

Building a Community among Locals and Food Initiatives in the North of
Amsterdam
*Results from an Explorative Research coupled with Current Areas of Struggle and
Future Recommendations*

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Summary of Main Suggestions

The following suggestions are categorized into 2 categories:

- Very Feasible: In Progress Now/ Feasible to Achieve
- Less Feasible: More Elaborate Projects

Very Feasible: In Progress Now/ Not Challenging to Achieve

- Samenwerking Stadslandbouw Amsterdam: In Progress

Several initiatives highlighted problems with the Municipality of Amsterdam. Currently, an organization is being build up to address these concerns and have representatives from several such food initiatives in their core group

- Voedseltuin Ijplein with Leefkringhuis Noord and Buurtcentrum De Meeuw: In progress

The community garden Voedseltuin Ijplein is currently supplying their produce to the food bank and to the neighbourhood centre De Meeuw

- Voedseltuin Ijplein and Sonja Kookt: Feasible to Achieve

Sonja Kookt should reach out to the community garden to collaborate with each other so that she receives an extra avenue of diverse food income

- Leefkringhuis Noord and the Community: Feasible to Achieve

Future neighbourhood activities can be advertised here. Participants who are willing to join can, of course. However, it is suggested that at least 1 volunteer is present the site of the event to welcome food bank participants.

Less Feasible: More Elaborate Projects

- Moestuyn School and the Community

By receiving a subsidy from the Municipality of Amsterdam, a few individuals could be educated about growing their own garden with the intention that they spread this knowledge to others in the lower income branch.

- Buurtcentrum De Valk: Art for Adolescents

Broadening the current activities for adolescents at the neighbourhood centre by providing art lessons, possibly involving the local neighbourhood as well

- Boeren voor Buren and Leefkringhuis Noord

Boeren voor Buren supplies cheap vegetables for individuals with a Stadspas. There could be a collaboration with the food bank, yet neither party has been informed of this idea yet

For more details, see page 11

Contextualizing the Research

Topic

This report shows how to build a community among food initiatives and among community gardens in the Vogelbuurt, in the North of Amsterdam with a number of final suggestions that should be followed up upon.

Purpose

The purpose of this investigation is to conduct an explorative research among community gardens, food banks, and community centres in the Vogelbuurt, in the North of Amsterdam. The research is situated not only with project leaders, but with participants as well. The aim was to interview food-related initiatives about their strategies on building a community in this neighbourhood and investigating whether the initiatives would be open to

collaborating among each other. The interviews also asked about problems/issues the initiatives had. This reports suggestions will therefore not only impact organizations and their collaboration, but also suggests changes for citizens.

Importance

This project is a preliminary investigation into the potential for collaborations among food initiatives. If this is successful, this research can be used as a basis for another project, namely Include situated around Food Commons.

Stand Point

Currently, Spring 2021, there are few collaborative efforts among the organizations. Nevertheless, the respective collaborations are successful and provide the benefit that is required from the receiving organization. There is a desire for more collaboration among organizations, but also a desire to have a more feasible and practical relationship with the Municipality of Amsterdam (North).

Literature Background: Community Gardens and Building a Community

This research stems from the community garden Voedseltuin IJplein. Therefore, the research is focused on community gardens and their relationship with building a community. The background information highlights benefits, but also crucial points that policy makers should be made aware of. This research does not focus on neighbourhood centres because their focus lies on activities and the neighbourhood nor food banks since their goal is to aid vulnerable groups. The literature about community gardens is less clear, hence this background.

