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Citizen Participation in a Mediated Age: Neighbourhood Governance in The Netherlands

JUSTUS UITERMARK and JAN WILLEM DUYVENDAK

Abstract

Two developments — the fragmentation of governance and the mediatization of politics — lead governmental organizations to engage in discursive and institutional competition. These new circumstances also drastically change the relationship of governmental organizations to clients, target groups and the citizenry as a whole. We empirically investigate these changes through a study of a privately funded community development organization in the Netherlands, the Neighbourhood Alliance. In this case, it is no longer the citizenry that articulates a public discourse, but a public discourse that, through the mediation of an institutional entrepreneur like the Neighbourhood Alliance, stipulates what type of participation is appropriate. This development raises the critical issue of the nature and mechanisms of democratic engagement in a fragmented, mediatized polity.

Introduction

Each generation of policymakers promotes brand new solutions in order to thwart 'downward decline' or to 'seize opportunities', keeping in motion a permanent wheel of change in marginalized urban areas. Each round of urban policies thus reflects the spirit of the time when it was incepted and represents an endeavour to redirect historically sedimented institutions and practices in order to respond more directly to present concerns. Participation is invariably one of these concerns. However, exactly how participation is defined and how it should be shaped — the participatory logic — varies a great deal. Participation is important, all commentators agree, but few dimensions of policy are so susceptible to practical and ideological changes as the criteria, methods and functions of initiatives that are supposed to promote participation.

On the basis of a case study of the philosophy and practices of the Neighbourhood Alliance, a privately funded community development organization active in Dutch urban neighbourhoods, we try to discern the participatory logic of the latest round of initiatives to promote participation. We suggest that these initiatives can only be understood within the context of two related developments: (1) the fragmentation and destabilization of the governmental landscape which encourages institutional entrepreneurs to provide quick responses to demands that are generated in (2) a context of mediatized public debate and politics generally. These two developments alter the type of interventions in profound ways, creating a situation where the precise effect of policies in disadvantaged

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neighbourhoods becomes less relevant than their legitimacy in the public sphere. These developments also have a profound influence on the ways in which residents are involved by policy initiatives. Governmental organizations formulate a discourse that primarily reflects the concerns of their institutional environment (in particular of their financially and politically powerful partners) and subsequently try to find residents who are willing and able to ground this discourse institutionally in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Whereas in the (perhaps idealized) past residents defined which discourses were legitimate, now the discourse defines which residents are legitimate. If this thesis proves to be correct, the consequences for (neighbourhood) democracy are profound, as the idea of a citizenry producing a public discourse is turned on its head.

The Neighbourhood Alliance is one among many organizations that provide expertise to support and initiate activities that improve the quality of multicultural society. Most organizations in this field — like Forum or Civiq — depend primarily on government subsidies or contracts. The Neighbourhood Alliance, in contrast, depends primarily on private funds, as we will show below. Another difference between the Neighbourhood Alliance and other organizations is that the Alliance has a clearly articulated ideology that revolves around the notion that all citizens in the Netherlands should feel and act Dutch. While the Neighbourhood Alliance shares with other organizations in the field an appreciation of diversity and an ambition to promote interethnic contacts, it is different in that it views the articulation of a Dutch identity as a condition and means of achieving these goals. The Neighbourhood Alliance is thus doubly atypical in that it is both privately financed and promotes a discourse that is still rarely used among professionals and experts. Even so, it is an organization that is important to study, since its history, its methods and its discourse are shaped by two developments that are affecting more and more policies and organizations. A study of the Neighbourhood Alliance will therefore help us to identify features of urban policies and logics of participation that may become more salient in the near future.

Let us now discuss these two developments, before addressing in more detail the discourses and practices of the Neighbourhood Alliance.

Neoliberalism and the fragmentation of government

It is a commonplace to suggest that the nature of policy and government has fundamentally altered during the last few decades. While in the post-war period national governments formed the solid core of a stable governmental framework, they are now considered as one actor among many subnational and supranational governments. It may be premature to announce the death of the nation-state or even to argue that its powers have diminished (Duyvendak, 1999; Jessop, 1999; O'Neill, 1997) but there is no question that its primacy has been undermined. One factor behind this process is the increasing salience of supra- and subnational governments. National governments have shifted part of their responsibility and tasks onto the shoulders of other bodies. Brenner (2004: 1–27) talks about 'an explosion of spaces' in this context, while Graham and Marvin (2001) speak of a 'splintered' and 'privatized' institutional configuration. Thus, there is not only a spatial reconfiguration but also a hybridization of government into public-private partnerships — the much-discussed shift to governance (Kooiman, 2003).

There is no need to summarize these debates here but we do want to point out one particularly striking development that can have far-reaching effects on the conduct of both public and private governmental organizations involved in social interventions in cities. This is that government becomes more and more *fragmented*: responsibility for social problems is now distributed over a large number of administrative levels and institutional actors. The relationships between different levels as well as between actors are increasingly discussed in terms of 'partnership'. These relations are regulated by covenants and contracts rather than through hierarchies of command (MacKinnon, 2000; Raco and Imrie, 2000; Hajer, 2003; Raco, 2003).

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As a result of such governmental fragmentation, the responsibility for social problems no longer clearly resides with any particular government agency or other institutional actor. The managerial discourse on ‘integral’, ‘joined-up’ or ‘partnership’ approaches cannot hide (indeed shows) the impotence of the actors involved to develop collective strategies. Whereas in the post-war period, the public or private agencies engaged in social interventions more or less ‘owned’ a social problem (i.e. the department for minority affairs was responsible for policies towards ethnic minorities), now public and private organizations are only concerned with a specific aspect or part of a social problem.

Partly as a response to fragmentation, New Public Management philosophies developed which aimed to let the neoliberal revolution of the 1980s bear on governmental organizations (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992). It turns out that new forms of ‘horizontal’ governance go hand in hand with new ‘vertical’ control techniques. Welfare organizations are subjected to evaluation standards and accountability procedures. If an organization does not deliver and does not reach the targets, it should be replaced, reorganized or removed altogether (Jordan and Jordan, 2000). In those areas where these systems of accountability are most developed, there is a constant urge to ‘innovate or perish’, to create new discursive and organizational forms; Schumpeterian innovation is no longer restricted to for-profit companies but is now also imperative for organizations involved in social policy.

This, however, does not mean that organizations are pushed into a straitjacket of market simulation and slowly but surely lose whatever discretion they once had. In fact, there are at least three possible organizational strategies that may be developed in response to the stress on accountability.

