

The changing role of inhabitants

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Summary

The trend in civil society is that citizens are expected to be responsible and display self-sufficiency. The role of the government is changing from doing everything to facilitate civil initiatives. The initiatives of Rural Alliances fit perfectly in the changing society. Lochem has a process facilitator to approach the several rural alliance projects in Lochem. Participants have to dare to ask inhabitants, companies and other organisations for support.

Issue/Problems

The last five years the role of the government in the society is changing. And the society itself is changing. Government interference is curbed in areas where citizens can be expected to display self-sufficiency and responsibility. There is however a need for a transitional period in which people get support to take their responsibility, to get the knowledge and tools to handle problems and opportunities in civil society. The role of the local government is to facilitate this process. The process is difficult. The government has to learn how to work together with inhabitants. Every project is different; people are different and react in different ways. They can give up easily when they are not satisfied in the way the project is going on. They voluntarily spend a lot of their time and expect that the government takes decisions. If a project is stuck in a long decision making process, people drop out.

Background

The trend in The Netherlands is decentralisation. The local authorities get more responsibilities in all kind of areas. The idea that the government is fully responsible for the environment, healthcare, care for elderly etc. gives way to a more modern vision of self-sufficiency and responsibility. Local governments implant these new ideas in different ways together with inhabitants and local organisations. The initiatives of Rural Alliances fit perfectly in the changing society.

Interests in the issue

It is not only an obligation for citizens to participate in the civil society, it is also an opportunity. When people are involved in a project, there is a much better chance of success and sufficient popular support. The benefits for the participants are clearer, the fundraising is efficient and we see that people are very creative to find relative proposals.

The project Lochem Energy is also based on a idea of a group of inhabitants of Lochem. The project is self supporting and has proven a right to exist. In the project Vedel (Verwolde Sustainable Energy Landscapes) inhabitants work together to realize the objective of a climate neutral area in 2030.

Existing Policies

The first policy is to have a point of call for civil initiative. Participants learn what the new role of the local government is and that is expected that they have to take responsibility for the project. They are asked what their input is in term of knowledge, labour, fundraising etc. If an initiative meets the requirements, the participants can appeal to the process facilitator. Lochem has a process facilitator to approach the several rural alliance projects in Lochem. Participants can use the offered facilities and knowledge to achieve their objectives and to stand on their own feet. A strategy document has recently been adopted by the local government and the city council. It is a foundation for the new way of thinking about civil participation.

Policy Options

“Dare to ask” and “Dare to fail” are two golden rules introduced by Nils Roemen at the Rural Alliance conference in Lochem in march 2013. People with an initiative for their community should dare to ask inhabitants, companies and other organisations for funds. Then appears how much potential there is in civil society, like someone who have spare room that can be used as meeting point, a painter who has a remainder of paint, factory with remains of materials etc. The advantage is that the society delivers the capacity, skills and funds for the project. It has proven to work well. But there is more. The engagement in the society is much stronger when a lot of parties support the idea in several ways. The disadvantage is that people find it hard to ask for help and support of raising funds.

Skill plotting is a tool Lochem wants to use in civil initiatives. Many alliances are looking for ways to bring people and places together, to maximise energy and efforts efficiently for alliance building and development, and to ultimately to support the community. The advantages of skill plotting are evident. It becomes visible which knowledge, experience and skills are available and what is needed to reach the objectives. A disadvantage is that people may find the questions to private. That is the reason to try this out in relative small groups.

The local government will support training and workshops for the participants of a project. This is necessary to support the initiative on the fields where there is a lack of knowledge.

Recommendation

We recommend “Dare to ask” for Rural Alliances. It brings people together and increases the chance of success. It creates also wider support in civil society, what is very important. But also the local government has to learn how to work together with inhabitants for the benefits of all.

Sources

Trendrede: <http://www.trendrede.nl/>
www.durftevragen.com

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