The health benefits of community gardens are widespread and well-known. By participating in gardening activities, the BMI gets lowered, participants eat healthier food, and do more physical exercise. Since gardeners work in nature, this tends to have therapeutic effects, and lowers stress (Spierings et al, p. 677). The nature in which gardeners work has even resulted in a “destabilization of societal hierarchies”, as cultural and socio-economic differences are no longer important when people garden together (p. 678). Among such a community, social cohesion builds, which is “Create a sense of collective identity and mutual support. This includes building a sense of local identity, social networks, and safe space; promoting features of an inclusive local cultural heritage; and encouraging cultural diversity while promoting tolerance and a willingness to accept other cultures” (Fonseca et al., p.15). Social cohesion can be developed by increasing the “width”, namely the amount of people gardeners gets to know, or the “depth”, namely receiving (mutual) help or caring for others (Veen et al., 2016). Nevertheless, current literature is stressing that such environments are not inclusive to all groups of people, and can even have an exclusion effect. There are a few traits that can enhance this effect:

Homogenous groups. Studies have found that gardeners tend to have a homogenous ethnic and socio-cultural background, despite this not being the intention of the garden (Neo and Chua, Glover; Irazabal and Punja; Domene and Sauri). Therefore, despite forming a community among the gardeners, only a few groups attend regularly. This is exemplified by a study conducted in the United States, where a community garden segregated among races (unintentionally). It was seen as a “white folks thing” (Spierings et al., p. 689). People recruited more gardeners from within their own network, hence attracting more homogenous socio-cultural groups and enhancing this effect. This is an effect that policy makers must be aware of. Homogenous group creation might occur at different “levels” of intensity, but nevertheless have an exclusion effect towards people who are not part of that group. This can (partially) be combatted by creating neighborhood activities, such as barbeques, parties, or other cooking-related events.

Other Barriers and Responsibility. Participation or access to gardens can be limited by physical, material, socio-cultural or even ideological reasons. Furthermore, not acquiring the right to use the space for gardening (by setting up fences around it, for example) diminishes the “open feeling” of a community garden by creating a closed atmosphere (p. 681). This is what can be described as “parochialism”, which is where certain groups unofficially claim a public space, making it uninviting for others to enter or even visit (Lofland). Also, the way a garden is set up redistributes responsibility among gardeners. Focusing on responsibility shows how and why exclusion is produced, therefore helping to understand the power relationships. To improve community gardens, they should be a space of multiple responsibilities, resulting in more involvement, the garden is “yours”, resulting into more commitment, and so hopefully more inclusivity, too. Policy makers must therefore ensure that their garden is targeted towards everyone to prevent such a reputation from building up.

Social capital, unlike social cohesion, is:” viewed as the connections among individuals or social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from those connections (Putnam). Building a strong network and relationships is beneficial towards members, yet it is important to note that this does not always mean that it is beneficial for the public. Sometimes such relationships protect the group’s interests only (Firth et al, p. 558). Social capital has 3 sub-categories to it: bonding social capital is the bond between individuals with similar socio-demographic circumstances (family, friends, neighbors), bridging social capital is the relationship with more distant people which also bridges people across multiple socio-demographic circumstances (colleagues, loose friendships), and linking social capital is created between people in dissimilar circumstances (people in power, (financially) influential positions). Firth et al. investigated how to bond, bridge, and link social capital within a community garden setting. The following is a list of advice:

Bonding:

- Community activities are useful to meet other locals
- Wide range volunteering activities: attending/managing events, helping to managing gardens, so everyone who lives close by can be involved
- Key motivations for garden activities are physical and mental health
- Locality was a strong identity and this helped forming a community

Bridging:

- Access to resources and helping strengthen the organization
- Courses are useful, develop bond between worker and volunteer
- Volunteers may have links with other gardens, especially when the chair person is well networked → new opportunities
- Other organizations can use the location, but repercussions may occur in the form of community-level ownership dropping
- Food growing and cooking draws people together, especially to share cultural practices → diversity among participants and “deep” social cohesion

Linking:

- Funding can have an impact on linking, for example paying workers
- However, too much funding might too much influence over the garden, which could threaten the independence of garden

How to generate social capital:

- Common purpose in joint activity, collective ownership and pride can be created. Altruistic but you also learn new skills
- Create a meeting place so people can interact

- Type of activities: growing, cooking, eating are all social and allow everyone (age ethnicity socio-cultural) to join, especially since food has a unifying role.
- Linking with other organizations, more resources and more community

Firth et al. argue that the most successful community gardens stem from internally-driven gardens, where the management is initiated by participants from within the local/neighborhood community (p. 565). On another note, the leader's intention and "performance" with the participants has an extensive effect on the success of the garden. To what extent the leader is involved with the community and/or has social ties within it can improve the atmosphere among participants (Drake, pg. 192). Therefore, it is important to be aware of the intention of the garden and how a leader's personality can affect the atmosphere of the group.

