

Exploring Community Organizing

The reason for this exploration

We live in an age where societal problems are increasingly framed as individual issues. This applies to housing, healthcare, poverty, and health: when someone struggles to find housing, it is seen as their problem, often even by the person themselves.

Together with perhaps family, friends, and maybe a support worker, they search for a solution. Shame plays a major role here. Because the problem is viewed as personal failure, it remains confined to the individual and their small circle. This makes the problem seem small.

Yet these are societal problems: challenges that we, as a society, have a duty to address collectively. Ensuring everyone has a roof over their head, that everyone can eat every day, and that everyone lives in a healthy environment. All of this is established in treaties and conventions.

The gap between the individualisation described earlier and these collective agreements is where things often go wrong. In practice, many people lack housing, do not receive the care they need, and see their neighbourhoods, entire communities, torn apart by new development plans. In such cases, affected communities must organize to defend their interests.

That is why LSA Bewoners commissioned this exploration. LSA has always stood alongside neighbourhood residents and invested in building communities. Community organizing is the logical next step.

In the following chapters, using practical examples and theory, we outline a directly applicable step-by-step plan to return neighbourhoods to their residents and how governments might engage with these active communities.



Contents

1. LSA Bewoners
2. Asset Based Community Development (ABCD)
3. Community Organizing
4. A short history about Community Organizing
5. Community Organizing, how does that work?
 - a. Listening
 - b. Building and strengthening relationships
 - c. Stories as a binding force
 - d. Team work and structure
 - e. Leadership
 - f. Strategy
 - g. Action!
6. But what does the government do?
7. Literature, reading- and listening tips

1. LSA Bewoners

The Landelijk Samenwerkingsverband Actieve Bewoners (LSA) was founded in the mid-1980s as a network of community workers and later became an independent association of residents' organisations. Today, more than 200 organisations are members, ranging from residents' companies and care initiatives to energy cooperatives and neighbourhood gardens.

By uniting these parties into a network, LSA has a unique perspective on what is happening in Dutch neighbourhoods and districts. From this position, LSA sets up pilot projects, shares knowledge, and advocates for the general interests of local initiatives.

LSA's goal is to place residents and their initiatives at the center of policy and implementation. Whether the focus is on residents' companies, combating loneliness, or the energy transition, all these challenges require a solid neighbourhood-based approach. In LSA's vision, government, policy, and professionals support community power, while residents retain control over their own neighbourhood or district.

The ABCD method serves as the foundation for this work. This exploration examines how Community Organizing can complement it, analysing the similarities and differences between the two approaches and how they can strengthen, enrich, and foster greater awareness of residents' own role.



2. Asset Based Community Development

For over twenty years, LSA has worked with the ABCD method, which is based on a fundamentally different perspective on community building and neighbourhood development. The focus is not on what is missing, but on what is already present: the talents and experiences of residents, the quality of public spaces, and existing neighbourhood structures. Since 2003, LSA has supported residents on their path to this central role through knowledge, training, coaching, and strong advocacy.

A recent milestone was the 2020 publication of the handbook 'Altijd Nieuw Gedoe' (Always New Business), followed a year later by the launch of the National Livability and Safety Program. This reflects the growing recognition that many neighbourhoods are struggling, while major societal challenges, such as the energy transition and healthcare, can only be effectively addressed from within and with the neighbourhood.

ABCD is not a project or intervention with a checklist. It is about making a community visible, strengthening it, and maintaining it, permanently. As a community builder, you work from a genuine interest in sustainable and structural change. Above all, it is about power in the neighbourhood, power that often lies with the municipality, housing corporations, or other institutions. The goal of ABCD is to shift this power. Nothing is decided or implemented without the neighbourhood. Partners are equals, and the neighbourhood leads.

ABCD always starts with the residents themselves, united and without outside help. Only then can they decide if they want external support. If needed, they can then explore how to organize things with that support. In short: by the neighbourhood, with the neighbourhood, and for the neighbourhood!



3. Community Organizing

Community Organizing is how a community can resolve a conflict of interest with an institution or company. For example, when neighbourhood residents, as a collective, need something from an institution that is unwilling to provide it, and equality must be restored. By bringing people together and organizing the necessary power, desired changes can be enforced. This strengthens the neighbourhood's position at the negotiating table, in lobbying efforts, and in public debate. Community Organizing is used when you want to change something and need to mobilise the neighbourhood. It is a method built on interdependent ingredients:

- Listening to the neighbourhood;
- Building and strengthening mutual relationships;
- Telling stories;
- Organizing strong teams and structures;
- Finding and developing leadership;
- Strategy;
- Action.

