving] the objectives formulated in the statutes", or "The association is an action center of active and progressive residents in the neighborhood". We found that ideological policies took general objectives as their starting points and focused on opinions about the rationale behind the association and what it is supposed to achieve. These policies were closely related to the goals and statutes that were formulated at the founding of the associations. In the case of ideological policies little attention had been devoted to concrete activities or plans of action. The instrumental ideologies were concentrated on formulating activities and action plans. Examples are: "Contribute to the livability in the neighborhood by making energy, knowledge and facilities available to residents", or "The outlines in our action plan are housing, traffic and transport and safety". In our view, such instrumental policies concentrated on the resources which the participants required in order to execute their activities and focussed on opinions about the nature of the activities and what the association has to do. The proposed activities were not embedded in a mission statement or general aims of the association.

Some of the associations expressed the opinion that they did not want to co-operate with the authorities but, instead, wanted to criticize political decision-making fundamentally and concentrate on the classical themes of the associations, such as reconstructing the neighborhood in a more democratic order. During the dialogue in the conference, some of the associations which had identified themselves in this vein felt shocked and emotionally disturbed once it became clear that their defensive position was based on obsolete objectives and achievements. They did not see this defensive strategy as very hopeful for the future and, as a result, they felt they had to change their strategies. They chose a strategy based on their own investigations, on the development of concrete action plans elaborated together with

residents, and a more pro-active policy of co-operation with the councils.

Other participants from associations that did not want to co-operate with the councils expressed anger and frustration during the dialogue on strategies. They felt that they had been vindicated in their opinion that councils were undemocratic institutions and that the politicians tried to hedge their bets on the associations and other democratic groups. They accepted that their position was defensive and decided to limit their action to whistling and signaling what was wrong with democracy in the neighborhood and the policy of the council. Essentially, they adopted a reactive strategy in criticizing the councils.

Another voice came from associations that had developed a more co-operative relationship with the council. They stated that they want to co-operate with the council to get more information on the policy of the council and to be able to anticipate this more readily. Another reason cited to co-operate was that the council would have greater financial commitments to the association. During the dialogue in the conference, some of the associations were able to recognize themselves as following this strategy and become aware of their dangerous position: there is, in fact, a risk that the associations may act as an extension of the council, especially when they pay little attention to the inhabitants of the neighborhood. Besides this, it becomes difficult to co-operate when the local council questions the usefulness of the association. These associations concluded that it is necessary to formulate a mission statement to guide their actions. If a mission statement is absent, their existence in the future is insecure and it is questionable whether their activities would contribute to livability in the neighborhood, based on the perspectives of the residents. Consequently, they decided to formulate a mission statement and develop a more pro-active strategy based on the political awareness and commitment of residents.

Other associations have co-operated with the councils in a kind of partnership and already had based their actions on a concrete policy and action plan. During the dialogue they realized that it is necessary to stay alert in mobilizing the inhabitants they are organizing, to legitimate their position and to effect their goals in a pro-active way. These associations committed themselves to help other associations in developing actions plans and a more pro-active and co-operative strategy, based on the perspectives from the residents in the neighborhood.

Almost all associations came to see the need to make more explicit their

policy, action plan and strategy with volunteers and residents in the neighborhood. More than three quarters of the associations recognized a usefulness in discussing their policy with stakeholder organizations in the neighborhood, including the council.

#### Follow ups

After the conference, almost all participants initiated a process to elaborate the policy, action plan and strategy in their association, together with volunteers, members of the committee and residents. In some cases, the researchers facilitated this process, on request. In some other cases participants in the search conference formed groups to exchange ideas and experiences, and to help each other in developing their action plans and strategies. Almost three quarters of the associates discussed their policy and action plan with members of the neighborhood councils. During these discussions the relationship between association and council developed positively in most cases. The members of the associations found common ground with the politicians and civil servants in the need for more attention to livability in the neighborhoods. In most discussions the tasks and action plans of the associations were seen as a significant contributions to issues of livability. The specific position of the associations as a volunteer organization working from the perspective of the residents was seen as an essential contribution to democracy by most councils.

The associations that did not want to discuss their policy with the councils were satisfied with their decision, and they believed they were able to fulfil their mission of criticizing the council and the undemocratic structures in society more effectively.

#### Lessons learned

Many people have learned from this action research project. We reflect here on the description of the action research process and relate our experiences to the theoretical frameworks outlined in the first section of this article.

First of all, the members of the neighborhood associations learned that it is helpful to define a mission, to formulate goals and action plans, as well as to choose and work out a strategy. The development of a strategy was not

intended for the usual sorts of reasons that might be given in the strategy literature, such as survival of the entire organization, competitive advantage, planning of resources, portfolio management, lower-level decision making, and so on. The strategic development of the associations was a process of learning, sense making, border crossing and relating. The members of the associations and the researchers learned a lot about this process. During dialogues in the conferences the *raisons d'être* became clear to the members of the associations. There was common ground about the specific tasks and the position of the associations as a volunteer organization rooted in participative democracy and contributing to livability in neighborhoods from the perspective of the residents.

