

## Chapter 29

# Sustainability-Oriented Social Learning in Multi-cultural Urban Areas: The Case of the Rotterdam Environmental Centre

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**Abstract** This chapter explores the utilization of social cohesion and diversity in creating more sustainable multi-cultural communities. Community greening is seen as a catalyst for sustainability-oriented social learning. Greening here is not the same as literally adding green to a community (trees, parks, gardens) – although that certainly can be a part of it – but rather as a metaphor for improving quality of life and a stepping stone towards sustainability. Social learning is introduced as a process that builds social cohesion and relationships in order to be able to utilize the different perspectives, values and interests people bring to a sustainability challenge. Although there are many perspectives and definitions of social learning it is defined here as: a collaborative, emergent learning process that hinges on the simultaneous cultivation of difference and social cohesion in order to create joint ownership, and to unleash creativity and energy needed to break with existing patterns, routines or systems. The chapter is empirically grounded in the Dutch city of Rotterdam. We use the phrase red zone to refer to parts of Rotterdam, because there are a number of socio-economic, cultural and ecological issues that could come together and escalate in ways that we have seen in similar Western European metropolitan areas such as the Paris *banlieues*. One of the questions we address is: How can, under conditions like these, diversity and social cohesion be used in building more sustainable practices, lifestyles and systems?

**Keywords** Social learning • Diversity • Social cohesion • Boundary crossing • Expeditionary learning • Community development

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*Parts of the city of Rotterdam are plagued by high levels of crime, unemployment, and pollution. Yet it is in these same neighborhoods that immigrant women are improving green space, young people are reconnecting to their North African homeland through learning about a migratory butterfly, and community members are turning traditional gatherings into an opportunity to learn about the environment. Authors Arjen Wals and Marlon van der Waal use a social learning perspective to help understand how a community organization facilitates this work.*

## **Introduction**

This chapter explores the utilization of social cohesion and diversity in creating more sustainable multi-cultural communities. Community greening is seen as a catalyst for sustainability-oriented social learning. Greening here is not the same as literally adding green to a community (trees, parks, gardens) – although that certainly can be a part of it – but rather as a metaphor for improving quality of life and a stepping stone towards sustainability. Social learning is introduced as a process that builds social cohesion and relationships in order to be able to utilize the different perspectives, values and interests people bring to a sustainability challenge. Although there are many perspectives and definitions of social learning (Glasser 2007) it is defined here as: a collaborative, emergent learning process that hinges on the simultaneous cultivation of difference and social cohesion in order to create joint ownership, and to unleash creativity and energy needed to break with existing patterns, routines or systems.

A key assumption underlying this perspective, one we will explore, is that breaking with current unsustainable practices, routines and systems requires creativity, agency, risk-taking and high levels of motivation. Questions that are addressed, and partially answered, are: how can we create a transformative culture of change that cultivates these qualities in people, organizations and communities? How can diversity and social cohesion be used in building sustainable practices, lifestyles and systems?

## **Rotterdam as Red Zone**

The chapter is empirically grounded in the Dutch city of Rotterdam. The city of Rotterdam is the second largest city of the country and together with the suburbs forms the most urbanized area in the Netherlands. We use the phrase red zone to refer to Rotterdam, or rather parts of Rotterdam, because there are a number of socio-economic, cultural and ecological issues that could come together and escalate in ways that we have seen in similar Western European metropolitan areas such as the Paris *banlieues* (Schneider 2008) and the city of Bradford, UK (Allen 2003). We will first describe some of the elements that are currently affecting different neighborhoods in Rotterdam, and which require the immediate attention of the local government, community organizations, and neighborhood groups.

