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Commentary

Working on the Root System of Social Connections in a Community

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This manuscript explores the transformative potential of neighbourhoods as pivotal units of societal change, employing the metaphor of a forest's root system to highlight the intricate web of social connections foundational to vibrant communities. Advocating for an asset-based, relational strategy, it underscores the importance of nurturing community connections to foster belonging, mutual support, and collective efficacy. Through the lens of Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) and the case of the Voorstad neighbourhood in Deventer, Netherlands, it demonstrates how grassroots initiatives can create sustainable, inclusive communities. By urging policymakers and practitioners to prioritize relationships as the cornerstone for addressing complex social challenges, this work suggests a nuanced approach for building more connected, resilient, and democratic societies.

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> "All that is gold does not glitter, Not all those who wander are lost; The old that is strong does not wither, Deep roots are not reached by the frost" (J.R.R. Tolkien, The Fellowship of the Ring).[1]

Introduction

In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs noted[2]: "Lowly, unpurposeful and random as they may appear, sidewalk contacts are the small change from which a city's wealth of public life may grow." Building on her insight, neighbourhoods, with their sidewalks and various other bumping places and gathering spaces, are the nests within which associational life is subtly and unceremoniously hatched. While modern life valorises the myth of the individual hero who saves the day, neighbourhoods and all the "small change" they host are the unsung workhorses of democracy. They function when they function well, like organisms pushing towards wholeness, and have the potential to be primary units of change in society if we learn to see them in new, more productive ways. Currently, the potential of a neighbourhood as a unit of change is generally unrecognised in Westernised societies because we need to clarify public narratives for speaking about the core value of a connected community of place.

In this article, as well as explaining why the actual value of a connected neighbourhood is generally invisible in Western societies and deeply

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undervalued by policymakers, we also offer a modest solution for this society-wide myopia.

Using a forest as an analogy, while it is often hard to see the "wood from the trees", it is even harder to see the underground root system and mycelium network behind/beneath the scenes that weaves the forest's life into a wood-wide web of interrelatedness. The same may be said about neighbourhoods. They, too, have undergrowth, an underground network of relationality that offers vast untapped possibilities for individual and collective well-being.

Of course, we are not the first to advocate for making visible the invisible associational life of local place-based communities. Alexis de Tocqueville, in Democracy in America[3], argued that the health of a democratic society is highly contingent on the quality of functions performed by citizens and their associations acting collaboratively. One-hundred and sixty-five years later, in *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam made clear the irreplaceable value of social capital[4]. He cites declining social capital in America as "one of the nation's most serious public health challenges" (p. 37).

Still, while concerns about loneliness and social isolation and evidence of its harm grow, care must be taken to avoid knee-jerk superficial responses. More on this later in the article. Among current commentators on loneliness, Julianne Holt-Lunstad is one of the foremost experts on the extent to which loneliness and social isolation are risk factors for mortality[5]. Her findings echo Putnam's. The Brigham University Study she led, which canvassed three million participants, found that increased social connection is linked to a 50% reduced risk of premature death.

Such findings require careful consideration. They teach us the value of social connections rather than the value of activities and programmes for lonely people. The forest's trees can be superficially connected above the ground by a network of overlapping ropes that increase their useful value for humans climbing from tree to tree but do little to enhance the collective well-being of the wood-wide web. Similarly, the activities and programmes parachuted into neighbourhoods by outsider actors to address issues as they perceive them, such as loneliness, crime, drug use, poverty, etc., do little to nourish the social soil, associational life, and collective efficacy of the neighbourhood. And they do even less to address the root causes of these issues.

The Neighbourhood Effect

Neighbourhoods are the seedbed of democracy and offer a means by which that overlooked root system and mycelia of relationships mentioned above can be valued and evaluated in respectful and non-invasive ways. However, in scant regard for the evidence, the vast majority of socioeconomic interventions and policies in Western societies are mile-wide, inch-deep, which is to say they are so general and spread so thin that while they may create waves at national, regional, or city scales, they rarely meaningfully hit the shores of real people's lives and habitats. At the same time, the evidence calls for the reverse, an inch-wide, mile-deep approach, what Robert Sampson calls the Neighbourhood Effect[6].

The Neighbourhood Effect is not about looking for an unrealistic version of society reflective of an idealised past when everyone looked out for each other and never locked their doors. If such a past ever existed, we are not advocating its return. Instead, we want to uncover a way of enabling citizens to organise

their corner of society towards the common good, but in a manner that is fit for purpose in today's individualised consumer world.

Altruism or Enlightened Self-Interest?

Most individuals who act collaboratively are not driven by altruism but by enlightened self-interest, just as with people living in 1830s America or the Netherlands of those bygone days. Then, as now, when people collaborate, it is because they care enough about an issue to do something about it while recognising that they must act together with others who share their concerns or priorities to realise their ambitions. In a more virtuous sense, it is also true to say that citizens enter the civic square because they recognise that their well-being is intimately interconnected with that of their neighbours. They act in the spirit of what is known as Ubuntu in South Africa: I am because we are. For instance, I may have an incredible singing voice and want to start a choir, but I cannot do it alone. I need others, and they need me.

