

Compass for Local Empowerment in rural areas



None of the big challenges of our time can be solved without the active participation of citizens!

Co-production of the European Partnership for Citizen-empowerment (SBE) and the European Rural Community Alliance (ERCA)

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Summary

The publication of the EU Long Term Vision for the Rural Areas (LTVRA) in June 2021 followed by the announcement of the Rural Pact, was the reason for the SBE (European Partnership for Citizen-empowerment) to dedicate its annual symposium to the theme of Local Empowerment. This Dutch-German symposium on May 31 2022 zoomed in on one of the four drivers of the LTVRA: Stronger, including empowerment of rural communities. If the European Commission really wants to empower rural communities, we must find ways to reach to the local level: the village or neighbourhood where people's daily lives take place. In this compass for Local Empowerment we look for practical ways to reach to the grassroots. With this we want to make a contribution to the (European) Rural Pact. As Herman Tjeenk Willink, former vice-president of the State Council in the Netherlands poses: "None of the big challenges of our time can be solved without the active participation of citizens." That statement also applies to the LTVRA. That is why the following question was central to the SBE symposium 2022: How can we reach a successful local interplay between citizens, public authorities and local organizations/companies in shaping empowered and vibrant local communities?

Community empowerment is connected to the democratic crisis in Europe, as trust in parliaments is alarming low. Community-led initiatives are a form of democratic practice which can help to restore trust between government and residents. People should be able to have their say in decisions that affect them. Community empowerment refers to the process of enabling communities to increase control over their lives. In this Compass we describe how this works, which tools are available and which bottlenecks can appear.

The Rural Pact, is aimed at enabling collaboration and mutual learning between pact members. ERCA member-organizations like LVKK (the National Association of Small Towns and Villages Netherlands) have a lot of experience with community development through their connection with thousands of grassroots initiatives. They can contribute this knowledge and experience to the Rural Pact (and vice versa) in cooperation with ERCA (European Rural Community Alliance). The draft results of the SBE-symposium on May 31, were discussed with Tom Jones, President of ERCA. The results of the Dutch/German symposium 2022 are further elaborated in this compass in which SBE and ERCA in co-production show several ways to shape vibrant local communities through local - and community empowerment, as an indispensable driving force for the implementation of the LTVRA.

1. Preamble

The SBE (European Partnership for Citizen-empowerment, established in the Netherlands, Germany and Belgium) is a cross border network of organizations focused on support for community led local initiatives to keep their village or neighbourhood liveable. The aim of SBE is to strengthen the position of (organizations for) citizen' initiatives in the Netherlands and Europe and to organize cross-border meetings as part of this.

The publication of the EU-Long-term Vision for the Rural Areas (LTVRA) and the preparations to build a Rural Pact, prompted the SBE to organize a Dutch-German symposium on Strong Villages/Local Empowerment on May 31 2022. The Symposium was focused on two questions:

- A. *How can citizen initiatives be or become an equal partner in the maintenance of local facilities?*
- B. *What interplay between citizen' initiatives, local authorities and social partners is required for this?*

Trends such as aging and population decline play a role in the border regions of Germany and the Netherlands and many parts of rural Europe. Although the context differs, we see citizens on both sides of the border taking initiatives to maintain the level of facilities. On the Symposium we shared successful German and Dutch solutions to encourage participants to take initiative themselves. In addition to sharing best practices at the Symposium and on the website, an additional objective was to use the outcomes of the Symposium to create a Compass for Local Empowerment. Through this Compass for Local Empowerment SBE and ERCA want to contribute to a successful implementation of the Long Term Vision for the Rural Areas (LTVRA) and the Rural Pact.

The structure of this compass is as follows. We first summarize the Long-Term Vision for the Rural Areas and the Rural Pact. Then we elaborate on the importance of community empowerment, regarding the democratic crisis in Europe. We present a conceptual framework for community empowerment. Chapter 4 is about practice and tools for community empowerment, Chapter 5 is about bottlenecks. Chapter 6 contains concluding remarks.



2. The Long-term Vision for the Rural Areas (LTVRA) and the Rural Pact

Across the European Union, the population in rural areas is on average older than in urban areas. Population numbers will slowly decline over the next ten years. Combined with poor connectivity, underdeveloped infrastructure, a lack of diverse employment opportunities and limited access to services, this trend makes rural areas less attractive to live and work in. At the same time, rural areas play a decisive role in the EU's green, digital and social transition. This offers opportunities for the sustainable development of rural areas. With the publication of **the Long-term vision for the rural areas** (30 June 2021), the European Commission took a further step towards broadening rural policy. Preserving a vital countryside has been identified as one of the priorities of the Common Agricultural Policy for 2021-2027. The vision is based on place-based development, in which the efforts of citizens are seen as the most important driver and the realization of one's own local identity, and as a guideline for action. The long-term vision is accompanied by a Rural Action Plan. The Rural Action Plan focuses on four areas for action; Stronger, Connected, Resilient and Prosperous:

- A. Stronger:** Emphasis on empowerment of rural communities, better access to services and social innovation; Rural areas should be home to empowered and **vibrant local communities**. Enabling all individuals to take active part in policy and decision-making processes, involving a broad range of stakeholders and networks as well as all levels of governance is key to developing tailor-made, place-based and integrated policy solutions and investments.
- B. Connected:** better connectivity, both in transport and digital access
- C. Resilient:** preserving natural resources and greening agricultural activities to combat climate change, while ensuring social resilience by providing access to training courses and diverse quality jobs;
- D. Prosperous:** diversify economic activities and improve the added value of agriculture, agri-food activities and agritourism

The focus of the SBE symposium and this Compass is mainly on action area A. **Stronger**, including empowerment of rural communities, better access to services and social innovation.