First, Hay (1995, cited in Ward, 2000: 173) has suggested that the constant shifts in policy discourse have encouraged local policy actors to engage in ‘discursive mirroring’, meaning that policy actors who have to account for their practices mimic the language of higher-order bureaucracies, but change their organizations and practices little or not at all.

Second, a consequence of accountability practices could be a focus on problems that can easily be fixed (Leeuw, 2000). Whereas discursive mirroring suggests that practices on the ground are relatively constant, this second coping strategy, which we may characterize as ‘opportunistic adaptation’, affects the modus operandi of organizations in a thoroughgoing way. It leads organizations to act in such a manner that statistics will show improvement. For instance, in the spirit of accountability, police departments in the Netherlands now make contracts with the government to produce a certain number of fines and arrests. This leads management to direct energy to those violations or crimes that are easy to detect. Such contracts and other forms of quantified reporting are characteristic of developments where professionals lose their discretion and autonomy and have to account for their actions to those who are politically responsible but professionally uninformed (Porter, 1995; Exworthy and Halford, 1998; Freidson, 2001; Banks, 2004). The more an organization has to account to higher-order bureaucracies, the less it will be distracted or concerned with the particular demands and needs of its target groups. Clearly, this situation has both advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, the stress on accountability forces professionals to focus on those problems that are considered most important by democratically elected officials. On the other hand, the democratic legitimacy of professionals may be undermined because they adjust their activities to the demands of authorities rather than to the demands of clients or target groups (Duyvendak *et al.*, 2006).

Then, third, there is what we refer to as ‘institutional mirroring’: the process through which adherents of a certain discourse seek to create institutions that reflect its assumptions and conceptions. In this context, the stress on efficiency and legitimacy generates a demand for new organizations and not simply for reform. An emerging discourse provides institutional entrepreneurs with an incentive to design institutions that reflect the values inherent in that discourse and that, hence, can count on the support of

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higher-order bureaucracies. The discourse in this case is institutionally reflected in a new organization that, in turn, serves to promote and disseminate that very discourse.

It has of course always been true that public and political discourses inform institutional entrepreneurship. But the fragmentation of the governmental landscape forces organizations nowadays to show extreme flexibility and transparency. Professionals can no longer expect to acquire resources for what they consider legitimate activities or discourses on the basis of their professional attitudes and preferences. They are increasingly forced to legitimize their activities to the public at large or to those who command resources in the name of the public, such as politicians or government bureaucracies. Fragmented and transparent institutions have to compete in a new landscape dominated by periodical evaluations and quick shifts in policy (Peck, 2001; Zijderveld, 2000). The introduction of market simulations has strengthened the position of higher-level bureaucracies (Uitermark *et al.*, 2005). They can now select from a number of governmental organizations and can easily shift resources from one place to the next. This flexibility for financers, including politicians, administrators and charities, has at the same time meant instability for professionals and citizens. Governments do not invest in stable, close relations with professional organizations executing urban policies. In the new world of contracting out, keeping distance becomes a characteristic of welfare organizations as well: they are forced to become footloose, subscribing for tenders all over the country. Tendered relations tend to be not so tender.

The mediatization of politics and drama democracy

The literature on changing institutional relations (accountability) and general political philosophies (neoliberalism) only provides us with a very general idea of how problems are institutionally dealt with. It does not tell us how social problems first become identified as such in the public domain and how they slowly find their way, via the media, politicians and administrators into policy. And it does not tell us what kind of emotional and moral mobilization or discursive framing takes place and how a sense of urgency is generated among the public and institutional actors. For this reason, we not only focus on the institutional dimension of policies but also on the symbolic dimension, drawing in particular from recent theories on the mediatization of political processes (*cf*. Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; Gamson *et al.*, 1992; Jasper, 1997; Koopmans, 2004).

An organization like the Neighbourhood Alliance depends for continued support upon its legitimacy in the public sphere. This means it has to take part in symbolic struggles in order to convince its (prospective) partners that its policies are not only effective but also, and perhaps more importantly, moral; i.e. that its policies conform to the ideals that are articulated in constant, highly mediatized discussions about who is right, who is wrong, what is problematic and what is self-evident — in a word, discussions on what constitutes a social problem (Gusfield, 1981; Schneider, 1985; Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988; Koopmans and Duyvendak, 1995; Ungar, 2001). The process by which social problems are identified in the public sphere has undergone profound change in recent years but scholars have hardly begun to grasp these developments.

There is, however, a wealth of highly normative accounts that may not provide a balanced analysis but that nevertheless highlight, from different perspectives, some of the processes that are taking place. On the one hand, there are scholars who feel that politics has been effectively democratized because the public sphere has become more accessible (Cohen and Rogers, 1995; Hendriks and Toonen, 2001). In this view, the improvement in levels of education and literacy, in combination with advances in media technology, bring relevant news to audiences who are now better equipped to interpret the messages they receive and to act collectively on their interpretations.

On the other hand, there are scholars who emphasize that, under present conditions, improved opportunities for political communication do not lead to better public

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deliberation. Zakaria (2003), for instance, develops the argument that only two decades ago elites could decide in relative autonomy on important issues. This was not exactly democratic but the concentration of power in a few hands made it easy for the elites as well as the masses to see where responsibility resided: that is, with the elites who cultivated amongst themselves a culture where the uses of power were strongly sanctioned. Elchardus (2002) also clearly belongs in the camp of authors who feel that the development of mass communication has not been beneficial for the conduct of politics.

One important consequence of the mediatization of social problems is that politics is loaded with emotion and becomes subject to public morality (Jasper, 1997; Goodwin *et al.*, 2001). As they are increasingly encouraged to take into consideration ratings and subscriptions, journalists are more likely to focus on stories that immediately capture the attention. Stories that provoke moral outrage fulfil exactly this function (Schudson, 1995; Jasper, 1997). When a certain theme is covered in the media for a long time, all institutional actors or politicians involved will feel the heat from public opinion, as represented in the media. They will be stimulated to reorganize themselves in response to the failures for which they are held accountable, rightly or wrongly, in the public sphere.

In the volatile symbolic economy of mediatized politics, there is a strong incentive for policy entrepreneurs to adjust their policies in ways that address the issues that the public finds important and away from traditional goals of urban policy. Thus, policies are now often immediately subject to political ideologies that are cultivated and expressed in the public sphere. For this reason, there is a tendency to develop policies that ‘do well’ in the media.

Summing up: enterprising organizations in a media democracy

The reader may object that most policies are designed far away from the mediatized public sphere. This is certainly true: we do not claim that all institutions and policies are immediately, permanently or strongly affected by representations in the public sphere. But we do argue that more organizations are subject to these forces more immediately, more often and more strongly. Policy entrepreneurs now care much more about their representations in the media than before, as witnessed by the explosion in the number of public relation officials.

