

Newcomer's initiative: a welcome box to explore the new area

Dated: March 2014

Author: Karel Lhermitte

Representing: Innovatiesteunpunt @Landelijke Gilden

Summary

When newcomers settle in a new area they always need help in their orientation. It will take time to get acquainted. Residents mostly are reluctant and will not address these newcomers if not asked for. If the nearby residents can deliver a welcome box to the new arrivals, it will be easier for them to get in touch with the newcomers and to promote local shops, clubs and societies.

Issue/Problems

Newcomers in a village can stay 'aliens' for the rest of their life if nobody of the residents is eager for making contact. Most residents are reluctant to approach the newcomers. If a simple practice of 'outreaching' can be introduced to lower the social barrier, the benefit will be that residents and newcomers have a better starting point to know each other.

Background

In former times migration of people came along with violence and oppression. In the last century we learned that newcomers bring gains to a society (new blood, new ideas, new perspectives...). So this alliance gives profit. We recall a saying of British political philosopher John Stuart Mill (1861) *"A neighbour, not being an ally or an associate, since he is never engaged in any common undertaking for joint benefit, is therefore only a rival."* (Quote in Putnam, p. 337).

"In relationship building or building social capital the general principle of generalized reciprocity – I'll do this for you now, without expecting anything immediately in return and perhaps without knowing you, confident that down the road you or someone else will return the favour – is very fundamental." (Putnam, 135).

Our interests in the issue

Boerenbond & Landelijke Gilden is a farmers organization as well as a rural movement, active in densely populated Flanders. We count more than 69.000 rural families, including about 16.000 farmer families. Local and regional chapters provide outreach, education, and advocacy to the local community and regional government through regularly meetings and events. By being connected with the main organization and other chapters, they are also linked to a global community that can help them keep their members on the forefront of trends in agricultural and rural development. As social (rural) movement we are devoted to develop a vibrant and resilient rural area in our backyard. We also support farmer families in the South.

Our interests in the issue (continued)

Civic engagement is the cornerstone of community life. And trust is the touchstone. *"Social trust in this sense is strongly associated with many other forms of civic engagement and social capital. Other things being equal, people who trust their fellow citizens volunteer more often, contribute more to charity, participate more often in politics and community organizations, serve more readily on juries, give blood frequently, comply more fully with their tax obligations, are more tolerant of minority views, and display many other forms of civic virtue."* (Putnam, 136).

In the case of a village where newcomers arrive, we have to devise a way to integrate 'new' and 'old'. In our view on the one hand we need 'new' – be it to become 'member' - but on the other hand we don't want to frighten off 'old'. So we have in a way work on 'trust'. Developing trust can only when reciprocity is introduced.

Existing Policies

For newcomers it is custom that local authorities have a yearly welcoming event. The focus is mainly on the municipal services rendered. Sometimes local associations also do a presentation.

In our organisation we had some years ago a welcome gift like most formal member organisations have. It is a sort of PR. The packet was stuffed with items like a calendar, pencil, mouse mat, a cap, a brochure... (Most of it fabricated in China) all in the right colours and style.

Policy Options

When newcomers settle in a new area they always need help in their orientation. It will take time to get acquainted with the neighbours, the school for children, shops, other facilities. Residents mostly are reluctant and will not address these newcomers if not asked for. In Flanders we often observe that newcomers keep on using the place where they come from to fulfil their needs (barber, dentist, sport club...) if the distance is not that great (approx. 1 hour).

Policy Options (continued)

To show to the newcomers that the new area also has a lot of opportunities e.g. shops, cultural events, friendly people... an alliance is made to prepare and deliver a welcome box. The box will contain information like a map and a list of contact points explaining the social network. Adding vouchers from local entrepreneurs e.g. 'free meal at restaurant' or '20 % off next purchase' is recommended because it shows that buying local is feasible (and in a way sustainable).

Proximity counts!

Residents or steering-members of a local association willingly to deliver are supplied with this box the moment newcomers are settling. Most important is that they hand over the box personally. If someone is asked to give a stranger something 'of value', it is easier to overcome his reluctance.

When handing over, they can talk about the village, introduce themselves and offer any assistance needed. This personal contact is very important and makes a win-win for both parties. The resident is happy he can give something of value he is proud of; the newcomer gets a box where he can learn at short notice the do's and don'ts of his new home environment. After the first contact in a positive atmosphere, it will be easier to develop a more profound relation and trust can grow. Hopefully this ends up in civic engagement.

Recommendations

It is profitable for local government, local community organisations and local economic actors to work together on the issue of the 'newcomer's initiative'.

Sources

Putnam Robert D. (2000). *Bowling Alone. The Collapse and revival of American Community*, Touchstone, New York, 541. (and the like)

Contact Details

Mr Karel Lhermitte, Rural Development Advisor

Innovatiesteunpunt@Landelijke Gilden (Innovation Centre for Agricultural and Rural Development)

Diestsevest 40, B-3000 Leuven, Belgium

E: karel.lhermitte@landelijkegilden.be; T +32 16 28 64 13

This policy recommendation paper has been jointly produced as part of the Rural Alliances project, involving twelve partners from Wales, Ireland, France, Germany, Netherlands and Belgium.

The project is co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund through the Interreg IVB North West Europe Programme, to promote strong and prosperous communities.