Participation in CGs are lauded spaces for immigrants and refugees who receive relatively more valuable economic benefits and a social bonding experiences than locals (Eggert et al.). CGs, therefore, serve a higher purpose, namely a place to build a community for socially excluded people to build social cohesion among themselves (Harris et al.).

For non-immigrants and non-refugees, CGs do not necessarily provide the socializing benefits. Among low-income residents in Canada, CGs are stigmatized and viewed as a "strategy of desperation", resulting in very infrequent use of CGs despite experiencing food insecurity (Kirkpatrick and Tarasuk, p. 138). Their data challenges the common ideal that CGs address unmet food requirements of food insecure households since such households rarely use CGs. A further study found that only 3.2% of low-income Canadians use CGs (Loopstra and Tarasuk, p. 3). The lack of participation is caused by inaccessibility to CGs (unaware of CGs in their neighbourhood and unaware of how to participate, proximity to their home), the failure to accommodate to busy schedules, an unappealing work-environment where sharing communal spaces and working alongside strangers is required, and a general lack of interest in gardening (Loopstra and Tarasuk, p. 4). Besides, food insecurity is rooted in inadequate income, yet policies tend to focus on food behaviour rather than addressing factors that constrain food purchases (Kirkpatrick and Tarasuk, p. 135). These findings help us understand the unappealing characteristics of CGs, and so the importance that CGs must be tailored to each garden's target audience.

Another feature of CGs to consider is the effects that funding has for participants. In Amsterdam, financing by city administrators resulted in drastically varied funding, ranging from 250-3,000 euros per year. Such subsidies enforce restrictions, such as failing to uphold an "open-door policy"; the ability that anyone, no matter if their intentions are to invest in gardens, are welcome, and proximity restrictions, such as CGs dedicated to their corresponding zip codes (Bródy and de Wilde, p. 249). Funding has resulted in closing off communal areas to the public. Monetary restrictions, such as paying annual fees or additional costs for workshops, exclude people from participating (Bródy and de Wilde, p. 252). This proposes a challenge: CGs are part of policies and thus funded, but how should this be implemented so that they remain an inclusive space for everyone?

This data suggests that social cohesion is a potentially beneficial secondary outcome. However, the requirement that CGs need consistent attendance remains problematic. Critics also argue about whether CGs are meant to empower its participants, or are a new tool for real-estate developers.

Situating Amsterdam Oud-Noord in terms of Community and Food Initiatives

The Organizations and their Profile

[Community Centre: Resto van Harte: Buurtcentrum De Valk](#)

In the North of Amsterdam, the neighbourhood centre De Valk is a “social neighbourhood restaurant”, more specifically a “teenager restaurant” (TienerResto). It is centred around adolescents who participate and help cooking. Fellow neighbours can therefore enjoy an affordable, healthy 3 course meal. This restaurant does offer halal and vegetarian options if requested during reservations. Its ingredients are fresh because vegetables are delivered daily.

Twice a week, Sonja Kookt (Sonja Hendriksma) cooks, as a volunteer, for lonely and vulnerable groups at this neighbourhood centre. Her dinner guests can count up to 100 people per night! A year ago, an article was written by WijAmsterdam that stated that Sonja cooks for 40 people 3 nights a week (“Buurtmaaltijd Bloemenbuurt”). Not only has her volunteering organization grown, but because of the COVID-19 pandemic, her services are very needed and appreciated. She receives her donations from subsidies from the Municipality, some help from some companies, donations, and in natura (Meershoek). Recipients are frequently elderly or those with economic shortages. Not only do they receive a warm meal, but they also build a social bond and have a place to ask for help. (“Sonja Kookt Voor Noord”).

Issue: The neighbourhood centre has struggled with the bureaucracy of the Municipality of Amsterdam. Long waiting times, high amounts of paper work, and missing a salutation person (aansprekingspersoon) has made collaborations with the municipality challenging and lengthy.

