

Local Knowledge

Vincent Tijms

Friday, July 15th, a conference will be held in Wijk aan Zee, on the topic of 'Local Knowledge'. The conference will be the kick-off of the Europa Tour, a project of Cultural Village that will explore the European countryside and harvest the many opinions on life and politics that exist there. During the conference, the concept of local knowledge and some of its uses will be introduced. After that, a series of presentations will be held by speakers from all across the village network. They will show in what way they have put their own local knowledge to use.

Knowledge of local things and people, one's own everyday living environment, is a kind of knowledge that is rarely appreciated, even scorned by some. Which flies right in the face of the fact that without it, life would be impossible. Therefore this conference is long overdue. The main question of the discussion is to what uses local knowledge could be put and, in what ways best to do this.

One example is democracy itself. While most democratic systems have some formal way of having civilians do their say on the plans of politicians, this often takes the form of people being allowed to complain about plans already made. To get "their opinions" earlier, most political systems make use of an elected representative. However, this representative does not always take all the different opinions from a community into account. Now if local knowledge is used while devising plans, the people who have

an interest in the plan will need to be consulted while drafting the plan. They will even have useful things to contribute, and save experts a lot of time. As an added benefit, the people who now stand around complaining after the fact will have contributed something to their community.

In fact, why even stop with using the community as an advisory organ to back the plans of politicians? Why not create a structure that lets a community take initiatives by itself as well, using its local knowledge to get to a consensus? This would be democracy at its finest!

Another way to benefit from local knowledge is economically. Instead of "developing" an area by building a large tropical swimming pool, one could also find ways to attract tourists or businesses that fit with the local. Knowledge of local history, customs, geography can all play a part in this. Having a good idea of the potential of an area can sometimes lead to well selling local products, be they wine, beef or olive oil.

Local knowledge can also have a positive social influence. It tends to forge bonds between an individual, the place where he lives and other people in that community. This creates a sense of belonging and helps people feel recognized as individuals. In other words, local knowledge also creates local culture.

Of course, these are only a few examples of the roles local knowledge can play. During the conference we hope to identify more, and discuss the ways in which they can best be implemented.

Four important items

Ivan Kisjes

During the Europatour, workshops will be held at four places: one each in the Netherlands, Estonia, Italy and France. Attempting to take advantage of the idea that an orientation on European scale contributes to the vitality of countryside communities, they are designed for analyzing and discussing problems at the places where these problems are visible and where the local communities are trying to find solutions. Each workshop will have its own theme.

The theme of the first workshop, to be held in Wijk aan Zee, The Netherlands, from July 15th - 16th, is 'The importance of local knowledge'. This is the knowledge of one's surroundings that only locals have; they are capable of seeing the aspects of plans that specialists tend to overlook. Thus, when local knowledge is not taken into account a plan can easily snag on unexpected complications. Nonetheless, locals in the past have often been told that local knowledge was unimportant.

The locals will show how Wijk aan Zee used its local knowledge to deal with plans of various authorities and planners. They will show the solutions they found. Production of bricks of heavily polluted sludge, the 'Kennermoppen', was the Wijk aan Zee's solution to the threat of toxic sludge storage on the beach near the village. The Sea of Steel, a sculpture-park between the village and the steelfactory Corus, is the result of Wijk

aan Zee knowing the neighbouring steelfactory and its own particular resources. Proeflokaal is another implementation of Wijk aan Zee's local knowledge. The other participants will contribute their local knowledge of similar issues in the field of planology and management of small communities.

The second workshop is themed 'Village Culture and Identity'. Village Culture is very much a participation culture. This will be illustrated on August 7th - 8th, when delegations of forty people from four communities from different parts of Europe will be present in the Estonian village Killingi Nõmme. Each of them will perform, illustrating what participation culture means: success is judged by engagement rather than by artistic ability. The workshop will work out the importance of village culture for life in rural communities. Cultural accomplishments are very important for the identity of community, and can make communities more aware of their own strengths and weaknesses. They increase social interaction in and self esteem of a community, building a more active, more vocal and more diverse European countryside. The Cultural Villages have, since they became involved in the network, seen increases in all above mentioned spheres. Representatives of the movement will explain how this happened. The other participants will show the workings of participation culture in their villages.

The third workshop, October 2nd – 3rd, is concerned with the interaction between different generations. The Italian village Pergine Valdarno is concerned about this issue. Every year they organize a film festival on this subject. The generation gap increases with the size of a community: while the young and the elderly hardly have any contact in urbanized areas, they frequently meet in villages. The other participants will tell about the generation gap in their regions.

The fourth workshop will be themed ‘Nature’ and will be held in Kreiz Breizh, Brittany, France on October 18th – 19th. The people of Kreiz Breizh will show Nature of the region and the threats by new kinds of agriculture, pollution of the land and of the sea. They will show the attractiveness of nature for tourists and artists. They will show how they deal with nature. How can rural communities care for their land when it is often not economically viable to do so? Participants will bring their own experiences.

