

# Green spaces and social cohesion

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*A study of green spaces in our designated area, Bouwlust 4, and their effects on social cohesion, knowledge sharing and safety, as well as reflections on what the future holds for such spaces. This blog is targeted at those looking to do future research in or are currently involved in projects of this sort in the Hague South-West as we think our findings and perspectives could be valuable considerations. Additionally, we have also written this blog to thank our stakeholders and celebrate some of their initiatives.*

At the beginning of the month, we started research with the aim of discovering the hidden biodiversity in an area of Bouwlust-Vredelust. We quickly realised that while urban biodiversity is important, the biggest threat to the Hague South-West, an area that holds the impressive title of greenest area of the Hague, is maintaining the neighbourhood's treasured green spaces. We were lucky to meet individuals and organisations that are pillars in their community and, although biodiversity and nature has not been their primary focus, they have made very valuable contributions to promoting and maintaining them.

## Changemakers in the Hague Zuidwest

Our meeting point on day 1 was at MengelMoestuyn which led us to a chance meeting that proved to be incredibly beneficial for our research. Within 5 minutes of arriving at the garden we met Zeynep Özdemir, a force to be reckoned with. She is a co-founder of MengelMoestuyn and intends on seeing her community thrive. MengelMoestuyn is a citizens initiative started by the [Moeders van Gaarde](#), Zeynep and a handful of other mothers in the neighbourhood, with the goal of transforming the neglected patch of green outside their apartment buildings. She also explained to us that the influence behind creating the garden was to teach their children how to grow vegetables. The care and attention put into the garden has spilled over into the green area that surrounds it. The absence of litter, the wellkept play area, the biodiversity and the expulsion of rats are a few of the successes that Zeynep shared with us and that we noticed on our visits.



Harvesting day, taken from the Groenematties instagram page.



An image of Zeynep in front of the garden on our first day in the area.

The space has developed into a meeting place for neighbours and a space of safe surveillance – where children can play but also an area that remains clean and tidy due to the constant presence of people keeping each other in check. When speaking with some of the other Moeders van Gaarde, they echoed another positive of the garden: an opportunity for social cohesion. They spoke about how the garden had provided a space for people that had lived in the buildings surrounding the gardens for over 10 years but had not met their neighbours to develop a more close-knit community. Zeynep fondly shared an anecdote about how the elderly residents in the surrounding buildings ask for people to volunteer in the gardens more often as they enjoy chatting with them from their balcony.

Zeynep pointed us in the direction of another important changemaker in the community, Kleurrijk Community Centre . We met with Achraf Hyati, a youth worker at the community centre, who stressed how valuable green spaces are for youths. He discussed the activities he does with the children and how he tries to incorporate nature in this. He showed us a project that he did with some of them where they had to photograph their neighbourhood and, as shown below. Nature featured in so many of the images, making it clear that it is something they take pride in and value.



Achraf's projects with youths at Kleurrijk, the photos on the left were taken by youths aged 16 to 23, and on the right are postcards made by students aged 8 to 16. Faces of individuals have been blocked out.



A third stakeholder is [Groenematties](#), a key sponsor of the MengelMoestuin. They are involved in other initiatives like this across the Hague and play an important role in developing skills and knowledge as they give gardening tips and teach techniques to the people volunteering in the gardens.

### The role of housing corporations

Another important sponsor of the garden is Staedion as they own the land that the green space is on. The Moeders van Gaarde have been told that the area will be reconstructed but have been assured that their garden will be restored. According to Staedion's [website](#), their only sustainable initiative involving biodiversity is to make inner gardens in their building

“more sustainable and greener”. After our encounter with the actors involved in the garden, we wanted to have an interview with Staedion as we thought it would be very beneficial to hear their perspective, unfortunately the limited time meant that this was not possible. We wanted to speak with Staedion employees working in the Hague South-West and hear their perspectives on how they view green spaces. Additionally, we also wanted to share the knowledge we have gathered to illustrate the numerous direct and indirect consequences of investing time and resources into a long-term project like the MengelMoestuyn and how this greatly benefits an area. Although the sustainability objective on their website is vague, we acknowledge that it would be too simplistic to paint housing corporations as unsupportive or not prioritising biodiversity initiatives and that interviewing them would have given a more holistic view to our research.

### “The green should stay green”

In an effort to diversify our local actor encounters, we wanted to gather information outside of the realm of MengelMoestuyn. To address this, we aimed to engage in random, casual conversations with passers-by on the street. One conversation that stood out was a conversation with a man called Arno who worked at Vrederust-West, the geriatric rehabilitation centre, and had lived in the area for a large portion of his life and felt that “the green should stay green”. The sentiment behind this statement is nice, however, with the population increasing in the Hague South, and with this, the increasing need for housing, it makes it very difficult to ensure. This raised important questions for our research group regarding if more housing comes at the expense of green spaces and, if we had more time, we would have wanted to explore this further. This particular interview also challenged us as researchers as the interviewee brought up some uncomfortable political opinions. This made us feel awkward and, in an effort to tackle the issue, we used humour and lightness to diffuse the situation.

### Biodiversity: the good, the bad, and the ugly

In this post we have talked a lot about the ‘good’ of biodiversity, and as students of sustainability, we like to focus on the positives of green spaces and biodiversity. However, our research over the past weeks has shown us that nature is not always good. Many of the different stakeholders and actors interviewed spoke about pests, rats and seagulls, when being asked about biodiversity. When we asked Zeynep about observed biodiversity and whether she thought there was a need for more diversity, she replied that biodiversity was not their priority but rather teaching their children and creating safe green spaces. She also spoke about biodiversity as a negative idea, focussing on seagulls and rats. This highlighted a key finding for us that biodiversity and green spaces fulfil different things to different people and everyone values nature for different reasons. The conversations we had diverted from biodiversity which has been one of our greatest learning outcomes as biodiversity cannot be viewed as something separate from the socio-economic environment. Achraf also brought up a vital point that nature is not always positive, making us reflect on our preconceived idea of “the more nature, the better”. He gave the example of how spaces with a lot of trees or high bushes that are not well maintained can become an unsafe space, because they create a more secluded and less visible environment.

## Reflections and a way forward

We have had a very enriching time in our encounters with stakeholders and residents in Bouwlust 4. The interviews have given us many new perspectives and the study of MengelMoestuin has shown us the ways in which green spaces can bring people together. A crucial aspect of the MengelMoestuin's success is that it was driven by residents who were able to gain the attention of larger stakeholders like Staedion. While this community garden has had a huge impact on the residents, we are aware that it should not be the case that Staedion implements such a structure in other areas as a "default option". As such, imposing a vegetable garden like this in another area might not take root if the residents are unwilling and it is not something they want. The topic of green spaces is complex because they should not be prioritised over housing needs but at the same time they should not be totally forgotten about. What the MengelMoestuin shows is that co-production is vital for reaching a middle ground.