[Food Bank: Leefkringhuis Noord](#)

The Leefkringhuis Noord is a food bank that provides crates of food to households, namely the vulnerable residents (kwetsbare inwoners). This includes people who have difficulties getting a job, who are in the welfare system (uitkering) or have difficulties finding work (hebben afstand tot de arbeidsmarkt). However, not only do they provide food, they also help with filling in forms, answering questions about money-related issues, or troubles with residency. One a week, their services are open to those who require food assistance. They help 420 households per week! (this does not mean 420 people; a household may consist of 2-10+people).

Their donations come from several sources. They are subsidized by the Municipality of Amsterdam, receive funds, and donations. Many of the donations must be picked up by the organizers themselves, which is labour intensive. Since the food bank is dependent on donations, their say in their product choice is very limited. This leads to little diversity in food, which is often met with repetition of the same foods.

There is little to no “sense of community” among participants. The manager has realized that individuals start feeling more comfortable after 4-6 weeks. The people are in “survival mode”. She believes that food is a means of moving forward in assistance (“voedsel is een middel om verder te komen in de hulp-verlening”). Therefore, the need for an immediate community is relatively low, yet could be appreciated among those who are ready and willing to get to know new people.

Issue: The food is currently struggling with diversity of food. A more stable/less labour intensive donation regime would be appreciated.

[Education-Based Community Garden: Moestuin School](#)

The kitchen garden (moestuin) school in the North is a re-vitalized construction sand, above a metro station, where the aim is to educate participants about how to grow your own herbs and vegetables. All the products are biological, and are grown without pesticide use. All the vegetables that are grown, get eaten by the people who grew them. Students share 15m² land. Participants range from 30 -70 years old. The program includes a few guest lectures and excursions. The education that they receive enables them to build their own garden somewhere in the city, a phenomenon the creators like to call “ripple-effect”.

The “sense of community” is minimal, but not non-existent. It is usually established among gardeners who share their plots of land. Since the focus of this school is education, not team-building, building a community is not a priority. Nevertheless, there is generally a pleasant atmosphere among the students.

This year, their costs are being subsidized by the Municipality of Amsterdam. This translates into the annual fee price being reduced by 50%, from 1100 to 550 euros.

Issue: The weaknesses lie in the fact that this is an expensive school to attend. Despite the municipality funding these costs, the subsidy will be withdrawn next year. The high cost results in low access to low-income residents, restricting them of this vital health-related knowledge. Furthermore, this school’s ground resides on a yearly permission from the municipality. The school sits on a possible new metro station. Their very temporary and makes it challenging to properly develop a school because its future is very undetermined. At the same time, the municipality did guarantee them a similar location if they were to be moved. This nevertheless has impacts on the school.

[Community Garden: Voedseltuin Ijplein](#)