That said, not all collective actions enhance the common good. Movements born out of populism, polarisation, and extremism can be fuelled by the collective action of one group against another to vile ends. While acknowledging the shadow side of collective action, we are not talking about a mob or a sect but a thoughtful and generative process of mutualism that actively rejects factionalism in favour of the common good and holds a welcome for the stranger. What we find so compelling about the neighbourhood as a unit of change is the small, modest, bounded scale, big enough to get beyond single-minded individualism yet small enough to involve everyone's personal contribution to a cause bigger than one person. Getting to such a level of wholeness is far from easy, but as we will demonstrate below, it is well worth the effort and resources required.

Products and Processes

Let us take a moment to share some of our reflections on the problems we observe in many of the more conventional approaches to communities of place and, indeed, in addressing societal issues more broadly. In our experience, when people take associational action, what is traditionally seen and valued most are their activities and the project itself, not the relationships or the processes by which they cultivate trust and belonging. Conventional attitudes count the outputs of a project and the number of its members as the high-water mark of achievement, how well they perform, and the audiences they attract. Funders audit the activities of projects but rarely ask if they are travelling at the spread of trust. And so, societies often fail to value the process by which associations have gotten to that point where they can produce, and, indeed, the unseen ripple effects of what they are doing and how they do it are rarely noticed, let alone celebrated. We foreground products and background processes when the reverse is required to sustainably address socioeconomic issues, including security, food sovereignty, family support, local economics, environmental stewardship, loneliness, and social isolation. Here, drawing on the distinction that the German-American psychologist and psychoanalyst Erich Fromm made between Having and Being is helpful.

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Community as a Verb: Having and Being

Fromm (1900-1980)[7] noted that one of the side effects of modernity is that what you have tends to matter more than your qualities as a person or, indeed, who you are becoming through your efforts to live authentically. As a result, nouns are now used where, in the past, verbs would have been. Fromm offers a powerful sample of everyday speech patterns:

"Doctor, I have a problem. I have insomnia. Although I have a beautiful house, nice children, and a happy marriage, I have many worries." Some decades ago, instead of "I have a problem," the patient probably would have said, "I am troubled."; instead of "I have insomnia," "I cannot sleep"; instead of "I have a happy marriage," "I am happily married."

This pattern of speech is not a benign turn of phrase. It has serious unintended consequences. When we speak like this, we distort our relationship to things. "I have a neighbour" replaces the subjective experience of being neighbourly. "The 'I' of experience is replaced with the 'it' of possession," says Fromm. But in reality, nobody can have a neighbour or a neighbourhood. Neighbours and neighbourhoods are not things that we can possess. What happens instead is that people who speak like this (in the having mode) have transformed themselves, their neighbours, and their immediate surroundings into "passive, disconnected objects". They have what Martin Buber called "I-It" relationships instead of more life-giving "I-Thou" interrelatedness.

When thinking of community in the having mode, we tend to elementalise, oversimplify, and try to possess the beauty and complexity of this organic generative system. The same is true when we think of social issues in the having mode instead of the being mode. I have a mental health problem (having mode), and I am distressed and overwhelmed (being mode), which are fundamentally different ways of narrating lived experiences. The having mode depoliticises the person - they passively possess or are possessed by "a problem" which can misguidedly conflate their identity. In the being mode, they can speak of what is getting in the way of more aliveness and their desires for their future. The distress is not their identity but a feature of their internal and external experiences. Our modern speech patterns around community suffer significantly from the overuse of possessive nouns, "I have" or "I have not" got a community. My community has a drug problem.

The other problem with confusing the having mode with the being mode is that we tend to address only symptoms, not the root causes. For instance, we offer relief actions while failing to address structural inequity.

When we move toward speech acts in the being mode, we replace such thought patterns as described above with "I am" statements. "I am a member of a community that needs me." We begin to see the proverbial wood from the trees and go deeper into the root system of community life where we feel more alive, more connected to ourselves, others, and non-human nature, and less dissociated from our agency and the resources and potential within and around us.

In the being mode, we understand that people are often lonely not because of a character flaw or poor lifestyle choices but because of barriers to participation. The two tools available to us in democratic societies to address barriers to participation in social and economic life are institutional services and associational life. Each operates as its unique operating system. The first offers goods and services (having), and the second offers aliveness (being).

This explains why, for many, the term loneliness is considered a stigma. Loneliness is further compounded by the all-too-regular fear of becoming a "burden" on others. People, however labelled, want to have a valued social role, belong, and be missed on the days they don't show up.