In January 2009, Rotterdam had just under 600,000 inhabitants and an incredible 2,847 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup> (the national average is 489 per km<sup>2</sup>) ([www.statline.cbs.nl](http://www.statline.cbs.nl)). Rotterdam is also a very diverse city with nearly half its population not of Dutch origin and representing 173 different nationalities. The largest groups come from Suriname, Morocco, Turkey, the Dutch Antilles and Aruba, and the Cape Verde Islands.<sup>1</sup>

As can be expected from a densely populated area, Rotterdam is facing major social, economic and environmental problems that cause troubled and tense relations between groups of citizens, but also health and security problems that affect all the inhabitants. In this respect, even though Rotterdam may not be struck by extreme dangers as hurricanes and war that create immediate life-threatening situations for tens of thousands of people, Rotterdam as a red zone harbors a series of more subtle threats that make living in this city slowly but increasingly intense and hostile (see also Stedman and Ingalls, Chap. 10, this volume for another type of red zone city).

Starting in 2005, the Rotterdam Centre for Research and Statistics (COS 2008) has conducted a survey among 3,500 inhabitants, asking them to define the main problems of the city. In 2007, the three most cited problems were crime, traffic problems and pollution, and (mis) management of public space (2008).

Crime in Rotterdam is relatively high when compared to other Dutch cities.<sup>2</sup> Rotterdam is the only city in the Netherlands that since 2002 has kept a public record of the ethnic background of people involved in criminal activities. These records show that more than 55 % of Moroccan men between 18 and 85 years old have had at least one encounter with the police, as have 40 % of the Antillean and Suriname men, and 36 % of the Turkish men in this age category, while 18.4 % of the native Dutch male population has had such an encounter (Bovenkerk 2009; Komen and Schooten 2009). High unemployment rates, as a result of loss of jobs associated with Rotterdam harbor, may contribute to this crime problem.

Key environmental issues listed in the survey are: dirty streets (usually referring to streets with litter and dog excrements), air pollution (depending on climatic conditions this usually refers to high ozone levels and/or particulate matter from motorized vehicles), shortage of green areas, noise (mainly from traffic, including air traffic), and risks of disaster by toxic substances (often related to the presence of a major oil refinery and chemical plants in the vicinity of Rotterdam harbor). Indeed inhabitants have reason for concern: a study by the Academic Coalition Healthier Rotterdam in 2008 revealed that lower life spans among Rotterdam residents relative to inhabitants of other parts of the Netherlands could be attributed to: air pollution, noise pollution, smoking, sleeping difficulties, lack of exercise, obesity as well as socio-economic factors such as social marginalization, loneliness, lack of social cohesion, and lower levels of education and income.

Although there are no simple causal explanations or linear relationships, the figures presented here for Rotterdam, particularly the ones related to unemployment,

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<sup>1</sup> [www.cos.rotterdam.nl](http://www.cos.rotterdam.nl)

<sup>2</sup> [www.cbs.nl](http://www.cbs.nl)

contribute to unfavorable perceptions various groups of citizens have of one another. In fact they have led to deep concerns about the integration of ethnic minorities and to fierce and bitter discussions between right- and left- wing parties in the city council of Rotterdam and in the Dutch Parliament. Arguably the buildup of ethnic tensions is not so much fueled by face-to-face interaction between these groups but rather by statistics and, indeed, populist rhetoric. The latter has led to the rise of what some refer to as a right-wing nationalist party: the *Partij voor de Vrijheid* or PVV (Party for Freedom), led by a very outspoken and public figure Geert Wilders, internationally known for his anti-Koran film *Fitna*. Wilders and his party have successfully tapped into the anti-immigration sentiment that grew exponentially as a result of two politically motivated hate murders that took place in the first decade of this century: the murder of Pim Fortuyn, a Rotterdam-based politician who is seen by many as Geert Wilders' predecessor, by a leftist activist, and the murder of the well known movie-maker and columnist Theo van Gogh by a Muslim fundamentalist. In many ways these two incidents, preceded by 9/11, have been landmark events completely changing the political landscape in local and national government and transforming a culture of tolerance and dialogue, which previously characterized the Netherlands, into a polarized culture of distrust and fear.