Community Organizing and ABCD

Both approaches share significant overlap, but they also have key differences. It is precisely these differences that allow them to strengthen each other and achieve better results. There is no Community Organizing without ABCD.

Similarities:

- Harnessing the power of the community;
- Building mutual relationships;
- Utilising the knowledge, capacity, and resources of the neighbourhood;
- Listening to neighbourhood residents as a starting point.

Differences:

- ABCD works best when the power imbalance between partners is as small as possible;
- ABCD focuses on building a community to solve problems;
- In Community Organizing, that community is the foundation for addressing a conflict.



4. A short history on Community Organizing

For as long as humans have existed, groups with shared problems have organized to demand action from those in power, from the temple builders of ancient Egypt to today's climate protesters.

In the 1930s, sociologist Saul Alinsky brought union-organizing tactics to Chicago's poorest neighbourhoods, tackling poverty, crime, and other social issues. His approach soon spread worldwide and remains widely used today, especially in English-speaking countries.

In the Netherlands, Piet Reckman, deputy director of the social academy in Driebergen, was the first to adopt Alinsky's work. This marked the beginning of politicising community work in the Netherlands. A method that, despite its ups and downs, is still applied in education and beyond.

At the start of this century, budget cuts and a shifting cultural climate led to a decline in this approach, with a focus shifting toward individual support. In recent years, however, interest in collective neighbourhood problem-solving has grown. Having learned from hard lessons, we now recognise that individualising collective responsibilities creates new problems, ones that harm not only individuals but society as a whole. This has renewed interest in Alinsky's organizing method and his book *Rules for Radicals*.

One of the most compelling organizing stories in the Netherlands may be the demolition of Rotterdam's Tweebosbuurt neighbourhood. That is why we interviewed Mustapha Eaisaoui.



The Tweebosbuurt

Around us, hamburgers and chicken nuggets are being served. We meet at Restaurant Verhage in Rotterdam-Zuid, where we stick to coffee. Mustapha Eaisaouiyeen reflects on how quickly the neighbourhood where he grew up is changing. He was only away for a short time, but here that is the difference between an open view one day and a wall of high-rise buildings on the horizon the next. This quickly brings us to the reason we are here: his resistance to the demolition of the Tweebosbuurt.



By now, the Tweebosbuurt is a well-known story. The neighbourhood, and its demolition, has been in the news repeatedly in recent years. Mustapha had not lived there for very long when his landlord, housing corporation Vestia, announced that his home was to be demolished. Along with 534 other homes. In their place, far fewer would be rebuilt, and those would be significantly more expensive. In an instant, the future became uncertain. Vestia offered no guarantee of return, and the replacement home was far from the neighbourhood. For Mustapha, this was an extra blow: at the time, he was also caring for his mother. Her health was poor, but she still lived independently, only possible because she lived nearby. This way, he could be with her often and quickly. Mustapha decided not to accept the demolition and took the fight to court. He lost the case, on his birthday, September 6th.

“I walked home feeling lost, doubting whether to appeal. By chance, I passed the building where the residents’ committee was meeting, and the meeting had just ended. I started talking to some of them, and the demolition was a current topic there too. I offered to help. After all, I had worked at a bank for a long time and could write a decent letter, if I do say so myself. That is where it started. In the weeks that followed, events unfolded rapidly. I decided to appeal and read everything I could find about gentrification, upgrading neighbourhoods by creating space for the higher class at the expense of the lower class, legislation, and anything else related to the topic. The demolition was all I could think about; it made me furious! I spoke to people from the neighbourhood and discovered that many more were concerned. Despite our different backgrounds and lives, we shared the feeling of not being good enough for the neighbourhood. A neighbourhood where we felt comfortable and at home, but from which we were being driven out.”



These different people found each other and united. As a result, the resistance took on a more serious form. It was the height of COVID, which made meeting in person difficult. Online was not an option either, many older residents lacked the digital skills. “We often stood under an awning, discussing things at a distance. Doing fun things, which are important for group bonding and morale, was certainly out of the question. Despite this, the group remained strong.”

Many neighbours had already left due to the threat of lawsuits. The vacated homes were either boarded up or occupied by a mix of temporary residents, including a group of squatters.

