

IMPLEMENTING EMPOWERMENT PROJECTS IN URBAN NEIGHBOURHOODS: ACTORS AND INTERACTIONS

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Abstract: Local governments support community empowerment in urban neighbourhoods through citizens' active participation in urban renewal. While specific actors implement empowerment goals using dedicated instruments, implementation gaps remain, partly due to a lack of knowledge of neighbourhood governance. Our study aims to understand the actors' roles and interactions in four cities of the Euregio Meuse-Rhine, combining action research and comparative case study analysis. Our results illustrate contrasting approaches to empowerment, influenced by cultural and institutional contexts. Enabling local governments adopt a project-based approach involving intermediaries and dedicated governance tools, making it possible for citizens to become co-producers. In contrast, facilitative governments adopt a neighbourhood-based approach relying on third-sector actors and consultation instruments, less favourable to community achievements, unless well-established citizen networks are present. Through the improved understanding of actors' and institutional settings' influence on the empowerment process, we hope to feed reflexions on innovative empowerment methods that foster collaborative planning.

Keywords: Urban renewal, Neighbourhood governance, Community empowerment, Intermediary actors, Interactions

1 INTRODUCTION

Urban renewal is increasingly supported in socially deprived urban neighbourhoods (Bailey & Pill, 2015; Williams et al., 2020). Neighbourhoods are understood here as space-time constructions built on overlapping social networks and continuously changing under socio-economic and political processes occurring at various scales (Forrest & Kearns, 2001; Lowndes & Sullivan, 2008; Middleton et al., 2005). Urban renewal contributes to improving environmental quality, enhancing social networks and inclusion of vulnerable groups, and meeting socio-economic goals (Zheng et al., 2014). It has given a central role to the neighbourhood as a target of urban development (MacLeavy, 2009). The neighbourhood level is relevant to enhance social change (Forrest & Kearns, 2001; Lowndes & Sullivan, 2008), empower citizens and improve social cohesion, which provides communities with the capacity to engage in further renewal opportunities (Middleton et al., 2005). Local governments and third-sector actors facilitate ‘community empowerment’, that is, citizens’ capacity to make choices that can be transformed into desired outcomes and, hence, address collective issues (Baba et al., 2017; Steiner, 2016). Before engaging collectively, individuals may empower themselves by taking control over their lives and developing competencies, depending on their background, activities, relational environment and involvement in their neighbourhood (Kearns & Whitley, 2020). State support to community empowerment is translated into different forms of neighbourhood governance, making it possible for citizens to participate actively in urban development (Brookfield, 2017; Kearns & Whitley, 2020).

Neighbourhood governance entails actors and instruments dedicated to the implementation of empowerment goals. Nevertheless, significant gaps between goals and outcomes have been reported across contexts (Lawson & Kearns, 2014; Schnur, 2005), which is partly due to a misunderstanding of citizens’ capabilities in urban renewal (Baba et al., 2017) and fuels difficulties to create active citizens (Andrews et al., 2008; Lawson & Kearns, 2014). Such challenges require improved knowledge of the actors involved in neighbourhood governance (Moulaert et al., 2005). Understanding their (sometimes divergent) interests helps achieve common goals (Falanga & Ferrão, 2021). In particular, the presence of intermediary actors is expected to increase citizens’ empowerment by ‘translating’ and ‘legitimiz(ing) local stories as valid sources of knowledge’ (Sandoval & Rongerude, 2015, p. 412). Assessing the implementation of empowerment goals should be based on empirical evidence retrieved from actual participation processes (Kalandides et al., 2012; Yang & Pandey, 2011).

Conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic, our research investigates the implementation of community-empowerment projects in neighbourhoods of cities belonging to the same European cross-border region and facing similar issues (e.g., demographic change, industrial and commercial decline). Our purpose is to understand the roles of local governments, citizens and especially ‘intermediaries’ and their interactions according to specific variables. Accordingly, we raise two research questions:

- What roles do the actors develop and how do they interact to enhance community empowerment in neighbourhoods subject to urban renewal?

- How may the institutional and cultural contexts influence such roles and interactions?

The following section introduces our theoretical framework, which draws on neighbourhood governance. The latter conceptualises the roles of local governments, third-sector intermediaries and communities, before introducing the empowerment variables retained to assess their interactions, that is, social identity, communication, trust and self-esteem and effective community achievements. We apply this theoretical framework to four case studies (Liège, Eupen and Genk in Belgium, Heerlen in the Netherlands) that are part of a broader action-research project (N-power) supported by the Interreg Euregio Meuse-Rhine (section 3). These cases allow discussing differences in the institutionalisation of empowerment in urban neighbourhoods through specific types of actors involved and their interactions. Section 4 then presents our action-research approach and empirical data, primarily retrieved from 18 in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in the four selected cities, that took part in the evaluation of N-power. We address the first research question in section 5, before discussing the second one in the conclusion. The latter shows the relevance of analysing real participation processes in a cross-border context to stress stakeholders' perspectives and their impact on the type and level of empowerment in different governance structures.

2 GOVERNANCE OF EMPOWERMENT IN URBAN NEIGHBOURHOODS

Originally referring to the self-organisation of deprived communities, the concept of empowerment emerged alongside the North-American social movements of the 1960-1970s and was integrated into public policies from the 1990s onwards (Bacqué & Biewener, 2013). Empowerment contributes to citizens' emancipation and power on their local environment as it allows them to become political subjects interacting with local governments (Jouve, 2006). By enhancing individual and community capacities, empowerment strategies improve quality of life and social integration in neighbourhoods (MacLeavy, 2009; Middleton et al., 2005). Baba et al. (2017) distinguish community empowerment from personal and psychological empowerment. While the former entails decisional power and interactions with policymaking (Kearns & Whitley, 2020), the latter is limited to sense of control over one's personal life and is a prerequisite to advanced forms of empowerment (Baba et al., 2017; Woodall et al., 2010). Given our interest in governance of empowerment in urban neighbourhoods, we focus on community empowerment.

