



Summary

# Together towards sustainable and resilient neighbourhoods

Lessons drawn from three years of experimenting  
in vulnerable neighbourhoods

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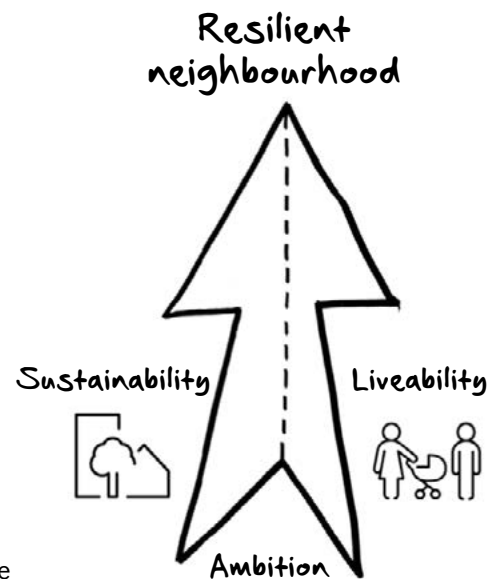
## Introduction: energy transition as a lever

**Can energy transition be used as a lever to improve liveability in vulnerable neighbourhoods? Platform31, Nyenrode Business University and eighteen Dutch municipalities explored this within the Sustainable Solutions for Vulnerable Neighbourhoods experiment programme. The programme kicked off in late 2018. Three years later, it has come to a conclusion. Now, the insights obtained during the programme have to find their way into the practice of other municipalities working on neighbourhood-based energy transition retrofits.**

Parties partaking in the experiment programme sought to explore how energy transition can be linked to approaches for social issues in these neighbourhoods in practice – with support of each others’ knowledge and experience, as well as Platform31 and Nyenrode Business University’s expertise. The underlying notion is that integrating solutions for various local issues in a clever way fosters socially sustainable, resilient neighbourhoods.

### An exploratory expedition

An experiment programme can be conceived of as an exploratory expedition; at the start of the programme, we knew (approximately) where we were headed, but the journey itself was largely unknown. Hence, we pursued a *learning approach*. All activities organized within the programme revolved around learning. The approach was threefold: *sharing knowledge* (scientific insights, case



studies), *interview* (sharing experiences and learning from one another), and *participatory action research* (learning in practice and from participants). Our initial approach differs from the approach that we ended up employing in late 2021. Learning by doing resulted in components of and activities within the programme being added or adapted in an iterative way. Occasionally, change was necessary because the former approach did not yielding satisfactory results. More often, the need for adaptation was sparked by changing contexts. External factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic and rising energy prices, as well as changes in (learning) needs of participants all played a part. Responsiveness to and acceptance of advancing insights and changing circumstances have proven essential for experimenting and learning in the midst of a transition.

### Drawing lessons from practice

The publication *Improved Neighbourhoods due to Energy Transition?* (2019) examines how stakeholders in partaking neighbourhoods started working in light of their ambition to generate sustainable, resilient neighbourhoods. This summary of the final analysis compiles the lessons drawn during three years of experimenting. The underlying analysis has a qualitative and explorative character. Like the 2019 analysis, this is a snapshot, as the transition towards a sustainable energy system is still in full swing in all neighbourhoods. Because interventions and investments aimed at improving livability are characterized by a long incubation period, it is too early to claim causal relationships. We do, however, identify a number of patterns that consistently emerge in different locations. These relate to the approach to issues and solutions, the infrastructure of partnerships, and the manner in and extent to which municipalities attempt to realize goals for the neighbourhoods.

### Increasing number of favourable factors

All parties involved in the *Sustainable Solutions for Vulnerable Neighbourhoods* program experienced a fair deal of frustration over the past three years. Entrenched habits, constraining rules and uncooperative colleagues and resi-



dents resulted in despondency for many involved. However, certain factors seem to have become more favourable since the beginning of the program. It should be noted that steps in the right direction are difficult to perceive when they occur as part of a broader transition. Nevertheless, under the radar, progress is made. The work that has been carried out in these eighteen neighbourhoods has contributed to exposing – and in part removing – obstacles. In the meantime, attention to opportunities brought about by energy transition for revitalizing vulnerable neighbourhoods has increased. Support for the ambition that we set three years ago – sustainable, resilient neighbourhoods driven energy transition – has grown.

In this summary, we attempt to unveil the invisible. Collectively, we have developed insights that can benefit other municipalities in the Netherlands and abroad. Moreover, progress has actual occurred in many of the partaking neighbourhoods. We hope that the knowledge generated through the *Sustainable Solutions for Vulnerable Neighbourhoods* experiment program prompts the notion of energy transition being a potential lever for improving the sustainability and liveability of vulnerable neighbourhoods. For more detailed information, we refer to the full report.

