

# **Real-Life Expressions of Vital Citizenship: a Typology Informed by Present-Day Community Participation in Dutch City Neighbourhoods**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Recently, in the public debate city neighbourhoods are often referred to as highly ‘uncivic’ places; places that lack a fundament of social capital (Putnam, 2000) and are trapped in ‘vicious circles’ leading to neighbours not knowing each other, people feeling unsafe and uncomfortable in their homes, and expecting a quick fix from local government to solve their neighbourhood problems. In our paper we try to look past this somewhat gloomy image of city neighbourhoods and their residents. We focus on, and try to understand, new initiatives of (apparently) vital citizenship and community participation that emerge in Dutch city neighbourhoods. Initiatives that – in various ways – try to tackle neighbourhood problems; carried by active citizens who are able to balance between self-organisation and coproduction with other local (municipality) actors.

Vital citizenship is often considered a key element for a strong (local) democracy and for quality of life in urban societies (see Putnam, 1993; Van Gunsteren, 1998; Van den Brink, 2002; Hendriks & Musso, 2004). But still little is known about the expressions and drivers of vital citizenship in practice (Van Gunsteren, 1998; Denters & Van Heffen-Oude Vrielink, 2004). This calls for bottom-up empirical research, taking as its starting-point cases where vital citizenship appears to be developing, connecting them to case studies that have already been done. On the basis of more than one and a half year of empirical research in Dutch city neighbourhoods, we try to present a typology of present-day community participation in Dutch city neighbourhoods: “What forms of community participation can be distinguished?”. We will go into essential characteristics of different expressions of vital citizenship, and their strengths and weaknesses in relation to local governance/democracy on the one hand and urban renewal on the other. In line with the notion of grounded-theory building, the line of reasoning in the paper will be case-driven, empirically-inductive and naturalistic: as close as possible to lived experience (Hendriks, 2003).

Research on citizenship is often quite abstract in a political-theory type of way – one would almost forget that citizenship is connected to people of flesh and blood. A notable exception is case-study research done in Denmark, by Bang and Sørensen

(1998; 2001). They present the 'Everyday Maker' as a particular expression of active citizenship: an expression distilled from Danish practices; but relevant to other contexts as well, the authors suggest (Bang and Sørensen, 2001). In this paper, we will mirror the Everyday Maker as typified by Bang and Sørensen to observations of vital citizenship in a Dutch context. Is the notion of Everyday Makership adequate and precise enough to describe and understand cases of (apparently) vital citizenship in the Dutch cities? What does this all mean for the conceptualisation of 'vital citizenship'? The 'Everyday Maker Danish-Style' is used as a sensitizing concept (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), a conceptual stepping-stone, for the exploration of concepts of vital citizenship 'Dutch style'.

**Key Words: community participation, vital citizenship, urban renewal**