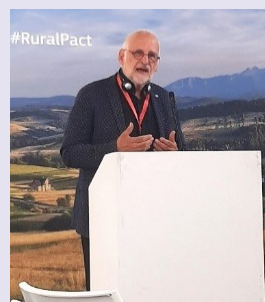
The Rural Pact

Drawing up a Rural Pact was part of the Action Plan, connected to the LTVRA. The Rural Pact provides a common framework for the engagement and cooperation of a wide range of actors at the **EU, national, regional and local level**. It contributes to increased synergies, complementarities and coherence between the EU, national, regional and territorial policies and interventions to achieve the objectives of the Long-Term Rural Vision and respond to the common aspirations of rural communities. Sharing experiences and best practises in the development of strategies, action plans and concrete measures that have been taken, will contribute to ensuring that all rural areas are stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous by 2040.

Graph 1: Main drivers shaping the future of rural areas for 2040 and the four complementary areas for action



On June 15, 2022 Ben van Essen presented on behalf of ERCA the results of the symposium Local Empowerment at the Rural Pact Conference in Brussels. The Compass for Local Empowerment also was the basis for a workshop at the European Rural Parliament on September 13 2022 in Kielce Poland.



2. The Long-term Vision for the Rural Areas (LTVRA) and the Rural Pact

The activities of the Rural Pact can be classified as contributing to three broad objectives:

- A. Amplify the voice of rural areas to bring them higher on the political agenda;
- B. Structure and enable collaboration and mutual learning between pact members;
- C. Encourage and monitor voluntary commitment for action by Rural Pact community members.

One of the priorities in the Rural Pact in 2024 is bringing the Rural Pact closer to citizens. With this compass we deliver a contribution to identify key ingredients of a successful implementation of the Rural Pact at the local level, and approaches that can help to make it happen.



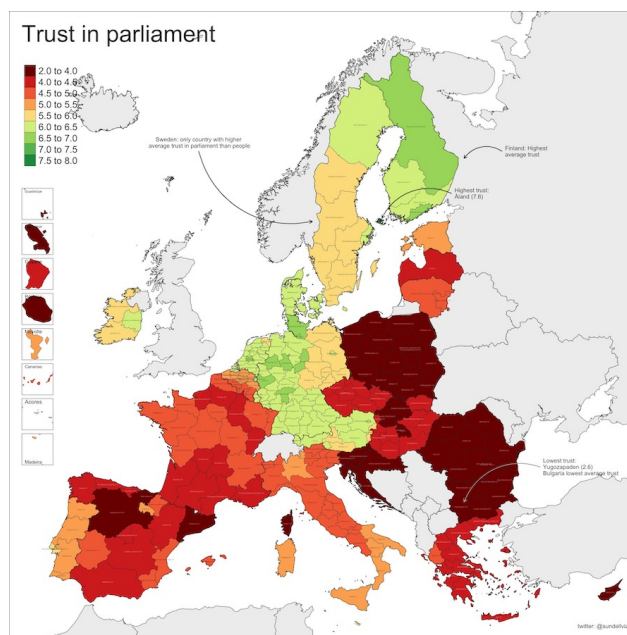
3. Community empowerment and democracy

The power of the idea of rural community to mobilise rural residents has many tangible social and economic benefits for rural development. There are strong commonalities in the experience of community mobilisation in rural areas across the global north. Themes of participation and partnership are evident in the policy approaches adopted by governments across Europe, America and Australia, while Nordic countries have sought to bend these models to their own traditions of democratic local associations. Many rural communities have benefited from more responsive and adaptable community based development initiatives based on participatory partnership arrangements. (1)

3.1 Community empowerment and democracy: rebuilding trust is needed

Community-led initiatives are a form of democratic practice (Ecolise, 2022). They bring a new vision for a hopeful future as they shape new sustainable living values, infrastructure, and the interaction between these living values and infrastructure incubators which challenge the current structures.

That there is a close relationship between democracy and community is also underlined by Cormac Russell. “Showing up more in our own and other peoples lives as active citizens is at the heart of the (contemporary) democratic challenge. Placing the provision of services and programmes in a more appropriate role alongside support for citizenship and community building is critical to the future of local democracy.” (2) Jim Diers: “democracy is not something done to us or for us, it’s what we ourselves do to create communities that work for all.” (3)



“Democracies are under threat around the world. Democracies – whether in transition or established for decades – are confronting serious challenges. Public distrust and the failure of governments to deliver equitable and sustainable economic and political progress has fuelled political polarization and the rise of leaders who are undermining democratic norms and institutions”. (4)

How is the state of democracy in Europe? How much confidence do Europeans have in (their country’s) parliament?” The 2021 Quality of Government Index shows how much trust the citizens of Europe have in their elected politicians. Even in “green” countries like the Netherlands, trust in Parliament is declining. According to the Eurobarometer 2022, confidence in the public administration in the Netherlands is 64%, which means that 36% of citizens have low trust.