## Theory: A drastic (energy) transition

This experiment program has aimed to find concrete, practical answers to the question: how can an approach to energy transition be integrated with an approach for social and other infrastructural challenges in vulnerable neighbourhoods? How do liveability and sustainability relate to one another? In this section we provide definitions for the terms 'liveability' and 'sustainability', which are central in this program. Further, we zoom in on what we call 'the transition perspective'.



### Liveability

Within the experiment program, a neighbourhood is considered 'vulnerable' when, besides a sustainability challenge, there are social and/or other infrastructural challenges at play that threaten liveability or safety and hence require attention from a governance perspective. In the participating neighbourhoods, we see relatively large numbers of socio-economically disadvantaged residents. Many experience health issues. Neighbourhoods are also considered unsafe and there is a lack of social cohesion. Residents are often more occupied with their energy bills than with climate change. Affordability of energy tends not to be their only concern.

The Netherlands has a long tradition of neighbourhood-based policy intended to protect vulnerable neighbourhoods from (further) deterioration. After a period of limited attention, there is renewed attention for vulnerable neighbourhoods among municipalities and social housing corporations. COVID-19 has contributed to the sense of urgency. Many cities are home to neighbourhoods where problems relating to education, unemployment, poverty, health, housing, safety and organized crime coincide. The national government's renewed attention is illustrated by the numerous programs revolving around integrated neighbourhood-based solutions that have been set up over the past few years.



## Sustainability

The term 'sustainability' has regularly led to discussion and confusion throughout the program, especially during the early stages. Many considered sustainability to be synonymous with energy transition, whereas others considered energy transition to be merely one aspect of sustainability. The term 'energy transition' was used by some to refer broadly to the (gradual) phasing out the use of fossil fuels and shift to sustainable energy, while others interpreted it as the transition to a natural gas-free society, and a third group equated it to merely installing a heating network. At the start of the *Sustainable Solutions for Vulnerable Neighbourhoods* program, we decided to adopt a broad definition of the term 'sustainability'. Firstly because the desirability of combining issues is implied within the broad definition. Secondly because allows for social as well as ecological issues to be perceived of as intertwined (as within the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals). All municipalities involved seemingly employed a more narrow definition of the term sustainability. The focus on transitioning to a natural gas-free society was found to be dominant nearly everywhere. This is unsurprising in light of the policy pressure on this issue.

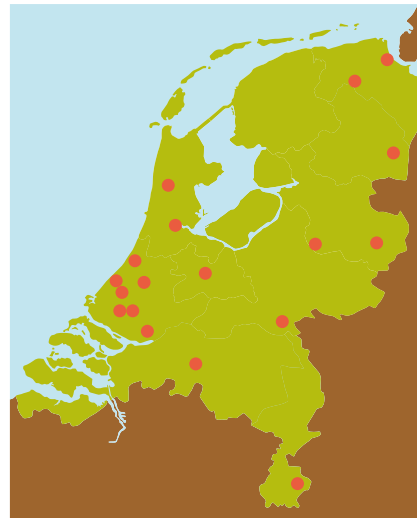
## Transition perspective

A broad approach to neighbourhood-based energy transition provides many opportunities on paper. However, after three years of experimenting, it is evident that reality is more stubborn. Participants within the experiment program faced many obstacles along their journeys. Such difficulties are to be expected in the early stages of a transition. After all, we find ourselves in a system-broad shift which requires tremendous changes in the functioning of public institutions, sectors and markets, as well as the lives of people and the structuring of society. Jan Rotmans, a Dutch professor in transition studies and sustainability, explains that transitions require that we change our thought patterns, let go of existing values and paradigms, and adopt new ways of working.

Transition professionals distinguish between different phases, each of which may take a long time. The energy transition is a lengthy and time consuming process. Above all, it is non-linear. Hence, the transition to a natural gas-free society in 2050 cannot be illustrated as a straight line along which a set number of homes are disconnected from gas every year. Most likely, very little will change over a longer period of time, until all the seemingly fruitless efforts have gained sufficient mass and a tipping point is reached.

### Eighteen neighbourhoods

Eighteen neighbourhoods participated in the experiment program. The program initially started with fifteen municipalities in 2018. Three municipalities (Alkmaar, Delft and Dordrecht) enrolled at a later point, while one (Leiden) dropped out prematurely. Every municipality participated with a specific neighbourhood. The table below provides an overview of the partaking municipalities, neighbourhoods, and the number of inhabitants per neighbourhood. The map on the left shows the distribution of the municipalities throughout the country. This even distribution has allowed us to gain experience in different regional contexts within the programme.