The Hidden Danger of Projects

Returning to the analogy of the wood-wide web as the proxy for talking about the hidden relationality of a neighbourhood and its potential to deepen, activities and projects are like the trees and branches of the forest; hidden beneath the having mode of activities and projects is a root system of relationships operating in the being mode that holds the keys to the well-being and democratic participation of those who live there, their local environment, economy, and culture. Encounters in the neighbourhood's civic life create a root system of connections between people operating in the being mode. Every neighbourhood already has such a root system, but too often, it remains fragile and only an inch deep due to neglect, lack of animation, or oppression by outside forces. Yet when nurtured, the root system has the potential to proliferate across the ecosystem of a neighbourhood and become resilient, even antifragile, creating a generative being effect with the carrying capacity to take on a range of essential functions, chief among them being health creation itself. As noted earlier, the Harvard criminologist Robert Sampson describes it as the Neighbourhood Effect[6].

He notes that neighbours' willingness to intervene in each other's safety is a far more significant predictor of safety than the number of police officers on patrol in a neighbourhood. Because people have found each other, knowing each other, knowing what they have to offer each other, and being able to support each other is not just a nice-to-have; it is, in fact, a critical social and political determinant of health, safety, prosperity, and democracy. Of course, it is not sufficient to solve all problems. It is nevertheless essential to a functioning and caring society.

Here, we wish to sound a note of caution. While this root system is essential, more is needed to address all socioeconomic challenges or provide for all life necessities. Projects, goods, services, and professional interventions will still be required to supplement what can be created in the being mode. People will still need to have things to function. But services cannot provide meaning, and projects alone mean little if they are not rooted in trust and kinship.

The Power of Connected Communities

Connected communities rooted in the being mode do not just happen. They are animated. Community building is what animates these neighbourhood root systems (hence why the terms Community Building and Community Animation are used interchangeably), helping to precipitate the story of what happens between people and is done by people as they discover, connect, and mobilise local assets and assume collective functions of their choosing. Such community-building initiatives are enlivened by a care for the whole neighbourhood, not single issues. While people may work on a particular project, they do so in a way that adopts a God's-eye view of the entire neighbourhood. Connected neighbourhoods are not composed of one connected circle of people thinking and acting in concert like an orchestra. Instead, they are made up of seemingly endless overlapping circles of associations connected in all sorts of synchronicity into an association of associations.

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While projects tend to emerge based on conformity to funding criteria set by outside donors and benefactors, a connected community cannot be done to or for a community. In other words, it is not what happens to people from the outside but what is created from the inside out.

The Root Is in the Fruit

Community building is about the vitality of connections, not the tasks they perform or the possessions they accrue. Such vitality is most evident in the quality of relationships rather than the quality of projects. When these relationships are good, multiple, energetic, open, etc., more happens in a neighbourhood as an outgrowth, which is to say the root is in the fruit. The fruits of such community building range from people visiting each other, organising things together, discussing small and large matters, having fun, and starting initiatives to challenge those institutions not operating in community-centred ways. In short, building a community becomes a culture of constantly broadening circles of participation until every human and non-human being is included and revered. In the connected community, all means all!

It is also clear that when citizens decide on what they care about enough to act upon together, they own and care for the process in a way they cannot if the agenda is imposed from outside in. In other words, if the neighbourhood is labelled as damaged and sick, the doctor will be the key actor. At the same time, if the community defines the priority as their well-being, they become the key actors, with the doctor and other professionals acting in a supplementary support role.

Patrick and Leendert had little in the way of possessions. Nevertheless, they are wonderful human beings. Here is the story of how they helped build a connected community where they lived in the Voorstad neighbourhood of Deventer.

The Voorstad Neighbourhood of Deventer

That is exactly how things started in the Voorstad neighbourhood of Deventer in the Netherlands. One day, Patrick and Leendert were sitting on deck chairs on the brick-paved footpath outside their front doors, chatting with each other as they did most days. The conversation turned to the harsh street environment; they felt there were too many bricks and insufficient plants and trees to soften the view. So, they initially started digging up some of the bricks—just a few under their windows—to reveal the soil underneath. They then used the bricks they had dug up to create a boxlike border around the space and filled it with compost and some plants. And just like that, they had a mini street garden.

They had no permission to do this and had little concern about what, if any, trouble they might get into with city officials. As they assumed their usual positions on their deck chairs the next day, some of their neighbours gathered to admire the new street garden under their windows. Then, a neighbour asked Patrick and Leendert to create a mini street garden. Both men were unemployed and had the time to do so; they were pleased to be asked. It was not long before street gardens began popping up on both sides of their street, compliments of Patrick and Leendert. They barely had time to sit down but loved every minute of their newfound roles. Neighbours on other streets heard about the street gardens, and requests started pouring in. Soon, both men mentored others on even more streets to create mini street gardens.

One day, while speaking with a lady knitting on a chair outside her house, Patrick told her he had seen others also knitting and suggested connecting her with them. She liked the idea, and so began the Voorstad knitting club. The members started by knitting scarves for the community-owned football club called the Go Ahead Eagles, which led to a Guinness World Records attempt to knit a scarf long enough to wrap around the entire neighbourhood as an outward demonstration of the warmth of their community.

