



Governing Urban Diversity: Creating Social Cohesion, Social Mobility and Economic Performance in Today's Hyper-diversified Cities

October 2015

Summary of 'Living with Diversity in Rotterdam: A Study of Resident Experiences in Highly Diverse Feijenoord'

DIVERCITIES: the project

European cities today are more diverse than ever before. Immigration, socio-economic inequalities, spatial segregation and a diversity of identities and lifestyles are all contributing factors. The challenges faced by urban policymakers and institutions to meet the needs of Europe's increasingly diverse population are numerous and complex.

The principal aim of the research project DIVERCITIES is to examine how European cities can *benefit* from diversity. The project examines how urban diversity shapes social cohesion and social mobility of residents of diverse, deprived and dynamic urban areas and the economic performance of entrepreneurs with their enterprise in such areas.

A European research team, headed by Utrecht University (Department of Human Geography and Spatial Planning), is conducting comparative research in 13 European cities and in Toronto (Canada). The project lasts four years (2013-2017). In the Netherlands, the research is carried out in *Rotterdam*, the second largest city of the country and one of the most diverse Dutch cities.

Living with diversity in Rotterdam

Our latest report focuses on resident experiences of living in hyper-diverse areas and how it affects their lives. It is based on in-depth interviews with 56 residents in the district of Feijenoord, Rotterdam. These were conducted between September and December 2014. We focus on Feijenoord because it is very mixed amongst others with respect to resident's education, ethnicity, household type, income, lifestyle and duration of residence. Besides being diverse, Feijenoord is also a relatively deprived and dynamic urban area: it can be characterised by high rates of low-income households, low-status housing, unemployment and a large turnover rate of residents and entrepreneurs. Many parts of Feijenoord function as entry areas for international immigrants who either seek a relatively cheap dwelling or want to live close to family members and friends.

We have spoken with a wide variety of residents in different parts of the district about their *housing choice, perceptions of diversity, activity patterns, social networks, social mobility and perceptions of diversity-related policies.*

This project is funded by the European Union under the 7th Framework Programme; Theme: SSH.2012.2.2.2-1; Governance of cohesion and diversity in urban contexts



This project has received funding from the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme for research, technological development and demonstration under grant agreement no. 319970.

Overall, the report indicates that from the perspective of residents, living in diverse, deprived and dynamic neighbourhoods is certainly not as bad as public and political discourses often suggest. Although we have come across some negative experiences with diversity, our general impression is that residents in Feijenoord mostly appreciate and profit from various aspects of local diversity.

Why did people move to their current neighbourhood?

For most residents the diversity of the neighbourhood was not the most important reason to move to their current neighbourhood. A primary reason to move to the area is the *availability of affordable housing*. Dwellings in the research areas often belong to the affordable alternatives in the city. This holds for low-income households, who can hardly afford to live somewhere else or even to think of moving to a better place in terms of housing and neighbourhood status. But also households with higher incomes deliberately chose for a dwelling in Feijenoord because they can often not afford a dwelling of a similar size in other areas of the city. Even though many interviewees moved from one relatively low-rent social dwelling to another one (horizontal move), they mostly experience their move as a step forward in their housing career, suggesting that for many residents of diverse (and disadvantaged) urban areas such as Feijenoord, moving to or within the area can actually be a positive experience.

How do residents perceive their neighbourhood's diversity?

Residents generally appreciate the diversity in their neighbourhood because of the lively and busy residential atmosphere and the diversity of shops and other facilities. Some also value the opportunity to learn about different cultures and to exchange new experiences. Furthermore, a diverse social context without particular majority groups offers residents who belong to minority groups (e.g. culturally or in terms of lifestyle or household type), an environment in which they feel less 'out of place'. Negative experiences of local diversity relate to crime of disadvantaged local youth groups, sometimes related to specific ethnic groups, and residents who do not speak the Dutch language in public and semi-public local spaces. The experiences are mentioned by diverse people in terms of ethnicity, income, household type and age. Some long-term Dutch residents have problems with the gradual disappearance of certain facilities such as "a Dutch butcher".

