**Social innovation – Content and Process**
***A discussion between Amin and the practical experiences we gained from our projects***

Since 2015 municipalities in the Netherlands have been responsible for various forms of social care. Within this they rely heavily on their citizens. Self-care and self-reliance are key and are preferably extended to also support other people in the neighbourhood. In the following argument, Amin (2010, p. 3) feels municipalities can also expect too much from its citizens:

> *"An increasingly narrow scholarly and policy framing of the challenges of social integration and cohesion under conditions of hyper diversity. My argument is that, seeing too much of the human in the social and in expecting too much from the inter-human in resolving societal difference and antagonism, a narrow framing misrecognizes the society of strangers compositionally and in terms of the normative potential" (p. 3).*

An example of such a solution in one of our projects is the following and concerns the contribution to liveability and quality of life in a municipality. Since the municipality decided "doing things together" must be stimulated a significant financial budget has been made available. However, this money is rarely used and when only very selectively. The submitted proposals do not meet the requirements of the municipality. Public officials would like to get started with this, they want to evaluate the process but politics are partly stopping this initiative. Aldermen prefer to use the budget for direct requests that they personally receive from the districts. There is no space for discussion about this. While there can be expected too much from people when it comes to self-reliance and participation (Amin, 2010) we experience in our projects municipalities are still very reluctant to put citizens in that role.

We see this development in many of our projects. Municipalities and related organisations are nowadays extremely concerned with what citizens want. Still, as stated above, not everyone feels comfortable with this development. Suddenly public officials need to become different people with different tasks. The question is if this is necessary. Municipalities could for example also commission partner organisations "to collect stories" in the regions they are in, to look at them together and see how they relate to policy making.
In our projects, we see municipalities struggle with this and ask themselves who needs to have which competencies and take which role. Which role can social organisations play in municipalities and how can they be asked to participate in this process. An example in the role of Stichting Welzijn. They have been given the task to become more active in the locations they are situated in and stay more connected with the people who live there. Still, this role is also taken by certain public officials. It is something people search together in how this can take shape.

In addition to the changes in responsibilities for social care, the Netherlands will also enforce the Omgevingswet in 2019. This new law supports the idea that parties who want something "spatially" (e.g. government, market and/or citizen) can faster and less hindered by rules start a dialog and try to come to an agreement. According to Kok (2017, p.3) various groups

of people argue this process of "doing more together" is being tempered by a growing gap between "I" and "we".

> *"Wetenschappers, intellectuelen, politici en vertegenwoordigers van diverse maatschappelijk organisaties verkondigen de laatste jaren steeds indringender dat het in Nederland ontbreekt aan saamhorigheid, nabijheid, eenheid. De samenleving zou gebukt gaan onder te veel 'ik' en te weinig 'wij': we zouden nog slechts naast elkaar leven in plaats van werkelijk samen"* (*p.3*).

Still, what about this "diagnosis" and how does it affect the "solutions" various organisations offer? Through the many interviews we conduct and the projects we work on, we acquire a view of how this diagnosis takes shape and how it works through in the offered solutions. We even see how the diagnosis of the solutions sometimes ensures the main diagnosis remains in place.

> *"Tegelijkertijd veranderd er wel degelijk veel en zien we dat veel mensen ook allerlei andere maatschappelijke betekenisvolle verbanden hebben. En dat gevoelens van verbondenheid en herkenning niet noodzakelijk berusten op een letterlijk 'samen', noch op het delen van dezelfde leefstijl, woonplaats, woonwijk, taal, belangen of overtuigingen" (Kok, 2017, p.3).*

This is also supported by the following quote of Amin (2010, p.1).

> *"If the locations of community (and its outside) spill over beyond its traditional containers, so too does the constituency of social being."*

This context provides the opportunity to, as Amin (2010, p.7) states:

> *"to scan the landscape for evidence and proposals for new ways of gathering diversity into a functioning commons".*

In the following quote, Amin (2010, p.8) refers to possible strategies for developing such new ways of gathering diversity:

> *"…proposes that a politics of care, aware of the limitations of interpersonal proximities, might usefully turn to strategies to reinforce social interest in the shared material, virtual and affective commons. It considers curatorial attention of the zones of engagement with other humans and non-humans to hold more promise for a politics of bridging difference than is an ethic of care for the stranger or for a particular notion of the community."*

While Ash Amin uses the term "stranger" to refer to minorities in our Western societies; to the racialized Other, we perceive the stranger as a representation of all people in our society. At any given point, someone could become a "stranger", an outsider, a minority. In our projects the stranger is represented by the villager, the elderly, the entrepreneur, the municipality. The stranger is a hybrid depending on the context and more so the view of the other strangers.

The following statement by Amin (2010, p.1) could support our argument:

> *"Modern Western societies have become thoroughly hybrid in every sense. With their heterogeneous populations and cultures, they exist as gatherings of strangers- home grown and migrant."*

Taking a closer look at the words "home grown and migrant" we compare this to the plethora of people participating in our projects. Oftentimes social cohesion between the "home grown and migrant" is something municipalities and other social organisations aim for.