Thanks to the neighbourhood’s open attitude, the newcomers were welcomed and joined the struggle. The squatters undertook actions the original residents would not have thought of so quickly, they brought a whole new dimension to the protest. Another temporary resident made a short film about the neighbourhood that even screened at the International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR).

“There was a lot of mutual respect in the group,” Mustapha explains. “If someone chose to leave after all, or if actions were taken that we had not thought of, there was a lot of solidarity. We understood if someone accepted a replacement home. We all knew how the stress and uncertainty felt. We supported each other.”

Gradually, a serious strategy with clear role divisions unfolded. “There were people who handled publicity and writing. They generated attention through networking, press releases, columns, and letters to politicians. And there were field workers who rolled up their sleeves and, for example, kept the neighbours informed,” Mustapha explains. “It was beautiful to see and very important that everyone could participate.”

One part of the strategy was to make the bigger picture of gentrification visible and place it in a broader context. By seeking publicity and timing actions well, they gained significant media attention. Among others, the Woonbond (Dutch Tenants’ Union), PILP/NCJM (human rights advocacy), and even the United Nations stood up for the residents of Tweekbosbuurt. The UN concluded that the demolition put human rights under pressure and fueled poverty and homelessness. It was to no avail: one week after the UN’s devastating verdict, Vestia demolished all the homes.



But the organisation that Mustapha helped start did not cease to exist. They have time on their side and only grow stronger. In the same period, the Woonopstand (Housing Uprising) took place: a large protest against the lack of affordable and accessible housing. More than ten thousand people participated in Rotterdam.

The Tweebosbuurt residents' group joined 'Recht op de Stad' (Right to the City), a collective of stakeholders and other residents' groups advocating for fairer housing policy.

"The Tweebosbuurt has been demolished, but in Rotterdam, things have changed structurally. The municipality has committed to giving residents a more central role in restructuring projects, and housing corporations now contribute to advisors and support for residents' committees. This creates a more level playing field of power and counter-power. We now also see that there is more space and less fear for that counter-power and for the voices of residents and citizens."

What would Mustapha like to pass on to organizers? "Take good care of yourself! Of your mental and physical health. At one point, I was working on the Tweebosbuurt seven days a week, twenty hours a day. That almost broke me, and I have seen many people around me go through the same thing. So also take care of each other. And very important: do not forget to celebrate your successes!"



5. Community Organizing, how does that work?

The necessary ingredients of Community Organizing have already been mentioned. Below, we discuss them one by one.

1. Listening to the neighbourhood

Anyone wanting to organize a neighbourhood must know what is going on and listen to all its residents. Not just the people who are already speaking up, not those who confirm your assumptions, but to everyone. This requires a systematic approach.

Anyone who brings people together and asks for their opinion will first and foremost hear the people who already have strong opinions and are quick to speak up. Language barriers, assumptions about the sender, and the available time and mental space in a busy, often stressful, existence can stand in the way of many.

Anyone who truly wants to listen to as many people as possible starts with just one. By literally going door to door, the chance is greater that you will also reach the people who otherwise never speak up. It is amazing how enthusiastic people react when you genuinely listen to their opinion.

A good conversation structure is essential to learn from these contact moments. What is going on, what touches people, and why. Look for BOND issues. Widely supported, Solvable, it is happening Now and is Deeply felt. The conversations also help to get to know the character of the community. Which words are used, how communication takes place. In the story of Mustapha and the Tweebosbuurt, there are elderly people who are not digitally skilled. In such a situation, extensive online communication does not contribute to bringing people together.

Listening

- Engage in conversations from person to person, go door to door;
- Ensure the right conversation structure, introduce yourself, explain why you are there. Give people the space to decline.
- Build a connection, show interest in who the other person is, be sincere;
- Work with a script or standard survey so that the answers are comparable.



2. Building and strengthening relationships

Sustainable relationships are an important part of Community Organizing. The stronger the mutual relationships, the more you can carry together. After the initial introduction, it is therefore important to strengthen the relationship.

To take risks together, learn from mistakes, and achieve something, a bond of trust is necessary. This can only be achieved by knowing what motivates the other person, what knowledge is being contributed, and what emotions are at play. Trust and respect must be mutual to ensure that people want to work together.