Today's approaches to community empowerment have moved beyond the question of power shift towards co-production (Rosen & Painter, 2019). The participation ladder conceptualised by Arnstein in the 1960s allowed shifting control away from economic and political powers towards citizens and influencing decision-making, but it missed power and resource asymmetries and the impact of local institutions' preferences (de Wilde et al., 2014; Rosen & Painter, 2019). In urban management, participation is also partly driven by the actors' hidden behaviours and intentions, whereas co-production is assumed to contribute to effective power decentralisation and positive outcomes (Rosen & Painter, 2019). It is based on the substantial involvement of multiple stakeholders in the delivery of public services (Nederhand & van Meerkerk, 2018).

Co-production takes part in a broader move in urban governance towards decentralised and collaborative planning involving private, public and civil-society actors (Healey, 1997; Horlings et al., 2021).

The remainder of the theoretical framework is divided into two subsections. The first one identifies the roles of each type of actor involved in community empowerment and the second one provides operational variables to assess interactions in the framework of an action-research study. Both aspects are conceptually represented in Figure 1.

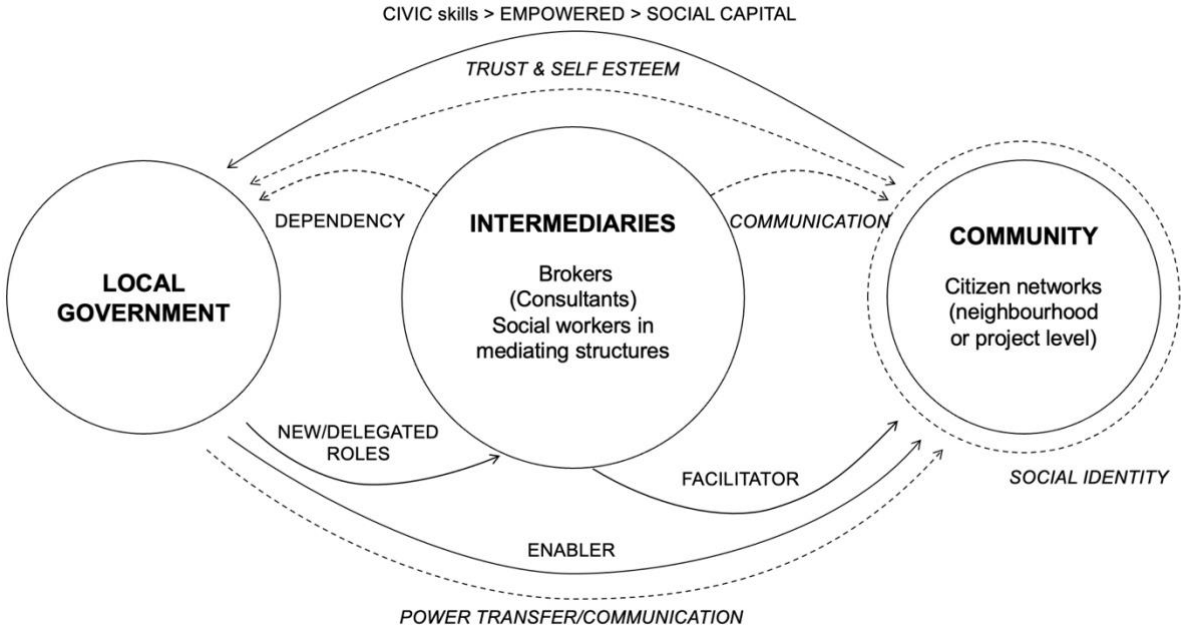


Figure 1: Actors’ roles (solid lines), interactions (dotted lines) - based on selected empowerment variables (in italics) - and positioning in the empowerment process

2.1 ACTORS’ ROLES

The actors intervening in community empowerment in urban neighbourhoods contribute to reducing implementation gaps (Schnur, 2005). Empowerment has integrated *local governments’* discourses (Bailey & Pill, 2015). State intervention remains fundamental to enabling institutional change by enhancing administrators’ trust, actively stimulating citizens’ involvement and coping with the demands of different groups (de Wilde et al., 2014; Yang & Pandey, 2011). One key principle of action research is for research organisations to work hand in hand with local governments. In the empowerment process, local governments are primarily facilitative (Lowndes & Sullivan, 2008) but may utilise trust-building to legitimise state action (Kalandides et al., 2012) and reproduce social inequalities rather than empowering citizens in deprived neighbourhoods (de Wilde et al., 2014). In behavioural understandings of community empowerment, institutions may even ‘suffocate citizen involvement’ (de Wilde et al., 2014, p. 3367), whereas institutional views consider the relationships between local governments, institutions and citizens as crucial in enabling community groups (ibid). Local governments may further assist citizens in participating collectively in decision-making to achieve community empowerment (Andrews et al., 2008; Lawson & Kearns, 2014). To develop such an entrepreneurial role, local governments create new functions (e.g.,

‘neighbourhood managers’) and governance arrangements, either internally or through the intermediary of third-sector actors (Taşan-Kok, 2010).

These *intermediary actors* intervene between local governments and citizens’ communities to facilitate empowerment. Those often belong to public or third-sector organisations, be they social workers – called ‘community agents’ when mandated by local authorities – or ‘trained facilitators’ from the design field. Social workers interact with citizens through street work or social activities (Semenza et al., 2007). Designers also use collaboration and communication skills to facilitate empowerment processes with spatial implications (Luck, 2007). Through their operational work with citizens and their collaboration skills, intermediaries contribute to enhancing citizens’ learning capacities, confidence and awareness of opportunities and constraints (Andrews et al., 2008). When needed, independent ‘brokers’ – a third party collaborating with the local authority – may take the lead in a citizens’ group to help decision-making, mitigate conflicts and involve ‘hard-to-reach’ groups (Lowndes & Sullivan, 2008). Alternatively, local governments may hire consultants to organise participation, whose role varies depending on their perceptions of citizens’ needs (Stapper et al., 2020). Therefore, we mainly focus on brokers and social workers belonging to ‘mediating structures’ (e.g., associations) supporting citizens and institutions (Bailey & Pill, 2015) and contributing to implementing the action-research project’s empowerment goals – for some of them, after receiving dedicated training.