Veldhuis and Bakker (2009) suggest we may need to soften this harsh conclusion a bit. At the end of their extensive report on Muslims in the Netherlands they write: 'The fact that the release of the anti-Islam movie *Fitna* did not lead to angry responses by Muslim communities may indicate two things. Either the idea of intolerance and polarization has been exaggerated, or Dutch society has gradually rediscovered its traditions and the importance of adhering to common rules and values that include mutual respect. Probably it is a bit of both' (Veldhuis and Bakker 2009). They conclude that globalization in recent years has resulted in increased interaction and interdependency between social groups and a corresponding awareness of social diversity and heterogeneity. According to Veldhuis and Bakker, in order to achieve successful co-existence social groups with different values, norms, historical backgrounds and beliefs need to: 'agree on a basic set of common rules and values and [maintain] a minimum level of mutual respect and understanding' (ibid, p. 28).

## The Rotterdam Environmental Centre

An NGO working against the complicated and often tense backdrop in Rotterdam is the 'Rotterdams Milieu Centrum' (RMC), translated: 'Rotterdam Environmental Center'<sup>3</sup>. The centre became independent in 2003 and is connected to related environmental centers in other large cities including Amsterdam, The Hague and Utrecht. The RMC aims 'to change the city of Rotterdam into a more nature- and environmentally-friendly city where people can live in safety, well-being and social harmony'. The work of the RMC is featured in this chapter because according to a number of indicators (increased participation, continued praise and funding from government agencies,

<sup>3</sup> [www.rotterdam.milieucentrum.nl](http://www.rotterdam.milieucentrum.nl)

participant feedback, consultation requests by similar organizations elsewhere in the country, and the results of a survey conducted by the independent bureau ORG-ID in 2009), the centre – under challenging conditions and against some trends in Europe in general and certainly in The Netherlands – appears successful in simultaneously developing social cohesion among diverse groups of people and in tackling local manifestations of un-sustainability. In doing so, we claim that the RMC confers resilience within the social-ecological system in this urban European red zone.

The activities of the centre rest on four pillars: ‘environment’, ‘nature’, ‘space’ and ‘diversity’, all of which are addressed in partnership with city government initiatives. Within the pillar *environment*, air quality and climate change are chosen as key themes in response to air pollution and threats of rising sea level. Rotterdam was chosen by the UN World Alliance of Cities Against Poverty as a Centre of Excellence regarding climate change, and the Rotterdam Climate Initiative and the Rotterdam Climate Proof programme tackle climate change issues. In the pillar *nature*, the RMC advises the city council in its management of nature and organizes many nature-oriented projects (e.g., the project ‘Mapping Nature’ in which volunteers are trained to monitor natural areas in the city). In order to make Rotterdam a safer ‘*space*’, inhabitants are involved in the mapping and construction of their city as well as the green elements within. RMC facilitates the process by informing, advising and supporting groups of inhabitants and individuals and by working together with other organizations (e.g., when new building projects are developed or valuable nature areas are threatened). Finally, the RMC addresses the *diversity* pillar by organizing a large number of activities within a special programme called ‘MilieuDivers’ (translated: ‘Environment-Diversity’ programme). It is this programme that forms the focal point of the remainder of the chapter. We will introduce the RMC’s Environment-Diversity programme and analyze it from a social learning perspective. Before doing so, however, we must pay attention to the theoretical basis of the RMC activities as they mimic principles and practices associated with social learning as defined in the opening paragraph of this chapter.

## The Theoretical Basis of the RMC Activities

A key component of the RMC’s strategy to green Rotterdam is the continuous strengthening of local and regional networks in order to establish a broad social basis for its activities<sup>4</sup>. The writings of Paolo Freire, Kurt Hahn and Carl Rogers provide a theoretical underpinning for this work.

### 1. *The critical pedagogy of Paolo Freire*

Freire (1921–1997) is well-known for his battle against suppression and exploitation of impoverished citizens in Brazil. As pedagogue, Freire focused his attention on learning through dialogue, which he saw as the meeting and interaction of human beings who are open to the dynamics of change (Freire 1985, 1987).

