

Learning from each other in times of change

A holistic sustainability approach in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Canada and the Netherlands



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1 Introduction

1. Introduction

We live in tumultuous times, characterised by major changes. Crises accumulate around us. An obvious example is the climate crisis, but we also find ourselves in a crisis relating to public trust – both in our institutions and each other – not to mention the rising geopolitical tensions. All this at a time when we only just seem to have reached the light at the end of a pandemic-shaped tunnel. Jan Rotmans, professor in transitions, speaks of a ‘polycrisis’; great chaos due to the shortcomings of our old systems, combined with the inadequate maturity of our new systems.¹ His message? To move towards a new, stable system as quickly as possible, by moving through transitions. We can only successfully move through transitions by doing things differently from how we are used to. And: holistically. Because – further adding to the complexity of it all – everything is interconnected.

Disadvantaged neighbourhoods

Neighbourhoods where problems accumulate – so-called ‘disadvantaged’ neighbourhoods – have been on our radar for a long time. Many of the challenges that play out in these neighbourhoods have been coined as ‘crises’ lately, for example poverty, inequality, health, loneliness (among the elderly), and the surge of crime. The polycrisis is particularly apparent in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. A multitude of issues accumulate here, leaving deep traces on the daily lives of residents. After a decade of absence of neighbourhood policy, the Dutch minister of Housing and Spatial Planning launched the National Programme on Liveability and Safety (Nationaal Programma Leefbaarheid en Veiligheid, NPLV) in 2022. The programme strives for improvement in liveability in the most vulnerable of neighbourhoods across the Netherlands over the coming fifteen to twenty years, offering residents

perspectives for a better future. Simultaneous efforts relating to energy transition could contribute towards the NPLV’s aims, as these are approached on the neighbourhood level as well. The Dutch experiment programme Sustainability in Vulnerable Neighbourhoods (Verduurzaming van kwetsbare wijken, VKW) sets out to utilise the energy crisis as a lever for improving the quality of life in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.²

Learning from each other

The VKW experiment programme was greatly inspired by the Canadian Sustainable Neighbourhood Action Program (SNAP).³ The next chapter of this publication offers an elaborate description of SNAP. In short, despite great contextual differences (in themes, legislation, culture, and policy), plenty of similarities can be found between SNAP and VKW. The Canadians have seemingly found creative and innovative solutions to shared issues. Similarly, experiences from the Dutch context seem to be a source of inspiration for our Canadian counterpart. The many lessons we have learned from each other are central to this publication. We hope that other professionals who are experimenting in similar contexts and working on similar challenges can benefit from our experiences. After all, experiments do not guarantee a positive result; there is always a risk of failure. Either outcome can be insightful but including findings of others who are further along in their experimental journey may increase your chances of success – however different the contexts of the experiments.

1. Jan Rotmans, Omarm de chaos, 2021

2. For more information about the VKW programme, please refer to the [English summary](#) of the programme’s findings.

3. For more information about the SNAP programme, please refer to the [TRCA’s website](#).

Not invented here?

We studied SNAP because the programme has an abundance of practical experience with the holistic approach. Unfortunately, studying a more experienced counterpart does not always appear to be self-explanatory. In practice, this indeed happens very little. An important bottleneck for using knowledge created elsewhere into one's own practice is the 'Not Invented Here Syndrome' (NIHS). Its scientific definition is as follows:

The phenomenon whereby ideas originating outside a particular organization or organizational unit are dismissed or downgraded because their source is external to the organization or unit. Awareness of the potential for NIHS to emerge can lead senior management to take explicit counteractions.⁴

Of course, there are plenty of reasons for why not to blindly implement lessons from others. For example in situations where the burden of proof is light, when one's own situation or organisation fundamentally differs significantly from the example, or in high-risk scenarios. When these (valid) reasons are not at play and the knowledge is disregarded nonetheless, this may be explained by the general aversion against something 'not from here'. In academia, the tooth brush metaphor is used here: a like a tooth brush, everyone wants a good solution, everyone needs one, but no one wants to use someone else's.⁵

Research shows that the NIHS is in fact one of the most obstructive factors when it comes to utilisation of knowledge.⁶ The same study shows that mere awareness of the existence (and dangers!) of the NIHS could majorly contribute to preventing it. Hence why we shed light on it in this paper. However, we want to take it one step further. Research namely also shows that

being invited to take someone else's perspective – 'walking a mile in someone's shoes' – reduces the risk of the NIHS-trap drastically. One's attitude towards the other becomes more positive, the evaluative and knowledge-absorbing abilities become greater, and a more holistic view of challenges is stimulated.⁷ The latter is what we need for improving disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

This is why we have chosen to write part of the text below from a personal perspective. Will this approach improve dissemination of the knowledge we have generated? We would love to hear if it had such an effect on you. In general, we very much encourage you to share your views on our findings. After all, the better our publications, the better we will be able to share knowledge with professionals who work in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

4. Dunford, R. (2018). Not-Invented-Here. In: Augier, M., Teece, D.J. (eds) The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Strategic Management. Palgrave Macmillan, London

5. [Not Invented Here Syndrome explained - Learnosity](#)

6. Katz, R. and T.J. Allen (2007). Investigating the Not Invented Here (NIH) syndrome: A look at the performance, tenure, and communication patterns of 50 R & D Project Groups. In: R&D Management 12(1):7 - 20

7. Dunford, R. (2018). Not-Invented-Here. In: Augier, M., Teece, D.J. (eds) The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Strategic Management. Palgrave Macmillan, London.



2. SNAP as a source of inspiration for VKW

As touched upon in the introduction, SNAP has been an important source of inspiration for the VKW programme. After four years of working on VKW, we are at a point where we can share experiences and lessons as well. In this chapter, we first explain both programmes – which, besides similarities, also have major differences.