In addition, strong relationships are necessary to handle potential disagreements, to reach compromises, and to motivate and activate people to achieve shared goals. Investing in a strong relationship is impossible without mutual coaching and the exchange of feedback. Even more important? Doing fun things and celebrating successes! Sometimes it is the other way around. In Rosmalen, the neighbours got to know each other through the neighbourhood campsite and knew how to find each other when needed.

Relationships

- Invest in strong relationships;
- Stay in conversation, exchange feedback, and coordinate with each other;
- Add a social element to meetings. Keep engaging (new) people.
- Do fun things, celebrate successes.



Voice of the Sparrenburg Forest Rosmalen

Four years ago, during the pandemic, no one could go on vacation and all kinds of restrictions were in place. Together with her neighbours, Roos Sohier organized a neighbourhood campsite in the Sparrenburg neighbourhood, a 1970s 'cauliflower' district in Rosmalen. People who had lived there for years got to know each other, and the social structure was greatly strengthened. "We knew how to find each other much better, and it was not just fun; we also helped each other with all sorts of little things." Because they spoke to each other so often, they were also able to prepare for the sudden residents' meeting organized by the owner of the Sparrenburg Forest.

That forest is located on the outskirts of Rosmalen and is a popular walking area. However, it is also a piece of land that has been the subject of speculation since the 1980s. In the last thirty years, the forest has changed owners five times. Time and again, the owners want to build in the forest. This causes a great deal of unrest among the residents every time. With the citizens' initiative De Stem van het Bos (The Voice of the Forest), residents want to secure the forest once and for all. For forest lovers, for future generations, and above all, for the forest itself.

In early 2022, the forest came into the hands of yet another new owner. Just like all previous owners, this one also wanted to build more than the zoning plan permits. In the autumn of 2022, the owner's dialogue with residents regarding the surrounding community stalled. Both De Stem van het Bos and the owner chose to continue the dialogue. The goal: to find out if a scenario is possible where no construction takes place in the forest and the open fields. In this scenario, the forest is offered for sale, and the new owner can build care homes where permitted by the zoning plan.



The negotiations were difficult. For a long time, it remained unclear which parts of the area were going up for sale and under what conditions. Ultimately, De Stem van het Bos terminated the negotiations in February 2024: the asking price remained far too high, and the owner was only willing to lower the price if construction could proceed. A shame, because the crowdfunding campaign for the purchase of the forest was about to launch.

During the campaign, Roos and her neighbours built up a large network of professional partners. Stichting Brabants Landschap is eager to carry out the management together with De Stem van het Bos. In addition, the citizens' initiative was in talks with Ark Rewilding Nature, BrabantWater, the Province of North Brabant, and the crowdfunding platform Brabanders voor Natuur. Discussions were held with the municipality at an administrative level, residents were given the opportunity to address the municipal council, and talks were held with the alderman. Everyone advised De Stem van het Bos to continue and persevere. Unfortunately, none of these organisations wanted to play an active role at the negotiating table.

What happens next? The plan remains to remove the forest and the small fields from the commercial market once and for all. De Stem van het Bos calls upon professional partners to join forces and assist the residents in this endeavor. Moral support is no longer sufficient. Their active input is needed. After all, as a citizens' initiative, it did not succeed alone. Roos and her neighbours are convinced that together, it will succeed!

Advice for action: Just do it! Share your ideas and see how many people are willing to participate. It is only with a large group that you discover just how much knowledge everyone possesses. And persevere!



3. Stories as a binding force

People tell each other stories; it is in our DNA. It binds a group together. Storytelling is a much more effective way to engage people than dry information. A good story is about how we overcome a setback or solve a dilemma. Ideally, the story is short and concise, so that most people will actually read it. As an organizer or neighbourhood group, you often use three types of stories that interlock:

A story about who you are, what drives you, and what you have come to do. 'Let yourself be known' and build a relationship.

A story about 'us' is the story about what makes us neighbourhood residents 'us'. What values and experiences do we share? What is our identity? A welcoming and inclusive story in which everyone sees a place for themselves.

A story about the present. This is the story that convinces even the most apathetic resident that change is possible and that they can play an active role in that change. A story of anger, hope, action, and a view of a solution.

Stories

- Tell a real and sincere story; make it 'exciting' and relatable.
- Keep it short and concise;
- Continue to inspire people with your own story. Repeat your story.
- Always speak in terms of 'we' (on behalf of the neighbourhood) and not of the neighbourhood as something external.