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<sup>4</sup>[www.milieucentrum.rotterdam.nl](http://www.milieucentrum.rotterdam.nl)

In having contact with others, humans develop what he calls ‘critical awareness’. A continuous spiral development of action and reflection characterizes the growth of such critical awareness. Freire regarded learning as a productive and creative process in which people are active participants who use and build upon their personal knowledge, competence and experience. Stimulating, arousing and provoking curiosity and engaging learners in collective search for existentially relevant solutions are essential components of Freire’s pedagogy.

2. *Expeditionary learning based on the philosophy of Kurt Hahn*

The German educator Kurt Hahn (1886–1974) developed an educational philosophy based on the idea that society corrupts the innate decency and moral sense of young people (James 2000). By giving learners the opportunity to develop personal leadership qualities and letting them experience the effect of their actions, ‘corruption of the mind’ can be prevented. Outdoor adventure programs, according to Hahn, can provide such opportunities. Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound schools that were founded on the teachings of Hahn (and others) have developed ten principles in order to create a caring, adventurous school culture and an experiential approach to learning, including processes of self-discovery, experimentation, responsibility for learning, mutual trust and cooperation, learning from failure and success, valuing of diversity and inclusion, heterogeneous learning groups, respect for the natural world, and time for solitude and reflection, service and compassion.

3. *The non-directive approach to community development by Carl Rogers*

Drawing on the writings of Carl Rogers, former Rotterdam Mayor Bram Peper puts forth his view that community work is a symptom of crisis in a society; a society in need of community work is characterized by feelings of discontent about welfare conditions. In the non-directive approach, community values are respected and no measures of change are forced. By seeking dialogue, a renewed sense of responsibility and autonomy is fostered. Change is a result of agreed upon cooperation by a large part of the community with government and civil society organizations (Peper 1973).

RMC Director Emile van Rinsum further developed this non-directive approach by creating a method called ‘Opzoomeren’ (‘improving the environment by improving communication between community members from within’). Central to this method are five parameters: determining a central question or need of the community (by doing research); approaching the management of organizations; organizing meetings with members (creating interest); when requested also deepening of the issues by offering workshops, excursions, and debates; and finally fostering the self-efficacy of community organizations and possible cooperation with the RMC.

In practice the method of ‘opzoomeren’ in RMC means reaching out to community leaders who are chairs of associations, committee members or spiritual leaders. They are visited ‘in situ’, in locations where community groups regularly come together (for example, clubhouses, churches and mosques, women’s centers and community centers). Here the RMC offers the community possibilities to organize nature-, environment- and sustainability- focused meetings, excursions and

workshops. The communities show a high interest in the activities of the RMC. Especially interesting to the communities are the documentaries made by the RMC, some of which are filmed in overseas countries as Morocco and Suriname. The documentaries spark discussions and often lead to new activities, such as the forming of special workgroups and excursions around a green theme. The point of departure of the RMC's work is not so much issues of cultural integration but rather existentially relevant issues or common interests that people share. However, by participating in the RMC's activities people do come to see the different ways of looking at, valuing and interpreting multiple issues, thus potentially facilitating cultural integration.

## **The Environment-Diversity Programme**

The Environment-Diversity programme forms an umbrella for a series of projects that together aim to attract the interest and participation of Rotterdam youth and ethnic minorities in nature and environmental organizations and activities. Many environmental education centers in The Netherlands have turned to RMC for advice, as they have been unable to develop a long-lasting relationship with youth groups and especially ethnic minority groups.

Below we briefly introduce three long-term sub-projects or activities that fall under the Environment-Diversity umbrella.