2.1 What is VKW and how did it come about?

The idea for the VKW experiment programme occurred in 2017. Anke van Hal, full professor sustainable building, and Matthijs Uytterlinde, urban sociologist, bumped into each other once again for the first time in a long time at an event organised by Aedes, the association for Dutch social housing corporations. A few years prior, Anke and Matthijs had collaborated intensively on a study into the role of human behaviour in energy transition in the built environment. At the time, Matthijs was conducting research on neighbourhood development and urban regeneration at Platform31. Anke and Matthijs shared the conviction that the energy transition had the potential to become a driving force for improving the quality of life in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

At the time, Anke was living in Toronto. Prior to her move, she worked in Canada a fair amount. She founded Parallel52; the Dutch-Canadian Sustainable Building and Planning Network, which organised activities both in Canada and in the Netherlands. This is how Anke met Sonya Meek, founder of the Sustainable Neighbourhood Action Program (SNAP). SNAP works to advance sustainability in 'strategic neighbourhoods' – where urban renewal priorities, vulnerabilities and environmental issues overlap – in Toronto and surrounding areas. SNAP's approach fit perfectly with the vision central to Anke's and Matthijs' study on the 'fusion of interests-perspective', in which stakeholders' interests are central.

A close collaboration resulted from Sonya and Anke's meeting – at first from a distance, and later in Toronto. This collaboration revolved around neighbourhoods that the Dutch refer to as 'vulnerable' or 'disadvantaged' (SNAP, on the other hand, targets all sorts of neighbourhoods with urban renewal, climate

resilience and environmental priorities). Anke was largely coincidentally especially involved in projects set in neighbourhoods that in the Netherlands would be referred to as 'vulnerable'. The collaboration with SNAP proved to Anke that a strategy based on residents' interests could lead to broader support for the sustainable transition in disadvantaged neighbourhoods as well. Upon her return to the Netherlands, she decided to start working in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, simultaneously stimulating energy efficiency measures and the use of sustainable energy sources and improving liveability by a merger of interests).

Matthijs had a desire to strengthen the energy transition component in his work in disadvantaged neighbourhoods as well – not just because of the major impact of energy transition on disadvantaged neighbourhoods, but

also because he expected that the energy transition could constitute an impulse for overall improvement of neighbourhoods. In 2018, Matthijs and Anke started an experiment programme aimed at disadvantaged neighbourhoods, inspired by SNAP's approach. During this same period, the National Programme Gas-Free Neighbourhoods (*Programma Aardgasvrije Wijken*, PAW) was launched by the Dutch Ministry of Interior Affairs. The PAW supported Anke and Matthijs' initiative. Eighteen municipalities joined the programme, each participating with a case study of a disadvantaged neighbourhood where, besides the energy transition, other challenges relating to liveability, safety and social disadvantages were at play.

The experiment programme VKW came to an end after three years, even though most municipalities involved were still only getting started at this point. Therefore, a follow-up programme has been set up. One of VKW's goals has been to render citizens' support for the energy transition. In light of the current energy crisis, the *why* has become apparent to most. People now want to find quick ways to reduce their energy bills; the discussion has thus shifted to *how*. On the other hand, social problems in many disadvantaged neighbourhoods have soared – largely resulting from increased poverty due to rising energy prices and inflation in general. Hence, VKW's aim to contribute to the liveability in disadvantaged neighbourhoods has become more urgent as well.



Verduurzaming van Kwetsbare Wijken (VKW)

Programme set-up

With the Sustainability in Vulnerable Neighbourhoods (Verduurzaming Kwetsbare Wijken, VKW) programme, Platform31 and Nyenrode Business University aimed to tackle two issues at once by connecting energy transition-related efforts in disadvantaged neighbourhoods with efforts to improve liveability. Other objectives related to, for example, health, safety, employment, education, and social cohesion.

For a period of three years, eighteen municipalities from across the Netherlands formed a learning community, in an attempt to gain broader understanding of and experience in this field. Each municipality participated with a minimum of two professionals, from different domains (social and physical), mostly from the municipalities, but in some cases also from other organisations, such as social housing associations.

Engaging residents from an early stage was a central principle within the programme. As such, one of the main questions the programme set out to answer was how to involve residents in vulnerable neighbourhoods was an important topic. An example of other questions that begged answering is how to set up meaningful collaboration with local stakeholders.

Platform31 and Nyenrode Business University (and from 2021, the Verwey-Jonker Institute as well) supported these municipalities by sharing academic perspectives and performing action research. Because an important goal of the programme was to contribute to upscaling, the programme closely followed the neighbourhood-based approach in these municipalities. To date, the programme has produced a vast amount of publications in which lessons and other findings are presented.

Lessons

The final publication 'Together towards a sustainable and liveable neighbourhood' (2022), concluded that the eighteen neighbourhoods started off in slow motion, and that their exploratory journeys came across obstacles along the way continuously. Such difficulties are characteristic for this early stage of a transition: after all, transitions encompass a system of broad changes that have deep impact on the functioning of public bodies, sectors and markets, as well as the lives of people and the way in which society is arranged.

As such, another lesson was that it is important to find new ways of working in practice by experimenting, to develop a shared perspective, to create starting conditions for effective integrated collaboration, and to adopt a learning approach for this all. A learning approach is essential for a complex transition – especially in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, which are characterised by wicked problems.

Funding

VKW receives financial contributions from municipalities who join the programme. The national Ministry of Interior Affairs (also initiator of PAW) has also subsidised the programme for the past few years.

Present and future

Since 2022, the VKW-team has searched for a fitting way to move forward, together with participants, who were still in the middle of working on these complex issues in their neighbourhoods. The existing network of professionals has been maintained by means of networking meetings, and we have continued (action) research in five municipalities.

