



**Essay from
WIJK AAN ZEE
Pergine Valdarno**



"Social Relations and Forms of solidarity in Small European Villages"

The village of Pergine Valdarno, Cultural Village of Europe 2002, has a traditional event: the tug of war. Strong men pulling a rope, an iron gaot in the middle. We have seen a demonstration of this event during the visit of Pergine in Wijk aan Zee and during the festival in Bystre last year. The place for this event is a bridge. A big struggle on a bridge, this is a wonderful metaphor for the social life in a village.

On the one hand there is stress and struggle between people who cannot avoid (or escape) each other and the collective social control. On the other hand there is always a bridge between people through communication, attention and tolerance. Living in a village is living between hate and love.

Living in cities seems to support the modern ideal of individualism. Individualism is not a bad way of life in itself. The right to live your own life is valuable in urban and rural life. Every human being is unique and has the right to be seen as such. The image of the cities is the feeling of freedom, to be unknown if you want. Townspeople don't like the social control of neighbours. But everything has its downside. The problems in big cities are the result of excesses of individualism. Older people lying dead in their homes for weeks, no neighbours who care. The missing of the feeling of responsibility for waste in the streets, the violence in streetcars or underground, robberies and pickpockets, the loneliness of young and old people. The problems of modern cities are huge and difficult to handle. Laws, rules and procedures are made to regulate the social life. In the city of Rotterdam there is even a project for city etiquette and there are cameras in the streets. In villages there are unwritten rules. Social control gives a feeling of safety.

Could the social life in villages be an example for the towns?

In the answer to this question we must not exaggerate. The social life in villages has also its own problems. What to think about the position of younger people with no prospect of work or housing. There is no reason for a sort of romantic idealism about the social cohesion in villages.

But in villages you find the natural circumstances for a power that is very essential for the modern society: involvement.

Nowadays in Holland there is a crisis in local politics. In Beverwijk no more than 50 percent of the voters used their right to vote in the last elections. The most successful parties are those who have one major item in their program. Most people say: politics, it's all the same to me. They are not really interested in politics.

But when there is any question or problem in their direct neighbourhood: car parking, traffic rules, green areas, new buildings, they are interested.

The traditional way of working in politics must be changed and the key words are:

involvement and participation. The local government has to develop new methods with interaction, co-making and room for initiative bottom-up.

The villages, having the tools for involvement and participation can be the laboratory for a new way of decision making.

Recently there was a good example in our village Wijk aan Zee. Many of you, who have been in our village, will remember the central square, the Julianaplein, near the historic church. At one side of this square are the former post office, the tourist information office and a shop originally owned by the butcher. These buildings were bought by a real estate developer, an architect made plans for this location: a high, huge, modern building with apartments without any relation with the surrounding historical buildings. Of course there came opposition against these plans, inhabitants of Wijk aan Zee went into court with their objections and they were successful after a difficult and long procedure. In the meantime the buildings were pulled down, a hole in the heart of the village as a result. A new architect came in and the first thing he did was: making pictures of the older buildings surrounding the square and he had conversations with people living around there. With this information he made a new plan: a modern building with classical elements and now the development is accepted by many inhabitants, they are even enthusiastic.

The key of success is the participation and involvement of the people.

Important in cases like this is our Village Council, an organisation of volunteers, with no formal, official status, but chosen by the villagers and accepted and recognized as discussion partner for local government. Political parties don't participate in the Village Council, you can say it's a non-political organisation. But this doesn't mean that there is no political engagement in the village. The participation in the elections for the City Council of Beverwijk in March of this year the number of voters in Wijk aan Zee was significantly higher than in the town of Beverwijk.