Patrick and Leendert met many neighbours with beautiful ideas for improving their neighbourhood. They would say, "I'd love to do X if only there were three or four neighbours to help me." On nearly every occasion, these two amigos knew just the people to connect them with. One day, while speaking with parents about the absence of a playground in the neighbourhood, Patrick and Leendert got them involved, along with other neighbours, in a mini treasure hunt to find an empty lot in the neighbourhood. The parents discovered a perfect location and created their own playground, ably decorated with mini gardens.

With hundreds of mini street gardens, a three-kilometres-long scarf knitted by 185 people and wrapped around the neighbourhood, and a playground—all handmade and homespun—it was now clear that something special was stirring up, something more extensive than the sum of all these significant initiatives: this disconnected neighbourhood was becoming a Connected Community; the culture of this place was changing. In addition to individual initiatives, new associations were formed every other week. Patrick, Leendert, the knitting club, and the playground parents agreed to meet with others from the neighbourhood and leaders from the football club.

Several new community initiatives had been planned by the end of a day of storytelling, celebration, and visioning. Two ideas that emerged that day would go down in local lore for many years. The first was to establish the Street Gardens Academy and appoint Patrick and Leendert as the directors so that they could feel proud of their achievements up to that point and show that they were authorised by their neighbours to mentor others in creating even more street gardens and playgrounds in the neighbourhood. The second idea involved knitting a scarf to wrap around a home allocated in 2015 by a local housing company to a family who had fled Syria following the Syrian civil war that started in 2011.

When asked to explain why they wanted to wrap an entire house in a scarf, one neighbour summed it up as follows: "If we are serious about being a warm neighbourhood here in Voorstad, then we must be willing to welcome strangers and be able to demonstrate that; what better way than to wrap the house of our newest neighbours in a scarf with the colours of our community football team, stitched by the hands of hundreds of their new neighbours?"

Making the Invisible Visible

The details of the Voorstad adventure are essential because they feature aspects of community life rarely valorised: the connections. This process of creating relationships operates in the sub-liminal spaces of our neighbourhoods, where the flower boxes become the cover story for what is being fertilised, the root system of human and non-human relationships in the undergrowth of the neighbourhood. As the root system became sturdier, more diverse, and synchronous, the community became more vibrant and produced vitality from root to fruit. The playgrounds, scarves, and radical acts of inclusiveness blossomed in the forest's life in spring.

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Like a root system, the human, physical, environmental, economic, and institutional assets used to fertilise growth in Voorstad were largely invisible for the other three seasons. Hence, with the permission of those involved, we share this story to make the invisible visible and celebrated all year round, and not just in springtime.

In a Nutshell

Just as the root system of a forest produces trees, shrubs, flowers, and mushrooms, attracting bees, birds, and caterpillars, and producing oxygen for the wider surroundings, that is much like how it works in a community of place. The power does not lie in working on projects and activities but in working on relationships. Then the projects follow, which in turn, if done in a being, not having, mode, generates new initiatives, producing abundance, aliveness, and collective power.

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Investing in that root system is advisable for sustainable solutions to social, environmental, and political issues. Then, people will develop collective efficacy and interdependence. And from the sturdy root system, the most equitable flowers and trees (activities, services, groups, associations, etc.) grow.

This root system approach will also lead to better institutions that supplement community capabilities and equitably re-distribute resources so all can participate in the associational life of the commons.

"Community is a word meaning "people in relationship." Association is a word meaning "people in powerful relationships." A powerful community finds its own way through ever-increasing connections of people who exercise their right to freedom of association in order to create a better future together." John McKnight[8]

Association of Associations

While each association has a particular focus that is usually not the neighbourhood as a whole, in an "association of associations," each group adds its power to the vision of a better, more holistic neighbourhood. In this way, disconnected associations of diverse interests become the unified neighbourhood force for a new way for citizens to produce their future. This offers a form of unity that respects the diversity of each association while also mobilising their collective power. In this way, it forms a unity that does not demand uniformity.

Implications for Policy

In regular policy practice, we often do things the other way around. We devise agendas, projects, and programs based on policy. The policy then determines the agenda for residents, and thus 'resident involvement' and 'ownership' are undermined. Are we to suppose the policymakers (on behalf of 'the system') hope the root system will pick it up whichever cause is deemed worthy? It would appear so, given how often we hear: 'We have come up with a government-sponsored programme to address 'x', and now it has to be secured through civic participation, volunteerism, and the wider efforts of civil society.' History shows this approach has a counterproductive effect on communities. That is because such programmes are not rooted in the neighbourhood from the start. They have entered the neighbourhood from outside: fruits without indigenous roots. If you invest in the root system, what is created is 'community secured.' It is sustainable change because it comes from the community itself.