### Overview participating neighbourhoods

Neighbourhood	Municipality	Inhabitants
Abdij- en Torenbuurt	Tilburg	1.590
Crabbehof	Dordrecht	7.420
Emmerhout	Emmen	7.235
Gillisbuurt	Delft	1.531
Groenoord	Schiedam	9.439
Laak	Den Haag	40.795
Meerzicht	Zoetermeer	15.239
Nieuwborgen	Oldambt en Delfzijl	2.825
Nieuw Overdie	Alkmaar	4.300
Nijverheid	Hengelo	4.305
Overvecht-Noord	Utrecht	17.335
Pendrecht	Rotterdam	12.380
Rolduckerveld	Kerkrade	2.605
Selwerd	Groningen	6.231
Wildemanbuurt	Amsterdam	5.005
Zandweerd-Noord en -Zuid	Deventer	4.535
Zuidhoven	Leiden	3.410
Zwanenveld	Nijmegen	4.695



## Conclusion: Progress under the radar

What conclusions can be drawn after three years of experimenting in eighteen neighbourhoods? Various patterns described in the 2019 report *Improved Neighbourhoods due to Energy Transition?* are still apparent two years later. At the time, we concluded that integrated ambitions rarely materialize in practice, as stakeholders try to move too quickly. Back then, we also identified limited capacity, constraining rules and insufficient financial funds as limiting factors. These are still at play today. Nevertheless, concrete results have been achieved in the participating neighbourhoods. Moreover, we have collectively learned valuable lessons and brought to light existing obstacles.

### Small but meaningful steps

In all participating neighbourhoods, the take off of energy transition retrofits has been less successfully than initially anticipated. Most approaches seemed to start in slow motion. Energy transition on a neighbourhood-level has proven much more complex technically, financially, legally, socially and procedurally than was envisioned three or four years ago. Processes are slow, collaboration falters, and there are a great deal of technical, legal and financial obstacles to overcome. Achieved results – such as strengthening collaborations and building community trust – are not directly visible and tangible. What should be kept in mind is that a difficult start does not imply the absence of progress.

From a transition perspective, a bumpy start is to be expected. After all, system changes happen in fits and starts at first. As such, experimenting is key, but it can be a straining process. In practice, stakeholders seemed to forget that they are operating in the early stages of a colossal transition. Practice shows that organizations predominantly rely on traditional, project- and plan-based methods and -processes. Project managers and other civil servants partaking in the program seem to become overwhelmed by the process, and this takes over. They adapted their course based on advancing



insights. An important lesson is that where a traditional approach is employed in the beginning, and fails to facilitate the transition from the onset, it is more difficult to anticipate the changing circumstances than when one starts from a less conventional point.

We identified new ways of working and thinking, and an active search for new principles and values within many organizations and in many collaborations. Those are meaningful steps, that can be considered the sowing of seeds. Much like the above-mentioned intangible results, this sowing of seeds is difficult to perceive for other parties and on other scale levels. Consequently, the progress, more often than not, remains under the radar.

### Integrated approach slowly gaining ground

News papers are once again pleading for a targeted approach of vulnerable neighbourhoods. This issue is getting more attention than it has in a decade.

The goal underlying this experiment program – namely to approach energy transition and other infrastructural and social challenges in a coherent and integrated manner – results in more policy fields colliding than previously. The participants shared this ambition; they pursued a broad and integrated neighbourhood-based approach in which various issues would come together. However, the way in which municipalities gave meaning to and approached these issues shows great variety. This, on the one hand, can be explained by differences in culture, structure, and ways of working that municipal organizations and partners rely on. On the other hand, the variety in part can be explained by the personal styles of coordinators or project managers involved. The integral shared ambitions of the participants have not been brought to fruition everywhere. The reality of the practice proved too rigidly compartmentalized. Still, in the rise of the new, integrated neighbourhood-based approach, small wins have been made that are in line with the initiated transition.



The approaches employed during early stages have shown to spill over to the development of the process. Some organizations are more used to employing an integrated approach than others. In neighbourhoods where energy transition was the primary factor driving the development of an integrated approach (and where there was usually no other neighbourhood-based policy), parties seemed little inclined to occupy themselves with other issues and opportunities compared to neighbourhoods in which organizations collaborated within a unifying and integral framework. In neighbourhoods where different departments collaborated from the onset, based on an integrated (policy) framework, a more integrated manner of working seemed more natural. However, securing this new way of working is a difficult and fragile process. Where it is not secured successfully, compartmentalization emerges anyway.