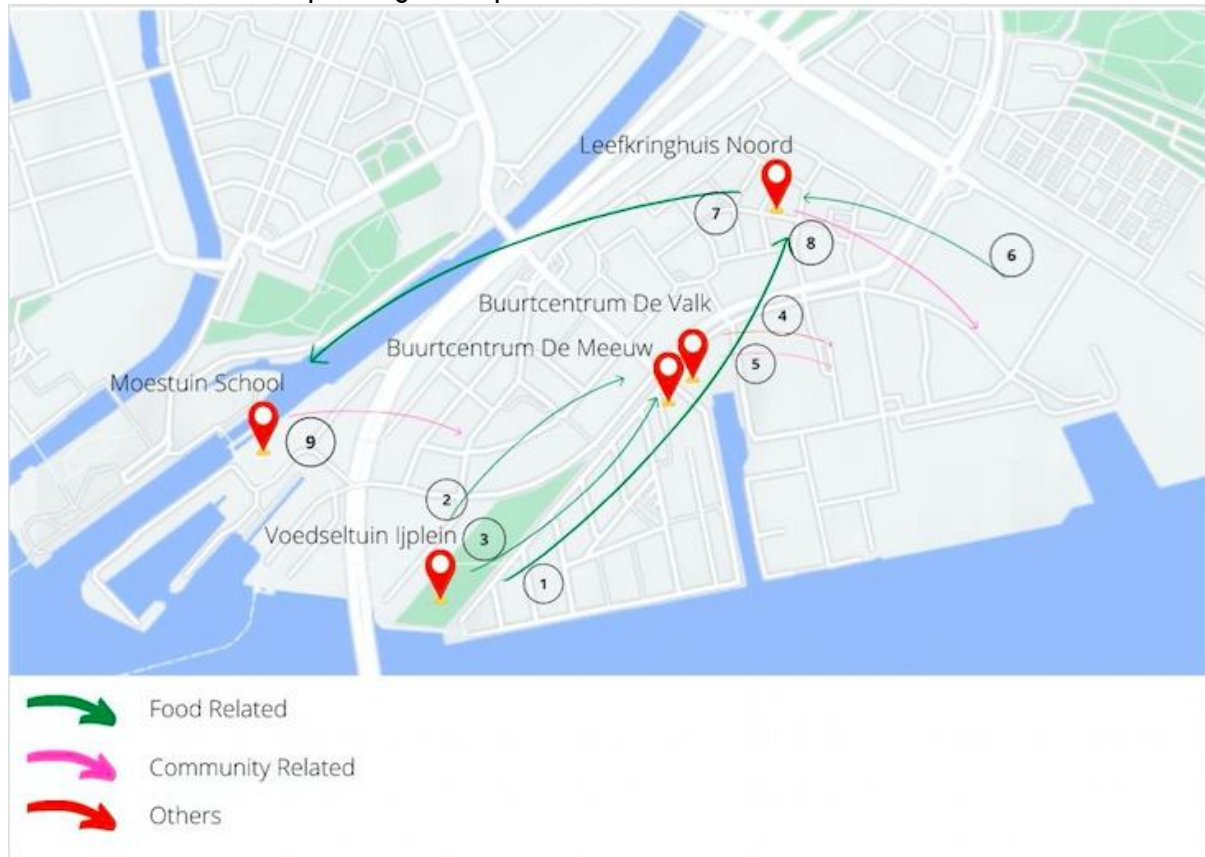
This community garden mainly produces food for the food bank and is fully based on volunteers. They produce fresh and biological fruit, vegetables, and herbs. They started in 2012 with a subsidy from the Municipality and the creation of the garden. In 2014, they became an official association. It is estimated that 3000 crates of food are produced yearly (!). The garden is also visually aesthetic because of the many flowers that are grown, a characteristic that was important due to the fact that the garden is surrounded by apartments and attracts people who are taking a stroll. The garden provides a basic course about gardening, insects, plants, and bees, as well. After 10 lessons, the new volunteers take an exam and receive a certificate.

The “sense of community” among the volunteers is relatively high. The garden also has enough volunteers to sustain their work. The owner was aware that there are more female than male participants. Pensioners stay for longer periods of time. Interestingly, around 60% of the people live across the Ij waters. The socio-demographic culture is situated mostly among Dutch participants, with few Turkish or Moroccan gardeners. Separate smaller plots of land were raffled off close by. Here, there are more Turkish owners, yet still very few Moroccan owners.

Issue: Despite having enough volunteers, there seems to be a homogenous socio-demographic group who volunteers. It is desired that this group changes to reflect the same diversity as the Vogelbuurt/ Amsterdam Noord.

Current and Possible Future Collaborations among Food Initiatives

Current and Possible Collaborations among Food Initiatives in Oud-Noord, Amsterdam, numbered with a corresponding description



1) Voedseltuin Ijplein → Leefkringhuis Noord

The community garden is already providing food for the food bank. This is a well appreciated collaboration and is encouraged to continue. Not only do food bank participants receive healthy, biological, and freshly grown fruit, they also receive diversity in their vegetables and herbs.

2) Voedseltuin Ijplein → Buurtcentrum de Meeuw

The community garden is helping the neighbourhood centre by giving a percentage of their growth to them.

3) Voedseltuin Ijplein → Buurtcentrum de Valk

Sonja Kookt is always in need of extra sponsors and donors. Since the community garden produces a wide array of vegetables and herbs, this collaboration would stimulate diversity among her meals.