Knowledge of humans

Bert Kisjes

What does insight into humans have to do with the relevance of local knowledge? The knowledge I have of my own village consists of the knowledge of the landscape and the local buildings, of the knowledge of people who live there and the knowledge of the local history of the last century (the stories told by grandparents, parents and others). So with knowledge on humans I don’t mean the general knowledge on human nature, like psychologists, psychiatrists and anthropologists tend to have. I’m only concerned about concrete knowledge of people, either living or dead, who have a name or nickname that sets them apart from others.

That knowledge is of great importance in order to be recognized as an individual. A lot of people complain about the fact that they are treated as a number and are supposed to behave accordingly. Large institutions have been treating people that way for a long time; they give everyone all kinds of numbers and it seems like everyone has accepted this. Not without complaining though, because “being a number” still isn’t a positive thing.

In small communities where it is still possible to get to know people, knowledge on humans has a wholly different side as well. Because of the small scale of such a society, a lot of things can

only be done voluntarily, since the money to hire a professional isn’t always there. This makes it quite important to know who can do what kind of things and for that, you need to have knowledge of the inhabitants. You can only do the things for which you have the people.

A project has started in Wijk aan Zee, in which senior citizens tell each other their life stories. This adds to knowledge on humans they have. During the conference,

Conclusions of Killingi Nõmme

The recent mayor’s conference in Killingi Nõmme was dedicated to the relation between local, regional and national politics. The unanimous conclusion was that there currently was little room for local governance and local politics.

- 1. Nobody was content about the relations between local and state organisation.**
- 2. A high degree of uncertainty.**
- 3. An attitude of patronizing by the higher institutions. Adult-child relation.**
- 4. Lack of money**
- 5. The state gives and takes.**
- 6. Local autonomy has been formulated but is eroded.**
- 7. Political parties are of no use for the local government**

The value of irrelevant knowledge

Vincent Tijms

Getting a discussion together on the value of local knowledge can be a revolutionary thing. Not by discussing how traditional knowledge can be exploited to lure tourists. Not even by pointing out that local knowledge often is 'valid knowledge'. On the contrary, one of the most exciting parts of the discussion will be challenging the conventional wisdom on what makes knowledge valuable at all.

In this scientific age, we tend to adopt a value system similar to that of scientists. For them, creating knowledge is part of a big, collective endeavour that tries to determine the truth. To do so, they have adopted what is commonly called "the scientific method", an elaborate framework that has proven to be very useful making scientific progress. Part of this method is performing experiments under controlled conditions. The reason scientists do this is to be able to eliminate the surroundings or context of

the phenomenon they study. In this way, they can get to the – often abstract – essence of their object of study, thereby creating, from their point of view, valuable knowledge.

Local knowledge is often completely at odds with this. As people learn about the quirks of their neighbours, the songs of the birds in their garden or the latest news from the local pub, they aren't doing so to bring civilization as a whole closer to discovering truth. Moreover, local knowledge doesn't concern itself with abstractions or generalizations: it tends to be relevant for, well, the local and as such is chockfull of context. Where scientific knowledge is valuable if you would put it in an encyclopaedia, local knowledge is valuable if it adds to day-to-day life.

It is hard for modern society to accept that this kind of "irrelevant" knowledge has any real value. This is remarkable, because quite a lot of fundamental problems can be handled by

recognizing local knowledge and tapping the possibilities it offers. In a community where the creation of local knowledge is stimulated, politicians will find it easy to consult its inhabitants and see whether plans made by experts are in fact viable. Besides that, the much sought after social cohesion is just a by-product of community knowledge creation. Knowing each other also means that individuals are known, helping them form an identity and achieve a sense of self-esteem.

Recognizing this "non-encyclopaedic" value of local knowledge is an important step towards the creation of healthy, democratised communities. I hope the conference in Wijk aan Zee will add to this recognition, but that it will also address the next, more difficult step: how to stimulate the creation of local knowledge in those communities that have forgotten how to do so.

At the start of Europatour

Bert Kisjes

On July 17th, 25 people will depart from Wijk aan Zee to travel the European countryside. Three months later, on October 26th, they will return from their voyage of discovery. Who are the people that have joined this Europatour? May I introduce a few of them?

Some of them intend to participate the full three months. They have the time, or have been able to make time. Others will only join for a few weeks.

Martin is 26 years old, is studying to be a history teacher, is active in the community of Wijk aan Zee and is a singer in a band that has become an increasing regional success this past year.

Sonja, 24 years old, is a film student from Vienna. She will make a documentary of 20 minutes of the Europatour. She will also collaborate on a series of four or six films by Roei from Tel Aviv. Roei (32 years old) will bring a camera- and soundperson to make these episodes.