The decision to approach the natural gas-free transition in a neighbourhood-based manner prompts a new type of professional to emerge on the stage: energy- and sustainability experts. In some neighbourhoods, we observed constructive collaborations between these experts, policy makers, and neighbourhood professionals from infrastructural and social departments. In many neighbourhoods, however, it is predominantly the professionals on the ground from different domains that pursue collaboration – often in contrast to policy makers who are bound to their desks in the municipal office. While neighbourhood-based coordination between policy sectors is oftentimes arduous, it is a crucial (though complex) factor for an integrated approach. Especially in larger cities and in neighbourhoods where an accumulation of challenges and problems is at play, we see a great number of civil servants involved. Sometimes dozens of policy makers, project managers, and other professionals from different departments are active. This begs the question who keeps an oversight of all activities in the neighbourhood. In municipalities that have worked in this way from the beginning, and where there is more attention for coordination, it is oftentimes easier to keep the integrated ambitions on track.



**Unifying opportunities are taking shape**

The participating neighbourhoods have capitalized unified opportunities in the past three years. The publication *Unifying Issues in the Neighbourhood* (2021) describes examples of projects or interventions in which different challenges and interests are successfully approached in a unified manner. On the one hand, this concerns *community-based* unifying opportunities, which are aimed at making it possible for residents to benefit from investments in their neighbourhood. On the other hand, we see valuable examples of *area-based* unifying opportunities, where investments in energy infrastructure are used to improve the quality of the public space. Promisingly, other municipalities seem to be making use of these examples.

Over the past three years, it has become clear that the ambition to identify and capitalize unifying opportunities is not the holy grail. Sometimes, the decision not to combine issues is a crucial intermediate step towards creating the organizational conditions that will allow for unifying opportunities to eventually be realized. We distinguish between three levels of linkage of opportunities based on our observations in the eighteen neighbourhoods:

- 1. Unifying opportunities:** This is the most ambitious and complex form of combining issues. Generating meaningful synergy requires a sector-transcending perspective. The professional examines what is at play in a neighbourhood and attempts to introduce an intervention that produces impact on different levels.
- 2. Linking opportunities:** Here, one ambition or (retrofit) intervention has priority, and another intervention which has its own benefits is added. The latter is secondary. Linking opportunities makes for a goal-oriented allocation of public funds and lowers chances of delay and nuisance for residents and users. For example, when the street is opened up for the installation of a heating network, the sewage systems can be renewed simultaneously.

- 3. Coordination:** This is the most minor form of combining issues. Where numerous parties are active in an area at the same time, they often need to share information and look beyond their own sectoral goals and show respect for each other’s position. Think, for example, of collective communication efforts or a certain level of coordination around the timing of plans.

**Community engagement: listening and persevering**

Something which received a lot of attention within the program was the process of engaging residents early on. The underlying aim was to gain insight into the lived experiences of the community and their perceptions on their neighbourhood and its retrofit challenges. Many municipalities experience difficulty when it comes to reaching and actively engaging residents. Experience from the program shows a passive and reactive attitude towards communication and engagement in many neighbourhoods. Oftentimes, residents were only engaged at a later stage. We see some cases where this has impacted the community’s trust in the (local) government negatively.





Moreover, traditional community engagement methods remained dominant: residents were informed and consulted, but co-directing and co-developing only occurred in a few instances. Where it did, it often yielded successful outcomes.

Simultaneously, we observe a positive development: in a growing number of neighbourhoods, policy makers and professionals invest time and effort into getting to know residents and understanding what is actually at play on the local level. It became evident that community support and engagement in participating neighbourhoods is frail. Where residents were engaged in an early stage, municipalities often struggled to keep them engaged throughout. Where community working groups or advisory groups were formed, so as to allow residents to provide input and feedback on planning, these were rarely representative of the neighbourhood. Participating municipalities, social housing corporations and energy suppliers indeed often voiced doubts as to whether perspectives of non-engaged residents were represented within the process at all. This fear was largely warranted, as in many neighbourhoods the great, silent majority is barely reached. Contact with residents who experience poverty only happens sporadically. The same goes for people with mental health problems, the (functionally) illiterate, and residents who do not master the Dutch language. The publications *Sustainable Communities* and *Unifying Issues in the Neighbourhood* discuss a wide range of approaches taken by participating municipalities that can prevent this problem.