Next step: Sonja Kookt should reach out to the community garden to initiate a conversation

4) Buurtcentrum de Valk, Sonja Kookt*

There is an incentive to grow the Sonja Kookt initiative. This can be done through two ways:

- a) ANBI Regeling: Sonja Kookt is currently not an association and has expressed in an interview by Het Parool that setting up an association has “too many rules”. Despite being helpful, this expansion might therefore not be feasible

- b) To increase access to Sonja's food, adolescents can be incentivized to work as courier. In collaboration with [Stichting Doras](#), [CIVIC](#) and subsidies by the Municipality of Amsterdam, a vacancy can be created for adolescents to work as courier for a (low) wage. This job would spread Sonja's food to people who are immobile or live further away, hence increasing access to her food. In exchange for this job, adolescents would receive a certificate of completion, which is beneficial for their CV and future jobs. Not only could this stimulate adolescents to work, but it could also connect the community to each other. If the people who receive this food feel lonely, similar to Sonja Kookt current target group, a small incentive like a conversation could aid this feeling as well.
- a. Similar successful examples: [Buurtbuik](#), [Hotspot Huutspot Rotterdam](#)

Next step: CIVIC and Stichting Doras must be contacted for this concept

Next step: find a willing candidate to work on this collaboration

- c) Sonja Kookt could be stimulated by:
- a. [Stichting Doen](#)
- b. [Oranje Fonds](#)
- c. [PACT](#)

*= these suggestions were given by the manager of De Valk, not Sonja Kookt herself. To further investigate this course of action, especially point b, please have a conversation with Sonja Hertseman first

5) [Buurtcentrum De Valk](#), art for adolescents

There is a desire to expand adolescent activities at this neighbourhood centre. Since De Valk used to have a pop-stage, the desire to stay connected to its roots in the music/art industry is strong. Therefore, art courses or art projects for the neighbourhood are feasible potential directions to involve adolescents in a different perspective. This could engage them more into their community because they would create art for their immediate environment.

→ Based on an interview with [Cascoland](#), art has been a very successful strategy to engage the community in neighbourhood projects. Cascoland uses "integrated art" more specifically, where neighbours are part of a "theatrical experience" by participating in their projects.

Next step: Contact Rasto van Harte to understand his interest in this project

Next step: Contact Cascoland for their advisors, project managers, or experienced personnel to help develop this project

6) [Boeren voor Buren](#) → [Leefkringhuis Noord](#)

[Boeren voor Buren](#) is an initiative that provides fresh and affordable local vegetables to Stadspas users. They have a pick-up point in Oud Noord. Since both organizations target a similar audience, a collaboration could be beneficial on behalf of both of them.

Pitfall: Currently, Boeren voor Buren charges €4.95 per 5 kilo of mixed vegetables. This price is probably too steep for some participants. Nevertheless, informing participants about this organization might be useful as they transition out of requiring a food bank.

Next step: This idea is my own inspiration. Neither organization knows about this, so the next steps would include informing them about this plan.

7) [Leefkringhuis Noord](#) → [Moestuין School](#)

The Moestuין School recognizes that their fees are restricting for people with a lower income. Nevertheless, the education they receive vitally contributes towards providing sustainable,

cheap, and healthy food for families. Spreading this information to lower income families would benefit them enormously. The manager of the Leefkringhuis mentioned that people tend to warm up to others after 4-6 weeks. Additionally, since so many people visit the food bank every week, this location is ideal for spreading ideas like this. The concept is as follows: one or two (or more) people, whether they be from the food banks, friends/family who go to the food bank, or come from elsewhere, would be subsidized by the government to attend the Moestuin School. After a year, they become their own leaders who can transfer this information to their own circle of people, thereby spreading the knowledge and providing more affordable access to food for more people.