Social cohesion is almost always perceived as something positive, something people should strive for. However, our research shows there can also be too much social cohesion. Both Zeeland and Groningen have various closed church and village communities where the social cohesion between people is very strong. In this context, social cohesion is often linked to commonality and with forming a community. Along these lines the interpretation of social cohesion is mostly formed around internal group connections. However, these strong internal group connections come many a time at the expense of connections between groups.

In one of the villages we work in, 'Kings Day' is always organised by the people who are perceived as 'import' in the community, who are relatively new in the village. Because this day also includes a dance evening the religious people in the community refuse to participate in the children games and other events such as the hiking and cycling tour organised at other times during the day. As a result, they do not participate at all during 'Kings Day' and has been decided the event will no longer be organised in this village.

Nevertheless, financial resources and other forms of support to steer citizens in the direction of commonality and cohesion are substantial. According to Amin (2010, p. 27)

> *"The result is a new 'ethopolitics of community and belonging, involving 'attempts to shape the conduct of human beings by acting upon their sentiments, beliefs, and values - in short, by acting on ethics'."*

The process of finding common topics of interest is very important since this is most relevant to the governance challenges that can be analysed. The question is: How do you organise this jointly and in a sustainable manner? Amin (2010, p. 33) refers to spaces of affiliation.

> *"The worthy ambition to foster empathy between strangers through multiculti projects of new metaphors of collective unity is likely to flounder…are not likely to be persuaded by a politics of care for the stranger……it turns to other sites of conciliation and integration, beginning with the spaces of affiliation..."*

In our projects, we see the "solutions" to bring people together and find a common ground often use "intermediaries" or key figures in the community. This can be people in villages, active volunteers, who serve as a connection between for example the municipality and 'the

village'. Through contact with key figures as well as village councils and other local associations, the municipalities or organisations fulfil their "task" to involve residents in their planning. Also, different types of volunteer organisations are assigned to this task. By taking on this task these key people or organisations often lose the connection with the rest of the village or their backbone.

Still, a resident who cooks weekly for fellow residents or a volunteer who supplies 150 meals for 'Tafeltje Dekje' both have a lot of knowledge about the daily challenges of their town mates. In addition, they make usage of their own informal connections to provide local solutions when needed. This point of looking at the existing networks and connections in the community is also made by Tobias (2001, in Amin, 2010, p. 33-34):

> *"A first step is to work with existing social transactions, sympathetically but critically…the stance adopted in this book towards the attentive society is one less interested in lead actors and states of being (e.g. local community) than the proliferation of everyday attentiveness as a condition of being in the world. Thus, the interest in transactional affinities relates to the potential of affective amplification, such that caring in different ways and for many things becomes central to identity and institutional practice."*

The assumption most citizens today want and can fulfil all sorts of social tasks themselves, we see reflected in a project we have been involved in for three years. This project also included the transfer of (local) government tasks with accompanying decision-making and budgets (in this case 1.5 million euros) ([www.deelnulrum.nl](www.deelnulrum.nl)). 'Ownership' was the term often being used in this project and referred to "citizens that are owners of their village with other citizens". The question in this project was: Is this possible and how does it work? The academic Annemarie Kok (2015) draws in an article about this project in Noorderbreedte the conclusion a leading government cannot be missed.

Another example of citizen participation and self-care is a project financed by a health insurance to gain a view of how people in a chosen village approach the topic living longer at home independently. The people spoken to indicate they go about taking care of each other very pragmatic and take subtle steps adjusted to the individual circumstances. However, the results of the research conducted need to be delivered in an Excel sheet. Consequently, all knowledge, insights and nuances are lost in this process.

> *"Affective amplifications however will not suffice to negotiate the plural society … First, the many forms of institutionalized aversion and discrimination (…) that silently neutralize positive feelings will not disappear as a result of affective amplification, even if without the latter there can be little public push for political and institutional reform. All too frequently, the very practices of care are filtered through the hegemonic institutions of social organisation, altered in the process… An expanded ethic of care..."*(Amin, p.34).

Nevertheless, the government has decided neighbours need to be closer and all kinds of social services must be organised between them. Even matters such as psychological assistance. In an experiment in which we are involved (Stichting HerstelTalent in which

people with psychological problems assist each other) we investigate the possibilities and limits of such an approach as intended by the government. Looking at our experiences in this process we agree with the following statement of Amin (2010, p.39):

> *"The micro-practices of creative forms of joint endeavour (…) have clear implications for strategies of social inclusion…"*

As referred to at the beginning of this writing we believe the process is of significance to enhance joined endeavours. How this process is taking place and which factors are of importance within it is also a question Amin (2010, p. 7) pounders about:

> *"…is there a way of working this through the urban unconscious, so that solidarities arise out of the pragmatics of negotiating a particular kind of material and aesthetic environment, out of the affects and solidarities forged through the urban commons? Explore possibilities that make virtue out of the condition of thrown-togetherness..."*

In this we agree with Amin (2010, p.10) content and process should go hand in hand and support one another.

> *"Sustaining an ethos of urban togetherness requires the continual play between explication and practice…and public articulation of what this adds to personal and collective life."*

Key words we take from Amin regarding the process of social innovation are
- The encounter;
- Events;
- Narratives/Stories;
- Imagined community

Key words we bring into connection to the content in social innovation are
- Practices of care (interviews)
- Politics of care (governance)
- Ethics of care

The attached illustration presents an overview of our current thinking in how these concepts could be related to each other.