In its report on Citizens’ dialogues and Citizens’ participation in the EU decision-making the European Parliament points out that the questioning, mistrust, and lack of participation of citizens, local authorities and civil society in “democracy” comes from the current structure or tools (democratic practices) used to engage citizens. These tools and structures seem to only enable a certain category of citizens to be heard, leaving out many voices. (5) At EU and national level the democratic deficits are screaming at us. (6)

3. Community empowerment and democracy

The increasing complexity of policy making and the failure to find solutions to some of the most pressing policy problems have prompted politicians, policy makers, civil society organisations, and citizens to reflect on how collective public decisions should be taken in the twenty first century. There is a need for new ways to find common ground and take action. The OECD has collected evidence and data that support the idea that citizen participation in public decision making can deliver better policies, strengthen democracy and build trust. Democratic institutions across the world are beginning to transform in ways that give citizens a more direct role in setting agendas and shaping the public decisions that affect them. (7) Democratic institutions are institutions that facilitate and promote the operations of democracy. They are those institutions that make democracy to work like governments, political parties and so on.

Participation includes “all the ways in which stakeholders can be involved in the policy cycle and in service design and delivery (Citizen participation playbook OECD)”. It refers to the efforts by public institutions to hear the views, perspectives, and inputs from citizens and stakeholders. Participation allows citizens and stakeholders to influence activities and decisions of the public authorities at different stages of the policy cycle and through different mechanisms. (8)

The OECD Recommendation of the Council on Open Government (2017) distinguishes between three levels of citizen and stakeholder participation, which differ according to the level of involvement: 1. Information, 2. Consultation, 3. Engagement: when citizens and stakeholders are given the opportunity and the necessary resources (e.g. information, data and digital tools) to collaborate during all phases of the policy-cycle and in the service design and delivery.

Why should governments involve citizens? The OECD (in “Citizen participation playbook”) gives four reasons: 1. It supports democracy, 2. It helps develop better policies, services, and projects, 3. It strengthens inclusion and diversity, 4. It supports legitimacy and facilitates implementation

Why should citizens get involved? What's in it for them? According to the OECD: 1. It allows citizens to shape decisions that affect their lives, 2. It is a chance to learn new things and develop new skills, 3. It gives a sense of accomplishment and pride.

ECOLISE (the European network for community-led initiatives on climate change and sustainability (9) thinks it is time to bring the voice of community-led initiatives into EU policy more strongly. Together with partners, they aim to make a call for transformational regional and local development policies, which enable a widespread community-led response to the multifaceted social and ecological crisis. (10)

3.2 The process of community empowerment

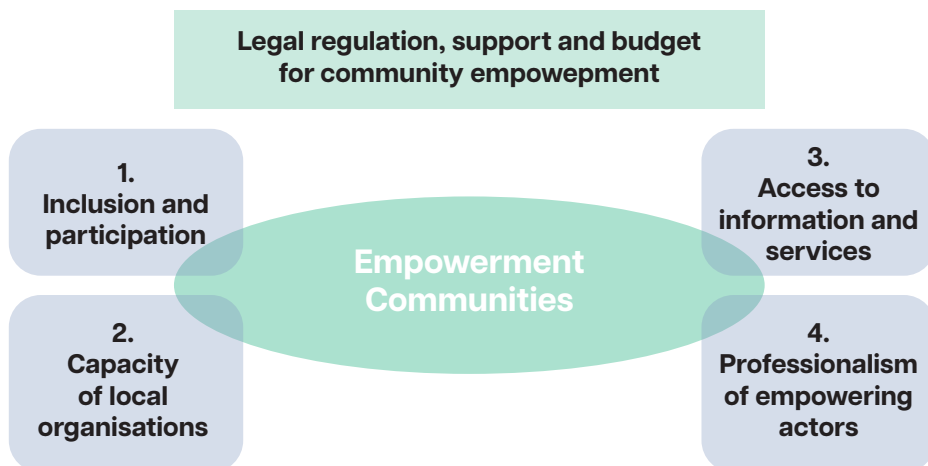
Community empowerment refers to the process of enabling communities to increase control over their lives. Empowerment means people having power and control over their own lives, and people get the support they need. You can't empower someone else or make someone empowered. It is about ways of working and supporting people so they can take control and responsibility for their own lives. It implies community ownership and action that explicitly aims at social and political change. People should be able to have their say in decisions that affect them. Involving people and communities in making decisions, helps build community capacity and also helps the public sector identify local needs and priorities and target budgets more effectively. Community development considers community members to be experts in their lives and communities, and values community knowledge and wisdom. It is not determined from outside the community but grows/emerges from within the affected community. (Australian Institute of Family Studies (11)

Scotland launched in 2015 **the Community Empowerment Act** to help communities to do more for themselves and have more say in decisions that affect them.