This dramatization of politics and policies leads institutional actors (consultancy firms, state agencies, advisory councils, politicians, and so on) to act more as charities: they constantly play into the moral sentiments of the general public in order to secure their legitimacy and to make sure that, the next time a decision is made about the distribution of resources, their organization is regarded as both morally and economically superior. Charities’ priorities are occasionally shaped more by the media than by the direct effects ‘on the ground’. The Worldwide Fund for Nature may have as its goal to protect biodiversity everywhere, but dolphins and giant pandas can count on extra attention for reasons that only media logic can help to explain. Greenpeace, to be sure, is opposed on principle to the dumping of oil platforms in the ocean but the intensity of its campaign against the Brent Spar cannot be understood if we assume that all that is at stake is the pollution of the North Sea.

Our representation of governmental organizations as resembling charities more interested in pandas than in biodiversity itself may be read as an *a priori* critique of those organizations and the processes that shape them. However, these policies can be defended on the grounds that their goal is exactly to produce those representations and that those representations have a cumulative impact on the attitudes and behaviours of the population at large, which may eventually result in more support for effective interventions on the ground. In addition, since surveys consistently show that charities enjoy more legitimacy than elected governments or other governmental organizations — it is not so easy to dismiss them as undemocratic (Selle and Strømsnes, 2001).

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But we are here not so much interested in a normative verdict as in an understanding of the mechanisms that shape participation. In this context, we hypothesize that the two developments discussed above, in combination, lead to a situation where interventions are judged not so much on the basis of their exact effects 'on the ground' (i.e. in disadvantaged neighbourhoods) but rather on the basis of how well they can be represented in the public sphere. This crucially implies that there is no need to involve all residents of a neighbourhood. On the contrary, it is much more efficient to engage only with those problems and residents that can help to strengthen the image of the organization. The importance of this image increases with the number of organizations that compete with each other for the legitimacy and resources to intervene in the multicultural society. In the next section, we discuss the Neighbourhood Alliance as one particular case of how discourses are generated in the public sphere, find their way to politicians or other institutional actors, are translated into policy and ultimately result in very distinct types of resident mobilization and participation.

Allying for institutional change: a case study into the institutionalization of discourse

It is difficult to overestimate the intensity and scope of the integration debate in the Netherlands. The Dutch have a long and uneasy history with ethnic diversity (Vuijsje, 1997). Here we only discuss the shifts and developments in the debate since 2000, when Paul Scheffer published his famous essay on the 'multicultural tragedy' (Scheffer, 2000). A quick look at Scheffer's article immediately shows the kind of presentation that became typical of the integration debate. Scheffer uses dramatic and dramaturgical metaphors by saying, for instance, that 'a multicultural tragedy' is unfolding in the big cities of The Netherlands:

> We now live with the third generation of migrants and the problems have just gotten larger. Whether the successful migrants will play their envisaged role of pioneers remains uncertain as they usually want to cut loose from their presupposed supporters. It is not a sign of open-mindedness to put these observations aside with an easy plea for a multicultural society. All those apologists of diversity do not care what is taking place in the big cities of the Netherlands.

Scheffer suggested that the Dutch had avoided any serious discussion of the problems associated with migration and the growing ethnic diversity that comes along with it. He warned of the formation of an underclass, an ethnic sub-proletariat that lacked both cognitive and economic relations with Dutch society. Arguing that a misplaced sense of political correctness had resulted in a gratuitous embrace of a multicultural ideal, he wanted the Dutch elite to change its attitude. Ethnic minorities should not be encouraged to cultivate their values in their own separate institutions, but should rather integrate with society in the full awareness that, in this process, they would lose some of their cultural particularities. Scheffer's argument revolves around the idea that a diverse and cohesive society can only exist once groups integrate with each other on the basis of widely shared Dutch values. Whereas, according to Scheffer, policies had been based on the cultivation and separation of ethnic groups, he wanted to see that both ethnic mixing and Dutch values would be promoted.

This particular discourse was already a lot stronger at the time when Scheffer presented his argument than he himself recognized, and it grew stronger still after he published his article (Prins, 2004). Even though the debate is incredibly complex and large, it is not difficult to see that one view is shared by most participants: different ethnic groups have been living too far apart from each other and should now integrate. Differences arise as soon as the reasons behind segregation are discussed. Some blame the intolerance of the Dutch population, others argue that some cultures or religious

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groups are just not inclined to integrate in any modern society. The first viewpoint may be popular among some groups of immigrants (such as the Arabic European League) but is not very often expressed in the public sphere. The latter viewpoint is supported by some of the best-known participants in the debate (like Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Afshin Ellian) but is certainly not hegemonic. Overall, we see that between these two extremes there is a consensus on four points:

1 The government has relied too much and too long on spokespersons for ethnic groups. Since these groups are internally heterogeneous, the legitimacy and usefulness of such spokespersons is by definition inadequate;
2 A culture of political correctness among the elite, including especially integration experts and professionals working with migrants, has too long made it impossible to discuss the problems of ethnic diversity;
3 Interethnic dialogue is crucial for creating the cognitive and social cohesion that is necessary for collective action and shared responsibility;
4 Migrants especially and Dutch citizens generally can and should develop responsibility for the public good (defined as an ethnically diverse society with basic Dutch values), which is possible if their initiatives are not mothballed by those mentioned under (1) and (2).

The intense public attention on the integration of ethnic minorities would probably not be there, and would not have the impact it has, were it not for the countless press reports about the big tragedies like the assassination of Theo van Gogh and small tragedies of interethnic tensions in neighbourhoods.

Politicians and other financers of policy, like funds supporting the Neighbourhood Alliance, are sensitive to the debates in the media and so their allocation of resources will in part depend on the coverage of integration issues. This effect is not very direct — political agendas are informed by public discussions, not dictated. We can presume that the more an organization depends on its image of addressing the urgent social problems of today and the less guaranteed its sources of funding, the more sensitive it will be to public concerns. Let us look at this impact in the case of the Neighbourhood Alliance. Where does its discourse come from and where does it lead?

The background of the case study

To answer this question, we draw upon the results of a student research project that was directed by the authors. As part of the project, five students investigated the Neighbourhood Alliance and the modus operandi of neighbourhood panels in three cities: Amsterdam, The Hague and Rotterdam. Where information was incomplete or unreliable, the authors and two research assistants checked facts and followed up on leads. Interviews were conducted with members of the panels, professionals who had worked with the panels, government representatives and employees from the Neighbourhood Alliance. If respondents agreed, interviews were recorded on an MP3-player and transcribed by the research assistants. If respondents did not agree to the recording of the interview, the interviewer made a summary. Apart from interviews, we also rely on minutes and correspondence provided by the respondents.