Obviously, *citizens* forming local communities are at the core of empowerment policies (Forrest & Kearns, 2001). Beyond ‘informed consumers’, active citizens fulfil social and political obligations (Andrews et al., 2008) and may become co-producers (Nederhand & van Meerkerk, 2018). They play roles that are missing among public and private actors and engage in their neighbourhood by forming collectives (e.g., networks, initiatives, thematic groups) that teach them to develop social and civic skills (Horlings et al., 2021; Michels & de Graaf, 2010). They may self-organise to initiate projects improving their environment (Nederhand & van Meerkerk, 2018). Their engagement tends to influence decision-making and interfere with traditional planning actors (Horlings et al., 2021).

Citizens’ networks strengthen civic capacity and improve trust in government and democracy (Michels & de Graaf, 2010). They form community organisations (e.g., neighbourhood committees, project-based groups) that are place-specific, built upon human capital and aim to solve problems informally (Florin & Wandersman, 1990). Acknowledging communities’ competencies, social ties and relationships to place contributes to reaching empowerment (Baba et al., 2017). Empowered citizens then develop social capital, or ‘relational bonds’ based on shared understanding and mutual trust (Healey, 1997) that they build by belonging to a sustainable network (Bourdieu, 1980). Mobilised collectively, such resources participate in neighbourhood regeneration (Purdue, 2001) and produce positive outcomes (Middleton et al., 2005).

2.2 ASSESSING ACTORS' INTERACTIONS THROUGH EMPOWERMENT VARIABLES

To discuss the nature and quality of interactions between local governments, intermediaries and citizens, we use four groups of variables. Those were central in the action-research process to reach empowerment goals. While some concepts were presented to the actors involved, others emerged inductively from field observations. Feedback on the variables was mainly retrieved from visits and analysis of instruments and interviews during the project's evaluation (see section 4):

- *Interactions among citizens and **social-identity** building:* this process draws on social networks and other sources of social recognition (Forrest & Kearns, 2001). In the globalisation context, neighbourhoods play a role in re-establishing social identity. However, the residents of an area can perceive themselves as not part of the same community, making them less likely to act as a coherent community (Middleton et al., 2005). Moreover, tensions can arise between cohesion and diversity, and between belonging and freedom, within communities (Lawson & Kearns, 2014). Social-identity building can be translated into multiple small actions aimed at gradually involving local communities in vulnerable neighbourhoods.
- *Government and intermediaries' **communication** towards vulnerable and hard-to-reach groups:* the communication process entails several steps, starting with informing people to enable them to get involved in the neighbourhood's transformation (Lawson & Kearns, 2014). Face-to-face dialogue and feedback are too often ignored after initial consultations, which can lead to the failure of empowerment (Baba et al., 2017; Lawson & Kearns, 2014). Vulnerable groups must also receive tailored support matching their needs (Steiner, 2016). Moreover, long-term and context-related interventions should be developed with the help of intermediaries to establish stable relationships with citizens and community resilience (Pill & Bailey, 2012; Steiner, 2016). Such relationships help intermediaries fulfil their role of improving communication between citizens and the local authority in action-research operations.
- *Government-citizen interactions built on **trust** and **self-esteem**:* these are the cement of citizens' relationships and arise within communities based on shared norms (Middleton et al., 2005). Self-esteem is part of the outcomes resulting from empowerment operations in neighbourhoods (Kearns & Whitley, 2020). Trust is another prerequisite and an indication of empowerment (Steiner, 2016). Increased trust in government results from satisfaction with the empowerment process (Brown & Chin, 2013). Citizens can be mistrusted in their capacity to know enough about a government decision (Yang & Pandey, 2011). Conversely, distrust in government and elected officials may motivate participatory processes and incline people to be more active in policy-making despite little desire to do so (Bowler et al., 2007). Participatory instruments enhance trust and commitment (Kalandides et al., 2012) but may deliver unwanted outcomes by requiring from citizens to develop advanced 'entrepreneurial' skills (e.g., negotiation) that devalue vulnerable

groups (Stapper & Duyvendak, 2020). Again, through small-scale concrete projects making communities interact, action research contributes to enhancing long-term trust and self-esteem.

- *Power transfer from government to intermediaries and citizens resulting in effective **community** achievements:* Firstly, intermediaries (in)dependency on local government influences community achievements. Highly hierarchical relationships between both actors favours predefined political agendas, whereas full independence better considers citizens' perspectives (Broner et al., 2001) but may miss the power and resources required to achieve community empowerment, in the absence of organisational and cultural change within the local authority (Adamson & Bromiley, 2013). Secondly, community achievements depend on citizens' ability to engage in their neighbourhood by instituting concrete actions (Lawson & Kearns, 2014). The empowerment process is sustained through participation mechanisms ranging from public information, consultation, extended involvement to joint planning and delegation (Fischer et al., 2007). Using multiple mechanisms allows reaching higher levels of consensus and responsiveness (Yang & Pandey, 2011). The overall effectiveness of empowerment hence relies on both process and outcomes (Brown & Chin, 2013). For example, neoliberal strategies reinforce the power of local institutions through top-down, short-term projects with high institutional control over goals and funding (Bailey & Pill, 2015). Conversely, providing specific funds supports community achievements (Kearns & Whitley, 2020), although it can lead to the higher power levels shedding their responsibilities to the local levels (Moulaert et al., 2005). Citizens can also mobilise additional resources, for example, in partnership with private actors (Lowndes & Sullivan, 2008).

3 THE N-POWER PROJECT AND THE FOUR CASE STUDIES

Our article takes part in the evaluation of the N-power action research project (2018-2021), which aims to support innovation in neighbourhood development policies and help cities regenerate deprived neighbourhoods through green-space operations that are co-constructed and co-managed with citizens. Such an approach is expected to reduce environmental inequalities, enhance economic vitality and improve social cohesion and engagement capacity. The project focused on nine pilot neighbourhood projects in seven cities of the Euregio Meuse-Rhine (EMR), namely Aachen (Germany), Heerlen (the Netherlands) and Eupen, Genk, Liège, Seraing and Verviers (Belgium). A Belgian academic partner coordinated the process and worked with two Dutch research organisations and local partners in each municipality. Working on cities from the same cross-border region allowed exchanging knowledge between the partners and drawing contextualised lessons (see section 4).