A new action programme is now starting in 2023.

2.2 What is SNAP and how did it come about?

SNAP was initiated by Sonya Meek. She had been working as a water specialist with the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA) since 1990. The TRCA is a regional organisation which provides programs and services that help municipalities create safe, resilient communities by regenerating natural environment and protecting against flooding. The TRCA could be considered the Canadian equivalent of the Dutch *Regionale Uitvoeringsdiensten* (RUDs), or *Omgevingsdiensten*. Initially, Sonya mostly worked on innovative solutions for improved urban stormwater management in the nine river basins within TRCA's jurisdiction. Between 2000 and 2009, she led major integrated watershed management planning projects in the Toronto region, aimed at a safe and climate-resilient living environments. These were complex projects in which public safety from natural hazards, nature conservation, nature-based recreation and even preservation of cultural heritage coincided, and which involved large numbers and types of stakeholders.

Sonya and her municipal partners saw that certain interventions could serve multiple purposes, resulting in their focus shifting from developing individual measures to systemic change – in which a multitude of smaller measures, coupled with larger regional scale initiatives, could bring about a collective impact, serving a range of interests. They increasingly studied the role of residents and came to the conclusion that local initiatives could be a driver of change if they were designed to address local interests. They also recognised that the case for environmental interventions would be more compelling and would secure more commitment to overcome obstacles if local social benefits were incorporated into the design.

Eventually, Sonya developed an implementation programme for TRCA's watershed management plans that combined various measures in different areas (though many of them revolving around water) with involvement of municipalities, local stakeholders and residents in each area. She opted for a neigh-

bourhood-based approach because the neighbourhood is where everything comes together (“manageable and meaningful”). Hence, there is a great deal of personal involvement (“there is something going on in our back yard!”) and tangible solutions become more evident for practitioners. The working title of the programme was ‘the Sustainable Neighbourhood Retrofit Action Plan’ – abbreviated SNAP. The name SNAP is still used today, although the abbreviation now stands for the Sustainable Neighbourhood Action Program. Sonya designed a blueprint for the strategy, and SNAP became a collaborative initiative between TRCA, municipalities and local communities.



The first project with a municipality began in 2009. TRCA's offer was attractive primarily because they offered to help the municipality address challenges associated with public engagement, retrofit planning and finding solutions to technical constraints. Besides, TRCA was considered a reliable partner by both residents and the municipality, allowing them to function as an 'external engine' that connected parties and activities. Two more collaborations followed that same year. Funding for these projects enabled Sonya to hire people, including senior programme managers Shannon Logan, early on, and Adriana Gomez shortly thereafter, allowing SNAP to hit the ground running. These dedicated staff fostered trusted working relationships with local partners and ensured project momentum. The pilot phase ended after five years, and attention shifted to implementation and evaluation. Now, SNAP is focused on optimisation and upscaling. Following Sonya's retirement in 2022 Shannon and Adriana took over her role together, and TRCA brought SNAP and another programme together in Partners in Project Green (PPG) under one umbrella business unit called "Sustainable Communities". To date, there are twenty SNAPs led by the TRCA and similar organisations in other jurisdictions.

The following table offers an overview of SNAP and VKW's main characteristics. A more detailed comparison is offered in chapter 3.



Sustainable Neighbourhood Action Program (SNAP)

Programme set-up

The Sustainable Neighbourhood Action Program (SNAP) is a neighbourhood solution for sustainable urban renewal and climate action. The Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA) developed SNAP to help municipalities overcome the challenges of retrofitting older neighbourhoods. Its success is rooted in a collaborative approach that aligns municipal priorities with local interests. SNAP improves efficiencies, draws strong community support and builds trusted implementation partnerships for initiatives in public and private realms. Working with local stakeholders, SNAP address a broad range of sustainability objectives by advancing strategies for:

- home retrofits (e.g. plantings, flood protection, rainwater harvesting, energy/water efficiency);
- infrastructure renewal (integrating social and environmental outcomes);
- multi-unit residential, commercial and institutional revitalisation (e.g. sustainable landscaping, urban agriculture, building retrofits); and
- community resilience and leadership capacity (e.g. neighbour connections, skills building, emergency preparedness).

Each SNAP neighbourhood project is locally customised, however all SNAPs share a common approach. The SNAP model includes the following critical features: neighbourhood scale (focusing on place-based solutions), multi-objective (seeking co-benefits), science-based (predicting measurable outcomes), demonstration (showcasing action), local networks (engaging a new public), and social innovation and market research (identifying local motivators).

Development strategies lay at the neighbourhood project and programme scales. Each neighbourhood project involves three phases and inherent strategies, including:

1. Neighbourhood selection/scoping: alignment with multiple priorities
2. Action Planning: partnership building, target-setting, defining motivational themes and project concepts through innovative engagement and co-design with multiple stakeholders
3. Implementation: partnership brokering, catalysing engagement, capacity building in local leaders and monitoring impact.

SNAP has been developed through four strategic phases:

1. Piloting neighbourhood action planning projects
2. Implementation, rigorous monitoring and lessons learned
3. Scaling strategies, streamlining the model and growing the network
4. Institutionalising the neighbourhood approach with municipal partners.

Lessons learned and adaptive planning have been critical strategies for continuous improvement at all scales, vital to maintaining programme resilience amidst policy and organisational change. Another important strategy has been regular recognition of all partners for their vital roles.

Funding

Being part of the TRCA, SNAP (indirectly) receives funding from municipalities. Additionally, SNAP receives funding from other governments (provincial and national), and tops this off with other subsidies and funds. Receiving consistent, core funding is a huge task for SNAP. Shannon and Adriana hope to gain a more structured operational agreement among TRCA's partners in the long term, especially including a financial model.