### ***Green Inside, Green Outside (In Dutch: Groen Binnen, Groen Buiten)***

The main objective of the Green Inside, Green Outside project is to enhance the participation and emancipation of women of lower social and economic backgrounds by connecting them to issues in the Netherlands related to nature, culture and sustainability. In this project, groups of 10 women from three 'back street' neighborhoods in Rotterdam with different ethnic composition search for a concealed green area in their own neighborhood. When the women find a potentially attractive green area they do research on the characteristics of the area, including its specific natural elements and its history, and discuss why they have chosen the spot. A professional photographer accompanies the women in their search for the green area. The 30 women then present their findings to each other and a public exhibition of the photographs is held during one of the green conferences of the RMC. In this project the RMC works together with Dona Daria, a local women's organization. In doing so, the RMC tries to counteract red zone risks by reducing marginalization and unemployment and at the same time raising awareness for the benefits of nature and the threats to its existence.

## *Atalanta Project*

The Atalanta is a butterfly that yearly migrates from Africa (Morocco) to Europe (the Netherlands) and is chosen as the name for a project involving young people from 16 to 22 years of age. Participants take a study trip to Morocco in order to explore possibilities for ecotourism in the Rif region, a poor mountainous area in the north of Morocco from where most Moroccans living in the Netherlands have migrated. During their stay in Morocco they have a chance to discover the uniqueness of the area and its nature, and also to gain insight into the difficulties and challenges of development aid and sustainable development. The participants make a short film and booklet about their stay in Morocco and each of them agrees to inform 150 people about their project; their presentations and discussions often are picked up by the local media.

The Atalanta project is part of a programme of the Dutch Institute for Care and Well-Being and is subsidized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Overseas Development, focusing on international exchange and internships. A regional centre for enhancing so-called 'north-south' understanding, COS Rijnmond Midden Holland, guides the group in discussing issues related to, for instance, the UN Millennium Development Goals<sup>5</sup> and development aid. In Morocco the Moroccan nature and environmental association Ilmas acts as content supervisor for the programme. The power of the Atalanta project for Rotterdam lies in the fact that it connects issues of sustainability in Morocco, where many Dutch immigrants originate, with sustainability issues in Rotterdam. It thereby enhances feelings of connectivity and responsibility that are needed to turn Rotterdam into a healthy community (Fig. 29.1).

## *Green Iftars (In Dutch: Milieu Iftars)*

During the holy month of Ramadan, Muslims all over the world fast from sunrise until sunset and by so doing learn such qualities as discipline, endurance, self-control and respect for fellow humans and the Creator. After sunset the fast is broken and people come together to thank the Creator and share a meal. In this month, the RMC and several youth, women's, and local community organizations organize a Green Iftar in different neighborhoods of the city. During a Green Iftar an Iftar meal (evening meal) is provided and participants engage in discussion about issues that are of common concern such as the importance of nature, air quality, climate change and energy. A full programme is provided with lectures, documentaries, theatre

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<sup>5</sup>The UN Millennium Development Goals are to: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; Achieve universal primary education; Promote gender equality and empower women; Reduce child mortality; Improve maternal health; Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; Ensure environmental sustainability; and Develop a Global Partnership for Development. Source: [www.un.org/millenniumgoals](http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals)





**Fig. 29.1** Several participants of the Atalanta project on national TV (Karin Oppeland)

and music. Some of the time is devoted to the introduction of other projects of Environment-Diversity. The Green Iftars are popular and attract residents, community workers, members of the city council and youth workers (Fig. 29.2).

## RMC's Work Viewed Through a Social Learning Lens

In almost all projects under the RMC flag one can find elements of a social learning perspective and strategy. This perspective or strategy is not explicitly coined as social learning by the RMC, but is recognized in its long-term goal: 'establishing full and long lasting integration of disadvantaged Rotterdam citizens in environmental organizations'. This goal is not reached by handing out energy friendly light bulbs or organizing an excursion for a school, but rather involves structural investment, long-term commitment, and acknowledging the uncertain development of the process of multi-cultural integration.