**A neighbourhood-based approach is people-focussed work**

Policy makers and project managers that participated in the experiment program are all pioneers within their own organizations. All participants seemed to understand that natural gas-free retrofit projects require perseverance. But lengthy procedure also increase the influence of and reliance on individuals. Creativity, passion and inventiveness of individuals involved results in break throughs and interim successes. Consequently, however, when a key person drops out or leaves, this may have significant (negative)

consequences. We have seen this a lot during the program. In fact, the original teams only remain largely intact in a few of the neighbourhoods. A painful lesson drawn from three years of experimenting in the eighteen neighbourhoods is that (dis)continuity in staff can be a determinant factor in the progress (or decline) of the neighbourhood-based approach.

How to deal with this? Municipalities sometimes have great difficulty filling openings. When a person leaves or changes position, the vacancy often remains unfilled for weeks, if not months. Additionally, handovers often falls short. It only happens in person rarely, and handover documents – if there are any – are oftentimes incomplete or otherwise lacking. New comers tend to take on their new role with open minds, enthusiasm and energy; they make new contacts and seek to add their own twist to the approach. The downside



to this is that they may try to reinvent the wheel, with a lack of prior knowledge of intricacies and sensitivities, prior conflicts and previously failed initiatives. Thus, an important lesson distilled from the programme is to invest time and effort into these handovers.

## Recommendations: Practical lessons

To conclude, we present a number of specific recommendations. These draw on the final analysis and the existing knowledge from different domains, as well as on the publications we have written in light of this experiment program over the past three years. We present seven recommendations in total.

### 1. Dare to experiment

Working on a transition is not an all-inclusive organized trip; it is an exploratory expedition. Hence, finding new ways of working by experimenting in practice is essential. This entails learning by doing. The following recommendations concern embedding experimental ways of working in participating organizations:

- Embrace complexity: accept that the practice is complicated.
- Think before you start: at the start, reflect on the goal and consequences of your approach.
- Build moments for reflection into the program/planning.

### 2. Develop a mutual perspective

Experiences from the neighbourhoods show that challenges and opportunities are difficult to combine on a neighbourhood-level when there is no local analysis which all stakeholders support. Without such an analysis, a mutual perspective on the desired improvements is unlikely to arise. As such, it is imperative to invest in a collective and broadly-oriented kick-off. To this extent, we offer the following recommendations:

- Create an integrated local analysis.
- Identify what is at play within the community.
- Identify external stakeholders and assess issues and positions.
- Form a local coalition (with relevant partners and residents).
- Formulate a shared vision for the long term.

### 3. Create conditions for effective integrated collaboration

In order to do 'good things', certain procedural and organizational conditions need to be met. Based on existing theoretical and practical knowledge, we recommend the following:

- Determine the approach.
- Formalize the collaboration.
- Formally organize governing principles.
- Organize process direction.
- Position the municipal council.

### 4. Put the right people in the right place

Policies, collaboration agreements and organizational alliances stipulated above do not guarantee success in and of themselves; it is people who give substance to and carry out the work. A well-organized and effective team with a large mandate can make neighbourhood-based practices thrive. We recommend the following:

- Give staff the room to act and experiment.
- Ensure the required competences are present in every phase of the process.
- Secure knowledge and networks within the municipal organization.
- Keep management and directors engaged.

### 5. Invest in trust and community ownership

Timely engagement of residents in sustainability projects within vulnerable neighbourhoods is not self-evident. The following recommendations are relevant for building and sustaining a good relationship with the community:



- Prioritize community engagement.
- Establish dialogue early on.
- Be transparent and approachable.
- Actively seek to involve groups that are difficult to reach.
- Invest in maintaining and renewing community engagement.

## 6. Switch between scale levels

Experience from the eighteen municipalities begs the question whether the local level is always the appropriate level for implementing energy retrofits. Residents often have a different notion of what constitutes their neighbourhood than municipalities; identify and match this. This helps encourage community initiatives and stimulates perceived ownership of the intervention. More specifically, we recommend:

- Match the logic of the neighbourhood.
- Split plans into phases for sub-neighbourhoods.
- Ensure de-compartmentalization on a neighbourhood- and street level.

## 7. Employ a learning approach

Adopting a learning approach is crucial within complex transitions. This is also why this experiment program has employed a learning approach from the beginning. Monitoring of progress and goals is helpful, combined with participatory action research, so as to keep one's eyes on the ball. We conclude with the following recommendations:

- Make use of existing knowledge.
- Ensure monitoring.
- Rely on participatory action research.
- Facilitate on-the-job reflection through systemic exchange of knowledge and experiences.

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**Design:** Gé grafische vormgeving