This paper used four projects as case studies (in Eupen, Genk, Liège, Heerlen – see Figure 2). We selected them because they belong to different institutional and cultural contexts. Higher institutionalisation of planning has historically differentiated the Netherlands from Belgium, which had no formal planning framework until the 1960s (Uyttebrouck et al., 2021). In Belgium, urban planning is a regional competence,

yet influenced by the communities (French, Dutch and German-speaking), resulting in local governance specificities regarding neighbourhood development (see Table 1, which summarises the timeline, actors involved, goals and corresponding activities for each case study). While Genk (Flanders) formally supports empowerment through a specific policy and city department, Eupen and Liège (Wallonia) rely on several public and intermediary actors to support local communities. Such differences influence the empowerment process and further roles and interactions between actors (see section 5).

Furthermore, according to the evaluation of N-power (see section 4), the selected cities were more advanced in community empowerment whereas the others remained focused on personal empowerment (Aachen) or were slower in adopting empowerment practices (Verviers, Seraing) (Schelings & van Doosselaere, 2021). In what follows, we briefly introduce the context of each selected project.

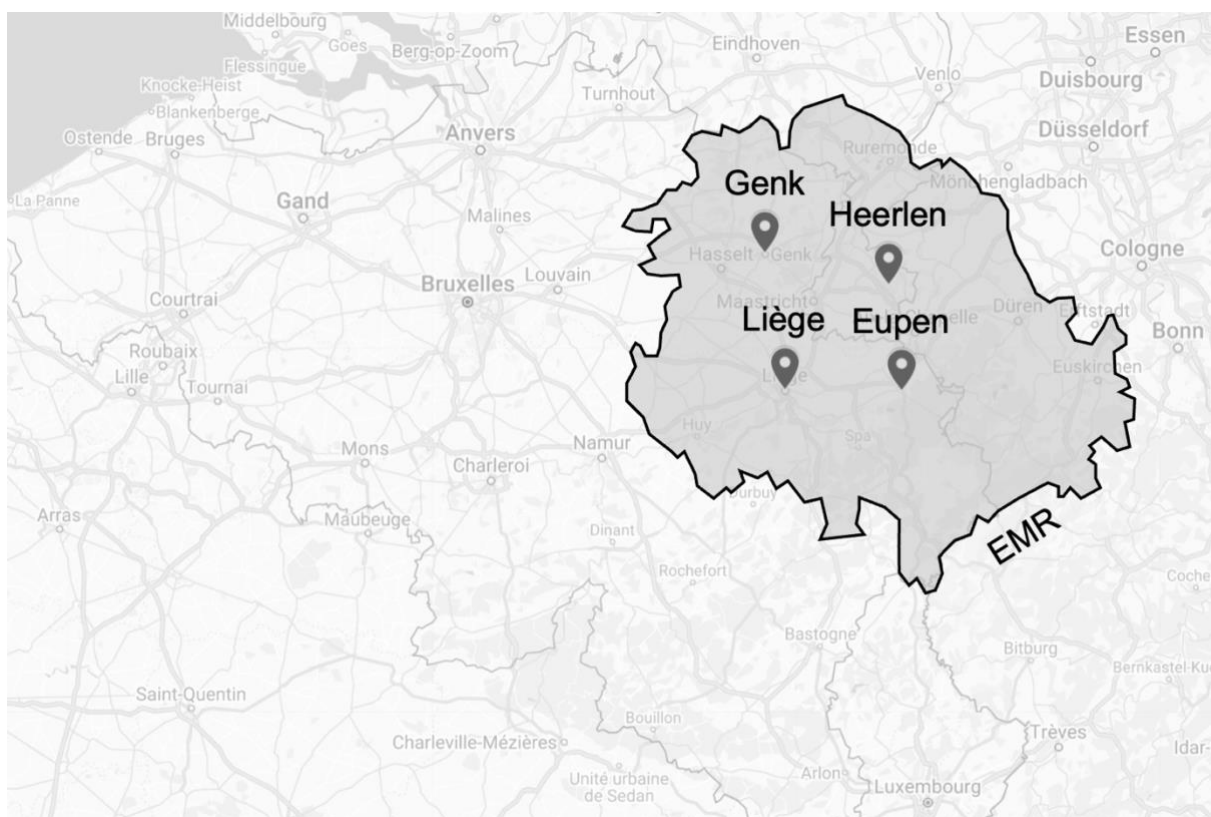


Figure 2: Four cities selected for this study, i.e., Eupen, Genk and Liège (Belgium) and Heerlen (the Netherlands), with the EMR highlighted in mid-grey (Map: *Googlemaps*; Diagram: authors)

Eupen (German-speaking community, Wallonia, Belgium) – ‘Park Loten’, Berg Viertel district

Berg Viertel is one of the inner-city neighbourhoods of Eupen. This former working-class district has suffered from commercial decline since the 1970s. Today, it is an ethnically diverse neighbourhood (45 nationalities) that concentrates young adults. At the city level, the N-power project manager works in the Urban Planning and Environment department, among other departments involved. Intermediaries include street workers, who organise activities with young adults, and the landscape architect responsible for the refurbishment of *Park Loten*, in the heart of the neighbourhood. The project was planned since 2014 and implemented in spring 2021 after the architect organised three workshops in 2019 with local inhabitants.

Citizens are organised in a neighbourhood committee which collaborates with a social contact centre, related to the local church.

Genk (Dutch-speaking community, Flanders, Belgium) – ‘Nomadland’, Zwartberg district

On the Northern side of Genk, the Zwartberg district has also suffered from commercial decline, but it has mining heritage. Nowadays, over a fifth of the neighbourhood’s population has a foreign nationality. Street workers (provincial level) are active in the area as well as community and neighbourhood managers (city level). They all act as intermediaries between citizens and the local authority; for example, neighbourhood managers from the city neighbourhood development department directly report citizens’ concerns to the city council. Nomadland is situated next to the ‘Labiomista’ biological and cultural centre (on former mining land), which resulted from a collaboration between a Flemish artist and the city of Genk. Since the early 2000s, the area hosts community-led projects, such as shared gardens. Nomadland consists of four wagons offering food and drinks to visitors. The idea came in 2019 from Labiomista’s artist, who developed it with a citizens’ group as part of N-power. The project was implemented in summer 2020 with the city approval.