2.3 SNAP and VKW side-by-side comparison

	SNAP	VKW
Programme type	Planning and implementation programme aimed at experimenting	Research- and learning programme aimed at experimenting, knowledge transfer and policy innovation
Initiative of	TRCA in partnership with municipalities	Research organisations and university
Scale	Regional	National
Target group	Strategic neighbourhoods having multiple environmental and retrofit priorities	Disadvantaged neighbourhoods where energy transition measures/renovations are scheduled
Core partners	Municipalities, communities and NGO's	Municipalities and housing associations
Objectives	Connecting environmental & climate resilience themes to social qualities of the neighbourhoods (holistic approach)	Connecting energy transition and other sustainability-related themes to the social quality of the neighbourhoods (holistic approach)
Starting principle	Stakeholder interests, with a lot of attention for residents' and municipalities' interests and engagement	An integrated approach of challenges that accumulate on the neighbourhood level, with particular attention for stakeholder interests and strong focus on community engagement (interests)
Role	Facilitator: Standardised step-by-step approach resulting in tailor made plans for every neighbourhood. Important role in implementation. Major role for residents.	Supporting and inspiring municipalities and advocate for resident interests. No standardised approach. Not involved in implementation.
Funding sources	Municipalities with additional grants from charitable foundations, provincial and national governments	National funding (PAW/Ministry of Internal Affairs), with additional grants from participating municipalities



3. Thirteen years of SNAP, four years of VKW: a comparison

Because VKW has some years of experience now, it became possible for the two programmes to inspire one another, and thus share Dutch experiences with SNAP as well. Because SNAP has gained many new experiences since the start of the VKW programme, we decided to exchange experiences in a structured manner, and to write up these experiences (of which this report is the result). The comparison offered in this chapter is structured as follows: first, differences in organisation and role are discussed, and then, the objectives and approach. After, we shed light on the differences in roles between VKW and SNAP towards citizens, municipalities and other partners. After, we offer a few interesting observations.

The first step towards meaningful exchange was to translate VKW's final report to English, in order for SNAP to be able to grasp VKW's set-up and findings. In 2022, a series of three virtual meetings was organised which allowed representatives of both programmes to exchange. VKW was represented by Anke van Hal, Matthijs Uytterlinde and Nina Tom (Platform31). SNAP was represented by Adriana Gomez, Shannon Logan and Sonya Meek. The latter is retired but is a great source of knowledge about the history of the programme and the lessons learned along the way. Together, SNAP and VKW reached the following conclusions.

3.1 Role and mandate

Organisation

Although the objectives of SNAP and VKW display strong similarities, the programmes are carried out by two very different organisations. SNAP was developed by a regional body (the TRCA) as an implementation programme carried out in collaboration with local authorities, residents and stakeholders. Shannon: "We position ourselves as facilitators. Although we do get involved in implementation of certain solutions, we don't have the capacity to be involved in ongoing implementation. We try to build capacity in others."

VKW, on the other hand, is neither an implementation- nor a policy programme. Rather, it is a joint initiative of a knowledge- and network organisation (Platform31) and a university (Nyenrode Business University). VKW is a knowledge, research and learning programme aimed at supporting local parties that work on policy implementation in their efforts to achieve certain goals. So, unlike SNAP, VKW does not have a role in the implementation or execution of policy at a local level. By facilitating a learning community for participating municipalities, VKW aims to encourage and connect local parties. Their independent position helps here. Both parties point out the importance thereof.

Implementation power

As a result, the mandate and implementation power of both parties differs. The main difference between SNAP and VKW then, is that SNAP is able to facilitate and (in some cases) take concrete actions within projects. Their

role can vary from supportive to in-the-lead, with responsibilities such as designing projects, fundraising, developing partnerships, building capacity, or in some cases leading implementation. VKW, on the other hand, cannot. The programme encourages municipalities to adopt different methods of working by providing academic insights and best practice examples. VKW mainly serves to inspire and tries to help municipal- and other parties working on the energy transition in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Whether these insights and the instruments offered are actually deployed, is beyond their sphere of influence.

Seeing the gap in implementation power between SNAP and VKW, being executor versus inspirer, VKW invited Elisabeth Boersma and Hans van der Schroeffer from ACT! to join one of the exchanges with SNAP. ACT!'s approach is in some ways more similar to SNAP, as they work with just one municipality per project, and they work on sustainability (both environmentally- and socially oriented) in a disadvantaged neighbourhood as well. A comparison between ACT! and SNAP is provided in the box below.

Comparison between SNAP and ACT!

The municipality of Tilburg has contracted ACT! to design and implement a programme for Tilburg North. This relationship is similar to the way in which SNAP works. ACT!'s Elisabeth Boersma and Hans van der Schroeffer have respectively worked at Bouwfonds Property Development and Volker Wessel, where they worked with residents a lot. ACT! functions as a private entity, in which these two companies have joined forces in order to develop a programme for the neighbourhood. It being a private entity is a difference between ACT! and SNAP. A ten-year contract has been drawn up between the municipality, the local social housing corporation and ACT!. Elisabeth and Hans initiate development projects and support local initiatives in the neighbourhood. This is similar to what SNAP does. Examples of initiatives are living room restaurants, vegetable gardens, and school breakfasts. Moreover, ACT! tries to create paid work as well as a stronger voice for residents through the 'Rooted in the Neighbourhood ('In de Wijk Geworteld') project.

Similar to SNAP in its earlier stages, ACT! experiences resistance from the existing organisations, as people there tend to have the misperception that part of their mandate has been taken over by ACT! SNAP has put a lot of time and effort into countering this notion and highlighting their added value to the community, but this might be more tricky for a private party like ACT!. ACT! is less trusted by default due to their ability to invest, granting them powers that the municipality does not have. ACT! also works with social housing associations, and is therefore not entirely independent, because they partly depend on them for (financing) their activities. The combination of public and private money is, again, similar to SNAP's funding. A major difference, however, is the length of its contract with the municipality of Tilburg (ten years vs. one to two years for SNAP). ACT! And SNAP both deal with supervisory steering committees in various ways. This ensures meaningful participation of invested partners in decision-making, although it can take time.