A challenge the RMC has identified is how to see the differences that one typically finds among people and groups of people living in the city of Rotterdam as drivers of sustainability. In a recent interview with us, Environment-Diversity programme leader Mohamed Hacene strongly supported the idea that social cohesion



**Fig. 29.2** Youth share a meal and discuss environmental issues during a Green Iftar (Karin Oppelland)

is a prerequisite for diversity to become a fruitful force of change. He identified the creation of loose and informal networks, of strong relationships with a diverse group of organizations by involving them in every stage of a project, of a sense of ‘w-ness’ or belonging to a wider group, along with the recognition of each group’s identities, as key success factors. The RMC chooses not to engage in drawn out bureaucratic consultation rounds which often characterize neighborhood improvement projects.

When mirroring the way of working of the RMC with social learning thought we see important overlap. Consistent with the definition provided in the introduction, social learning is essentially about bringing together people of various backgrounds having different values, perspectives, knowledge and experiences, both from inside and outside a group or organisation, in order to come to a creative quest for answers to questions for which no ready-made solutions are available (Blackmore 2007; Muro and Jeffrey 2008; Wals et al. 2009). Social learning is a process in which people in a safe environment are jointly stimulated to reflect upon implicit assumptions and their own frames of reference, in order to create room for new perspectives, common frames of reference and collaborative actions. The most important characteristics of social learning are:

- it is about learning from each other together;
- it is assumed that we can learn more from one another if we do not all think alike or act alike, in other words: we learn more in heterogeneous groups than we do in homogenous groups;

- it is about creating trust and social cohesion, precisely in order to become more accepting and to make use of the different ways in which people view the world;
- it is about creating ‘ownership’ with respect to both the learning process as well as the solutions that are found, which increases the chance that things will actually take place; and
- it is about collective meaning-making and sense-making (Wals et al. 2009).

Much of the RMC work reflects these characteristics as they reflect the underlying pedagogical and community development principles of Freire, Hahn, and Rogers (see above). Another way in which the center’s work reflects social learning is its ‘iterative’ and ‘emergent’ way of planning and organizing (Holden 2008). The centre does not fix intended outcomes and steps to achieve them but rather sees outcomes as targets and stepping stones that are subject to change as an activity unfolds. This flexibility allows for co-ownership and co-creation of all actors involved but also can be disappointing and stressful to those who are used to or expect clearly defined goals and concrete agreed-upon steps ahead of time. People are not only different in terms of their cultural background or their experiences and knowledge in regards to issues at stake, they also differ in the degree to which they are comfortable with uncertainty. Some deal with uncertainty much more easily and can flexibly adjust themselves to changing circumstances, new insights and new discussion partners than others. Based on insights gained from a study of a Dutch community co-creating its own neighborhood gardens, Wals and Noorduyn (2010) conclude that it is advisable to point out the uncertain nature of a social learning process to those involved early on when one is considering utilizing a social learning-based strategy. It may also be wise to involve people who, by their nature, are already somewhat oriented towards uncertainty and who are unlikely to avoid risks. In the RMC’s experience the people who are drawn to their activities already tend to meet this criterion. The challenge then becomes to also involve or at least keep informed those who are not drawn to the activities.

Whereas other interactive and participatory approaches maintain a focus on hard or measurable results, social learning processes are more about the softer, more difficult to measure results, such as the energy and creativity that can come about when people in a heterogeneous society meet one another and create social cohesion. Such cohesion is considered a precondition of creating a robust system that is capable of dealing with setbacks (Rolfe 2006). Further, whether or not a community can make use of diversity and can deploy conflicts and tension constructively depends in part upon the solidarity or the amount of social cohesion between people. A resilient community also generates a certain degree of trust and safety, so that people will more easily open up to one another and are less frightened about being held accountable for ‘errors’ or alternative views (van Asselt 2000; Bouwen and Taillieu 2004; IFRC 2004; Armitage et al. 2007; Plummer and FitzGibbon 2007; Beers et al. 2010). Opposites and differences, which inevitably arise in processes like those facilitated by the RMC, do not immediately result in the project or activities collapsing, when sufficient social capital is present or has been created among those involved. Environment-Diversity programme leader Mohamed Hacene



**Fig. 29.3** Mohamed Hacene in discussion with representatives of religious groups (Karin Oppelland)

stresses the development of a strong relationship with a wide diversity of organizations at an early stage of every project, as well as the sharing of responsibilities for the organization of activities. The direct contact with these organizations leads to a relationship based on mutual trust (Figs. 29.3 and 29.4).