Community building based on the ABCD principles is concerned with working on that root system of connections from the beginning. The more connections, the stronger and more resilient the neighbourhood fabric. And the more vital and visionary the neighbourhood will be. That is often invisible work. You connect with the energy that exists in neighbourhoods. You go at the pace of residents and not that of programmes or policy agendas. You create opportunities for encounters between people and make room for their ideas, initiatives, and desires, but you do not direct them. You work with resident connectors on maintaining and nurturing all connections and relationships that arise. You are the gardener of the community. Some management and maintenance remain necessary. We must continue to pay attention to a bridge, a building, public greenery, and our health. It is the same for people living together in

neighbourhoods; we must attend to the underground, the root system, while also being attentive to what is happening above ground.

A psychological sense of community has a binding function for residents. Residents in the Rotterdam neighbourhood, Bospolder-Tussendijken, mentioned the following community root system values as being important: doing things together, friendships, solidarity, togetherness, a place for everyone, feeling at home, feeling stronger, having a say, feeling safe, sharing, working together, attention, and support. These values reveal the intrinsic drive to work on community building. After all, these are being needs, not having needs; they require a process, not a programme.

Increasingly, agencies and policymakers are recognising the value of communities as key to policy results because how else can societies achieve sustainability goals? Without the direction and commitment of local communities, issues such as care and safety cannot adequately and equitably be addressed. Safety in the neighbourhood is largely a community matter, and the key to good care is your nearby community, albeit with services and state resources taking a supplementary role alongside communities.

Community Function: Carrying Capacity

Much like a forest can perform functions within its sphere and beyond, such as being the lungs of a city, communities of place can take on functions that are essential for the well-being of residents and the natural environment. Asset-Based Community Development Institute Co-founder John McKnight has designated seven community functions: care, health, safety, raising children, sustainability, local economy, and food production.

The Honeycomb Effect

In their recent book[9], The Connected Community, Cormac Russell and John McKnight develop their thinking on the seven functions of a connected community:

1. Enabling health
2. Ensuring security
3. Stewarding ecology
4. Shaping local circular economies
5. Contributing to local food production
6. Raising our children
7. Co-creating care.

The underlying principle is that as local communities become more connected, they become stronger in non-centralised, disaggregated, self-organising, and emergent ways, and they become more ‘productive’ in these seven domains. More importantly, these domains do not function like parts of a clock. Instead, they are dynamically interconnected, creating a honeycomb-like effect.

Nurturing Ecology

Indigenous and holistic ways adopt the ecological viewpoint from which the interrelatedness of the seven functions can be most clearly perceived so that, from this perspective, the health of the honeybee, raising children, and sustainable livelihoods are as one. This deep interrelatedness brings a balance

among all the elements of a local ecosystem for it to thrive, functioning generatively in the good times and regeneratively after crises. The neighbourhood can be seen then as an ecosystem or organism, like a forest or a human body, and through this lens, we could ask, is the organism of our neighbourhood functioning well? Is it doing its work as nature intends? Which is to say, is it generating anything, and can it regenerate in the face of crises? Consider how honeybees help maintain a thriving neighbourhood by cross-pollinating the seven functions. Honeybees help a neighborhood thrive because:

- By taking care of bees, we (humans) **steward our ecology.**
- Bees, in turn, pollinate an incredible number of crops that we consume, such as apples, blueberries, watermelons, almonds, and many more, improving crop yields and thereby **shaping our local economies,** especially in farming communities. They also contribute to **local food production.**
- Honey and beeswax are valued products in every community and generate a worthwhile income, **shaping our local economies.**
- Bees' products are a source of natural medicine/healing; for example, honey is used to care for minor wounds, and propolis, a natural resin collected from the buds of conifers and other trees by honeybees, has anti-bacterial and anti-fungal properties, **enabling health.**
- Bee hives can be made from local materials at low cost or no cost – allowing anyone to get started. Bees are usually freely available in urban and rural communities, especially if we do them no harm and take steps to keep them coming back, such as rewilding urban spaces. Creating a beehive with local materials is also a valuable way to model for and enable children to **steward their neighbourhood ecology**.
- Tending beehives also creates a tacit oversight in the community, which helps in **ensuring security.**
- Also, beekeeping need not be time-consuming. It can, therefore, fit around other commitments such as a job elsewhere, volunteering, child care, and/or other caring responsibilities, helping us **co-create care**.
- The products of bees: honey, beeswax, pollen, and propolis can be used to make **valuable secondary products** – this creates income-generating possibilities for more people, helping spin-off businesses grow in the **local economy.**
- Beekeeping generates income **without destroying** forests or other habitats and is an important means of **stewarding our local ecologies**.
- Beekeeping is a generative and regenerative activity. By pollinating flowering plants, bees feed themselves while ensuring food for future generations. In this way, biodiversity is maintained. The bee is a model citizen in a generative community with much to teach its human neighbours.

The diagram below further illustrates the bees' interrelatedness with the seven functions (the honeycomb effect).