Vincent, 26 years old, is a chemistry student. He has seen the Cultural Village of Europe movement develop from its birth back in 1999. He intends, together with Ivan (28 years old), to start up the internet magazine The Rake - the magazine of the European countryside. Ivan is



an archaeologist who worked in Mexico and is now seeking shards in the city of Utrecht.

Erica (60 years old) does not usually like large enterprises. Organisations, to her mind, are usually oversized. Reality is always much smaller. She has a sharp eye for day-to-day reality. She occupies herself with ancient languages (Greek, Latin and hieroglyphs) and writes short stories.

Hans Peter (retired), trumpet player from Enkhuizen, likes the idea of the trip. He will primarily join as a musician. His wife Anna

Christine will join only the first month. She has an interest in biologic farming.

Jitka, her older sister Martina, Klara and Milada, students social work in the Czech Republic, will travel with the tour up to Stockholm.

Leo, (54 years old) works in a garage but was ready for a little adventure. He plays the guitar and slide guitar and has been in numerous bands.

Another **Leo** likes to travel and to film. He really likes to go. At 84 years, he is the oldest traveller.

Marian Stuiver (30 years old) studied rural sociology with Jan Douwe van der Ploeg in Wageningen. Together with Frank Verhoeven (31 years old) and two students from Wageningen they will have kitchen-table talks with farmers, and publish the results in a book. Frank is also a rural sociologist. He founded an organisation bearing the name "farmer's sense". He can also mediate bands.

Sarah, 26 years, a journalist from Brittany will join in Italy and will finish the tour from there. As a journalist she specialises in European affairs. Her knowledge will certainly benefit the tour.

Edwin, (38 years), is a trucker and used to haul

flowers to and from Spain. He wanted something different. Our Tour appealed to him, so he will drive the truck.

Paul, 62 years, likes nothing better than driving through Europe. He loves the road. It doesn't matter how long he has to drive. He started out as a horticulturalist, then became a hotel owner and then a transport enterprise. He is a true entrepreneur.

Mike and his brother are originally from Poland. They want to use the Tour to explore rural Poland, which they do not know.

Paul (26 years old) is a computer specialist. He knows all about Linux. Together with Anke, his girlfriend and a journalism student, he will travel with the Tour to Finland.

Faye, 30 years old and a lawyer, will join in Greece. In 2004 she worked hard on the festivities in Paxos, her native island, which was Cultural Village of Europe in that year. Now she can't leave Paxos because of the tourist season;

otherwise she would have joined for the whole trip.

Martin from Le Caylar in the Provence will join the tour through France.

Jaap, 60 years old and an ex-farmer will join for the second part of the Tour. Jaap is an active member in the organisation of critical farmers.

Doede (64 years old) used to farm on the island of Texel. A few years ago he moved to Wijk aan Zee. A large part of the trip he will drive the bus and participate in the kitchen table project.

Tomas, a Czech photographer, will ensure quality photos of the trip. His girlfriend Petra knows all there is to know of sustainable energy and will join for fourteen days.

All these people have not been chosen according to certain criteria, but they participate because they deem the Tour important, all with their own motives. Their ages and backgrounds are very diverse. All these people have their own

eyes, ears and noses. It is this diversity that should guarantee the expedition to be a success. What one doesn't pick up, another will. That should provide for an interesting report that we will offer EU-commissionary Fisher Boehl on the 25th of October. The tales that the travellers collected on their journey through the European countryside should justify the Tour to themselves as well as the sponsors. The result is not yet planned. We just suspect that the countryside has much more to tell than people in the cities think. Much depends on the preparedness and ability of the participants to open their ears and exchange and process knowledge.

The expedition can begin. It is now the task of the villages that will be visited to show something of themselves. We hope for and count on an openness of the villages like the hospitality we have learned to appreciate during the many visits in six years of Cultural Village.

“Slogans like ‘controllable’ and ‘transparent’ leave little room to do something your own way, as simply as possible, befitting people, local history and the surroundings. Because, to a controller, this is not controllable. This means in fact that there is very little room for local politics based on local knowledge. It is almost always difficult”.

“Local politics: the beating heart of democracy.”

“Now things are such that someone who wants to get something done goes to see a lawyer, an accountant, a bank or an alderman to get things done and not his neighbour”.

Desalination

In May arrives the first desalination machine that should solve the water problem of Paxos. This machine makes sweet water from salt seawater.





€ 8.70 = 1 km

The Europa Tour needs the support of those who understand its meaning and sympathise. Its organisers do not want to depend solely on governments and companies.

MAKE THE EUROPA TOUR YOUR TOUR

For € 8.70 you can sponsor one kilometre; you can even choose which one!

Of the total of 13 000 kilometers, we still need to finance 2000. You can send your donation to:

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CULTURAL VILLAGE of EUROPE

Colophon:

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