Heerlen (Limburg, the Netherlands) – ‘Bongaard park’, Hoensbroek district

The Bongaard park is part of a citizen initiative and neighbourhood renewal strategy applying to the Northern area of Heerlen, Gebrookerbos, which started in 2014. Like Genk, Heerlen conserved mining heritage, but it suffers from demographic shrinkage of the younger cohorts. The Gebrookerbos strategy relies on community-led micro-initiatives and is directly managed by the mayor and the city general department. Within the municipality, ‘account managers’ are contact persons for administrative issues in community-led projects. Those are partly paid on the N-power budget, together with the external broker (see section 2.1 – intermediary actor). In the Maria-Gewanden sub-area, a citizens’ group realised the Schurenberger park (2014) and the Bongaard park (2019), the second one being previously occupied by social housing and completed within one year. The park was designed in close collaboration with the city and the social-housing corporation (landowner). Besides, a local academic partner also studied the Gebrookerbos strategy (not included in this article).

Liège (French-speaking community, Wallonia, Belgium) – ‘Around the pound’, Droixhe district

In the North of Liège, the Droixhe district has a large share of inhabitants with a migration background. It was physically marked by high-density social housing estates, which have suffered from overcrowding and ageing infrastructure since the 1980s. In the N-power framework, the city launched the ‘around the pound’ project to refurbish the park located in the core of Droixhe modernistic developments. Several departments of the municipality administration are involved, including the social services, which are responsible for the district house and directly mobilised citizens in the park’s transformation with the help of consultants. Several non-profit organisations, gathered in a citizens’ collective, also support local inhabitants. The participatory process (workshops, individual meetings) started in summer 2020, and the refurbishment works were conducted in summer 2021.

Table 1: Summary of the timeline, local governance structures, actors involved, goals and N-power activities for each case study (based on Schelings & Van Doosselaere, 2021)

| Eupen/Park Loten | Genk/Nomadland | Heerlen/Bongaardpark | Liège/Around the pound |
|--|--|--|---|
| Timeline (events relevant to the analysis) | | | |
| <p>2014: start of the project</p> <p>2019: participatory workshops</p> <p>2021: refurbishment of the park</p> | <p>Since 2000: successive community-led projects</p> <p>2014-2019: Labiomista project</p> <p>2019-2020: wagons' design and construction</p> | <p>2014: Gebrookerbos' launch</p> <p>2014: Design/creation of the Schurenberger park</p> <p>2019: Design/creation of the Bongaard park</p> | <p>2020: participatory workshops and individual meetings</p> <p>2021: refurbishment of the park, social cafeteria in discussion</p> |
| Municipal governance structure and integration of community empowerment | | | |
| <p>N-power <i>project manager</i> (department of <i>urban planning & environment</i>) engaged for the project and mobilising citizens with street workers and the neighbourhood's social contact centre.</p> | <p>Specific policy and city <i>neighbourhood development</i> department (with <i>neighbourhood managers</i> reporting to the <i>city council</i>) encouraging citizens' engagement, with the help of street workers and community managers.</p> | <p>N-power manager in the city <i>general department</i> depending on the <i>mayor</i>.</p> <p>Structural support to citizens' initiatives within the city services through, a.o., <i>project managers</i> and <i>account managers</i> (for administration matters).</p> | <p>N-power <i>project manager</i> (department of <i>public space management</i>) supervised by the head of <i>social cohesion</i>.</p> <p>Local development agent (department of <i>social services</i>) present in the neighbourhood and in touch with citizens.</p> |
| Actors involved (of interest to the analysis) | | | |
| <p><i>Municipality</i>: project manager</p> <p><i>Intermediaries</i>: social contact centre, street workers, landscape architect</p> <p><i>Community</i>: Neighbourhood committee</p> | <p><i>Municipality</i>: project manager, community and neighbourhood managers</p> <p><i>Intermediaries</i>: street workers (province), La biomista cultural centre</p> <p><i>Community</i>: project-based citizens' group, neighbourhood committee</p> | <p><i>Municipality</i>: project manager, account manager</p> <p><i>Intermediaries</i>: social-housing corp., broker</p> <p><i>Community</i>: project-based citizens groups</p> <p>(R&D: two research organisations)</p> | <p><i>Municipality</i>: agent from the social services among other departments involved</p> <p><i>Intermediaries</i>: non-profit organisations, consultants</p> <p><i>Community</i>: citizens' collective</p> |
| Specific goals | | | |
| <p>Collaborating with local actors</p> <p>Using the park as a social meeting point</p> <p>Enhancing changes of behaviour change among local actors</p> | <p>Experimenting self-built wagons offering catering</p> <p>Experimenting the Labiomista approach connecting science, policy, art and community</p> <p>Enhancing employment</p> | <p>Transforming the neighbourhood through bottom-up micro-initiatives</p> <p>Supporting community-led initiatives through roles of the broker and the account managers</p> | <p>Involving a diversity of inhabitants in a neighbourhood project</p> <p>Co-constructing the park with and for the inhabitants</p> |
| N-power tools and activities | | | |
| <p>Idea market, participatory workshops, co-constructed initiatives, action plan with social events, branding campaign, cultural events</p> | <p>Co-construction of the wagons offering catering, festive events (<i>tomato fest</i>, <i>appel fest</i>, ...) and other community-led parties</p> | <p>New actors, Gebrookerbos academy (workshops, conferences), digital platform, neighbourhood deals</p> | <p>Information meetings and festive events, exploratory walks and interviews, participatory workshops, individual meetings</p> |

4 DATA AND METHODS

Participatory action research implies specific project governance, which conditioned the fieldwork conducted for the present study. In this collective process, researchers and local stakeholders have different perspectives but cooperate to become knowledge co-producers and favour community empowerment, (Moulaert et al., 2013; Schafft & Greenwood, 2003). By fostering empowerment and considering formal and informal governance arrangements between different kinds of actors, action research enhances social innovation and may affect institutional frameworks and power relationships (Galego et al., 2022).