4. Teamwork and structure

Organizing is teamwork. It is crucial to build strong teams and structure. This makes it easier to offer new people a place, execute a strategy, and take action. People want to feel that they belong and are part of something bigger.

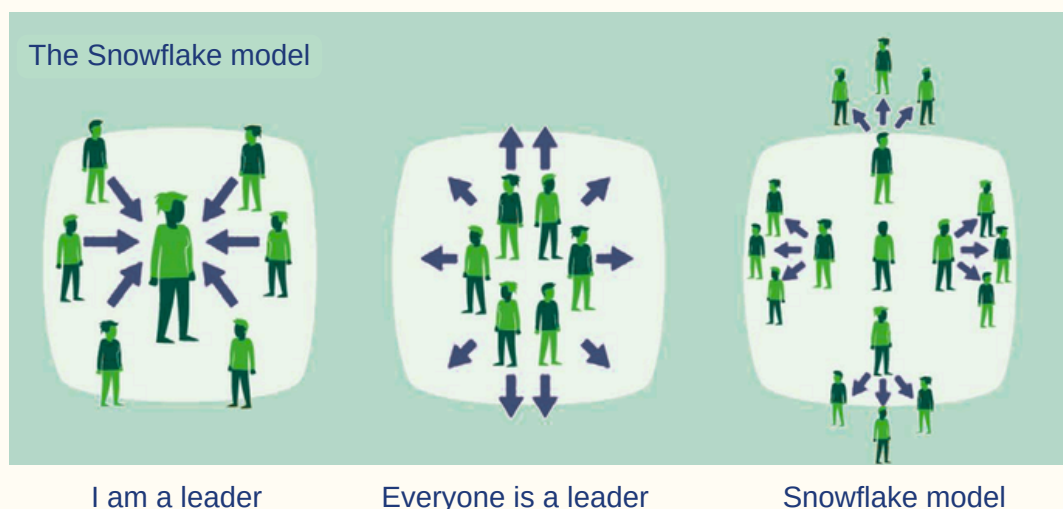
A strong team is large enough to handle the work but small enough to remain decisive. It has a shared goal, one or more servant leaders, and is diverse enough to be a reflection of the neighbourhood. There is a clear division of tasks and mutual trust. It has an identity; a name and a character. It has fun, celebrates success, and bears setbacks together.

Structure

If a team becomes too large (twelve is the max), structure is needed. Without structure, effective collaboration is not possible, and you cannot execute a strategy. An organizing structure works like a snowflake. Multiple teams work together, and an infinite number of new teams can be added. It is clear to everyone what is expected of those teams and how they communicate and make decisions among themselves. In the Amsterdam Noord case, a board and a confidential counsellor were even appointed. Later in the process, tasks were clearly divided among various committees.

Teamwork and structure

- A strong team is crucial; it is neither too large nor too small.
- Multiple teams work together in a snowflake model, as shown in the image.
- In a team and in multiple teams, it is clear what the shared goal is and what is expected.



Red Amsterdam Noord

Eva Bollen, from Amsterdam Noord, gets straight to the point: 'When I encountered yet another defect in my home, I had had enough. After consulting with the neighbours, we compiled a blacklist of all the defects caused by overdue maintenance and approached landlord De Key. After three years of haggling, it turned out that the corporation actually wanted to demolish, but following pressure from the neighbourhood, they ultimately decided to renovate instead.' During those three years, the residents in Noord organized themselves well under the name 'Red Amsterdam Noord' and are pressing ahead. Not only the homes, but also the public space has been severely neglected. Based on a carefully drafted manifesto, they organized a hearing at De Balie in 2021. Despite it being in the middle of the Corona pandemic, thousands of Amsterdammers and the entire city council, including the full council, watched. As a result, the entire Municipal Executive finally came to Noord. The neighbourhood guided them through all kinds of issues, where the common factor was: The arrival of all the new residents was destroying houses, greenery, and above all, social cohesion.

A year later, the residents submit the document 'Aanpak Noord'; as a result, a representative for North is appointed, and the proposed protocol on participation is converted into a binding guideline. When asked how Red Amsterdam Noord managed to build such a strong organisation, Eva replies that they mainly talk to each other a lot about how they want to organize things and resolve conflicts through discussion. What also helps is that they have a number of people in their network with extensive organisational and meeting experience whom they can always ask for advice.