3.2 Objectives and approach

Sustainability as starting point

One of the main similarities between SNAP and VKW is their shared environmental focus. For VKW, the environmental theme is the energy transition: reducing energy demand and/or transitioning from natural gas to a more sustainable heating source – hence mitigating climate change. Being a part of TRCA, SNAP takes water (management) as a starting point: preventing floodings, and other forms of climate adaptation, such as green infrastructure.

Holistic approach on neighbourhood-level

Both programmes embrace a holistic approach by seeking connections with issues that are at play at the neighbourhood-level. The selection of relevant issues is strongly context dependent; this can range from interventions to reduce poverty and unemployment to improving green spaces or creating safe pedestrian crossings and parking solutions. One of the arguments for working on a neighbourhood-level is that here, the effect of human interaction is greatest: people talk to their neighbours, for example. Another argument is that the cumulative impact of many small actions can be measurable and offer economies of scale to implement. The Dutch government has stimulated that each municipality has to draft neighbourhood action plans for transitioning to gas-free buildings.

Integrating multiple policy fields

Both programmes have experienced that the added value of a holistic approach needs to be stressed continuously, as most stakeholders – be it municipal departments, housing associations, social welfare organisations or technical partners – are used to focussing on one or more pre-defined task(s). Both programmes require municipalities to work differently from how they are used to. Governments and other public sector organisations are usually governed and managed along the lines of these sectoral tasks. As a result, they sometimes tend to reject an integrated neighbourhood-oriented

approach, as it is considered to complicate matters unnecessarily and slowing down the process. This can be seen both in the Netherlands and in Canada. However, over time, municipalities and local stakeholders (at least those involved in the programmes) often do acknowledge the added value of the holistic, integrated approach pursued by SNAP and VKW.

Standardised method

Being in charge of determining and facilitating the neighbourhood-approach allows SNAP to employ a fixed method in their work. Sonya designed this method in the early stages of the programme, and it has remained largely consistent over time. It consists of successive steps that ensure a connection between existing local initiatives and top-down initiatives. This method is applied to all neighbourhoods, but blanks are filled in based on the local characteristics and circumstances and reconciled in a tailor-made integrated approach for each neighbourhood. It encompasses the following steps:

- **Pick a central theme:** with parties that know the neighbourhood well
- **Translate it into concrete goals:** with residents
- **Identify opportunities and obstacles:** by professionals
- **Look for solutions to obstacles:** by professionals
- **Translate goals into measures:** with residents
- **Develop an action plan and seek financing:** by professionals
- **Link measurable goals to the action plan:** with residents
- **Organise collaborations for implementing the action plan:** with residents
- **Evaluate regularly (also over the longer term):** with residents

In part thanks to their standardised approach, SNAP's brand has become very recognisable. This is no accident; SNAP has strategically worked on its branding, for example by adopting a recognisable name, drafting a pitch that conveys its vision and strategy (in collaboration with marketing specialists), and designing figures and tools that illustrate its message. However, TRCA welcomes its implementation partners to profile their own brands alongside

SNAP, illustrating the collaboration and shared vision. As more municipalities utilised the SNAP-methods, its appeal has grown among other municipalities. Now, all these municipalities form a network in which organisations can learn from one another and potentially offer access to greater market potential from the perspective of private investors or scaling potential for successful strategies.

So far, VKW has invested limited time into developing and branding a standardised approach. This was also not an objective of the programme. At the start of VKW, an infographic was designed to visualise the programme's objectives. Back then, even though the key ingredients were clear, finding out how to achieve these goals was seen as an exploratory journey. The main priority, then, was to generate lessons that can be applied in different settings. Similar to SNAP, the VKW-approach has been gradually further developed. Along the way, VKW has made strong efforts to share intermediate findings and results through lectures, papers and reports and by establishing relationships with relevant networks and (policy) programmes.⁸

Neighbourhood selection process

A major difference between SNAP and the VKW programme can be found in the neighbourhood selection processes. This follows from the diverging set-ups and objectives: where VKW started with fifteen municipalities at once in 2019, who participated in the programme together. SNAP, on the other hand, chooses to get involved in local processes, which each have their own planning. As such, municipalities interested in participating in the VKW programme were simply asked to select a vulnerable neighbourhood; no predefined set of indicators was used, and in some cases the team had little

insight into which considerations led to the selection of the neighbourhood in question. At the start of VKW, the team made a neighbourhood scan for each participating neighbourhood, based on local data and interviews with the project manager and (in some cases) local partners. Sometimes this neighbourhood scan provided new insights for local parties involved.

For SNAP, the neighbourhood selection process is an important step in the process. This is also where support among all parties involved commences. All stakeholders are invited to participate in the selection process; the decision is made jointly. The discussions around the selection also provide SNAP with a tremendous amount of information about the area. According to Shannon, it is important to know what arguments there are for the selection of a certain neighbourhood, in order to be able to fall back on these later on so as to ensure retention of key stakeholders by regularly addressing their objectives.