Evaluating the empowerment process is inherent to action research and builds upon the local stakeholders' knowledge (Schafft & Greenwood, 2003). Action research is here mixed with comparative, case-study research, which favours the generalisation of local empirical actions (Yin, 2009). The multiple case studies provided opportunities for exchanging knowledge and best practices between the local stakeholders of the different contexts and accelerating empowerment in some of them. Such knowledge exchange and capacity-building created a collective memory of the project among the municipalities involved. Although discrepancies in political support and organizational approaches were noticed between the Walloon cities and the other regions, the N-power project helped them experiment governance arrangements integrating empowerment, hence initiating mindset shifts, or at least, increased awareness (Schelings & van Doosselaere, 2021).

The evaluation of N-power drew on mixed methods including informal interviews with local project managers, a survey with official partners, and participatory meetings aimed at evaluating each action undertaken. As part of this process, we conducted 18 in-depth, semi-structured interviews. We chose this qualitative investigation method, not only to get more specific feedback, but also to emphasise understanding of *how* local empowerment practices took place in different contexts.

The interviews were performed in French, Dutch and English¹. They were organised over February – April 2021 (see Table 2), corresponding to the end of the second partial lockdown period implemented in Belgium and the Netherlands to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic. All interviews took place in 'real life', with masks and social distancing, except the four Heerlen interviews which were held online (borders closed). The transcriptions were qualitatively coded, based on a pre-analytical framework, but with great attention to empirical observations, following abductive principles.

In each city, our goal was to meet at least one intermediary actor between the city authority and the citizens. These intermediaries were of different types:

- Actors belonging to the municipality administration and being the direct contact person with the citizens (GE-1-b; LI-1; HE-2) given their role in, e.g., community-building;
- Social workers belonging to third-sector associations (EU-3; LI-2);

¹ In section 5, the excerpts from interviews in French and Dutch are the authors' translations.

- Street workers depending on regional public institutions (EU-1; GE-1-a);
- Independent broker hired by a research institution partner of the project (HE-1);
- Landscape architect (design field) also hired specifically for the project and responsible for the refurbishment of the park and the participatory workshops (EU-2).

We also met at least two citizens in each city, with different profiles, including heads of citizens' groups (EU-5; GE-2; HE-3). The citizens' contacts were systematically provided by each city's neighbourhood managers as part of the N-power governance. Although we didn't get the chance to reach out to citizens by ourselves, receiving contacts from local managers allowed us to meet those who were the most involved in the empowerment process.

Table 2: Empirical material - Visits and Interviews held in French, Dutch and English [language in brackets] - **Virtual interviews

| Eupen | Genk | Liège | Heerlen |
|---|---|---|--|
| Visit: 18/02/2021 | Visit: 18/03/2021 | Visit: 04/02/2021 | Visit: - (borders closed) |
| Interviews [FR]: | Interviews: | Interviews [FR]: | Interviews**: |
| <i>EU-1</i> : Street workers (German community) | <i>GE-1-a</i> [EN]: Street worker (Province) | <i>LI-1</i> : Social worker (Municipality) | <i>HE-1</i> [EN]: Broker (Independent) |
| <i>EU-2</i> : Landscape architect | <i>GE-1-b</i> [EN]: Community manager (Municipality) | <i>LI-2</i> : Social worker (Association) | <i>HE-2</i> [EN]: Account manager (Municipality) |
| <i>EU-3</i> : Social worker (Head of the social contact centre) | <i>GE-2</i> [NL]: Citizen (Head of a non-profit organisation) | <i>LI-3</i> : Citizen (Artists) | <i>HE-3</i> [NL]: Citizen (Head of a citizens' group) |
| <i>EU-4</i> : Citizen (Newly committed) | <i>GE-3</i> [NL]: Citizen (Old neighbourhood committee) | <i>LI-4</i> : Citizen (Old neighbourhood committee) | <i>HE-4</i> [NL]: Citizen and local councillor (Citizens' group; Municipality) |
| <i>EU-5</i> : Citizen (Head of the neighbourhood committee) | | <i>LI-5</i> : Citizen (Collective) | |
| <i>EU-6</i> : Citizen (Artist) | | | |

5 RESULTS

5.1 ACTORS' ROLES

This section examines the roles undertaken by the actors involved in the case studies, with emphasis on the intermediaries – compared to local governments – and the citizens.

Intermediaries and local governments

Analysis of the intermediaries' and local governments' roles in the case studies reveals contrasting approaches to empowerment and differences in local governance structures. As mentioned in section 3, neighbourhood development is explicitly integrated in the city organisation in Genk and Heerlen while this

competence is decentralised and spread among several city departments in Eupen and Liege. Besides, intermediaries have a co-productive, informal, and bottom-up approach focused on social needs, whereas municipalities have a predominantly consultative, formal and top-down approach to empowerment. The intermediaries still play specific roles in each case study. Only in Heerlen is there a ‘broker’ (HE-1) – a facilitator hired by the research institution partnering with the city government – with a well-defined vision of empowerment:

‘We create a better world if we are capable to involve people and their social area. So, they are responsible of their own homes, and their living room and sleeping room and kitchen, but after that front door, there is another living room, a social one. And if you are involved, you’re taking care of that outdoor space where you gather with other people.’ [HE-1]

He defines his mission as ‘filling the gaps’ between the city and the citizens and, if needed, leads the group until a citizen is ready to take over, hence contributing to developing citizens’ capacities. This was not necessary for the Bongaard park as the group drew on the experience of the Schurenberger park. The broker’s role and his interactions with the city dedicated services illustrate institutionalised empowerment in Heerlen.