To what extent do residents make use of the diversified areas they live in?

Several researchers have indicated that the neighbourhood is losing importance for many of its residents, especially because people have become increasingly mobile. At the same time the literature also makes clear that for certain groups – notably low-income groups, minority ethnic groups, the elderly and children – the local environment can, for several reasons, still be important. Our results confirm both statements: most residents of Feijenoord have both activities inside and outside the neighbourhood. There are no indications that people with low incomes feel hindered to conduct activities outside of their neighbourhood, however the activity patterns of low-income groups are clearly more local than those of higher income groups. Most public spaces in Feijenoord appear to be used by a diversity of social groups, although this does not necessarily mean that these groups mix in such public spaces.

To what extent does the diversity of the residential area reflect in the social networks of residents?

Particularly for residents with a low income, households with children and elderly people we find that: (1) the neighbourhood is important for the development of social relations; (2) living a

diverse neighbourhood contributes to diverse local social networks, in terms of education, occupation and ethnicity; and (3) social networks of neighbours and other local acquaintances often provide various and important forms of care and support, which complement those of (local) family members and friends. While the first finding is in line with findings of earlier studies on the topic (in the Dutch context), the second and third findings are not. In contrast with previous studies on social networks, our findings indicate that in hyper-diverse contexts, particularly networks of ‘*weak ties*’, neighbours and other local acquaintances can be ethnically, and to a lesser extent also socio-economically, diverse.

Two elements were found to foster social cohesion in particular. First, semi-public spaces such as schools, community centres and religious institutions appear very important for facilitating weak and strong ties between diverse groups of residents. We have come across several instances in which local acquaintances with diverse ethnic backgrounds have become friends. Second, commonalities in individual features and observed practices between residents were found to foster social cohesion. The particular commonalities that do so depend on (a combination of) people’s subjective norms, values and lifestyles. Thus, commonalities and differences that respectively foster and hinder cohesion differ per individual. An important dissimilarity that was found to particularly hinder the development of ties between neighbours and other local residents is, again, residents not speaking the same (Dutch) language.

To what extent is the diversity of the neighbourhood important for social mobility? Which elements foster and hinder social mobility?

Our study indicates that for residents with a low income, the neighbourhood is much more important for finding paid or unpaid work than existing studies and policies often presume. People find work through local social contacts, including neighbours, other local acquaintances, friends and family. Local institutions appear crucial for facilitating fruitful exchanges about paid and unpaid work between diverse – often disadvantaged – people.

Nevertheless, in recent years the municipality of Rotterdam has decreased the budgets for local institutions, including community centres and libraries, significantly. Many have already closed. Yet, our study indicates that these places are very important for the development of diverse ‘weak ties’. These might not lead to an improvement in the socio-economic status of work throughout the labour career of low-income people. However, they appear to act as an important safety net to prevent *downward* social mobility. They enable residents to sustain an income (even though sometimes small), diversify and strengthen their professional networks and gain new work experiences, knowledge and skills. The steps these residents make in the labour market and volunteering may seem small from a governmental perspective. Yet, given their poor starting positions, we think they are not so bad. The social costs of the alternative – losing or having no paid or unpaid work – are probably much higher.

How do residents perceive diversity-related policies for their neighbourhood?

Residents have little knowledge of existing urban policy programmes for their neighbourhood. Residents appear more familiar with bottom-up local governance arrangements such as community centres, schools and libraries, which interviewees and those who do not participate in the initiatives, appreciate highly. Supporting local initiatives e.g. financially and recognising their importance for the neighbourhoods should be key priorities for the municipality of Rotterdam interviewees argue, as the initiatives are thought to contribute to social mobility, social cohesion, liveability and safety.

Another way in which the municipality can support Feijenoord is by tackling poverty and helping more people into paid (or unpaid) work. Both research observations and interviewees with residents indicate that there are many poor households in Feijenoord, which face difficulties participating in (local) everyday life, socially and socio-economically. According to residents, disadvantaged youths require particular attention as they are related with feelings of unsafety and criminality.