This process of learning was not without frustration, especially for the older volunteers who felt denied and misunderstood in their work and contribution to society. The clearness about the *raison d'être* led to a feeling of relief and generated new energy. New strategies were constructed in an ongoing relational process of intermingling voices. The dialogues on strategy formulation during the conference were strong emotional events for many of the participants. The strategies used were located historically and socially, reproduced in relational processes and taken for granted as real and good by the members of the associations. In the dialogues these 'taken-for-granted' strategies were questioned through the intermingling of voices. Questioning the strategies gives rise to disbelief, anger, frustration, passivity and new energy. For most of the participants the dialogues opened new ways of thinking and preparing themselves for action. After the conferences, the development of new strategies became a communal process in the neighborhoods when the associations discussed their mission statement, action plan and strategy with residents and members of the councils. During these social relational processes a common ground began to emerge with regard to the relevance of the associations.

We have learned again about the usefulness and the potential power of action research and the necessity to construct relationships in this kind of research. The start-up conference was needed to make joint choices about the focus, objective and method of the research, and to build the relationship between researchers and subjects of research. The choices in this research came from the interaction of researchers and researched. During start-up the framework for research was developed and common ground was created based on the focus of research. But that's not the complete picture.

As researchers, we found it disappointing that the members of the associations made it a choice not to involve the local councils in the search conference. In our view, bringing the councils into the search would have created opportunities for relationship building and common ground. Because action research is based on a mutual relationship and trust, we accepted the decision of the associations to do so. After the process of data gathering we felt even more unhappy with this decision, because the relations between the associations and the councils seemed to be problematic and linked with the central research question about the right of the associations to exist. Our efforts failed to discuss and change the decision, and we felt slightly confused about this.

Looking back at the research process, we realized that we should have been to eager to exploit a breakthrough process in the relationships between associations and councils at that moment. During the search conference at least four voices of the associations intermingled on strategy and relationships with the councils. The dialogue in the search about these voices was complex and confusing for most of the participants. Now we think that the attendance of the councils would not have helped to open up the dialogue, nor contributed in building new relationships at that moment. In the search it became clear to us and other participants that the relationships between the councils and the associations were of great importance for the strategic choices of the associations. In dialogue, four strategic choices were worked out and the participants felt free to make their own choice. These choices could have been limited if the members of the councils had also attended the search conference. This leaves us with the question of how many conflicts and ideologies can be handled in a search conference and how many voices are useful to create new constructions of reality in an open and inspiring atmosphere of confidence and trust. All's well that ends well: encouraged by the dialogues in the search conference, more than half of the associations started to build new relationship with the councils and managed to reach common ground with regard to their contribution to livability and democracy in the neighborhoods.

As far as the research process is concerned, we were very happy with the combination of a start-up conference, the data gathering and feedback, and the search conference. The start-up conference was necessary to build trustful mutual relations and to create a consensus about the problem, focus, method and assumptions of the project. The data gathering and feedback was

a powerful method to collect data about the tasks and functioning of the associations, and to alert the associations towards participation in the search conference. Also, it stimulated discussions within the associations between volunteers, members of the committee and professional workers. The search conference gave meaning to the activities of the associations and turned out to be very helpful in reconsidering their missions and activities and to develop new prospects for the future. We endorse the criteria for success described earlier: linkage between past, present and future; small group structures within a framework of larger groups; alternation between heterogeneous and homogeneous groups; help from experienced facilitators and openness in communication.

For us a further reason that underpins the effectiveness of search conferences is the existence of multiple voices to create space for the construction of new futures and relationships. In a certain sense we split up the visualization of history and present circumstances, and the dialogue between present circumstances and the future. The data gathering and feedback procedures used to get a picture of the history and present circumstances proved very effective in preparing the search conference and stimulated the dialogue in the search. In the situation described, survey feedback was a very powerful intervention and, although it was not embedded in a relational starting point, it turned out to be very helpful in initiating and supporting relational processes as processes of social construction.

All of the participants in this action research project have learned that democracy is a multi-voiced conception, related to the groups you belong to, the situations you live in, and the historical and cultural contexts you are part of. In our description, democracy turned out to be a set of assumptions, norms, experiences and acts. In this action research project there were several voices. The councils view democracy primary as representative democracy. The politicians are supposed to guide the neighborhood toward the achievement of common interests. Important decisions must be left to politicians. Administrative and technical professionals support the process of policy making and implementation. Conflicts in the neighborhood are removed through good local governance, political debate and appropriate co-operation with residents and interest groups.

Although the associations had several voices on democracy, they were unanimous about the relevance of local participatory democracy. Some associations did not want to co-operate with the councils because the

councils are seen as undemocratic institutions, linked to wider processes of social control. Other associations did co-operate with the councils but were almost an extension of the councils themselves. They viewed democracy as the achievement of common objectives in the neighborhood. In their opinion the politicians had an important task in policy making and implementation. The association had a task to inform the politicians of what was going on in the neighborhood and to control and evaluate policy decisions. Most of the councils had an eye for the diversity of interests in the neighborhood and had experienced the problems of representative democracy in the neighborhood. They were prepared to co-operate with the councils in partnership and strove to contribute to livability and democracy in the neighborhood from the perspective of the residents.

At the start of the action research the relationships between associations and councils were problematic. During the action research new relationships were built, and the associations and councils developed common ground in the need for more attention to livability in the neighborhoods and the specific position of the associations working from the perspective of the residents in a form of participative democracy. Earlier in this article we raised the question whether it is possible to change and improve the system of representative democracy. On a local level in a modern city we experienced that representative democracy could be improved in a relational process of social construction and dialogue.

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