Wijkwijs – Community Based Research collective Rotterdam

There is a growing public call for academics to engage with societal issues and make scientific knowledge more relevant for a broader public. Yet, even well-intentioned (research) projects primarily aim to contribute to academic publications and policy recommendations, taking years to make positive societal impact , if at all. Often, researchers encounter risk of exploitation of neighborhoods and its communities giving something in return. This is especially problematic when involving marginalized and vulnerable communities in research, who are asked to share their time and knowledge repeatedly without direct impact and practical meaning (Miller & Wallerstein, 2008; Kaida et al., 2019).

In Rotterdam too, many neighborhoods, especially in the poorer south district of the city, are overcrowded with researchers and research-projects. In some neighborhoods, at least ten Dutch universities have some sort of research project going on[1]. These studies are often project-based and time-constraint, focus on a set research question, and too often without acknowledging existing social capital, civic networks, experiences and knowledge. This makes that many citizens and organizations in Rotterdam are becoming tired of new research and researchers, and the research-projects itself are often not truly embedded in the urban fabric: "*they just come here and get data"* (Oostveen, 2023).

By setting up a collaborative network between researchers, city-makers and citizens, Wijkwijs seeks new ways to engage with the city and its knowledge, questions and existing networks. The name 'Wijkwijs', which translates as 'neighborhood-wise', already reflects this ambition, as it emphasizes the need for shared and reciprocal knowledge production. In doing so, as a collective of neighborhood researchers, Wijkwijs strives to transform the role of universities in urban contexts, by building on lasting relationships and implement and evaluate research for, by and, with neighborhoods and their communities. Wijkwijs functions as a place to share experiences of researchers who work with community members on local issues, highlighting the context-based specificities of what is means to work collaboratively. We believe in the importance of continuous reflection, learning, and sharing, as there are many unknown issues, and contextual sensitivities to navigate.

Who is Wijkwijs?

Wijkwijs is collective that brings together scientists, city-makers, social organizations and citizens to work on local issues and share experiences doing so. Formally, Wijkwijs is a collaboration between Resilient Delta initiative and the Vital Cities and Citizens initiative[2], together with local (non-profit) organizations and urban researchers.

Wijkwijs' research practices currently have emerged in 10 neighborhoods in the city of Rotterdam, in the south, north, east and west of the city. Some practices initiated directly from local organizations or cooperations, some emerged from ambitions of researcher or city-makers, but always in collaboration with existing networks, key-figures and established citizen collectives, such as neighborhood cooperatives and community initiatives, addressing local themes and urgencies. The focus of the studies is contextually driven and varies from research to experiences in health, well-being, innovations in climate change to poverty and homelessness

How do Wijkwijs-practices operate?

The Wijkwijs-research practices are pivotal examples of Community-Based Research (CBR) approaches as an 'orientation to inquiry' (Boyd, 2020). This means that researchers engage with local partners from the beginning of the research, and continuously work together towards the collaboratively agreed upon

[1] See for example in district Bospolder Tussendijken, where researchers mapped initiatives and research-projects: www.veldacademie.nl/en/projecten/monitor-veerkrachtig-bospolder-tussendijken-2028

[2] As part of the Technical University of Delft, Hogeschool Rotterdam and Erasmus University Rotterdam.

finalization of the inquiries. This gives way to processes of shared knowledge production and community-driven change, where everyone has the 'right to research' substantiating first steps towards a 'knowledge democracy' (Lepore et al. 2020; Godrie et al., 2020). Doing so we underline the importance of lived experience, embodied knowledge and contextual meaning as equally valuable in understanding and addressing urban problems, and how they manifest in daily lives of people (DelSesto, 2021).

The CBR approach also advocate for involving in-depth qualitative methods such as participatory action research, storytelling, photo-voicing and collaborative design to do so. These approaches prioritize community voices and experiences and give room for local issues and questions to arise (Lepore et al. 2020).

3 Core values of Wijkwijs

By learning from each of the research practices of Wijkwijs, we identified three core values and eight guiding principles that shape our approach towards community-based research. The three core values: *justice, reciprocity and ownership,* reflect our fundamental beliefs central to Wijkwijs. They are at the basis of our approach to research and how we believe truly collaborative research should be. Evidently, ethical challenges arise, and continuous reflection is needed. Next, we describe our core-values and illustrate how they play out in some Wijkwijs practices.

1. Reciprocity in community research means making sure that both the researchers and the community benefit from the study, ensuring that the research is fair and helpful to everyone involved. Reciprocal research can mean many things for a community but should at least be reflected upon in each stage of the process. As such, reciprocity can be transactional by for instance paying members of the community for their time, making a map of local initiatives, but it can also be realized in the process by working on a common agenda, helping at events, localizing research questions together and so on (Albagli & Iwama, 2022).

> For example, in the neighborhood Reyeroord, together with local youth, researchers set-up a community-house and involved parents, schools, welfare organizations, neighborhood-police as well as the municipality in the process. The youth-hub is now owned and operated by a board of youngsters earlier involved in the research. Also, a documentary was made about the research by a local filmmaker.