## Some Critical Success Factors

Below we pull together some considerations that may help in designing similar community-based change processes that hinge on social learning and the utilization of diversity.

### *Contemplation*

Before deploying a social learning-based approach in multi-cultural communities that are under pressure, it is important to carefully determine whether or not social learning is the most obvious path to take (Wals 2007; Reed, 2010). Those who have the possibility to initiate and/or support such a process, e.g., policy-makers, programme staff, project managers and advisors, need to reflect on the *type* of change that is at hand. Contemplating this may lead to favoring either more instrumental or



**Fig. 29.4** ‘Crossing boundaries’ during one of the Environment-Diversity excursions (Karin Oppelland)

a more transformative, social learning-oriented learning process (Wals et al. 2008). Further, it is advisable to determine ahead of time just how certain one can be about the desired change. Social learning-based change seems to be most appropriate in situations where there is no one right solution available beforehand or where there is not one single authority capable of prescribing a pre-determined solution without upsetting the community.

### *Communicating with the Periphery*

As it is tempting to work only with those who are interested from the start, continuous effort needs to be expended in trying to reach those who are not. This is not so much with the aim to turn them into active participants but to make sure that they know what is going on and can step in when they see the project move in a direction that does affect, concern, or interest them. Failing to do so may result in the silent majority or even minority becoming a powerful force that makes itself heard at the end of an interactive process in ways that could undermine everything that has been accomplished. People who are at the periphery of the social learning process need to learn alongside the core even though they are not active participants, to prevent the core group from becoming an exclusive group of capable and motivated citizens who lose touch with their own neighbors, network or organization. We often see a small group of very committed people emerge who can be very creative in generating fantastic solutions that do not resonate at all with other, less involved residents or

other interested parties, such as the municipality, the water board or the architect. Interim steps, choices and results must be shared time and again with people who stand along the sidelines and who have related interests, both officially in the form of a newsletter, public minutes, a website or neighborhood paper, or posted project updates in neighborhood stores and public transport vehicles, as well as informally at home, at the local coffee place, at school or at the sports club.

### ***Fine Tuning Expectations***

When can the outcome of a social learning process be considered successful? The answers to this question often vary considerably. Moreover, this question is usually asked too late or not at all. However, if people have the opportunity to lay their expectations on the table early on in the process, then it is possible to adjust the unrealistic expectations that might be present and therefore to prevent disappointments later on. Whereas one person may have an ecological, sustainable and permaculture based living environment in mind, another may focus mainly on a safe and green playing area built with sustainably-harvested wood. People often also have different perspectives on how much time certain changes should take, as well as on the spatial scale of projects. Whereas one person may only consider the neighborhood itself as becoming sustainable, another may view the neighborhood as an integrated part of the world and may see all kinds of lines running from the neighborhood to elsewhere in the world.

### ***Checking the Institutional Room for Change and Innovation***

Social learning can result in creative solutions for challenges that are collectively experienced. If, upon translating these solutions into strategies and concrete actions, it is found that the proper authorities have not issued a mandate for the realization of the plans, frustration may ensue. Political support and official procedural mandates are therefore a must in social learning processes and the government should be involved from day one. This requires that the governmental commissioning party and/or the management accept the uncertainty that results from a social learning process.

### ***Reporting, Feedback, and Evidence of Success***

The reporting on interactive processes is important for multiple reasons. First, the reporting is a form of legitimization of the process and recognition of the contributions of those involved. In addition, reporting offers one the opportunity to check whether the images, ideas and solutions have been well understood and reproduced correctly. Feedback is essential in order to prevent expectations and images from developing in more than one direction without the group being aware. Reporting also leads to a 'sense of urgency' when agreements are made and deadlines established. At the same time,

reporting is key in terms of recording one's progress (tangible *and* less tangible results). Reporting to the supporters (residents who do not actively participate in the process) and to the 'outside' world (municipality, authorities granting subsidy) is essential. The form of the reporting, the language used, and the distribution of the reports must be in line with the intended audiences.