Neighbourhood analysis

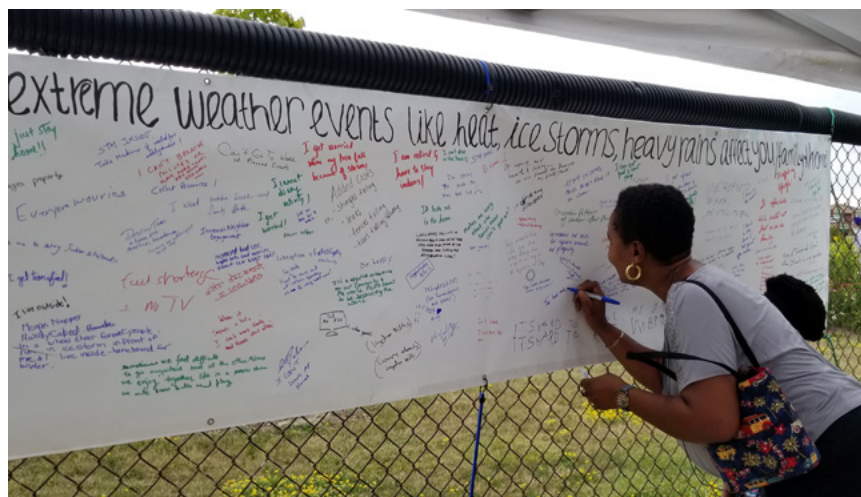
Both programmes strive for high-quality, data driven neighbourhood analyses that map all available information about the neighbourhood at the start of a project. Initially, SNAP would spend significant amounts of money to create a scan. Now, they mostly bring together all professionals who are active in a neighbourhood and inform the scans based on their input: everyone briefly presents their experiences, the accumulation of which paints a clear picture of the neighbourhood and shared priorities for filling data gaps. A benefit of this approach is that it makes all parties feel heard as well. It furthermore helps them achieve greater impact as they can align with planned infrastructure, and it also helps identify integrated projects that may be undertaken by others, and helps SNAP set out a longer term work plan for future projects. Where there is a need, a more in-depth analysis can be made in a later stage. SNAP's method, using a starting meeting, could work well in the Dutch context as well. VKW is dependent on municipalities for the quality of the neighbourhood analyses.

8. VKW has a strong relationship with and network within several Dutch national programmes. PAW and its successor support and collaborate with the programme, and Anke used to be a member of their advisory committee. She is furthermore ambassador for the so-called City Deal Energetic Neighbourhoods (*City Deal Energieke Wijken*), a programme that aims to change organisational structures and regulations in order to (energetically and otherwise) improve neighbourhoods. Matthijs is involved in a national programme focussed on liveability and security (*Nationaal Programme Leefbaarheid en Veiligheid, NPLV*), which also shares common interests with VKW.

Informed by scientific knowledge

Both SNAP and VKW rely heavily on scientific knowledge. For VKW, this is rather obvious, as one of the partners is a university. VKW often brings in, in an attractive summarised way, academic knowledge during the sessions and exchange meetings they host, in order to provide useful theoretical insights in manners that are inspiring and understandable for municipal staff. This way of working is highly appreciated by the participating municipalities.

SNAP also regularly seeks collaboration with research institutes for programme-level evaluations and project-level data collection, implementation designs, and partnership development strategies. Collaboration is not yet structural by any means, but they desire to make it structural, for example in order to carry out high-quality evaluations. SNAP does have access to a lot of scientific knowledge in more technical areas, thanks to the TRCA's experience herein. Sonya: "Based on scientific knowledge, we always look for the most strategic approach with the most suitable techniques to make significant impact, and these inform priority actions."



SNAP also increasingly recruits people who have a professional understanding of behavioural science for their own pool of employees. They furthermore hire marketing and design contractors where needed to inform effective engagement strategies. SNAP also uses business knowledge in order to attract potential investment partners. Sonya: "For example, we need to be able to speak the language of marketers to get prospective partners interested in our programme. We need to know what share of their market we think we can reach or provide another value proposition, such as the opportunities to help them achieve their Environmental Social Governance goals." SNAP furthermore seeks cooperation with commercial parties that have a behavioural science-approach. For example, they used community-based social marketing research for the business case of some programmes aimed at resident participation. Within VKW, a similar study was also carried out for the Pendrecht neighbourhood in Rotterdam. Adriana adds: "More and more scientific knowledge about the relationship between the environment, poverty, health and the like is also available. We also try to apply that knowledge as much as possible."

3.3 Collaborating with residents and other stakeholders

Community engagement

As is evident from the above-described approaches, both programmes pay a great deal of attention to residents' experiences and interests. Anke: "This may appear self-explanatory, but in practice it's a rarity." Both VKW and SNAP strive to involve citizens in municipal plans as early as possible. In practice, again, SNAP does this more consistently than VKW. The VKW-team not being involved 'on the ground' in the implementation of projects prevents them from doing so, and their advice to do so is not always put into practice by municipalities. With regard to community engagement, SNAP also regularly experiences resistance from municipal departments, mainly because municipal staff tend to find collaboration with residents very difficult. Another differ-

ence is that VKW focuses on residents in relation to the municipality and/or social housing associations, whereas SNAP also involves NGO's and other local organisations early on in their projects, as well as parties who financially contribute to the programme.

As a means of (accelerating) citizen engagement, VKW advocates for reliance on community leaders or ambassadors. The consistency with which this is employed among VKW-projects, again, differs. SNAP does this too. Sometimes, established leaders already exist. Where this is not the case, SNAP trains residents who they deem suitable for this role, in order to ensure they have the knowledge and skills required to (co-)decide. This proves to be difficult in practice. Municipal staff often seem to struggle to hand over decision-making power. With SNAP having an increasing number of examples of successful projects in which residents have had an important say, resistance decreases. Within its standard framework, SNAP organises some sessions with residents, some sessions with professionals only, and certain sessions with everyone present together. Although time consuming for SNAP staff, this is time-efficient for partners and builds trust over the long term.

Municipalities as partners

Besides residents, both SNAP's and VKW's most important partner organisations are municipalities. This follows from the neighbourhood-based approaches that serve a multitude of purposes, often touching upon the municipal infrastructure and programmes. In addition, SNAP works closely with non-government organisations (NGOs), private landowners, resident groups and local institutions. For VKW, social housing corporations are a logical partner as well. Since SNAP's and VKW's roles are very different, municipalities are involved as partners in policy and as participants in a (knowledge) programme respectively.

