

## **Report from the Policy Platform meeting**

### ***Resident experiences of living in a diverse neighbourhood. Lessons from Feijenoord, Rotterdam.***

**Date:** Friday June 5th 2015

**Time:** 3–5pm

**Location:** 't Gemaal, Pretorialaan 141 in Rotterdam

**Facilitators:** Anouk Tersteeg, MSc, Prof. dr. Ronald van Kempen and Dr. Gideon Bolt

**Participants:** Leonieke Schouwenburg (Rotterdam Kenniscentrum Diversiteit), Mehmet Akozbek (Min. BZK), Melinda Lorincz and Manouk Peper (City: Maatschappelijke Ontwikkeling), Leonie Andriessse (City: Stadsontwikkeling) Arjen Verweij (Min. SZW), Wim van der Zanden (City: OBI), Vincent Florijn (City: gebiedsdirecteur), Joeri Viergever (City: gebiedsnetwerker), Hanneke Schreuders (Platform 31), Monique van Oosterhout (Woonstad), David Wills (Utrecht University).

#### *Introduction*

Ronald van Kempen opened the meeting followed by brief introductions from the participants noted above. The participants include six members of the Policy Platform for the Rotterdam case study area and five other urban professionals who are involved in the governance of urban diversity in Feijenoord, Rotterdam. Anouk gives a short presentation outlining the main goals, procedures, concepts, and organisational structure of the DIVERCITIES project. The slides used during the meeting are included in the appendix.

#### *Presentation of research findings on resident perceptions*

Anouk proceeds with the next presentation highlighting goals, procedures and findings of our research on resident perceptions of living in a diverse area. She presents the preliminary research findings on the relationships between local diversity and housing choice, residential careers, perceptions of neighbours and other local residents, activity patterns, social cohesion, social mobility, and perceptions of local policies and policy priorities. Participants are asked to reflect upon our findings.

The following issues arose:

- A participant asked if we could say more in our report about the geographical areas that people use for local activities. Local initiatives including libraries and community centres appear important for social networks and for the social mobility of residents. But what are residents preferences regarding the proximity of these initiatives? This is important to know for policy in relation to local initiatives.
- Several participants noted that other studies on resident perceptions of safety indicated that residents in Feijenoord do not feel very safe, particularly at night. We did not find this in our study.
- Several participants said that we need not see it as a problem that residents are unfamiliar with urban policy for their neighbourhood, such as the National Programme Rotterdam South (NPRS). The NPRS doesn't explicitly set out to make itself well-known, so it hardly surprising that people are unaware of them. Participants argued that it is more important that residents are aware of local initiatives—a finding in our study—because these are often funded or initiated by urban policy programmes.
- Some participants had expected that people would stay more within their own ethnic groups, pointing to less interaction within groups. Instead, we found that especially between neighbours and acquaintances, networks are quite diverse. We explained that isolated ethnic groups might exist, but we have not been able to reach them. One barrier for studying this group is that people may not speak Dutch or English, the research languages, well.
- Several participants agreed with our finding that many people in Feijenoord with a low SES take small career steps rather than large ones. It is an important finding with more realistic policy indicators and expectations needed in order to develop policies that cater better to the social mobility needs of these groups.

Following the presentation, five discussion options were given to the participants. They were asked to pick two that they would most prefer to be debated. After a short break, the two statements that received the most votes would be discussed. They were:

*Discussion 1: 'By drawing a negative image of Rotterdam South, policy makers disadvantage residents of the area'*

Participants agreed that it is a problem that residents feel discriminated against in the media and by the municipality. The perception is due to

negative images about their area of residence or their ethnicity. A participant noted that it was precisely the aim of the NPRS to contribute to a more positive image of the area and its residents. The issue of creating a negative image of an area in order to attract government investment is not only a problem in Rotterdam South, but also in other disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the Netherlands, both past and present. In order to receive attention and to convince the national or municipal government to invest money in an area, civil servants need to convince them of the urgency of the 'problems' in the area. The municipality of Rotterdam is very much focussed on attaining funding from the national government. They seek to attract funding by communicating a negative narrative of Rotterdam South. One of the participants noted that by doing so, the municipality not only affects the residents negatively, but it also discourages private funders to invest in Rotterdam South who could help to improve the quality of life in these areas. Several participants make clear that there is a demand among policy makers in the Netherlands, and for Rotterdam South in particular, to learn about policy strategies that attract funding for disadvantaged areas and that they can contribute to a more positive image of the area. It was asked whether the DIVERCITIES project can contribute to this knowledge 'gap'.

One resident explained that the municipality regularly tries to communicate positive news to the media. However, it often seems that the media is not interested in positive news. She argued that the media cannot be controlled.

*Discussion 2: 'The social mobility of disadvantaged groups on Feijenoord and Rotterdam South needs to be addressed from within rather than by attracting middle classes'*

In response to the statement, a participant argued that the statement is nuanced and therefore incorrect: social mobility of people with a low SES should be enhanced from within, but this can also be done by attracting more affluent groups. Thus, it should not be either the former or the latter. Participants agree that bringing in the middle classes does not result in socio-economically mixed social networks, but it does contribute to better facilities. One participant also believes that the middle classes can contribute to more healthy role models for disadvantaged children. Nevertheless, we (researchers) raised the point that from our study it appears that schools in Feijenoord are often very segregated in terms of ethnicity and class. While participants agree that it is important to tackle this, it was important to note that the quality of education in Feijenoord

is, in general, not so bad.

The discussion proceeded with a debate about policy discourses on the middle classes in Rotterdam. Several people argued that the municipality pays too much attention to the (native Dutch) middle classes, referring to recent housing policies in the so-called 'bak-fiets neighbourhoods' where economic and integration policies for middle class families are presented as a standard for lower classes. A participant explained that it is important to realise that these policy discourses are political strategies that often do not translate into practice. Also, the amount of money that is reserved to attract and support the middle classes is not as much as one might expect. Nevertheless, participants agree with the findings from our study that policy makers should be more aware of and actively encourage the people with low SES taking 'small steps' in their working careers. One participant added that it is also important for policy to more effectively support the many residents with high education levels and high potential in these diverse and disadvantaged areas so as to achieve upwards social mobility. Finally, participants raised a finding of our study on the importance of speaking Dutch for social mobility and social cohesion. A few years ago all migrants (including the poor ones) need to fund Dutch language courses themselves. A participant argued that, in practice at least, there are still many opportunities for migrants to follow Dutch language classes free of charge. Other participants suggested that policy makers could consider re-introducing low-cost Dutch language courses.

### *Wrap up and reflection on the session*

Ronald ended the discussion explaining that we would be happy to present our findings to policy makers in other meetings or settings. We concluded the meeting with drinks and nibbles provided by Neighbourhood Kitchen, an initiative from WP5. In this more informal setting people offered their opinions on the round table experience. Those present at last year's round table said this experience was better as there were fewer participants, those here listened to each other more intently, there was more time for discussion and the discussion was more structured. The organisers thought that allowing participants to choose the discussion topics may have also improved the quality of the meeting; it was more interactive and focussed on the interests of participants.

**Report written by: Anouk Tersteeg**