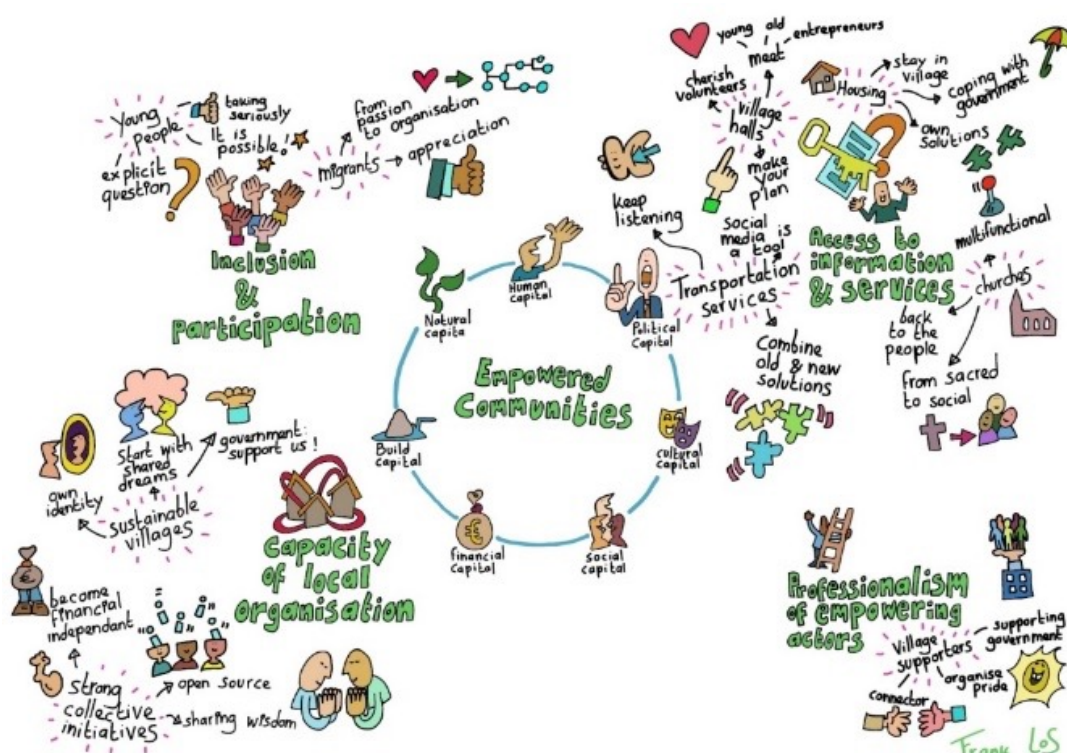
“It is a law that will help people do that. We also help by giving community groups money to make them stronger, and asking public bodies to make sure they listen to what communities want.”

4. Practice and tools for local empowerment

Community empowerment asks for four elements: inclusion and participation, access to information, capacity of local organizations and professionalism of empowering actors.



At the SBE symposium Local Empowerment May 2022 we explored these elements. In her keynote speech professor Bettina Bock elaborated on rural development in border regions. Rural Europe has many similar challenges (Population decline, Aging, Poverty) but also an increasing demand for new services. Border regions in particular can contribute to the search for - and exchange of solutions. By joining forces of city and countryside, citizen and government and between countries. Heinz Frey, Managing Director of DORV-Zentrum GmbH in his speech followed up with examples from the European project Nah-Da. In this Erasmus + project examples from several countries are shared with each other, how the supply of facilities in villages can be maintained by bundling services. After these key-note speeches in 9 workshops examples were discussed, how residents' initiatives take action in maintaining facilities, in co-operation with local government and local partners. For subjects like renovating the Village Hall, involving young people, or building a sustainable village, local initiators from the Netherlands and Germany explained how they work together to come to results.



4. Practice and tools for local empowerment

In addition to the concrete experiences at the symposium, the literature offers many examples of tools for community empowerment. We present some examples, without being complete:

4.1 ABCD: Asset Based Community Development

Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) is a method developed in the late 1980s by John McKnight. ABCD is an approach to sustainable community-driven development. Beyond the mobilisation of a particular community, it is concerned with how to link micro-assets to the macro-environment. Asset Based Community Development's premise is that communities can drive the development process themselves by identifying and mobilizing existing, but often unrecognised assets. In the method, the resources (assets) are the starting point for community building. Mapping, mobilizing and activating the assets creates an (informal) network of residents, local organizations and associations that work together to improve the neighbourhood. This is fundamentally different from the traditional approach that focuses on the problems and shortcomings present in a community, because this approach does not focus on the positive and overshadows the talents and abilities of residents. (12)

4.2 The Village Appraisal method

The village appraisals methodology and material were developed for rural communities in the UK. Such appraisals are aimed at describing local resources and facilities, assessing the options for achieving resources currently not possessed, and planning for the future. Village appraisals can involve parish councils and other local organisations such as schools, Women's Institutes etc. Everyone's opinion can be taken into account through this simple survey technique. A computer programme helps users choose questions from a menu, print a questionnaire and analyse replies. (13)

4.3 Parish council planning (case study)

Mobilising communities to achieve rural development objectives is in an international trend that has been achieved in different ways, and to varying degrees, across the global north. A specific example of that is an English initiative to involve rural communities in planning for their futures – parish, or community led, planning (14). Parish councils are the smallest unit of democratically elected government in England. They consist of community members from within the parish territory. Parish councils have no statutory planning powers but have been encouraged by government to engage in the planning process as a means of giving voice to rural communities in the planning process. Over two decades parish based community groups have been producing 'parish plans'. Around 1.200 parish based community groups were funded to produce parish plans under the Vital Villages programme. Provision has been made for statutory planning authorities to take into account these plans. In practice this 'taking account' has been both open to interpretation and difficult to achieve in practice.

4.4 Community Led Local development (CLLD)

The community-led local development (CLLD) funding approach, initially limited to the rural areas under the name LEADER is a European Union initiative (since 1991, funded by the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) investment pillar (Pillar II) to support development projects primarily in rural, but also in coastal and urban areas of EU member countries at the local scale by involving relevant local actors, including local organizations and associations, as well as individual citizens. CLLD projects are managed by local action groups (LAGs). Projects are implemented under so-called local development strategies (LDS), providing an in-depth assessment of the area, objectives and expected results. The LDS is (in most cases) developed in close cooperation with local and regional stakeholders (bottom-up approach). Each LDS must involve a relatively small, rural area, with a population of between 10,000 and 100,000 inhabitants.

