



Transnational Meeting Ghent

On 27-28 of May, The Civic eState network gathered in Ghent for a second transnational meeting. The programme, a mix of expert key notes, exchanges on policy instruments and visits to local initiatives, meant to question and inspire the participants own experiences.

Social infrastructure and commons

In a first keynote, Prof. Edoardo Reviglio, member of the High-Level Task Force on Investing in Social Infrastructure in Europe, highlighted the role of social infrastructure in generating inclusive growth, wellbeing and resilience of people and communities, and upward convergence and cohesion between EU regions and countries. Demographic trends require our social and welfare systems to adapt more rapidly and continuously. At the same time, local authorities, who have a big part and responsibility in investments in social infrastructure are often facing tight budget constraints. Thus the need for alternative and innovative financial instruments, blending of resources, pilot investment platforms and new public-private funds for social investment.

In her keynote on the second day, Tine De Moor, professor "Institutions for Collective Action in Historical Perspective" at Utrecht University, addressed the 'commons' or 'institutions for collective action'. Starting from the origins and development of commons, she depicted their role and place in the current disruptive economic and political developments. Local participatory governance offers a broad window for interaction between commons and local government. The resulting public-collective partnerships need to balance decision making power, ownership and responsibility, which often proofs a difficult act.

Policy to enhance citizen initiatives

Next up were the different tools and policies of policy participation at the City of Ghent. The host city of the meeting wants to depict itself as a flourishing ground for civic initiative and as a city open to participation and co-creation with those initiatives. To make this possible, the neighbourhood managers in each of the 25 districts of Ghent play a pivotal



role. As middlemen or connectors, they are often the drivers for finding (new) solutions to urban challenges in the neighbourhood. They look for the necessary links between policy and administration and various stakeholders on the basis of a helicopter view inside and outside the city. While they certainly were pioneers for this approach at the City, they are now backed by a vast political will to facilitate participation and cocreation and by a growing number of initiatives and (legal) instruments at the various departments of the city administration. The resulting mix consists of initiatives such as the participation platform, crowdfunding platform, temporary use of vacant buildings, participatory budget, neighborhood management projects,... and of instruments such as city regulations, subsidy agreements, real estate agreements, permits for the use of public space,... Untangling this complex mix so that citizens and also civil servants find their way, together with the simplification of the administrative and regulatory procedures are now the challenges the City is facing. The sharing of information and knowledge and the collaboration between various departments is the first step in this process.

Taking it to the streets

Listening to the experiences from the existing initiatives is another step. So we took the participants out to the streets of the “Rabot-Blaisantvest” and “Bloemekenswijk” neighbourhoods to put their insights, lessons and experiences to the test.

We passed by a once classic neighbourhood center now turned into a volunteer-run ‘bazaar’ with a giveaway shop, second hand shop, social grocery, and more. We heard the experience of the complementary currency “Torekes” as a tool to create a network between inhabitants, local economy and civil society organizations and to promote participation in the neighbourhood. We took a look in the Sint-Jozef church that is now closed for religious activities and returned to the neighbourhood as an open space that gives local residents the opportunity to develop activities and a social network based on their own needs and possibilities. Residents of the Van Beveren Square unfolded their plans to turn their square into something more than a parking lot. We met the volunteers of the Food Bank that dispatch unsold products from supermarkets to local welfare initiatives and social restaurants. And the volunteers from Bloemekensforum, a non-profit association formed by inhabitants, presented us their challenges in looking for a new location to carry out their temporary use projects.



Article



It inspired Nathalie van Loon from the City of Amsterdam to think of an incubator for civil servants and citizens, such as a 'commons in residence', to nurture the layer around the government with a network of new and established civic initiatives and to create the necessary humus for a local do-democracy.