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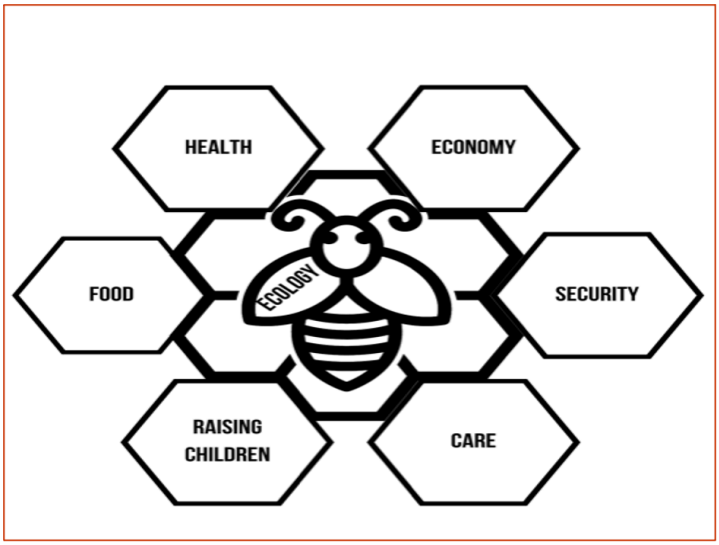

Figure 1. The honeycomb effect in the relatedness of the seven functions

Community is Not a Problem to Be Fixed

For many policymakers, the community is often a problem to be fixed or an instrument to achieve policy success. This can lead to paternalistic and extractive behaviours in the form of professional overreach. It also promotes instrumentalisation, where outside institutions view communities in instrumental terms as passive recipients or helpful volunteers to fulfil institutional agendas. In such a professionalised and bureaucratic paradigm, civic participation is about getting people to engage in the activities that "helping institutions" have decided are "good for them". This is damaging to the individual and collective agency of citizens. At scale, this has the effect of inverting democracy, where the role of the citizen is defined as that which happens after the vital work of the professional is done. That is not the case for residents of the stories featured here. They are busy with the work of connecting with their community. In their minds, they are participating first and foremost with their neighbours. They are in the driving seat, with institutions in a supportive role. For them, the role of the professional is defined as that which happens after the work of citizens is done. That doesn't mean that the work of a professional is not essential. It means that professional institutions do not have a monopoly on solving societal challenges.

Residents know that the development of a community is non-linear. Some call it chaos, others eclectic. As the song says, "It's not what you do but the way that you do it." And the sequence you do it in. A community-first approach creates a more democratic and inclusive movement for change.

The Role of a Paid Community Builder

Being a community builder in a neighbourhood involves deep intentionality in nurturing connections. These connections are one-to-one, association-to-association, and ultimately towards an association of associations. It is a combined and continuous will towards broadening circles of community

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participation: more connections, deeper connections, more diverse connections, collective connections, and energy in the connections. That is the groundwork of a community builder. This will lead and grow together into a second circle in which communities adhere to the values mentioned by those Rotterdam citizens, translated into community characteristics such as identity and involvement, values and norms development, cooperation and initiatives, support and help, sharing social capital and development, rituals, stories, and moments for reflection and learning. This creates the outward visibility of a community and the inward psychological sense of belonging. It is the fertile soil, slightly different everywhere. Care, health, sustainability, learning, growing, safety, local economy, food production, and consumption will grow, not as separate domains, but as a stew of everything: a well-functioning community.

Only that is not what you, as a community builder, are about, nor is that what you are paid to do. That is what the community does. You cannot be deployed or paid for that, which residents must do. You are the facilitator, not the leader. The community builder is about creating the conditions and facilitating connections in the neighbourhood—the middle circle of community building. They will work closely with neighbourhood connectors and formal and informal associations to achieve this climatology, while not determining the direction.

Three Layers of Community

This community circle is visible in Deventer, Netherlands, where residents refer to the ABCD work in these three layers.

Layer 1 (first contact) is the hard work of neighbourhood makers and neighbourhood connectors: the real community builders. They are tinkering with connections between residents. On beautiful days such as a neighbour's day, on rainy days when they ring the doorbell in the street, at meetings,