LEADER developed seven principles of a local development approach: 1. Area-based: taking place in a small, homogeneous socially cohesive territory, 2. Bottom-up: local actors design the strategy and choose the actions, 3. Public-private partnership: LAGs are balanced groups involving public and private-sector actors, which can mobilise all available skills and resources, 3. Innovation: giving LAGs the flexibility to introduce new ideas and methods, 4. Integration: between economic, social, cultural and environmental actions, as distinct from a sectoral approach, 6. Networking: allowing learning among people, organisations and institutions at local, regional, national and European levels, 7. Co-operation: among LEADER groups, for instance to share experiences, allow complementarity or to achieve critical mass

4.5 Smart Villages

Smart Villages (15) are communities in rural areas that use innovative solutions to improve their resilience, building on local strengths and opportunities. They rely on a participatory approach to develop and implement their strategy to improve their economic, social and/or environmental conditions, in particular by mobilising solutions offered by digital technologies. Smart Villages benefit from cooperation and alliances with other communities and actors in rural and urban areas. The initiation and the implementation of Smart Village strategies may build on existing initiatives and can be funded by a variety of public and private sources. A participatory approach means an active participation of the local community in the drawing up and decision-making regarding the Smart Village strategy. During the implementation phase, the participatory approach will ensure that the needs for capacity building and for training of people are properly addressed. Strategies must determine short, medium and long-term goals. Progress must be measurable through performance indicators that will be set in a roadmap. These roadmaps should be reviewed at regular intervals to allow continuous improvement. Strategies may aim, for example: to improve access to services (in various fields such as health, training or transport) or to enhance business opportunities and create jobs.

4.6 Community Capitals Framework

The Community Capitals Framework (CCF) provides a comprehensive way to categorize a community's assets and explore the relationships among them. The CCF describes seven capitals - natural, build, financial, social, human, political and cultural - form the basis of a community. The basic principle is that every community has these, but that the strength lies in the good use of these 'capitals'. They are not separate from each other, but are related to each other. For example, if a community invests in good meeting spaces like a Village Hall (build capital), this can influence meeting each other (social capital). It is a holistic view of what a community is, and the seven capitals are (integrally) connected to each other.

COMMUNITY CAPITALS FRAMEWORK

Flores & Flores (2018)



The Local Government Scotland Act 2003

introduced the Village Pact Community Planning as a process which helps public agencies to work together and with the community to plan and deliver better services which make a real difference to people's lives. The reference to the Community Empowerment Act Scotland underlines the importance that citizen participation is regulated, including law/legal foundation, budget etc. That means needed support and policies like:

- formalised recognition, respect and (financial) support for value of bottom-up processes (right to challenge);
- alternatives for segmented and compartmentalized public and private funding (local revolving funds);
- incentives for governments to reconsider their traditional position (training politicians and public servants in new roles, integrated development services);
- incentives for local integrated approach of sustainability (green deal);
- experiments for development of integrated regulations (free zones);

4.7 The cooperative as an organization for residents' initiatives

In her inaugural lecture at Utrecht University in 2013, Prof Tine de Moor (16) sketches the picture of a third wave of cooperatives. After the Guilds in the Middle Ages and the emergence of cooperatives such as banks at the end of the 19th century, a new wave of cooperatives has emerged since the beginning of this century. Many of these cooperatives form the legal basis of a citizens' initiative, for example to jointly purchase energy, realize a fiber-network or organize care in the village itself. Valentina Caimi, Senior Policy Expert (AEIDL) (17) gets in to the specific contribution of the social economy and of civil society organisations to the provision of social care in the EU.

Social economy actors and civil society organisations, thanks to the participatory governance model which characterise them, contribute to improving working conditions in the care sector. Another very important dimension that those care providers embed is the link with the community. Social economy actors and civil society organisations are often the only care provider in remote and rural areas. Many of these initiatives are organized in cooperatives. The cooperative is an organizational model for residents' initiatives because of benefits like organizing the participatory governance model and because it enables an entrepreneurial approach.

4. Practice and tools for local empowerment

4.8 Local Place Plans Scotland 2019

A new initiative by the Scottish Government is the development of Local Place Plans (18). This connects the regional planning process with local communities. Local Place Plans offer communities the opportunity to develop proposals for their local area, expressing their aspirations and ambitions for future change. Local Place Plans were introduced by the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019, which contains a new right for communities to produce their own plans as part of the new Scottish planning system. Local Place Plans contain the community's proposals for the development and use of land and provide a new opportunity for communities to feed into the planning system with ideas and proposals. However, Local Place Plans are more than just a plan: they can help communities understand what they want to be like in the future and help to develop a positive community identity. They can help develop local connections and collaborations and develop community capacity and improve social capital. They can support community aspirations on the big challenges for a future Scotland, such as responding to the global climate emergency and tackling inequalities. They are an opportunity for real, community-based change. The Scottish Community Development Centre and Nick Wright Planning developed a draft 'How to' Guide aimed at supporting communities to prepare Local Place Plans.



The Black Isle Local Place Plan is a recent example. In the local community, the Black Isle - a rural area with 8000 people and 8 Community Councils - the Black Isle Partnership has completed 1 year of intensive community involvement to develop a LPP. They have also worked with the local and national authorities in this process. The plan covers all aspects of life in this area.