In the other cities, social workers from provincial institutions (e.g., GE-1-a) or third-sector associations (e.g., EU-3, LI-2) respond to existing needs by providing targeted support and implementing bottom-up, self-organised initiatives:

‘We try to avoid as much as possible to suggest a list of projects to people, we rather wait that projects come up from the citizens’ interactions, contacts and ideas.’ [EU-3]

‘We are very glad that we don’t have to organise people to do [something]; they organise it themselves and we are just going to put the right people together.’ [GE-1a]

Street workers aim to approach citizens, especially vulnerable groups (e.g., youngsters, migrants), the most informally possible to be the closest to their social needs and improve their confidence and awareness of opportunities:

‘Our goal is to be the most informal possible to be the closest to realities (...) All youngsters, but particularly those in fragile situation or who are not reached by other organisations, who do not use other offers of the socio-cultural sector’ [EU-1]

In contrast, local governments facilitate participation by asking citizens’ feedback on their own ideas, possibly with the help of consultants (Liège, Eupen), although such a process may foster power asymmetries.

The participation process consists of selecting the most recurrent suggestions based on a predetermined budget and encouraging common-identity building for the neighbourhood. The history of the place is recurrently used as a cultural link (e.g., EU-2) contributing to the identity-building process among diverse communities. This was the case in Eupen, where the long-term involvement of religious communities has been central for urban renewal (e.g., conversion of a chapel into a cultural place – EU-5) and empowerment. The social contact centre originally worked with catholic youth movements [EU-3] and the neighbourhood committee resulted from a citizens’ group involved in the former chapel [EU-5]).

In two cases, the city created specific roles within the administration to enable more advanced forms of empowerment through a bottom-up approach based on citizens' projects. Firstly, Heerlen municipality designated an 'account manager' to fulfil this enabling role. He established dialogue with citizens whose project is on municipal land and helped them balance rules, evaluate risks and become accountable (HE-2).

Secondly, the city of Genk created a 'community manager' for each neighbourhood, who connects citizens and supports their projects. He works closely with street workers from provincial associations:

'We almost work on a daily basis together. So, it's very much overlapping, and I think if we both see an opportunity for the community, for the neighbourhood, we jump on it and we try to work it out and get all the people involved and make it work.' [GE-1a]

Hence, a project-based approach characterises Genk and Heerlen, while the other cases are neighbourhood-based. In Eupen, this scale is coherent with the neighbourhood committee and related religious communities, but not in Liège, where no citizen structure currently exists at the neighbourhood level. The project-based approaches are observed in contexts where empowerment is further institutionalised at the municipal level and citizens' initiatives are accordingly more structurally organised (see Table 1).

Citizens

The *citizens'* roles depend on the above approach (project-based or neighbourhood-based) and their level of engagement. They share a similar desire to improve the image and attractiveness of their neighbourhood through green space, heritage (e.g., LI-3, LI-5, GE-3) and cultural mix (e.g., EU-4; LI-5):

'There is heritage at different levels that is far under-estimated, and I would like to transmit it to people at my level – Colibri approach! – for them to be proud of the place they live in and so that they can maybe, even though they come from the other side of the world, feel there, here, present at home, now. And create their own roots, find their place.' [LI-5]

Such motivations are apparent in the actions of neighbourhood committees, which allow citizens to strengthen their civic capacity and even acquire entrepreneurial skills – i.e., develop creativity, negotiation skills and innovation capacity through activity, flexibility and self-organisation (Stapper & Duyvendak, 2020). In Eupen (neighbourhood-based), the committee works actively on connecting better the neighbourhood communities, with the support of the social contact centre:

'With the centre here, we organised a language café. It is still organised now. We have cooked with them, and we have also celebrated the Ramadan, in the evening.' [EU-5]

Not all case studies have a neighbourhood committee, though. In Liège, it collapsed years ago (LI-4), making it challenging to mobilise citizens today without a well-accepted leader (LI-3, LI-4).

In the other cases, citizens formalise their actions in project-related groups and possibly non-profit organisations, which allows them to develop advanced civic skills. In Heerlen, the Bongaard park group is well-experienced, committed and accountable for the neighbourhood. It managed to empower a broader network of citizens by collecting their ideas, encouraging active participation and facilitating communication with the municipality:

‘And so things happened, small projects where you involved people. And then, once a project is completed, you support them so they can go further and you put them in touch with the municipality. They know the way to the municipality because they have actually become completely independent’. [HE-3]

For this group, community-led projects are an alternative to government support (HE-4) that complements traditional planning. In Genk, the Nomadland working group was formalised as a non-profit organisation, mainly to buy equipment (GE-2). Beyond developing their project and trying to make neighbours use it, the group had to mitigate the conflicts that arose from their project.

Citizens’ organisations include various profiles of individuals, yet we identified ‘nostalgic citizens’ in all cases (e.g., EU-5, LI-4, GE-3) who influence the groups’ endeavours to urban renewal, especially those sensitive to preserving heritage in neighbourhoods subject to large-scale regeneration programmes:

‘Because we like the park. All the old ones who knew the park, a magnificent park, where there was a guard, where one could not walk on the grass. (...) It was flowery; it was magnificent. And then, it deteriorated gradually; repairs were not done (...). Yes, do the fountain, just like it was before.’ [LI-4]

Besides, they believe all citizens should become active in the neighbourhood to forget their struggles and become self-confident:

‘People have to act, give their opinion, be able to follow it. Then they have to be able to say, “well, I’m going to participate in that, and I want to do it that way”. We held many parties in Zwartberg, and some people helped from morning till evening, others came to help for two hours, and then there were sometimes discussions, and...What everyone does is important, and we will not use a scale here, saying, “oh, I do so much, and I do so little”. (...) Everyone does what they can, and that is important that people can also use their talents.’ [GE-3]

Hence, nostalgic citizens play an essential role in enhancing inclusive community development.

5.2 ACTORS’ INTERACTIONS

The assessment of the actors’ interactions that follows is based on the variables and instruments introduced in section 2.2, using the same structure.