Both SNAP and VKW strive for long-term cooperation with municipalities, albeit it in different ways. Whereas SNAP designs programmes and facilitates implementation, VKW strives for a holistic approach that enables participating municipalities to customise it in accordance with the challenges and objectives in the respective neighbourhoods. Designing plans and interventions is up to the municipalities themselves, and as is the execution. SNAP, on the other hand, has a long term association with neighbourhoods: partnership building, action plans and a few quick starts usually takes two or three years; implementation of larger projects takes five to seven years. At its start in 2019, VKW entered a three-year commitment with municipalities, after which the programme continued to offer some support to municipalities that were keen to continue. The national government financed this 'light' version of support. SNAP has never had long-term contracts with municipalities (contracts run on a year to year basis, but some have continued over ten years), but the TRCA can step up as continuing partner, seeking other sources to complement municipal funding and help fill gaps where needed.

Some difficulties may arise from working with municipalities. Both programmes require municipalities to work differently from how they are used to. For example, the holistic approach to challenges and policy objectives, and the integrated way of working described above, require overcoming departmental silos. Difficulty also arises in relation to community engagement. Both VKW and SNAP regularly experience resistance from municipalities on this matter; investing time and resources on community engagement is often considered tricky and as increasing risks of delay. Adriana: "Some municipal staff seem to be scared of the community and prefer not to ask." Involving residents furthermore tends to be considered too time-consuming in both Canada and the Netherlands. Often, there is simply a lack of interest in residents' ideas and experiences, particularly at early stages of project planning to make meaningful difference.

Uniting role

Both programmes largely function as supporting entities; municipalities remain the central players. A major advantage of the TRCA – and by extension thereof SNAP – is that they are at arm's length from the municipality. This generates trust. VKW is also independent, and hence considered a trustworthy partner as well. Both SNAP and VKW conceive of their added value in terms of uniting different parties and activities and drawing lessons from those experiences. SNAP on a local level, and VKW on a national level. This uniting role is in fact a crucial factor for the projects' successes. Unfortunately, this does not seem to be self-explanatory. Sonya: "People understand the value of planting 50 trees and other deliverables, but not as much the value of the integrator. The fifty trees don't plant themselves on private property, nor do they promote home energy retrofits and flood risk reduction measures at the same time". SNAP is trying to illustrate the added value of the uniting role in their business case based on prior experience, in order to make the value more apparent. VKW attempts to emphasise the value of the uniting role in their publications, in which findings of all involved municipalities are shared.



3.4 Other factors

Timing

Sonya notes that there is regular debate about the timing of SNAP's intervention. In her view, it is important to get involved at an early stage, but not everyone is always open to this. Similarly, joining early is considered important by VKW. However, also in the Dutch situation, this is not always (deemed) possible, since developments diverge within the municipalities that take part in VKW; they do not work along parallel timelines.

The programmes differ in their timing of actions. Within SNAP, partnership building, action plans and a few quick start projects usually take two to three years; implementation of larger project takes five to seven years. VKW created the above-described results within the first two to three years of planning (during a pandemic). Whereas Dutch policy makers and project managers often consider their project development as moving slowly, in the eyes of the SNAP-team, VKW moves at a very fast pace. Their intention is to speed up the SNAP-programme. Shannon: "We are considering and piloting a more rapid approach, which is needed to help municipalities meet their residential retrofit and GHG [greenhouse gas] reduction targets." But, as Sonya explains, "progress occurs at the speed of trust."

Evaluation methods

Both VKW and SNAP attach great value to evaluations, but SNAP attaches much more value to 'substantiating' claims with numbers. VKW focuses much less focus on numerical substantiation. This difference may be partly explained by cultural differences. The VKW team observes that the Dutch tend to respond skeptically to quantitative findings. For example, Anke regularly discusses SNAP's findings in lectures and presents the results of the San Romanoway project. The audience tends to be wary of these figures, and suggests, for example, that questions must have been posed in a suggestive manner. Besides quantitative research, SNAP also conducts a lot of qualitative

research. Their experience is that qualitative research attracts more attention and thus majorly contributes to creating goodwill among the parties involved.

Another difference is that intermediate evaluations are part of SNAP's standardised approach. Because the methods are so similar for all project, findings can easily be compared, and patterns detected. This is what VKW strived for, too, but in practice this did not always happen. This results from VKW being dependent on municipalities. In some cases, the Covid-pandemic left its mark as well.

Staff turnover

Over the years, VKW has seen a constant influx of new people and simultaneous outflux of professionals (for example because they have a new position). In order to mitigate this gap, professionals who newly join the VKW programme receive a short starter course. SNAP also experiences issues due to people changing jobs, both within their team and on their partners' side. "It takes a lot of time to build a good relationship with people within the municipalities. If someone leaves, you have to start again" Sonya explains. To mitigate this, SNAP always makes sure that there are two people from each party present at key meetings, so that they can replace one another internally. Both SNAP and VKW have found that the importance of personal competencies of the professionals involved cannot be stressed enough.



4 Lessons learned



4. Lessons learned

Despite the many differences, much can be learned when comparing experiences with a neighbourhood approach centered around disadvantages neighbourhoods from different parts of the world. Especially in times of great change and chaos onset by transitions, this is important. The most valuable general lessons to be drawn from the comparison between SNAP and VKW, is to try and perceive one's own experience from a different perspective. It can be comforting when it turns out that problems that one has ran into in one's own projects arise in other projects as well, or when it turns out that what is seen as a weakness by one, may be seen by others in a very different light. It also opens one's eyes to blind spots and broadens one's view, which helps in identifying new opportunities.