Three neighbourhood panels in Amsterdam were investigated particularly intensively, one in the Transvaal neighbourhood, one in Osdorp and one in Geuzenveld-Slotermeer. The first panel is still operative; the other two panels had been dissolved by the time of our investigation, but some of the former members were still active in the neighbourhood. Transvaal is located in Amsterdam East, the other two neighbourhoods are part of the Western Garden Cities of Amsterdam. In all neighbourhoods, native Dutch are the largest ethnic group in the neighbourhood (around a third). Transvaal has 19% Moroccans, 13% Surinamese and 11% Turks. In the other two neighbourhoods, the Dutch are followed by Moroccans (around 25%), Turks (around 15%) and Surinamese

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(10%). In all neighbourhoods levels of deprivation are high. The two neighbourhoods in the Garden Cities in particular have become an 'emblem' (Hajer, 1995: 20) for integration problems: they are often presented as a visible and tangible expression of problematic or failed integration.

The philosophy of the Neighbourhood Alliance

The Neighbourhood Alliance is an organization that has as its statutory mission to 'strengthen liveability in multicultural neighbourhoods and regions'. Its main vehicle for achieving this goal is to create and support 'neighbourhood panels' i.e. 'intercultural resident networks' that develop 'citizen initiatives related to intercultural liveability' (Stichting de Wijk, 2004: 21). Such panels are considered important for solving 'a problem in Dutch society: we live in isolation from each another, as individuals and as (ethnic) groups' (*ibid.*: 7). Because of this, 'public space is at risk of turning into a no-man's land' (*ibid.*: 7). However, the Neighbourhood Alliance feels that there is an 'immense willingness' to be more involved with each other, on the part of 'both the new and the old Dutch' (*ibid.*: 7). The organization wants to cultivate initiatives that stimulate intercultural communication. 'The use of the word "intercultural" is deliberate. The goal is not a more or less peaceful coexistence of different cultures (known as multiculturality). Between all residents — including people from different countries — a positive social interaction should be created on the basis of a universal Dutch, cosmopolitan identity' (*ibid.*: 7).

The Neighbourhood Alliance presents itself as an institutional extension of a movement of citizens. Quoting research that it commissioned, the organization suggests that both ethnic Dutch and ethnic minorities are concerned about ethnic segregation and yearn for friendly contacts with neighbours and that a large share of the minority and majority is conditionally prepared to contribute to neighbourhood activities (Stichting de Wijk, 2003: 16).

For the Neighbourhood Alliance, this research raises some questions: 'Why, then, are there so many multicultural tensions in neighbourhoods? Why is this capacity underused?', which are then answered as follows:

1 The countless initiatives on a local level operate in isolation. They emerge, bloom . . . and fade when the momentum is gone. This makes it a huge burden to participate;
2 The government mothballs spontaneous initiatives because it has high demands regarding their representativeness and accountability;
3 The government and welfare professionals have a blind spot for the optimism of residents about intercultural cooperation . . . They focus on problems and appropriate initiatives and thereby fail to appeal to the self-organizing capacities of residents;
4 There is no 'ideology' for neighbourhood residents . . . Residents [who want] to contribute to their living environment lack a platform that supports them and protects their interests (Stigting de Wijk, 2003: 16).

This is how the Neighbourhood Alliance defines its position: in opposition to those who frustrate the 'countless' spontaneous initiatives and in support of residents who are prepared to commit to intercultural cooperation.

The discourse of the Neighbourhood Alliance concerning ethnicity and citizenship is as complex and ambivalent as the integration debate itself. On the one hand, there is a general idea that all citizens should share a common frame of reference and conform to certain basic values (values which are variously labelled as Dutch, universal or cosmopolitan — the words are used interchangeably). Cultivating ethnic identities is considered detrimental to the social cohesion in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and the organization regularly laments the neighbourhood councils for minority organizations, as they exist, for instance, in Transvaal. On the other hand, ethnicity is a constant cause of concern and the growth of ethnic diversity resulting from immigration is considered as

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the main problem of disadvantaged neighbourhoods. It is for this reason very difficult to think of residents (only) in terms of neighbourhood citizens and not (also) as members of an ethnic group. The solution to this problem, on a discursive level, is to create supra-ethnic identities, to find people who are able to bridge divisions between different ethnic groups and individuals.

When discourse meets practice

So how does this discourse work? Very broadly speaking, we can study two sites where the discourse operates: in the market for resources for social interventions and on the ground in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

To start with the market for resources: there the Neighbourhood Alliance is a small but quite successful player. This is only true for private sources of income, not for public sources. In the first years of the organization, subsidies were granted by local and provincial governments and the Neighbourhood Alliance was largely oriented to these parties. When it became clear that it was difficult to compete with the big players on this market (like Forum or Civiq), the organization shifted its attention to private partners. It was and is especially successful in tapping into foundations established by large companies like the DOEN Foundation (lottery), the VSB Foundation (a financial conglomerate), the Rabobank Foundation (likewise) and more recently the Shell Foundation (see Table 1). At any one moment, the organization relies on a limited number of financers and there are few secure sources of income. From these data, we draw the conclusion that the organization is performing well but at the same time is in a vulnerable position and constantly needs to reaffirm its credibility and legitimacy to its financers and to the public generally.

There are certainly organizations that have higher legitimacy in the public sphere than the Neighbourhood Alliance and who therefore saw a more rapid growth in recent years, but we can nevertheless safely conclude that the discourse of the Neighbourhood Alliance is appealing to financers. This is in large part connected to the considerable efforts of the organization to present itself in a positive light in the public sphere with its impressive website and through promotion at conferences.

One particularly important event is the yearly ‘neighbourhood conference’ where numerous neighbourhood volunteers as well as professionals come together to share experiences and also to communicate to the public. One newspaper article that reports on the conference gives an idea of the moral appeal of a meeting where volunteers come together (*De Volkskrant*, 25 April 2005). It is entitled ‘The Magic of Neighbourhood Resides in Spontaneity’ and says that there is ‘a silent revolution’ going on. The director of the Neighbourhood Alliance, a former director of an agency for non-profit promotional activity who is (in)famous for promoting his views in pep talks and polemics, is quoted in the newspaper article as saying that ‘volunteers now often only get government support when their activities fit with existing policies. Citizens are “pulled into” it. This is typical of a government that thinks it can manage society. That pretension should be discarded. The government needs to facilitate. It needs to give people who want to bring together the neighbourhood a push in the back’. Even though the Neighbourhood Alliance does not appear in the press all the time, this article does give an impression of the image that the organization communicates with the outside world.