4.9 Self-governance in the municipality of Peel en Maas Netherlands

In the Netherlands the relationship between citizens and public administration has been changing substantially in recent years. The vision of the municipality of Peel en Maas (19) (20) is that the residents of villages and neighbourhoods are quite capable of assuming responsibility for the development of their own community. And that self-governance calls for the definition of new roles for local governments and social organisations.

As of 2000, the Peel en Maas village communities started to work on drafting quality of life schedules and village development plans (Village Pacts!). The first series of village development plans (Village Pact) was primarily aimed at physical projects, such as community centres and redesigns of the village centres. In these projects, the ideas came about in discussions with the villagers, while the municipality played an important part in the realisation of the physical amenities. In the next generation of village plans a concern for social development was added, such as facilities for the elderly and an eye for the welfare of the entire population (self-guidance 2.0). Over time, the function of the municipality shifted in the direction of helping the villages to carry out these social projects. The villages increasingly decided on their identities and future. In 2012-2016 self-governance 3.0 emerged: the village communities more and more focus on their 'mental states'. This includes questions such as: What sort of village do we want to be in 10 years' time? Residents determine the village agenda and make a sharp distinction between what they can tackle themselves and for which parts they need help and support from the municipality or social organizations. Only in a dialogue between parties can the issues at stake be solved at a qualitatively higher level, in which sometimes the community takes the lead, sometimes the authorities take the lead, and sometimes both jointly.

Village Pact Meijel (Netherlands)

The village of Meijel is located in the region of the Peel and has approximately 6,000 inhabitants. In Meijel in 2010 a number of citizens saw explicit opportunities. They were successful in bending the negative signals into positive sounds by investing a lot of energy in self-government and community development. The community network looked for and found answers and guided Meijel in its search for a new identity and vision of the future. Inhabitants were invited and challenged to help construct the future of Meijel themselves. The result was the establishment in 2011 of 'Denk je aan Meijel' (Do you think about Meijel), a vision of the future of Meijel. There was also much agreement about the approach of a number of attention points. Many successful projects in the areas of vital community, living, nature and recreation, and youth have been realised with still more new ideas in the pipeline.

4.10 The Village Pact

A specific tool for working on community empowerment could be the **Village Pact**. A village plan is a plan about the future of the village, written by the residents themselves. A good village plan states where the village wants to go and why. Of course everyone has their own opinion on that, but it is good for residents to think together in a structured way about the future of the village. A Village Plan becomes a Village Pact, if it is translated into concrete agreements about implementation, with a division of tasks: what does the government do, what do other partners do, what does the community itself do and where do we do it together.

In the Netherlands there are several manuals on how to make a village plan. A Village Pact mostly consists of:

- A summary of characteristics and qualities of the village;
- A future vision for the village and the countryside;
- Goals and Objectives per theme, such as housing, road safety, club life, facilities;
- Proposed measures;
- Priority scheduling.

A Village Pact planning process takes about 1 year (from start to presentation of the village plan). Steps: Kick-off meeting (inventory wishes and ideas of residents), Sounding board meeting (discussing ideas with organizations that are needed for implementation), Presentation of the village plan and Execution (in work groups per theme).

In the Netherlands, broad experience has been gained with Village Plans (Village Pact) in the past 20 years. In those 20 years we have seen a development in which initially much emphasis was placed on the role of government to meet the needs, to an increasingly stronger role for the community itself to shape quality of life (Broad Wellbeing) in collaboration with the government and other relevant partners.

Other examples of working with Village Pacts are found in Belgium, Schotland (Local Place Plans Scotland), Germany and the UK (for instance Parish Council Planning).

The advantages of a Village Pact in comparison to other methods are:

- The Village Pact takes shape bottom-up because it starts at the place where people lead their daily lives. That is in their village or neighbourhood. The Leader approach is also bottom up, but Lags often are organized on a regional level.
- In the Village Pact residents determine the village agenda, not limited by a framework from the government or other. Leader for instance is based on an obligatory framework determined by the EU.
- In the Village Pact residents make a sharp distinction between what they can tackle themselves and for which parts they need help and support from the local government or other organizations.
- The Village Pact leads to real action because it is an agreement between residents, the (local) government and other partners about implementing the necessary steps regarding the quality of live in the village. In this sense it could be part of a Smart Village strategy.

Good for each other villages

May 2022 the Dutch Village Association LVKK published the research report "Good for each other villages. How community strength develops". Community power comes to flourish as residents themselves take responsibility for the future of their own village or district. In some villages this development is not coming off the ground, in other villages it is unstoppable. What makes that difference? Or: who makes the difference? In this report the inhabitants of eleven villages themselves are speaking: what is their success? What are they warming up to? How do they achieve their goals? What bottlenecks do they meet? They look also at the role of the municipality. How can she support communities? In the second part of the report a broader framework is given for these developments.

The eleven village portraits in Volume 1 show that there is an important change going on, both within communities themselves and in the relationship between municipalities and villages. Residents are no longer a leaning back consumer of what the government offers. They choose to engage in policy making or go a step further, they take control themselves and get to work on the good life in their own village to give shape. From passive to (pro-)active, of moving along to himself at the helm. A movement that can't be stopped!

In most of these villages, being successful in building community power, the strategy is built upon a Village Pact.