Next step: set forward a follow up meeting with the Moestuin School to understand to what extent they are willing to participate. Do the same with the Leefkringhuis Noord. Preliminary interest was shown by the Moestuin School

Meanwhile step: request subsidy from the Municipality

8) Leefkringhuis Noord → community

There is a preliminary interest by the manager of this food bank to help develop a sense of community among the participants. This development, however, should not be strictly enforced and only encouraged to those who are open towards it. Building a community would work by directing the people towards local activities in the North (although this might currently be challenging due to the pandemic). The proposal that was made emphasizes that at the site of the activity, a “friendly face” should greet the food bank participants. The “friendly face” can be anyone from someone who works at the food bank, to a volunteer. The manager indicated that *familiarity* could stimulate the interest in community initiatives.

Next step: interview the participants of the food bank. Despite attempts being made, the short duration of the internship meant that no interviews were conducted with the locals themselves. This is crucial before enacting this suggestion

9) Moestuin School → community

See suggestion 7. This idea is not limited to food bank participants

10) Municipality of Amsterdam; Council

Among several interviews, dissatisfaction with the municipality was expressed. Complaints were about the high bureaucratic workload, long response times, lacking a department chief, and challenges with current contracts. Unlike building a house, there are no clear steps to set up green initiatives or organizations. This makes it even more challenging to start a business, never mind the bureaucratic paperwork aspect of a start-up. A council was suggested where the participants were parts of organizations in (Oud) Noord. The struggles are common, which is why a Council is currently being established, namely the Samenwerking Stadslandbouw Amsterdam. It is made up of a collection of companies, namely Noord-Oogst, Food Council Metropolitan Region Amsterdam, Mijn Stadstuin, Tuinenvan West, Gezondestad, and Eetbaar Amsterdam. The first challenge they are tackling is finding a civil servant for Amsterdam Noord. This requires finding someone in the municipality (loket) and finding a representative among the organizations (aansprekingspunt). The first challenge also addresses difficulties with location scouting and advocating for easier access to creating green space (instead of apartments). Secondly, the procedural issues should be tackled. This is all currently taking place. It should be noted that this organization is dedicated towards large gardens, not small neighbourhood initiatives

Other Suggestions

Based on the interviews with parents from the primary school [BSO Ijplein](#), there is a desire to work more frequently with community gardens (among other nature activities) to enhance the relationship children have with nature. There is a consensus that the current curriculum is well-liked, especially that parents must pack healthy lunches and are given advice on how to do so. Introducing “health” is done relatively late (group 6). It would be appreciated if activities, not lessons, are started earlier. Activities have already been made with the Voedseltuin Ijplein. To express the parents’ desire to start this earlier, the community garden is open to receiving the children, on the condition that the children are supervised and taught by their own teachers.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is an initial desire for some organizations to work together. The Voedseltuin Ijplein already has 2 connections, namely with the Leefkringhuis Noord and the Buurtcentrum De Meeuw. This could be expanded by possibly collaborating with Sonja Kookt. There is a desire from parents from the BSO Ijplein primary school to have more activities for their children in gardens. The Leefkringhuis is willing to act as an information place for community activities under the circumstance that volunteers are present at the locations. The Moestuin School is ready to help low-income groups with subsidies from the Municipality of Amsterdam to enhance the ripple effect of their education. The Buurthuis Centrum De Valk has creatively suggested to expand Sonja Kookt's services by potentially setting up a collaboration with CIVIC and Stichting Doras where adolescents can work for a minimum wage as courier in exchange for a certificate of completion. They are also willing to host more art-related activities for adolescents for the neighbourhood. And finally, there is a general dissatisfaction with the collaboration between the respective organizations and the Municipality of Amsterdam. This is already being tackled through the organization SLA. Therefore, this research has shown that there is a desire for future collaborations among the food initiatives in the North of Amsterdam and that future volunteers/collaborators should pursue the suggestions in hopes of establishing a larger, more welcoming community in the Vogelbuurt.

Due to the short duration of this research, not every food-initiative was interviewed. Similarly, it was challenging to interview participants of the initiatives. This is limiting since part of this research is dedicated towards building a community for the locals. Nevertheless, this explorative investigation has shown some possible future directions for upcoming organizations. Therefore future research should further investigate the desires of the locals, with possibly using the above-mentioned suggestions as guidelines for the interviews.

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