How does it work on the ground? We can answer this question by analysing how three different aspects of the Neighbourhood Alliance’s discourse (spontaneity, independence and ethnic diversity) play out in the institutional reality of some of the neighbourhoods where it intervenes.

Spontaneity versus planning

Given its modest funds, it is not surprising that the Neighbourhood Alliance is active in only a limited number of disadvantaged neighbourhoods. But it is analytically important to note that the method by which neighbourhoods are selected for its interventions is

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Table 1 Revenues of the Neighbourhood Alliance

1999	€	2001	€	2002	€	2003	€	2004	€	2005	€
DOEN Foundation	45,000	DOEN Foundation	90,756	DOEN Foundation	45,378	VSB Foundation	117,000	VSB Foundation	55,000	Shell Netherlands	115,000
Rabobank Foundation	45,000	VSB Foundation	127,966	Oranje Foundation	34,033	Rabobank Foundation	50,000	Rabobank Foundation	110,000	VSB Foundation	40,000
Province of Noord-Brabant	53,246	Rabobank Foundation	45,378	Neighbourhood panels (balance)	63,104	Oranje Foundation	20,000	Shell Netherlands	172,500	Oranje Foundation	15,000
Municipality of Breda	38,925	Province of Noord-Holland	17,811	Neighbourhood Web (balance)	18,068	Project subsidies	51,000	Project subsidies	12,500	Project subsidies	28,975
Municipality of Uden	6,750	Project subsidies	14,748	Project subsidies	4,539	Revenues from services	35,563	Various revenues	6,915	Revenues from services	18,712
Municipality of Veldhoven	4,500	Revenues from services	17,175	Revenues from services	34,946	Revenues from sales	1,692			Revenues from sales	2,629
Other	7,970	Revenues from sales	6,090	Revenues from sales	3,482	Various revenues	8,108			Various revenues	14,508
				Various revenues	2,994						
Remainder of subsidy 1998	37,895	Revenues from participants	16,297	Donations	8,920						
Total	239,286	Total	336,221	Total	215,464	Total	283,363	Total	356,915	Total	234,824

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entirely different from the method used by government agencies. Government agencies have responsibility for a certain geographical or territorial area, even though this responsibility is increasingly diffused over, and often evaporates in between, a number of scales and actors. The Neighbourhood Alliance only focuses on those neighbourhoods where their actions are most likely to have a certain impact. Sometimes they initiate their intervention after having been approached by neighbourhood residents. But most of the time the organization *proactively* and *selectively* contacts residents and institutional actors in a neighbourhood they deem fit for intervention. Before they start their intervention, they do a quick scan of the neighbourhood. The most important reason not to intervene is when the situation is so alarming that neighbourhood citizens cannot be expected to engage in any kind of positive interactions. Another reason might be that the institutional conditions in a neighbourhood are not optimal, either because enough organizations are already present or because there are clear signs that the Alliance's presence will generate hostility.

A feature that is increasingly typical of contemporary organizations involved in social interventions is to 'help people help themselves', i.e. to undertake one strong intervention with the ambition to generate a process of self-organization. The Neighbourhood Alliance is no exception as it presents itself as the outgrowth of, and response to, a widely felt urge among residents to participate in the public life of the neighbourhood and to help cultivate, through useful and enjoyable activities, positive interethnic relationships. The reality in the neighbourhoods we studied, however, is that citizen initiatives are far from spontaneous and that enduring professional support seems a necessary but not sufficient condition for sustained activity.

In order to assess professional input, we have documented the presence of volunteers and professionals at the meetings of the neighbourhood panel for which we could obtain minutes (see Tables 2, 3 and 4). These data should be interpreted with some caution since it is likely that the involvement of professionals was lower during meetings with a less official character for which we could not obtain minutes. However, these figures do give an impression of how professional input evolved over time and allow us to identify some key moments in the history of all three panels.

The panel in Osdorp was one of the first to be established as its inception actually predates the establishment of the Neighbourhood Alliance. Before June 1998, it was a project of the company previously run by the director of the Neighbourhood Alliance. After that, the panel was 'adopted' by the neighbourhood district — against the will of the members of the panel. The professionals of the neighbourhood district continued to be present until the end of 1998 and often got into confrontations with the panel members because the neighbourhood district tried to determine the agenda of the panel. In 1999, the panel members decided to continue independently of the neighbourhood district and to re-establish their liaison with the Neighbourhood Alliance. However, an attempt by the Alliance to get subsidy from the neighbourhood district failed and their involvement consequently remained limited and largely symbolic.

The disputes with the neighbourhood district did not end, however. When the conflict escalated, conflicts of interest between different participants and organizations became apparent. Some members of the panel, referring to a report by the director of the Neighbourhood Alliance, claimed that their independence should be respected. The neighbourhood council, however, clearly felt that independence would imply that the panel was in the hands of Neighbourhood Alliance and demanded that the panel no longer meet with the director. In this correspondence, several members of the panel had an ambivalent position. They did not want to be dragged into the conflict between the neighbourhood council and the director of the Neighbourhood Alliance because they were not only involved with the panel but also with the neighbourhood council or the local welfare organization (Impuls). It became painfully clear that the panel was not by any means 'independent'. It was the product of several organizations with a stake in the neighbourhood. Rather than representing the interests of residents, the panel became a vehicle in a conflict between the neighbourhood council, the director

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Table 2 Participants at meetings of the neighbourhood panel in Zuid-West Kwadrant, Osdorp

	Residents	Professionals Neighbourhood Alliance	Professionals Neighbourhood District	Percentage Residents
1998				
08 June	14	3	3	70
15 June	15	0	2	88
06 July	–	–	–	–
15 July	–	–	–	–
24 August	8	0	2	80
07 September	11	0	1	91
21 September	9	0	2	81
05 October	–	–	–	–
26 October	9	0	2	81
09 November	9	0	2	81
1999				
12 April	8	1	0	88
26 April	7	1	0	87
03 May	9	0	3	75
17 May	4	0	0	100
07 June	7	0	0	100
12 July	4	0	0	100
19 July	3	0	0	100

Table 3 Participants at meetings of the neighbourhood panel in Geuzenveld 8, Amsterdam

	Residents	Professionals Neighbourhood Alliance	Professionals Neighbourhood District	Percentage Residents
2002				
23 April	8	1	1	80
22 August	5	3	2	50
12 September	6	2	5	46
26 September	10	2	3	66
10 October	7	2	1	70
17 October	8	2	1	72
22 October	7	1	0	87
21 November	8	2	1	72
03 December	8	1	1	80
2003				
13 January	3	1	1	60
17 February	2	2	1	40
12 March	2	1	2	40
10 June	2	1	2	40