2. Justice as a value and approach to research means that Wijkwijs' research practices in one way or the other, are encouraged to challenge systemic inequalities that marginalize the livelihood of specific groups of people. Justice also refers to how institutions like universities and municipalities have traditionally shaped what and whose knowledge and perspectives matter, who asks the questions, and in turn, whose issues are recognized and how policies are designed (Grayson, 2020; Godrie et al., 2020). Wijkwijs research aims to actively seek for diverse perspectives in a neighborhood beyond the dominant images, knowledge and stories. Doing so, we reflect on our own role in the possible reproduction of those problematic dynamics (see Stewart, 2017).

> For example, during the research processes, in the neighborhoods Beverwaard, Afrikaanderwijk and Vreewijk, personal experiences of poverty and access to health and welfare show where policies and formal support-systems fail to meet the needs of certain groups. The significance of alternatives, such as informal networks and small initiatives also arise during get-togethers, and are, when endorsed, actively involved and recognized in research outcomes and future policy-formations.

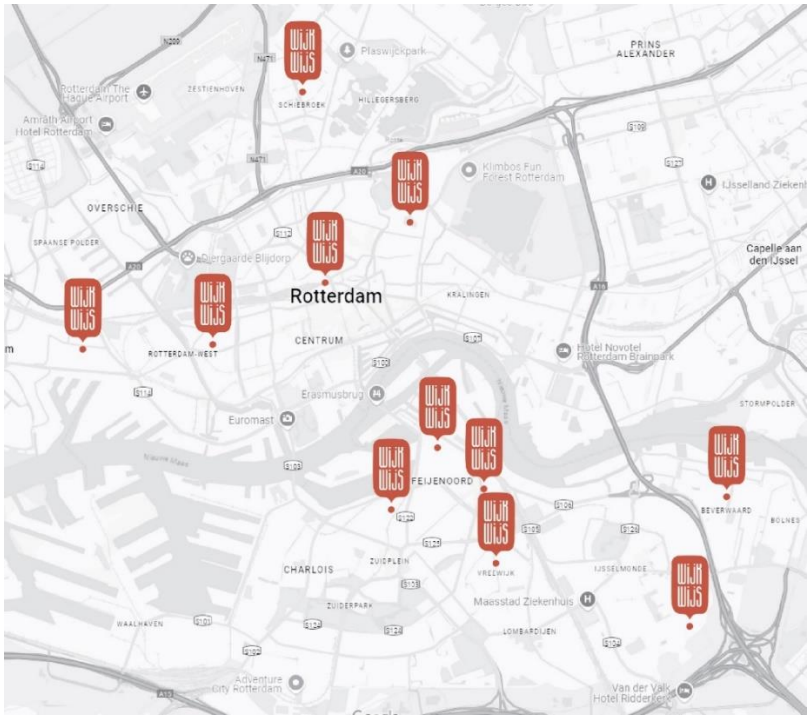
3. Ownership is about recognizing all types of contributions in research. Yet, ownership in research extends beyond recognition of tangible contributions; it is also about a feeling of ownership people develop when their participation is truly equal and recognized. For instance, in decision-making and recognition of expertise (Strasser et al., 2021). Ownership also stresses the importance of large institutions like the university or municipality, to not take over or appropriate initiatives as part of their programs. It is important to be very sensitive to the possible negative influence of bureaucratic logics and power-imbalances (as noted above) (Wallerstein et al., 2019; Breton-Carbonneau et al., 2024).

> For example, in Delfshaven, citizens are now part of a coordinating body in their neighborhood. Citizens, together with support of an academic board, decide what research questions are relevant to their neighborhood, investigate the existing research projects and organize events and get-togethers with citizens to seek out how to further involve different communities. The initiators of this research initiative, chose to take a step back and opened up these coordinating-roles to engaged citizens, which shows trust in decision-making and leadership of local citizens while emphasizing the importance of engagement and space to develop a sense of ownership through action.

Future outlook of Wijkwijs

Looking ahead, as a research collective, Wijkwijs will further focus on sustainable involvement and engagement with communities and initiatives in Rotterdam. Thereby, we will look into opportunities in strengthening collaboration with local governments and professional networks. Opportunely, in ways that support both formal and informal local networks for social change. At the same time, we will continue to reflect upon our values and guiding principles and engage with the (ethical) challenges that arise in our practices. Amongst these ambitions, we are also dedicated to training the next generation of scientists preparing them to collaborate in a reciprocal and just ways with local communities and contribute to truly impactful research.

Locations of current research practices connected to Wijkwijs in Rotterdam:



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Program team:

Jelle Burger, Msc, Seline Westerhof, Msc

Prof. dr. Jurian Edelenbos, dr. Mike Duijn

dr. Ir. Beitske Boonstra & prof. dr. Jiska Engelbert