5. Bottlenecks in community empowerment

The SBE symposium Local Empowerment 2022 was focused on the question how citizen initiatives can be an equal partner in the maintenance of local facilities and what interplay between citizen' initiatives, local authorities and social partners is required for this. Although there are several successes of local empowerment, there are also many examples where things didn't go well. There are numerous problems associated with community participation identified in research in rural communities. We list a few important issues here:

5.1 The complicated role of government

In chapter 4 we provided a list of tools for involving communities and finding out what communities want. One of the big issues to achieve what is wanted and needed, the authorities at local, regional and national levels have to be committed partners in the process. An important emphasis is on the role of municipalities as the administration closest to the communities.

In paragraph 4.3 we mentioned the method of parish council planning in the UK. The reality has been that many parish plans are ignored by planning authorities whilst others are selectively and spasmodically used. Evaluations have concluded that overall parish plans have little influence in the planning system. The experience of parish, or community led, planning in England highlights the contradictions between policy rhetoric and experience. Politicians and policy makers remain committed to the notion of empowered communities able to mobilise resources from within but in the case of parish planning it has proved difficult to achieve tangible community level influence. (21)

The question is whether the local government respects the authority of the community? The American researcher James Scott (22) coined the expression "Seeing like a State" to indicate the dominance of governments that devise plans for the betterment of society without taking sufficient account of the knowledge of people and their social connections. Around the turn of the century in the Netherlands, the realization dawns that residents want to take responsibility for the quality of life in their village centres themselves. The citizen's perspective becomes dominant: 'Seeing like a Citizen' (expression of sociologist J. Gaventa (23). Villages draw up their own development visions. With exceptions, many governments assume that they know what is best for the community, after all they have been democratically elected!? They look upon themselves as an enterprise that has to tackle all the problems of its population (seeing like a state !!). But vital communities do not call for authorities that consider all problems as their problems, nor for greedy authorities, nor for neutral authorities, but for authorities that are aware of when they should act or when they should step back. Vital communities prosper better with low-key and cautious authorities (seeing like a citizen).

To a better understanding of how (local) government can properly deal with autonomous communities, Peel and Maas introduced the concept of multiple government. They distinguish three roles of government (24)

A. *The authoritarian government role*

From this government role the government guarantees a certain order and safety for the inhabitants. In this government position we can place the commandment and prohibition conditions and the upholding role of the government. Legislation and execution are done relatively autonomous by the government; the elections are in fact the only form of influence for the citizen within this framework.

B. *The rule-controlled government*

Values such as equality and justice are the starting points for the execution of this role. Many of the rules that the government makes belong in this part. Just think of spatial planning, management and maintenance of public spaces and the execution of tasks that are related to the social domain. The government expects that the citizens will obey the rules that they impose. That's why the citizens are explicitly involved with the drawing up of these rules by the government. In the end the municipality decides about the rules, but citizen participation

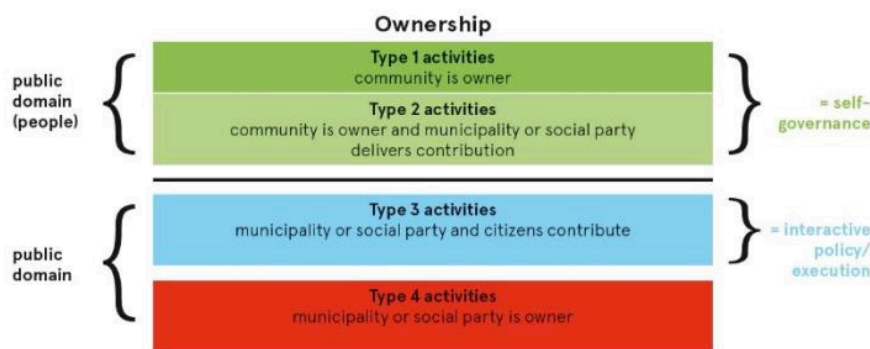
is desirable – from the point of view of the quality of policy and support. This rule-controlled government meets citizens mostly as consumers. Consumers that are primarily occupied with the question: what's in it for me? And thus, in all layers of the society a market arises to outwit the government. That development has the result that many things have to be captured in contracts and rules. Contracts and rules that can then be avoided by smart manoeuvring or can be used to one's own advantage. The new challenge is the offering of space to society to expand the living world of the people. Without intervention of the systems of the market and/or government. The challenge is to get past the arisen contract society. This challenge asks for a different, supplemental government role.

Multiple government

Communicative government	
Philosophy	qualities values
People image	professional, the creative human being
Government form	communicative self-governance
Rule-controlled government	
Philosophy	equality and justice in the contract society
People image	customer, the claiming human being
Government form	ruling governance
Authoritarian government	
Philosophy	equality and justice by general law
People image	subject, the silent human being
Government form	authoritarian governance

C. The communicative government

If the government wants to be of added value for the Good Life, then it is very important that the government knowingly steps out of the systematic of the 'red' authoritarian government and the 'blue' rule-controlled government. It then has to enter the world of the 'green' communicative self-governance and take the role of a communicative government. In the role of the communicative government, the government is not 'in charge'. This in contrast to the roles of the authoritarian and rule-controlled government, where the government is solidly in control as the owner with the end-responsibility. In the role of the communicative government, the government places itself in the position of partner next to the citizens. The communicative government asks for relationships where rules play no or a subordinate role. This means that in the communicative part we do not reason from rules, but from equality from parties. Where the citizen is 'primus inter pares'. There is literally deregulation. Because citizens and government meet each other as equals, the elements of authority from the indirect democracy are taken off the table. So now it is depoliticised. A third element is the consultative form. In this communicative part it is about consultation with the goal of agreement, about dialogue, about generating discussion. And it's not about the debate or the dry exchange of points of view. With these forms of communication, there are no structure appointments, there is disorganisation. The quality of the dialogue forms the basis. Set rules, based on power relationships disappear. Knowledge power of the government is non-existent in this green part; a community is highly educated and therefore the often-supposed superiority because of knowledge by the government is not present anyway. The addition of this communicative role to the government repertoire, does not make the authoritarian and rule-controlled roles disappear. It does take care of it that the addition of the communicative role changes in those other two roles.