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Table 4 Participants at meetings of the neighbourhood panel in Transvaal, Amsterdam-East

	Residents	Professionals Neighbourhood Alliance	Professionals Neighbourhood District	Percentage Residents
2003				
20 January	7	3	1	63
18 February	4	1	2	57
05 March	4	1	2	57
17 March	9	0	2	81
02 April	5	0	1	83
27 May	8	0	1	88
23 June	6	1	1	75
14 August	6	1	1	75
08 September	6	1	1	75
20 October	5	1	1	71
17 November	5	0	1	83
08 December	5	1	1	71
22 December	7	1	1	77
2004				
09 February	no data	no data	no data	no data
11 March	6	1	1	75
07 April	6	0	1	85
11 May	7	1	1	77
03 June	7	0	1	87
06 July	7	1	1	77
20 July	6	0	1	85
26 August	7	1	1	77
22 September	7	0	1	87
2005				
24 February	7	0	1	87
30 March	10	0	1	90
25 April	8	0	1	88
25 May	6	0	1	85
04 July	7	1	1	77
27 July	5	0	1	83
14 September	5	0	1	83

of the Neighbourhood Alliance and the local welfare organizations — the organizations that first helped to put together the panel now pulled it apart. The number of active residents declined and in July 1999 the panel was officially declared ‘dead’.

Neighbourhood 8 in Geuzenveld also does not present a particularly successful case in the sense that extended efforts in the end did not result in the establishment of a

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permanent panel. The involvement of the Neighbourhood Alliance in Geuzenveld started in December 2001, when the organization contacted some neighbourhood agencies and residents. From December 2001 until April 2002, one community worker of the Neighbourhood Alliance worked part-time to organize a meeting where the panel would be founded. The method was very intensive: she approached people in the street and went from door to door. The community workers of the government-funded neighbourhood association Buurtbelangen supported her.

In the end, the informative meeting was attended by around forty people. The first meeting of the panel took place on 23 April and was attended by eight residents, the consultant from the Neighbourhood Alliance and a community worker from Buurtbelangen. A group of Moroccan girls and young women formed the core of the panel. At least one consultant from the Neighbourhood Alliance would always be present at the meetings. Later meetings would also be attended by other professionals in the neighbourhood, especially youth workers. Topics that were discussed included language courses, a neighbourhood party, the design of (defensible) public space, a self-help group for Moroccan and Dutch women, a party for girls, the maintenance of a playing ground and a Moroccan fashion show. Some of these activities were carried out; others were not successful.

Both the Neighbourhood Alliance and the neighbourhood district invested large amounts of professional energy in order to get the panel started. The professionals who were involved with the panel, both on the part of the Neighbourhood Alliance and the neighbourhood government, did attempt for a long time to rejuvenate the panel but to no avail. This does not mean that the panel was entirely without success — it did create activities and some of the residents who first got involved in the panel have taken up other tasks in the neighbourhood. It is also impossible to say whose fault it was that the panel was discontinued. The explanations for this failure vary widely but all those involved agree that professional input was high throughout the period and that only incidentally would residents develop minimal levels of self-organization. The constant investment of professional energy is strongly at variance with the discourse of the Neighbourhood Alliance and, more generally, with the idea that, after an initial impulse, residents will be able to self-organize.

Perhaps, then, the case of Transvaal presents an example of sustained and independent citizen involvement? Certainly the data shows that the panel was stable through time and that the input of professionals slowly decreased. The Neighbourhood Alliance supported the panel in the first two years and then withdrew in 2005, handing the responsibility for support over to the local community workers. While this case demonstrates clearly that panels can potentially survive, it also shows that 'spontaneity' should be put between inverted commas and is only possible after intense professional guidance and under the condition of continued support.

Independence

Even if it is possible to recruit persons into a panel, it is another thing to actually make sure that they do what they are supposed to do. This is especially problematic for an organization that has a strong ideology, like the Neighbourhood Alliance, but does not want to serve any interests or particular groups. In fact, the organization wants to bring together people who have very different interests. This creates a situation that is intrinsically difficult to maintain for at least three reasons.

First, any group that claims to serve the general interest is bound to have conflicts with other organizations that have a similar claim and that share the same working area. In the case of the Neighbourhood Alliance, these may be resident committees, government agencies, housing corporations and/or other organizations. For instance, in Transvaal, at least according to the director of the Neighbourhood Alliance, there is an enduring conflict between the neighbourhood panel and the Body for Multicultural Affairs (BMA)

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that unites minority organizations in the neighbourhood and meets with the local government every month:

> The neighbourhood district heavily subsidizes activities that are organized on an ethnic basis. Every ethnic group receives some carrots . . . That undermines the process. This is what is going on in Transvaal where the panel has to go against the grain. They keep going in spite of nuisance drug users and problems related to Moroccan and Antillean brats who spoil things. They keep going, it is incredible (interview with the director of the Neighbourhood Alliance).

The conflict between the panel and the BMA represents a conflict between two participatory logics. The panel recruits members who conform to the ideal of a supra-ethnic identity and who speak for the neighbourhood as a whole. BMA, by contrast, helps the government to reach groups that are difficult to contact without the help of minority organizations. The government in this case tailors its activities to the activities of minority organizations; for instance, it gives information during consultancy hours at the mosque or it responds to issues raised by representatives of minority organizations. In all cases, the goal is to represent, and to be presented to, members of minority groups within the area in order to maximize the reach of the government. The Neighbourhood Alliance instead selects and supports a couple of residents in order to put into motion activities that are not organized along ethnic lines.

Second, most members of the panel are not directly aware of the ideology they are supposed to promote. Sometimes the headquarters of the organization explains that the Neighbourhood Alliance will not support activities that do not conform to Dutch standards, like a dance night that is exclusively for Moroccan girls (an activity that was then arranged through another organization). The contact person for the Neighbourhood Alliance is also likely to have some idea what the organization stands for and can try to inspire residents to undertake activities that fit within the organization's ideological framework. But, at a further remove, awareness of the ideology is low. Especially after the initial period of intensive counselling, members are likely to go to other organizations, leave the panel or, when they are not aware of the ideology, support activities that run counter to the principles of the organization. This was most apparent in The Hague, where members of the neighbourhood panel in the neighbourhood of Moerwijk at the time of the study (2005) were setting up a special society for Turkish men and a special society for Turkish women. In Osdorp two members of the panel were also setting up a Turkish organization. This completely goes against the philosophy of the Neighbourhood Alliance, but for the members of the panel it is simply one more way to organize activities in the neighbourhood. Since residents who want to get involved in the neighbourhood usually do not support coherent ideologies, they rather pragmatically adjust to whatever circumstances may arise. And since the Neighbourhood Alliance cannot control those circumstances, especially after they stop the period of intense interventions, it is quite likely that the panel will dissolve into other organizations or that its ideology will be watered down.