Experience makes such a difference, and it was also a good idea to immediately establish a remote board and a confidential advisor for the foundation. That provided a lot of peace of mind! As a result, we also gained the opportunity to apply for subsidies, as only legal entities are allowed to do so.' With those subsidies, stemming from the Aanpak Noord, Red Amsterdam has appointed three coordinators. With more than 20 members, consisting of neighbourhood committees, green groups, and clubs like 'Verdedig Noord', having that support is sorely needed to ensure that the monthly meeting, the setting of strategy, and the maintenance of mutual equality and solidarity continue to run smoothly.

Although Eva is pleased with the results achieved, she does issue a warning. 'You have to stay involved constantly and keep a finger on the pulse; you do not want to be the 'participation excuse.' The main question, of course, is what kind of city Amsterdam is and, above all, wants to be. Who do you want to come and live here, and how do you ensure that you retain your rough edges?'



PETITIEWEL

Red Amsterdam Noord

Wij
Oude én nieuwe bewoners van Amsterdam Noord

constateren
Dat:
het moeie en bijzondere groen in rap tempo verdwijnt, duizenden bomen worden gekapt, de ecologische zones weggevoerd worden bedroefd, er sprake is van een slechte informatievoorziening en participatie, oude wijken zwaar worden vernieuwd, er torenhoge, onbetaalbare flats worden gebouwd en goede sociale huurwoningen worden verduikt of naar de vrije sector worden verplaatst.

GEMEENTE AMSTERDAM, HET IS GENOEG GEWEEST!

en verzoeken
De raadsleden van de gemeente Amsterdam om een hoorzitting bij te wonen, georganiseerd door bewoners, waarin de raad uitlegt:
- waarom zij geen respect toont voor de bewoners, de natuur en de stedenbouwkundige kwaliteiten van Noord, waarom de informatievoorziening en participatie niet deugt en hoe zij dit denkt recht te zetten in de nog resterende én nieuwe bestuursperiode.
Deze hoorzitting vindt plaats op dinsdag 25 mei 2021 van 19.30 - 21.30 uur.

De petitie heeft 1255 ondertekeningen.

Naam	Woonplaats	Functie of situatie	Bewoogd
Katrina Bruchart	Amsterdam		29-03-2021
A. Vroeg	Amsterdam Noord		29-03-2021
Debra Niekrova	Amsterdam		29-03-2021
M. Hegema	Amsterdam		28-03-2021
M. Verhulst	Amsterdam		28-03-2021
Lisa Weemstra	Amsterdam		28-03-2021
Elsie Meijer	Amsterdam		28-03-2021
J. van Schaik	Amsterdam		28-03-2021
S. Kneese	Amsterdam		28-03-2021
Nancy Sint	Zandvoort		28-03-2021

Pagina 1 van 10



5. Finding and developing leadership

Organizing is also about seeking leadership. Without leadership, a group is indecisive, internal conflicts remain unresolved, and the group does not dare to take risks. But what is leadership?

The definition of leadership that Marshall Ganz, an organizing expert at Harvard University, uses is: "Enabling others to take responsibility and contribute to the goal of a group in an uncertain context."

A leader is not The Boss, but takes responsibility for the whole and their own tasks, can bind people to them, and encourages them to continue committing to the common goal despite setbacks and uncertainty. A leader supports decision-making, assigns the right person to a task or role, resolves internal conflicts, forges a team, sets out the strategy, and represents the group externally.

Not everyone has it in them to take on leadership. Leaders are the people designated by others in the neighbourhood as someone they look up to. Who they turn to when there are problems, or those they know have a large network in the neighbourhood.

Leadership

- A leader is not The Boss but serves the group;
- A leader enables others to take responsibility;
- Not everyone has it in them to take on leadership.

The story of Lisan, who uses her background and experience to organize her neighbours, is a good example of leadership as it is meant here.



Kolkakkerbuurt, Ede

Lisan has only been living in her house in Ede for a few years when she receives a letter from the housing association with unpleasant news. Her entire neighbourhood, 163 homes, is to be demolished.

The Kolkakkerbuurt, where she lives, is a typical garden village, built in the early 1920s and extensively renovated in the 1970s. People enjoy living there, often for generations, with a close-knit social structure. Many neighbours are shocked by the plans.