Here is a schematic depiction of what this looks like

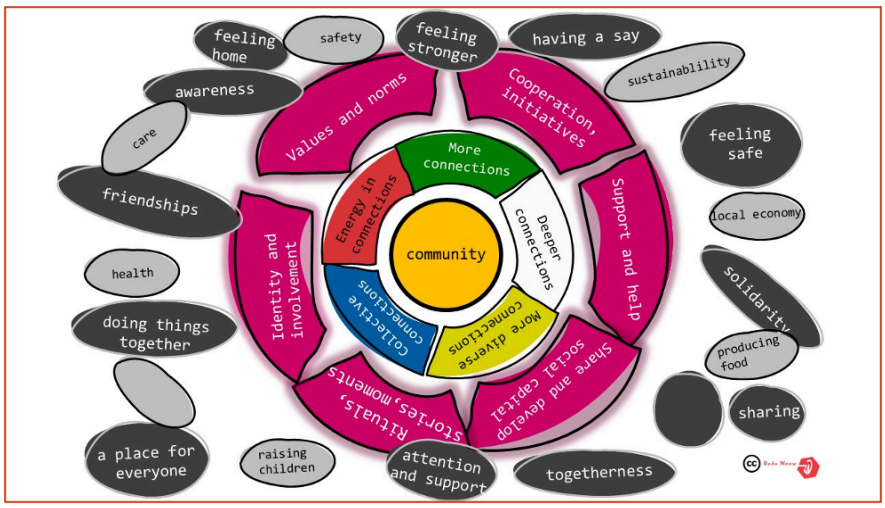

Figure 2.

in the coffee corner of the supermarket, during a chat, everything is a reason for contact. Sometimes romantically translated into 'making more connections', but

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even more often, hard work, setbacks, and dealing with ten 'Nos' because you know the next one will be a 'Yes'.

Layer 2 (going deeper) is the root system beneath the ground (layer 1). That which grows when we work on connections. Residents and community builders in Deventer indicate what has changed in that root system. So where has the individuality (the DNA) become more visible, and what do the relationships in the community mean for the community? Has it led to more friendships, more mutual attention, more solidarity, or a sense of security? Has the community become more of a hospitable place for everyone, and do more people feel at home there?

Layer 3 (mobilising in thoughtful, well-rooted action) is evident in the initiatives that have become visible above the ground: A children's club, a neighbourhood vegetable garden, a group of neighbours installing solar panels, a walking club, a community living room, and so on. None of them grow on stony ground. They are rooted in rich social soil.

How Do We Evaluate Our Work at the Associational Level?

Many important lessons can be drawn from the resident-led initiatives described in this article that are relevant to institutions and communities. Firstly, they teach us what truly counts as a means of evaluation. Counting is a limited tool when it comes to sustainable community development. It does not help us much in determining the quality of the root system: friendships or webs of mutual support, creating a culture of interdependence. There are, nevertheless, five forms of connections and social capital worth counting:

1. One-to-one relationships
2. More than two people being connected in a new association
3. Individuals (previously not connected) being connected to an existing association
4. Individuals connected to a hyper-local institution that is community-oriented.
5. Associations connecting with other associations.

Each can be counted to demonstrate the depth of associational life (layer 1). We can deepen our appreciation of social capital by paying more attention to what is happening in the being mode and how that feels. Focusing more on how people do community life together will bring us to layer 2.

Layer 3 is concerned with Action Outcomes. As noted, most conventional institutions, donors, and policymakers are more interested in action outcomes (the fruits on the branches) than social capital (the root system and the mycelium network that connects the roots to form the wood-wide web). They want to know what happened as a direct result of the connections and have little interest in the quality of those relationships or the conditions that gave rise to those qualities. For example, it was assumed by a municipality that two lunch clubs specifically for lonely residents were adequate for a neighbourhood of 5,000 inhabitants, and they measured success by the number of lonely people in each club. Based on our analysis, we would evaluate them as being stuck in layer three and having a mode with little concern for sustainability or aliveness. They are in the business of hot housing the symptoms of loneliness instead of addressing the root causes.

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There's a big difference between thinking of communities as means to help improve public services and recognising that communities are essential to health and well-being in their own right. The challenge is to nurture the ecology of the community, not count the attendance of siloed groups in segregated programmes. Suppose, in contrast, that a Municipality supporting a neighbourhood to become more connected through an ABCD community-building process wished to evaluate the neighbourhood impact the approach has on loneliness and social isolation. If they worked closely with residents, especially those at risk of not having their contributions valued, to see if:

A. Socially isolated people are missed on the days they don't attend various clubs and groups.
B. More associations are actively creating spaces in the neighbourhood for the contributions of marginalised or oppressed individuals and groups.
C. People who were isolated or solely dependent on institutional support are experiencing more interdependence and shared lives with non-paid, freely given support in the neighbourhood.
D. Helping institutions and local associations are concerned about the quality of life of locals who are socially isolated or simply the quality of programmes they are promoting.
E. Neighbours are joining in solidarity with socially and politically isolated neighbours to ensure they have the support they need to participate in society fully, and there is reciprocity in those relationships.

To evaluate this community-centred way of working in partnership with residents, supportive institutions must seek insights across all three layers, as described above. Over and over, we have seen attitudes change due to deepening associational life through Community Building. Better stories of collective desires and combined capabilities eclipse old stories of damage and deficit. It is possible to measure such attitudinal change by asking questions at the initiative's beginning and following up within a year or so with the same questions to determine changing attitudes. One example is the Sense of Community Index: https://senseofcommunity.com/soc-index/

Better still, it is worth adopting a blended resident-led approach to learning with methods like the Developmental Evaluation (DE) and Most Significant Change (MSC) technique, where, on an ongoing basis, residents lead their own action-learning process and share their learning with each other and local institutions that they are in mutual alliance with.