The Village Council is a platform for initiative. In the question of the buildings on the Julianaplein there was an important role for the 'quality plan for buildings', a framework for judgement. This plan was not formulated by the official local planning agency, but by members of the Village Council and based on reactions of the villagers. Experimental ways of decision making with the participation of citizens and the politicians in a different role of director of the process are recently introduced in the new law for local government in Holland. We think the experiences in villages can be helpful for projects in urban areas, because in every decision there is some sort of 'tug of war' between different interests, but you also need a bridge to communicate. Tug of war and bridge, the two elements in the tradition of Pergine Valdarno

The image of villages is conservation and conservatism and the image of cities is one of progression, development.

But is it really true, that cities are the breeding ground for experiments and villages are only fit for tradition?

In Wijk aan Zee we have some examples of the contrary.

In Holland we have a law on freedom of education. This is important in our small country with many different religions and outlooks on life. We have public schools, founded by the local government, and private schools most of them founded by religious groups. So about twenty five years ago we had three different schools in our village: public, Roman Catholic and reformational. In the Dutch law public and private education are strictly separated, it's part of the constitution. So an initiative of parents in Wijk aan Zee to realize one school for all the children was formally impossible. Even until now there are discussions on this item in parliament, but in Wijk aan Zee we found a solution to make one school of good quality for all our children. Impossible by law, but possible in the mind of people and then there is a way out!

One other example of experimental development: for many years the two churches in our village have been working together in a respectful way in ecumenical activities. They have the Lord' s Supper and Eucharist together three times a year, even on Pentecost (Whitsun). We had an ecumenical service like this together with the visitor' s of Aldeburgh in 1999.

Forbidden by the official church, but in a community at the basis, as in Wijk aan Zee it' s a fundamental Christian gesture to share. There are bible discussion groups, the choirs of the churches sing together, etc. In Beverwijk, only 5 km away, these things are impossible until now. Perhaps Wijk aan Zee can be the laboratory for development of ecumenical activities.

An other example: During your stay in Wijk aan Zee most of you will have been in the Hotel Sonnevanck. A hotel as a public meeting place, not a sophisticated accomodation owned by an international company, for a part against the regulations of the hotel and catering industry. But a meeting place for the people of Wijk aan Zee and guests, a place of initiative and experiments.

A last example: the place of the rehabilitation centre Heliomare, the two centres for mentally handicapped people and the centre for people seeking asylum is not a problem in a village as Wijk aan Zee. Handicapped people and refugees are accepted because of the small scale and possibility of direct communication.

We hope that the experience with experiments on a small scale in a village like Wijk aan Zee can help the authorities to look at the problems in the cities from an other point of view.

What about lessons we as villages can get from the cities.

Are there problems in villages, that can be solved by input from the cities?

The most attractive property of cities is speciality. People in village need special, modem services and therefore they are dependent on cities. There must be a way in between a town with all sort of facilities and a village without any.

We think there are interesting possibilities for the economical situation in villages. To start business in the urban area is very expensive. We think there have to be more attention for the possibilities of small business in villages. For the development of economical activities in villages there are many interferences in the law. The laws are made for big business and internationals, small business has to struggle with the same rules of administration as the big ones. We think that big cities and towns has to stimulate small business to establish in villages around. Economical activities are essential for the life in villages.

A post-office or a bank is important for a village. With the modem technology it' s possible to realise a good level of service. We need creative entrepreneurs as well in the big post and banking companies as in the villages itself.

Another item which is important for villages is the level of public service. In the cities decentralisation of police-men is an important element in security. In the organisation of the regional police we can learn of the experiences with local police-officers: direct communication between officials and citizens is important for the feeling to be safe and to maintain social control.

Also in other parts of social service decentralisation is important for the villages, for example local officers for the greens and clean streets. These officers are part of the bigger regional or municipal organisation, but they are the ears and the eyes of the bigger organisation that can offer service and they are the persons for direct communication with the consumers.

To realize these things in villages is not a question of big plans and laws. In villages there is a direct connection between thinking and doing. So we hope, that in the relation between government and villages there will be room for experiments and improvisation. It' s like the bridge of Pergine Valdarno we started with in this staterønt: there can be

stress and even struggle between cities and villages, but it all depends on communication and tolerance.

Wijk aan Zee, april 2002