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# **BOUWLUST 2 - DE VENEN**

## SUCCESS STORIES OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: ENGAGING TODAY FOR A BETTER TOMORROW

#community

#biodiversity

#Bouwlust

#garden

#reconstruction

## **INTRODUCTION**

**Talking with stakeholders requires taking things one step at a time.** Knowledge is limited before actively interacting with someone, and it seemed like, as our primary questions were being answered, new ones would arise, especially our research question combining society and biodiversity together. In this blog, we structured our storytelling in a sense of presenting the perspectives of professionals, who have devoted their work and time in the area, as well as the experiences of local residents, who display a deep connection with the neighbourhood and a high level of engagement within the community. Our aim is to offer a holistic overview of the diverse problems, the potential impacts and the motivation of people to go against the tide and contribute towards a brighter future.

### **Helga and Yolanda**

**Meeting with Helga and Yolanda convinced us that having deeper conversation with stakeholders is always the first and essential move to unfold the hidden stories behind.** When we first visited the area and came across their wonderful community garden, we could have never imagined how decisive and influential their role would be for our research. Helga's energy and willingness to engage us in their project, Yolanda's valuable knowledge of nature, quickly made us realize that this was a project of caring people, interested in contributing towards the local community.

**"We struggled for 8 months before we managed to get even a handful of people in the neighbourhood involved in our garden", Helga mentioned, highlighting local residents' engagement as one of the main challenges they had to overcome.** She explained how language barriers often make it difficult for the community to bond over common goals. She further elaborated on reasons for disengagement, explaining how several problems local residents face, like poverty and health issues will often prevent them from participating in community projects in their area. They also touched upon their difficulties to get youth involved in the garden, mentioning that, despite their attempts, the local primary school has never answered to their calls. "We try every year, but we never manage to get a response from them", Helga recounted, with subtle bitterness in her voice. Furthermore, they elaborated on the role of the Municipality, which provided them with funding and technical support, as well as Vestia, the social housing corporation, which granted them the area where the garden was created.

**After an insightful conversation, they were very enthusiastic to show us around the community garden.** There, they maintained compost made by them and the residents and explained to us the different plant species that had been planted, as well as the importance of insects in maintaining this ecosystem, showcasing the undeniable presence of biodiversity. Our meeting concluded with the promise to see them again in the local market organized by them in the following days.

### **Madeleine**

**While Helga and Yolanda laid out a puzzle of community engagement, Madeleine helped us find several missing pieces and connect some of the existing ones.** Since she and her team were the designers of [Hengelolaanpark](#), which is located in the heart of the neighbourhood, we deemed it important to listen to her story. She recounted that during the initial phase of the designing process, students from the local primary school and adult residents of the area were approached. The kids were invited to participate in interactive activities related to choosing what the park should include. Although their primary focus was sports areas, natural biodiversity was also something they wished for. Their experience with the adults was not as expected, as participation was extremely low. She cited as a possible reason the existent language barrier within the area, as the majority of mail the citizens receive from the Municipality is in Dutch, thus the invitations were probably overlooked.

**Though the local authorities didn't agree with several of their plans, citing maintenance as their primary concern, Madeleine and her team were satisfied with the environmental awareness the youth displayed.** A heart-warming moment involved the Municipality giving the chance to some of the children to "adopt" the trees that were planted in the park, a subtle gesture that contributed to strengthening their bonds with nature. "There is, fortunately, a change of perception within the years, as recent designs have been much more inclusive and the local government seems to highly consider the importance of biodiversity" Madeleine underlined.

## **Citizens of Bouwlust**

**During our first encounter with what we can define as our main stakeholder, the social workers Helga and Yolanda, we were invited to the local market of [De Venen](#).** When we arrived at the local market, Helga greeted us showing her usual enthusiasm. She was happy to introduce us to the several residents that were chatting volubly among themselves. We could easily tell that every person there wanted to be part of a community, to which we were welcomed warmly. It's true that many of them are not active in the community, often because they are busy with other issues that they legitimately prioritize. However, there are citizens who in fact care for the environment and want to keep living in a green area like Bouwlust.

**There's Cigdem, who was too busy with her children to inquire about the garden but then got involved and has been an active participant for three years now.** As many other residents we met at the market, she values nature deeply. She told us how she grew up spending a lot of time outside, in nature and that she wishes the same for her children and future generations. "They should become aware of what is important for the Earth, for the climate, for people", she said.

**Gunay cried when she first knew that the garden was going to disappear due to the reconstruction projects and would like to see more collaboration in the community garden.** While she was talking, we could feel that she was very passionate about nature and disappointed at those who don't engage with the community garden. Encouraging her neighbours to participate in the project wasn't successful. "They always have an excuse", she said. She stressed how important it is for everybody to understand that the world belongs to all of us and that everybody should contribute.

**Theo reminisced about a time when the area used to be much greener and shared with us his positive experience with the community garden.** When he first moved in the neighbourhood, there were many more tall trees and animals. Residents were more active and willing to build a community. The neighbourhood has changed since then and people's economic and social conditions have worsened through the years. From their perspective it's not only because they lack time or financial resources, instead they think people are just unwilling to participate in a bigger community. It is also a matter of cultural difference and language barriers. Bouwlust is a multicultural area and people tend to meet with neighbours that have the same origin and speak the same language, which in fact causes more and more segregation. Those few that feel passionate about taking action as a community to keep and improve their green biodiverse spaces sometimes lack substantial resources like time, financial support and human resources.

**Furthermore, as mentioned above, the majority of the buildings will be torn down and eventually be reconstructed.** The district will change in shape and in composition in terms of residence as well. This complicates the situation even further: the current residents don't even know if they're going to come back to the area or not. What we aspire is that after the reconstruction, actors that have not proved useful and supportive so far will have a more active role in the building of a renewed

community. With greater contributions from bigger actors, the few people whose stories we've told have the potential to become a wider group and create some actual change.

## **FINAL REMARKS**

**What we've observed in these past four weeks of work mainly by talking with the people involved is that there is a general lack of engagement in biodiversity-related activities and issues around the neighbourhood.** This can also be found more generally as a widespread unwillingness and disinterest in building a stronger and wider community. With the help of Helga, we've tried to reflect on the information we've collected so far and build an idea to inspire some change. Based on the needs and the resources we've established, what we aspire at is more participation among the residents through weekly meetings and activities both for youths and adults where they can get to know each other better, bond despite cultural differences and build trust towards the social workers. Moreover, with the help of the municipality and the social housing corporation's knowledge and information about biodiversity in the urban district can be spread among residents, building more social cohesion and reinvigorating the community. Starting from a smaller scale, involving the youth, understanding and accepting cultural differences we expect the community to be more receptive to participating and learning about local biodiversity initiatives.