Much has been written about the importance of Community Participation in the Netherlands. In that regard, an increase in membership of associations, an increase in shared efforts among, between, and beyond the members, the depth and breadth of dialogue, and an increase in diversity can all be measured. These measures are far more meaningful than numbers in attendance, albeit an increase in attendance is also worth measuring. In evaluation terms, it is the combination of insights concerning the quality and quantity of a) connections, b) attitude change, and c) community participation that leads to indicators of culture change and sustainable development.

Conclusion

Well-being is not an individual medical issue; it's social, economic, and political. Hence, population health improves due to collective, not just individual, agency, which, in turn, means health improvement requires community building, not

signposting or linking individuals to activities or projects. The same applies to security, environmental sustainability, child welfare, and general equity.

Many policy implications arise from the growth of grassroots Community Building across the Netherlands for those policymakers convinced that their crucial role is to support, not direct, the growth of associational life. Here are some foundational questions for consideration concerning Civic Participation in the Netherlands:

1. Are there initiatives in the Netherlands that consider their primary task to enhance the proliferation of associational life? If so, how can policies or state resources be offered to fertilise these initiatives? If not, how can such initiatives be incubated?
2. To what degree are the effects of increasing institutionalisation of community functions in the Netherlands a significant deterrent to associational proliferation in neighbourhoods as we describe it here? What research is being undertaken in the Netherlands to demonstrate the unintended environmental impacts on social capital?
3. What could be done to limit such institutional overreach? For example, before introducing interventions affecting local neighbourhoods, obliging large institutions to conduct social capital impact assessments (similar to Environmental Impact Assessments that housing/commercial developers must undertake).
4. Are there institutions in the Netherlands currently supporting but not directing neighbourhood associational life right to the very root system? How can they be supported to share insights?
5. How can current associations of associations in neighbourhoods in the Netherlands be better supported?

Seeing is believing, but it does not automatically follow that seeing is also valuing. To ensure we value associational life at all levels of society, we must continue to avoid modal confusion between the having mode and the being mode. We must also move beyond fragmented, top-down, and siloed approaches to change that superficially address symptoms in isolated ways and fail to get to the root of the multi-layered challenges if we are to avoid playing whack-a-mole with each socioeconomic and environmental crisis due to the elementalised ways of addressing issues. As we try to “fix” one “problem,” ten others pop up around them as a direct result of our misguided interventions. Our world and its challenges are ecological, not elemental, more a forest than a laboratory. Most of those challenges require full and broad participation from citizens and their associations, and that means working close to people’s doorsteps on a scale where there is a felt sense of ownership and the potential to animate collective agency.

James C. Scott, in *Seeing Like A State*, notes that a form of what he terms ‘high modernism’ looms large as a feature of how many states approach the communities they serve, especially those that are distant or resistant to the conformities of the state. For high modernism, read top-down social engineering. He also notes that a feature of this imperial impulse is the imposition on communities of form and structure that is easiest for the state to manage and control. Using the way states have traditionally brought forests under their aegis and within their taxation systems, he notes that trees in forests don’t grow in straight lines. Historically, states have imposed those conventions to make forests “legible” so that they can be more easily counted, measured, and taxed.

While the state of the Netherlands may wish, with all good intent, to encourage more civic participation, if they are to do so in sustainable ways, they must resist the impulse to line citizen initiatives into rows of legible activities and projects that they pre-approve, sponsor, audit, and ultimately control. A new form of stewardship is required, where the state of the Netherlands takes on an enabling role.

For a democratic enabling state to see further, it must be guided by the vision of its citizens; through their eyes and inventiveness, they will learn to see like a community and then serve accordingly. Even better than seeing like a community is being like a community. An enabling state creates the space for citizens and their associations to function like a community. The roots of that democratic promise are found within the three layers of community described above and sustained over time within the associational root systems of our neighbourhoods, out of which emerge the seven interrelated functions of connected communities. As we address the poly-crisis of our shared futures, it is becoming increasingly clear that an alternative future will not emerge from next year's Conference of the Parties of the UNFCCC (COP28). Still, viewed from our neighbourhoods and regional biospheres, the primary unit of change is closer than we may think when it comes to the sustainability of our pale blue dot. While thinking globally, we must redouble our efforts to act locally.

Through its national community-building initiative, the Netherlands has made a compelling start in the right direction towards reseeding associational life in neighbourhoods. We are at a point of divergence in this national story. Paraphrasing the American poet Robert Frost, two roads diverge; let us take the "one less travelled by", rooted in the belief that that will make all the difference.

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Ethics Statement

Written informed consent was obtained from the individuals described in the case study for the publication of the details included in this article.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization: C.R., J.H.; Writing – Original Draft Preparation: C.R., J.H.; Writing – Review & Editing: C.R., J.H.

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