Providing some kind of 'evidence' of progress in a desired direction is an everyday reality. The Rotterdam city government, which subsidizes the RMC projects, demands to see more tangible results in terms of social and ecological sustainability. Currently, the RMC already collects evaluations and feedback from project members, makes developments visible by organizing exhibitions (as in the Green Inside, Green Outside project), and is registering 'measurables' such as the number of meetings held, the number of people who attend the meetings, the number of community organizations reached, and number of trained and certified environmental educators.

The independent research bureau ORG-ID recently conducted a survey among 26 representatives of various stakeholders working with the RMC. The analysis showed that in general the key stakeholders (e.g., local governments, other nature and environmental organizations and grass-roots supporters) respect and value the RMC as they find that the centre operates professionally, is very much engaged in its work, and is a reliable partner. The RMC is also positively evaluated for its recognition of the interests of other organizations. For RMC Director Hacene however, meeting people and listening to their stories and personal victories is far more valuable and meaningful. In Hacene's words: 'the programme proves itself to be successful when the RMC is invited to attend meetings of the community organizations and when sometimes, even after a few years, an organization calls and asks the RMC to participate in a self-initiated environmental education project'.

One critical success factor is the make-up of the RMC's staff and body of volunteers, which reflects that of the multi-cultural communities with which the centre works. This is in contrast to many other nature and environmental organizations in the Netherlands and in Rotterdam, which are almost all staffed with non-immigrant Dutch employees.

## Final Thoughts

Social learning in the context of sustainability is an open-ended and transformative process that needs to be grounded in the everyday worlds and lives of people and the encounters they have with each other. Especially in potentially red zone multi-cultural neighborhoods such 'encounters' provide possibilities or opportunities for meaningful learning as they can lead both to constructive dissonance and increased social cohesion. The value of difference and diversity in energizing people, creating dissonance and unleashing creativity seems to surface in the projects supported by the RMC, as does the power of 'social cohesion' in creating change, and building resilience, in complex situations characterized by varying degrees of uncertainty (see Carpenter et al. 2001; Rolfe 2006). The success of social learning depends a great deal on the collective



**Fig. 29.5** The Rotterdam mayor Aboutaleb (*left*) together with RMC project leader Mohamed Hacene (Karin Oppeland)

goals and/or visions shared by those engaged in the process, as well as on the quality of the communication with those who are not! Whether such collective goals and visions can actually be achieved depends, at least in part, on the amount of space for possible conflicts, oppositions and contradictions. In social learning the conflicts and their underlying sources need to be explicated rather than concealed. By explicating and deconstructing the oftentimes diverging norms, values, interests and constructions of reality people bring to a sustainability challenge, it not only becomes possible to analyze and understand their roots and their persistence, but also to begin a collaborative change process in which the kind of shared meanings and joint actions emerge that will ultimately help create a more sustainable world.

The RMC's work in greening the Rotterdam red zone and using social learning as catalyst seems to show that such change is possible. The strategy of the RMC to reach change is regarded as successful, but its success also depends on the financial support of local governments and hinges on the personal contacts, competences, trust and flexibility of the project leader and director of the RMC. Despite these dependencies the RMC seems to have succeeded in making the red zone of Rotterdam a little less red and a little more green.

Who would have thought five years ago that in some of the most deteriorated neighborhoods, youth could have co-designed and co-constructed a butterfly garden near the Afrikanerplein (African Square) as a part of a 'nature playground' for inner-city children? Who would have thought that in 2009 there would be neighborhood 'stop climate change street parties' that would inspire a Rotterdam neighborhood like Crooswijk to equip its neighborhood center with solar panels? And, finally, who would have thought five years ago that Rotterdam would have a mayor of Moroccan descent, as is currently the case? (Fig. 29.5).



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