Third, it is usually the case that as soon as panels or residents show some kind of activity, they tend to become involved with all kinds of other initiatives. Since members of the panel ideally share only good qualities (active, open, independent) and lack any clear group membership, they are an asset for any other organization or group of people who wants to organize activities in the neighbourhood. There is little that binds the members of the panel since they are selected on the basis of *not* having strong and durable loyalties. It occasionally happened that, during interviews, some of the most active residents could not distinguish their membership of the panel from other activities.

More important than the attraction of residents to other initiatives, are the attempts on the part of professionals to claim and mobilize residents. This happens, for instance, when local community workers have to account for their hours to the local government; they want to count the panel, so they suggest that they support it. Or they let the panel

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become part of another project as part of the strategy that we identified above as 'discursive mirroring'. The Neighbourhood Alliance is fiercely opposed to such claims, but it, too, capitalizes on citizen initiatives. One resident in Rotterdam said that she was contacted to come to the neighbourhood conference long after she had laid down all her voluntary work following conflicts with Antillean and Surinamese volunteers. In Transvaal there was irritation in the panel and among local professionals because the Neighbourhood Alliance was contacting one member of the panel for its national events without consulting in advance. A volunteer in The Hague said that the Neighbourhood Alliance only helped to present a positive image to the outside world (which she found important) but did not give practical advice. These comments give the impression that, after a period of intense and sincere involvement, the Neighbourhood Alliance mainly returns to neighbourhoods in order to capitalize on its initial investment by reaping symbolic rewards. This is not always a bad thing for those involved, as the example of the just-cited resident in The Hague shows. Other residents are keenly aware, and passionately agree, that 'nothing bad should be written about the Neighbourhood Alliance'. This way of working, however, does generate conflict, not only between residents but especially between professionals: both local professionals and the Neighbourhood Alliance regularly claim that the other party is either showing off with their successes or is endangering those successes through organizational imperialism. These examples confirm that the likelihood of competition increases as the number of organizations goes up and professionals are expected to demonstrate successes. Typically, organizations blame each other for this situation rather than the fragmented governmental landscape that induces organizations to pursue their own projects and interests.

Undeniable ethnicity, irrelevant ethnicity

An important part of the Neighbourhood Alliance's ideology is a *dislike* for articulated ethnic identities and a *preference* for ethnic diversity. The organization is remarkably more successful than most other organizations in mobilizing members from different ethnic groups. When we use names of people present at meetings as a proxy for ethnicity, we can see that the panels in all three cases were ethnically diverse which is, according to the Neighbourhood Alliance's own standards (which are in turn derived from the public debate), clearly an indicator of success (data not shown).

The Neighbourhood Alliance, in line with many participants in the public debate, is extremely worried that most people appear to prefer to engage in recreational activities within their ethnic groups — the cliché of the Turkish men who play cards in a coffee house or the group of elderly Dutch people who play mono-cultural bingo in a multicultural neighbourhood centre. In their communications with the outside world, the Neighbourhood Alliance and the panels emphasize the diversity of their members, especially their ethnic diversity. For instance, in a letter to the Minister of Big Cities where the Osdorp panel laments the attitude of the neighbourhood council and requests the intervention of the ministry, the ethnic backgrounds of the members of the panel are mentioned several times. The ethnic composition of the panel sometimes seems more important than what the panel actually does. This holds true especially for institutional actors, not only for the Neighbourhood Alliance but also for government-funded community workers and civil servants. In the Transvaal neighbourhood, for instance, the community worker who now supports the panel was worried that some ethnic minorities, especially Moroccans, were not involved. It happened quite frequently that Moroccan neighbourhood residents showed an interest in the panel but after one or two meetings, they did not continue their involvement:

> Sometimes I try to achieve more involvement of Turks, Moroccans and Surinamese residents. But it is difficult, Moroccans are not used to voicing their concerns. And you can't force it [their

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> involvement]. The panel has a multicultural composition but it does not reflect the neighbourhood (interview with a community worker in Transvaal).

Such concerns clearly reflect the public debate which emphasizes the need for ‘integration’ of ethnic minorities into governmental institutions like the neighbourhood panel. These concerns, however, are not shared by neighbourhood residents, at least not in the same way. There are roughly three ways in which residents deal with ethnic differences. First, generally speaking, residents do talk about ethnicity and migration when they are asked an abstract or general question like: ‘what have been the major changes in this neighbourhood during the last decade?’ Ethnicity seems to provide the most important categories for analysing social change locally or nationally.

Second, when residents are frustrated about certain developments on a panel or during activities, they also refer to ethnicity and often make it clear that some ethnic groups pose more of a problem than others. Interviewees often talk about their own prejudices. They are keenly aware that such prejudices are problematic and may limit the possibility for cooperation but at the same time they often feel during an interview that ‘it has to be said that . . .’ (Moroccans are unreliable, the Dutch are intolerant, etc.). When they feel they need to tell ‘the truth’ they often resort to generalizations about ethnicity and refer to important incidents (a stone being thrown through a window, children staying out on the streets at night, the stiff social atmosphere during meetings) as rooted in ethnic differences.

Third, and most significantly, residents tend to ignore ethnic categories when they talk about concrete activities they undertake in the neighbourhood. The only way to deal with the much-discussed integration problems, it seems, is not to talk about it. When they are not analysing social change but rather planning activities and informally socializing, interviewees most of the time do not mention ethnicity. When they do, it is usually only as an attribute of persons, not as an explanation for their behaviour. Instead, residents emphasize their common interests as *residents* and tend to explain conflicts as resulting from differences between individuals rather than between ethnic groups.

So residents seem to care about ethnic differences in different ways under different circumstances. This flexibility in dealing with ethnic differences (emphasizing them at some point, ignoring them under other circumstances) is, of course, essential for dealing with the complex realities of ethnic neighbourhoods (Baumann, 1996). But the relative silence about ethnicity during practical activities also makes it difficult to orient these activities to the goals set by the Neighbourhood Alliance and other stakeholders. It seems incredibly difficult to first identify ethnic differences and then to bridge them. The scenario is rather that they are not mentioned, yet bridged, or that they are mentioned but not bridged.