Furthermore, when it comes to improving sustainability in deprived neighbourhoods, the following lessons can be distilled from the comparison above:

- **Involve citizens from the start and throughout.** Let the project be informed by the world as perceived through their eyes.
- **Adopt an overall neighbourhood revitalisation strategy.** Incorporate the best practices discussed in this paper and apply the strategic approach to develop specific action plans and project designs in each neighbourhood (but be ready to adapt quickly if something does not seem to work within a certain context). A fixed strategy has many benefits and can greatly contribute to a project's success and to the formation of knowledge. The detailed outcome differs of course from one place to the other and depends, amongst others, on the outcome of the following actions:
 - Consider how the local population views the government and other organisations. Is this largely negative? Consider communicating about the projects from another source.
 - Build in time for devising a high-quality neighbourhood analysis. Consider bringing together all professionals involved in the neighbourhood as a starting point.
 - Link top-down and (existing) bottom-up initiatives in your strategy.
- **Customise your neighbourhood strategy to the social interests and spatial characteristics of your area.** Even when starting from a standardised approach, based on an overall strategy, it is important to be adaptive and to tailor your project to local interests, challenges and characteristics. Finding a good balance between your aims and the possibilities relating to the social dynamics in the neighbourhood in question is key.
- **Work across policy fields.** Adopt an integrated approach, by involving relevant policy fields based on the results of the neighbourhood analysis and the input from residents. Multi-objective co-design offers efficiencies, motivates action and may provide cost sharing opportunities.
- **Work in a holistic way and try to get funding from all domains that your project includes.** That way, different objectives can be approached with equal standing and in unison.
- **Involve other parties besides municipalities** such as NGOs, local entrepreneurs and private builders. If there is a value proposition for these parties and the municipality to enter into a long-term partnership, this could be an important model for future private-public partnerships toward ESG (Environmental-Social-Governance) goals.
- **Make use of available scientific knowledge.** Not just technical knowledge, but also understanding of how to involve residents and other parties (found in behavioural science and/or marketing), and insights into transition processes. And think of the way how you share this knowledge and how to make it accessible.

- **Adopt a learning approach.** Evaluate continuously; improve, adapt, and celebrate successes. Build in time for these steps.
- **Seek out parties and networks who are working towards similar objectives** but who possess additional knowledge or resources to your own.
- **Be patient.** Especially the early stages, meant for getting to know the neighbourhood and its residents and other parties, take a long time. However, this is also where one builds the basis for multiple outcomes and much more sustainable long-term solutions and relationships for ongoing implementation.
- **Pay attention to branding.** Have a clear message, both in content and in how you present it. Also come up with an attractive name (easy to remember).
- **Seek out trusted partners on site** -because of the importance of relationship building. This can be someone who has been active in the neighbourhood for a long time and who can build trust among residents and other parties (especially if they are willing to invest time). Pay partners and resident leaders for their engagement.
- **Be prepared for staff turnover.** In order to mitigate the risk posed by a change of staff, make sure that every party sends multiple people to participate in key meetings or require sign-off by senior levels from each organisation at regular intervals. This prevents the loss of knowledge, commitment and relationships in case someone involved changes jobs.
- **Work on replication/scaling to many neighbourhoods simultaneously/quickly.** There is tension between spending a lot of time in selected areas and working in numerous areas at a higher level. To avoid the risk of action planning getting ahead of the rate of implementation, the number of concurrent neighbourhoods should be limited to where available resources can ensure implementation momentum or where similarities and shared partners offer economies of scale.

Finally, keep in mind:

- **The importance of an independent broker/third-party facilitator** – which reinforces the need to have an external force helping facilitate this work and make it happen
- **The importance of a streamlined action planning process** – a focus on collaborative, integrated implementation helps to get on with it faster! No one wants more plans. We need action.
- **The importance of integrated design** – it is important to understand different ways in which this may play out in projects. Use, for example, academic analysis of integrated design (i.e. the 3 levels of integration). Enable cross-departmental working teams and non-traditional external partners.
- **The importance of personal dedication** – especially among project managers to achieve progress and the ability to adapt/innovate (e.g. to challenges of the COVID pandemic restrictions, obstacles of holistic collaboration, etc.). Personal qualities of leaders should be recognised and invested in to ensure the long-term continuity of the project.
- **The importance of supportive higher governments** - also higher-level government (national and regional) should identify a rationale for its investment in a neighbourhood-oriented programme. It is helpful when the neighbourhood-oriented programme delivers outcomes valued by higher-level governments.

5. To conclude

This concludes our account of our inspirational exchanges with the team behind SNAP: Sonya, Adriana, and Shannon. We hope to have instilled even a fraction of the excitement and mutual interest that characterised our collaboration onto you, the reader. It has been a while since Sonya and Anke met, at a dinner in Toronto. In the meantime, much has changed – on both sides of the ocean. This flux of changes will most likely keep flowing. It will take a while before the many transitions that were touched upon in the introduction come to a conclusion (if they ever do at all), and we reach more stable systems, and thereby calmer waters. Until then, we must remain flexible and reflective, and change course where necessary. This is especially the case when working in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, which can almost be considered microcosms of our society.

Therefore, we must keep innovating and experimenting. The importance and value of sharing knowledge and exchanging experiences that have been gained elsewhere, cannot hardly be overestimated. Also when it takes time – which seems a very sparse resource. Due to its persistent nature, the NIHS remains a threat. We would like to ask you to be alert to this. Of course, every situation is different: no two countries, two cities, and two neighbourhoods are the same, but good examples can be incredibly valuable, and learning from others can be very stimulating.

Sonya, Adriana and Shannon: thank you so much for your time and effort. We consider our collaboration to be a great pleasure, and we hope it will continue further into the future.



Colophon

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