5. Bottlenecks in community empowerment

For many governments, dealing properly with the distinction between the three roles is a difficult task, with the communicative role in particular often falling short. There should be incentives for governments to reconsider their traditional position (training politicians and public servants in new roles, integrated development services). As an additional aid Peel en Maas developed a frame of mind to support determining the ownership of activities and therewith also decides which of the three government roles should be deployed. In the thinking frame there are four types of activities that are distinguished, coupled to the ownership. The role that the citizen has in type 1 and 2 they call (communicative) self-governance and the role that reflects type 3, they call citizen participation.

5.2 Other obstacles

- Finance: One of the most important problems has been reliance on fixed term funding with the result that most partnerships in rural areas tend to be short term, lasting as long as specific funding programmes. Partnerships also tend to be unevenly spread with many communities ending up left out or unable to attract any money for their initiatives. (Shucksmith, Thompson, 2010).
- Laws, rules and protocols. Much policy is laid down in laws, policy documents and protocols. Moreover, policy is often segmented. Residents' initiatives often do not exactly fit within the rules and protocols. These initiatives often also touch on several policy areas, making coordination difficult.
- Time and pace. Decision-making within the government can take a long time due to various circumstances. That can discourage residents.
- Professionals. There is a big gap between the everyday lives and perceptions of many people in communities and the work of professional specialised public organisations. Professionals are working to targets and performance indicators often set from above by government, as well as the professional education of staff. Residents are working with everyday reality of the places, people and needs of their area.
- Myths about citizens. The OECD (25) mentions three myths about citizen participation; 1. Citizens are not capable of understanding the complexity of an issue or project. 2. Citizens are unreliable and will not commit fully to the participation process. 3. Citizens will develop either a wish list or a list of grievances. These myths are often used as an excuse for not involving citizens.
- Obstacles in the community itself. There may also be obstacles on the part of the communities. For example, lack of support in the community (democratic level/ representativeness), lack of specific expertise, limitations due to working with volunteers, etc. And there may also be disinterest and un-motivation to commit to the community. That requires community leadership which is not always present.



6. Final remarks

Rural areas should be home to empowered and vibrant local communities, according to the LTVRA. The Dutch-German symposium on May 31, 2022, zoomed in on one of the four drivers of the Long-Term Vision for the Rural Areas (LTVRA) to wit “**Stronger**”, with an accent on empowerment of rural communities. Community empowerment refers to the process of enabling communities to increase control over their lives. It is about ways of working and supporting people so they can take control and responsibility for their own lives. It implies community ownership and action that explicitly aims at social and political change. In chapter 4 we give a lot of examples how community empowerment can be stimulated. Including the instrument of the Village Pact.



The Rural Pact is aimed at enabling collaboration and mutual learning between Pact members. For 2024 the focus is on bringing the Rural Pact closer to citizens. To achieve this, multiple and long-term efforts are required. Community empowerment is one of them. In this Compass for Local Empowerment we looked for practical ways to reach to the grassroots, as a contribution to the Rural Pact. In this way ERCA wants to contribute to identify key ingredients of a successful implementation of the Rural Pact at the local level, and approaches that can help to make it happen. By our 14 national members, covering thousands of local initiative groups, ERCA is a connecting link between grassroots initiatives and Europe. In this way ERCA is an “elevator” organisation. We see this compass as a first step in working on several ways to shape vibrant local communities through local - and community empowerment. We invite all our partners to work together to collect knowledge about supporting vital communities. We search, among other things, especially for literature with examples of (variations of) Village Pacts and their implementation throughout Europe.

Invitation to send your comments

If you would like to respond to this compass or add best practices (preferably variations of Village Pacts), please contact ben.van.essen@outlook.com

List of footnotes

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Partners

European Partnership for citizen-empowerment (SBE), established in the Netherlands in 2015, was responsible for the organisation of the Dutch-German symposium on Local Empowerment on 31 May 2022, which was the basis for this compass. SBE is a partnership/network of organizations focused on citizen' initiatives to keep their village or neighbourhood liveable and in that context maintain cross-border contacts. The aim of SBE is to strengthen the position of (organizations for) citizen' initiatives in the Netherlands and Europe and to organize cross-border meetings as part of this. Website: <https://sbeeurope.eu> Instagram: [sbe_europe](https://www.instagram.com/sbe_europe) LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/sbe-europe/>

The European Rural Community Alliance (ERCA) was established in 2009 as the network for the rural village/community movements in Europe. Its main objectives are: to link and support the national and regional rural community movements; to support the creation of new movements in countries where they do not currently exist; to enable exchange of knowledge and mutual support between members; to promote integrated, cross-sectoral, place-based rural development; to raise the voice of rural people and influence public opinion; to influence rural policy at EU and national levels and to organise the European Rural Parliament in co-operation with partner organisations. ERCA has 14 members. All of these organizations are very active in supporting rural community development in their own countries. <http://www.ruralcommunities.eu/>

Editorial: Ben van Essen