When activities for children are organized, older Dutch members of the panel usually take the lead and do the teaching or direct the exercises. Dutch children usually do not attend the activities at all. Migrant parents are present but stay in the background. For reasons we can only speculate about such ethnic divisions of labour arise very quickly. This is not only so within activities but also between them. For example, Moroccan girls in Geuzenveld organized a Moroccan fashion show and language courses for migrant women. Both activities were, perhaps unsurprisingly, not attended by any Dutch neighbourhood residents. Similarly, activities to improve gardens were only attended by Dutch neighbourhood residents. Apparently it is extremely difficult to organize activities where people from different ethnic groups interact in the positive and egalitarian fashion that is envisaged by the Neighbourhood Alliance. What we rather see is that people develop the competency to interact together during brief moments and then return to their own network, which can be more or less segregated. In other words, members of the panel do not organize activities for the sake of interethnic contact but simply because they feel like undertaking those activities in the neighbourhood, with or without members of other ethnic groups. They appreciate diversity when it naturally arises (for instance, when a playground is used by children from different ethnic backgrounds) but do not really seem to use the panel as a vehicle to actively promote it.

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Discussion

Part of the reason the citizens' movement does not really materialize at a neighbourhood level is perhaps that the Neighbourhood Alliance is looking to recruit very particular types of people. They need to have the time and skills to develop initiatives, they need to commit to longer-term efforts, they need to have a positive attitude and they need to withstand both the temptation of becoming a part of the neighbourhood's ruling bureaucratic elite and the ordeal of occasionally having to deal with the bureaucratic demands. And, most important of all, they need to have a very particular ethnic identity or, perhaps, non-identity.

In sum, it is very clear that not just anyone is destined to become a valued member of the panel but that this does not imply that potential panellists have to hand in their CVs before they can participate. Selection takes place through a subtle interactive process between the consultants of the Neighbourhood Alliance and prospective members of the neighbourhood panel. The investment of one leads to the investment of the other and ideally this process, in the end, results in a group of qualified people who operate independently from government institutions. In reality the ideal appears difficult to realize for the reasons discussed above. What, then, explains why this method is used? We suggest that its strengths lie not so much at the local level — where it may have support but where it proves difficult to translate it into institutions — but in the public sphere. This is so because the members of such a panel represent the exact opposite of the identities and institutions that are criticized in the public sphere (spokespersons, bureaucratized organizations, soft welfare workers) and are considered as the harbingers of positive developments (interethnic diversity without complaints and with a lot of spontaneous and positive activity). We may label this form of participation as showcase participation because its logic is determined by its appeal in the public sphere and the contribution of local activities to the national goal of minority integration, not necessarily by its appeal to users and the direct benefits that accrue to individuals.

By formulating our preliminary conclusion this way, we can easily provide ammunition to those who wish to criticize the Neighbourhood Alliance as an inefficient organization. We do not want to do that, since this may give the impression that the alternatives are obviously better. But many of the criticisms of the Neighbourhood Alliance are valid in the sense that many initiatives are co-opted, bureaucratized, segregated, etc. If the Neighbourhood Alliance does not succeed in avoiding these traps, it is not because the organization does not try hard — it does. The failure of the panels is thus not (only) the failure of the Neighbourhood Alliance but (also) a failure of local institutions to accommodate the kind of participation that is construed as ideal in the public sphere. When such participation nonetheless arises, it is often rather quickly frustrated because the multitude of organizations that have promoted it subsequently tear it apart by the inter-organizational rivalry that seems endemic to a fragmented governmental landscape.

Conclusion

In this article, we have examined the participatory logic of community work by investigating one organization: the Neighbourhood Alliance. The organization seems to be very much a pioneer in the sense that it is at the forefront of two changes that profoundly shape a significant part of urban policies in the Netherlands and probably elsewhere as well: the creation of a fragmented governmental landscape with institutionally thin, flexible and entrepreneurial institutions, and the growing importance of legitimacy in the public sphere. In this volatile symbolic economy, those who intervene in cities sooner or later are confronted with the question of whether their position, methods and beliefs are compatible with the discourses promoted in the public

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debate. It would therefore be wrong to say that the approach of the Neighbourhood Alliance 'does not work'. It works very well for some purposes as is demonstrated by the ability to acquire funds and to promote a more positive image of neighbourhoods that are normally portrayed in a negative light. Many of the parties involved at a local level also highly appreciate the interventions of the organization. It is only when they are judged in terms of their effects for entire neighbourhoods that the activities appear expensive, limited in scope and exclusionary to certain types of residents and ideas.

In a sense, the Neighbourhood Alliance can be seen as a welcome privately funded complement to publicly funded government arrangements. Whereas the Neighbourhood Alliance provides for well-funded, targeted responses in showcase participation, government agencies can take responsibility for all residents of an entire area. But in another sense, the Neighbourhood Alliance is not simply a complement to other forms of neighbourhood governance but perhaps its future as well. The two forces that shape the Neighbourhood Alliance — mediatization of politics and fragmentation of governance — also shape other organizations, including government agencies. As residents of disadvantaged neighbourhoods are less likely to organize collectively and articulate their claims, organizations will have more freedom to work on problems that are easily solved and that may help the organization to gain legitimacy in the public sphere. In this light we should understand also many other attempts to bring together different religious or ethnic groups, such as the public 'Islam debates' organized by the city of Rotterdam or Amsterdam's 'day of the dialogue'. These and other such initiatives certainly create positive experiences. It should be recognized, however, that participants in these events are pre-selected or even educated to perform in showcase participation and that there initiatives do not correspond do the daily concerns of residents. But this apparently is the kind of participation 'we' would like to — quite literally — see.

Justus Uitermark (j.l.uitermark@uva.nl) and **Jan Willem Duyvendak** (duyvendak@uva.nl) Amsterdam School for Social Science Research, University of Amsterdam, Kloveniersburgwal 48, 1012 CX Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

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Résumé

Deux évolutions — la fragmentation de la gouvernance et la médiatisation de la politique — poussent les organismes gouvernementaux à une concurrence symbolique. Ces contexte nouveau change aussi radicalement la relation de ces organismes avec les usagers, les groupes ciblés et les citoyens dans leur ensemble. Nous examinons ces transformations à travers une étude empirique d'une structure néerlandaise à fonds privés de développement de quartiers, Wijkalliantie *(alliance de quartier). En l'occurrence, ce ne sont plus les habitants qui déclinent un discours public, mais un discours public qui, par le biais d'une entreprise institutionnelle comme l'alliance de quartier, spécifie le type de participation approprié. Cette évolution soulève la question cruciale de la nature et des mécanismes de l'engagement démocratique dans un fonctionnement politique fragmenté et médiatisé.*

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