In her daily life, Lisan is a community worker, and she decides to put this experience to use. Together with others, she writes a clear letter to all 163 households, and a meeting is organized. At this well-attended evening, everyone is able to express their views, and it is decided to form a neighbourhood committee to enter into dialogue with the housing association. Shared values, such as the structure of the neighbourhood, its historical value, and the quality of life, are also emphasized.

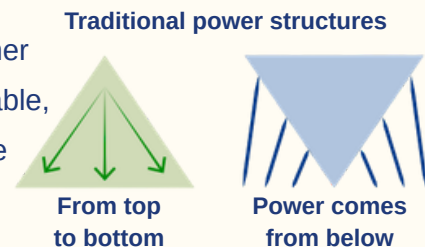
No sooner said than done. The seven members of the committee held long and frequent discussions with the corporation and the political parties regarding the core values and the actual condition of the buildings. Ultimately, it turned out that the foundations of many buildings were in such poor condition that demolition was the only option. However, all fifty homes on the most visually prominent section, Kolkakkerweg, could be saved. They were renovated and insulated so that they can last another hundred years!



6. Strategy: a plan to win

Neighbourhood residents need a strategy to deploy available capabilities and resources. A strategy must be accessible and understandable to everyone. A good strategy shows what options are available, where the people are who want to join, what the possible reaction of your opponents is, how to deal with setbacks, and how to profit from your successes.

The first step in designing a strategy is to investigate whether the problem you want to tackle is Broadly Supported, Solvable, Now, and Deeply Felt (BOND). If so, then it is suitable to be tackled using community organizing.



The power structure surrounding a problem must be mapped out. Organizers work with the assumption that power does not come from above, but that power rests on acceptance or active support from below.

Furthermore, an organizer needs an overview of who the allies and opponents are, and who participates passively and actively or resists. In this way, opponents can be isolated, perhaps some passive allies can be persuaded to become active, and, if all goes well, public opinion and the balance of power will eventually shift.

Strategy is about building and making choices. You cannot do everything at once. You start with those first few neighbourhood residents at a kitchen table and work towards that major action involving the entire neighbourhood, ultimately arriving at a solution. Do this step by step. Build pauses into your campaign to catch your breath, take stock, and prepare for the next step.

The story from Broek in Waterland beautifully illustrates how residents themselves set to work on an alternative plan, generated the resources and attention for it, and achieved success!

Strategy

- Must be accessible and clear to everyone;
- Must pass the BOND test;
- Allies and opponents, and their attitudes, must be mapped out.



Broek in Waterland, North Holland

It was over thirteen years ago when the Province of North Holland decided to improve the accessibility of Waterland, an area of more than one hundred square kilometers north of Amsterdam. The plans were disastrous for the village of Broek in Waterland. With the replacement of a monumental bridge and an extra road, the community was literally split in two.

Shocked, the village council organized resistance and came up with a plan that was widely supported among the residents: a tunnel under Broek instead of a road. Using its own funds via a successful crowdfunding campaign, the Village Council commissioned the engineering firm Witteveen+Bos to conduct a preliminary study into an underground solution, assessing feasibility and costs. Based on this citizen-funded study, the Province changed its mind and began seriously investigating the underground option. In this co-creation project, which lasted from 2016 to 2023, the plan was further developed. All involved parties, local residents and administrators in the region and the province, were actively involved through walk-in evenings, sounding board groups, and brainstorming sessions. Goof Buijs of the village council says: 'The goal has always been to design a solution that does justice to all interests, of the residents of Broek in Waterland and of the entire region.'



After good cooperation, extensive public consultation, and a social cost-benefit analysis, the province decided in 2023 to opt for an extended underpass with two lanes in each direction, two of which are bus lanes. The province agrees with the Village Council that this option restores the appearance of our village, connects both halves of the village, leads to better traffic flow for the entire region, offers more space for greenery, and represents a significant improvement in the quality of life.

What is the current state of affairs? The village, the Municipality of Waterland, the province, and the transport region want a tunnel. The plans are finalised, and only the national government still needs to contribute to a solution that takes accessibility, livability, and the residents seriously.

Advice for activists: Actions usually begin with anger and resentment. Logical, and often justified. The best way for yourself and your group to convert that anger into positive energy is to advocate for a better alternative. Ensure that your support base is and remains broad, and remember that such a process will also take a great deal of time. But time is your best friend.



7. Action!

Neighbourhood teams, check. Strategy, check. A good story, check. Leaders, check. Listened to the neighbourhood, check. Time for action! Time to turn all the work into deeds. This can be a classic action with protest signs and banners, but it can take many other forms. Going door-to-door with a petition or a street play explaining what the solution to the problem will look like.

Strong actions have several of the following characteristics.

- A strong action is simple;
- A strong action evokes a reaction from your opponent;
- A strong action invites people to join your neighbourhood group;
- A strong action taps into the emotion in the neighbourhood;
- A strong action gives participants a good feeling and encourages them to continue;
- A strong action is well-prepared;
- A strong action strengthens your lobby or negotiation;
- A strong action fits within your strategy and enables you to take the next step. A strong campaign results in an image in the newspaper that makes your story clear in one go.



6. But, what does the government do?

Now that everything has been said about organizing your neighbourhood in a conflict, the question of how the government can respond to this naturally arises. They are frequently positioned as 'the other side' in that same conflict. Governments, both national and local, are constantly engaging with residents and their communities. For instance, there is the right to challenge, an approach whereby residents can take over government services in their own neighbourhood, and neighbourhood councils are on the rise again.

In addition, larger concepts are playing an increasingly prominent role. Such as civil society, in which the triangle of society, government, and market is being re-examined. The 'government - market' line is firmly anchored in policy and regulations, but the one between 'government - society' needs to be improved to create a level playing field. In line with this, the Advisory Committee on Strengthening the Resilience of the Democratic Rule of Law wrote in the autumn of 2023 that action is needed to fundamentally strengthen the democratic rule of law and the connection between government and citizens. While the issues mentioned above contribute to community involvement in decision-making, many people individually experience a lack of control over their lives and feel like pawns of the government and its associated institutions. At the same time, many feel that the business sector is allowed to do whatever it pleases. As a result, trust declines, and with it, participation in society. The much-vaunted concept of obedience is disappearing.

Therefore, governments should not become rigid when residents organize themselves. Not even if this initially does not align with their own plans. It is important that governments, in particular, listen to residents, take their problems seriously, and act accordingly.

When neighbourhoods organize themselves, this should be appreciated and supported, so that numerous societal problems are solved. Governments and communities need each other, and therefore they must coordinate effectively and agree on who is responsible for what. Ultimately, the government's ability to solve problems never reaches the very fabric of society. For that, you need communities on a manageable scale: the neighbourhoods and districts. As writer and organizer Margareth Wheatley says: 'Whatever your problem is, the solution lies in the neighbourhood!'



7. Literature, reading and listening tips

Have you become enthusiastic after reading this exploration and do you want to read on, participate, or know more? Below are a number of links to texts, collectives, etc., that helped and inspired us to write this guide:

Books:

- Lowlander Project - Stickers plakken is niet genoeg (2022), in Dutch
- Saul Alinsky - Rules For Radicals (1971)
- [Marshall Ganz - People, Power, Change \(2014\)](#)
- Jane MacAlevy - No Short Cuts (2021)
- LSA bewoners - Altijd Nieuw Gedoe! (2021), in Dutch

Websites:

- [Movisie, Politiserend werken, pak armoede aan door structurele problemen zichtbaar te maken. \(2022\)](#) (in Dutch)
- [Community Organisers UK](#)

Podcast:

- [Listen, Organise, Act](#)
- [Collective Impact Forum](#)

This guide was developed for LSA Bewoners.



We are Stroomversnellers

Stroomversnellers is a trainers' collective of experienced campaigners, organizers, facilitators, and trainers. We have all been active in environmental organizations, grassroots initiatives, labor unions, or anti-racism movements. Through trial and error, we've learned how to run effective campaigns, build organizations, and create social change.

We are constantly learning and love sharing our knowledge and experiences with others. The world doesn't move in the right direction on its own, far from it. Only with many well-prepared people can a different, more just society come closer. That's why we support a wide range of groups fighting for social and ecological justice, offering advice, strategy and brainstorming sessions, (action) trainings, and workshops. Together, we grow, strengthen our impact, and work toward a better world!

Toolbox for Movements

This guide is part of the "Toolbox for Movements." The toolbox includes a collection of short digital guides covering the basics of strategy, movement building, activism, and organizing. It provides a solid foundation for beginning activists, while also offering fresh insights for experienced changemakers. [Here](#) you will find links to all other guides published so far.

We love learning too

If you have ideas for improving this guide or adding your own experiences, we'd love to hear from you!

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