Citizens’ interactions: building the social identity of the neighbourhood

In all cases, social identity fosters the cohabitation of communities with diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. This happens through social activities (e.g., gardening, repair cafes) that valorise such a diversity (e.g., photoshoot in Eupen – EU-4). In Liège and Eupen, diversity is an essential component of the neighbourhood image and a matter of pride. However, integrating newcomers moving into newly-built developments in the complex structure formed by these communities is challenging. Creating and improving green space is also key to identity-building and urban renewal, notably to make unoccupied areas liveable again (HE-1). This process can be seen as a reaction to social decline – following the commercial downturn and struggles to accommodate demographic change – and physical mutations. Still, by improving the neighbourhood image, inhabitants are more inclined to take care of their environment (HE-4). The area becomes attractive for visitors (e.g., GE-2), but this may threaten the inclusion of more residents (GE-3).

Social identity is crucial in Droixhe (Liège), given the transformations the neighbourhood has been experiencing, notably with new public transport and real estate developments – ‘We see buildings are being erected, we don’t know what they are’ (LI-4). Some citizens suffer from the renewal operations:

‘It is a neighbourhood in profound mutation. So, the citizens are conscious about that. Some of them suffer of it because they lose the neighbourhood they used to know. This is a revival and the concern of several inhabitants is to be forgotten from this requalification process.’ [LI-1]

Therefore, there is a consensus on returning to the original park, and the associations’ activities emphasise the citizens’ sense of belonging to the neighbourhood.

Reaching vulnerable groups: a challenge for local governments and intermediaries

Reaching vulnerable people relies on several factors, including appropriate time and scale, actors and tools, and communication. The interviewees were divided regarding the relevance of engaging these groups. For some, they are too busy with filling their ‘primary needs’ (e.g., EU-5; LI-2). For others, engaging in the neighbourhood helps them escape from their daily problems (LI-1; GE-3), which is why they should launch small-scale projects by and for themselves (EU-5; GE-3). Self-organised projects become quickly visible and have snowball effects, as observed in Heerlen (HE-4). However, language and cultural barriers must be overcome, and the right actors and tools must be mobilised. Previous research showed that the ones who design the participatory process shape its participants, explaining the exclusion of certain groups (Michels & de Graaf, 2010). According to our interviewees, excluded citizens mobilised through associations hardly become active for the ‘whole’:

‘We had invited representatives of different associations and institutions to the table here, for what we call the neighbourhood committee, to allow for exchange, cooperation, interaction. But well, there too, we mostly observed that many were either too strongly engaged in their preoccupations or were mostly interested in their association and hobbies, and not by the wider perspective of being actors for the whole society.’ [EU-3]

This risk was confirmed in Liege where the communication through associations resulted in little diversity among participants:

‘If you are not part of an association because you do not benefit from a social revenue or something, then you don’t get informed.’ [LI-3]

‘I received feedback from two women of the group who took part in the meetings and for whom inhabitants *per se* were missing. There were a lot of people active in the voluntary sector’ [LI-2]

Difficulties in engaging with vulnerable people were also observed in Genk (GE-3), leading social workers to prioritise the appropriation of the project by the whole neighbourhood.

After the completion of a project, keeping people long-term active is another challenge as many become only ‘consumers’ of the parks created (e.g., HE-4). Although lasting implementation can lead to frustration and disengagement (EU-1; LI-2), reaching vulnerable groups is a long-term process that may require ‘slowing down’ the process (GE-1-a). It is thus a question of balance and ‘time-convergence’ (Moulaert et al., 2005). Targeted communication is also needed, but often fails. In Genk, little feedback and changes within the municipality led citizens to consider the process untransparent, with decisions made out of the

blue (GE-3). Tensions related to the wagons' construction during the pandemic and nuisances related to visitors' noise also affected communication.

Government-citizens interactions: enhancing trust and self-esteem

The studied projects enhanced trust between citizens, the local government and intermediaries, for example in Heerlen, as acknowledged by different types of actors:

'Because they have confidence in us, because they see what we can achieve. And we, the committee Maria-Gewanden, in each area, if we get an idea then we work it out, and we know what the municipality has difficulties with and what it can accept. And then we apply with our project and we always have a positive reaction from the municipality' [HE-3]

'I saw the gap between the local government and the citizens getting smaller so people are trusting each other in a way they could depend on each other.' [HE-1]

Citizens also felt listened to in Liege, notably thanks to the individual encounters around the 3D model that replaced the last workshops during the pandemic:

'When we saw it [the model] – also the other ones said that – we said “well, they did listen to what we asked”' [LI-4].

Conversely, trust deteriorated in Genk – particularly between citizens – following miscommunication and conflicts (see the lack of transparency mentioned earlier in this section).

Self-esteem is another dimension of empowerment that can arise when citizens become aware of their impact on their immediate environment:

'Well, I think they have learned, first, that they have the possibility to intervene, to organise with each other, to influence things in a certain way (...). For some, I think it's precisely important to have this positive experience because we see that, often, they are the ones who come back too, to see how things develop or to intervene and, yes, become themselves actors of the projects that are realised.' [EU-3]

Power transfer resulting in effective community achievements

Enabling citizens' engagement and achievements through power transfer, beyond valuing their contributions, was far from simple in our cases. Firstly, letting the citizens interfere in decision-making is a long learning path for local governments. In Liège, the city services remain reluctant to move beyond consultation and, to some extent, the N-power project might have rather legitimated public policy than empowered citizens:

'It is not the inhabitants who submitted a project to revalorise the park, it is the city who took part in the call for projects, so it is rather a top-down proposal (...) So, it's a project that will be done anyway, and the citizens were consulted in that sense' [LI-2]

Participation is still a top-down process intended to make the citizens understand government decisions:

'It has also been, I find, an opportunity for the citizens to express what they wanted for the park. But they could also hear the different *constraints* related to the park, be it human constraints, budgetary constraints, or technical constraints. And so, I, well, we thought it was important to be able to *explain* it to the citizens, and they have become conscious of it and said, “ah yes, with... Now we are conscious that there are things that will not be possible to be done”. (...) This is it also, it is

to bring the inhabitants the possibility to *reinvent* themselves if they do not get what they want'. [LI-1, emphasis added]

Conversely, in Genk, the municipality backed citizens' engagement and supported the project's realisation (on municipal land), but it happened at the expense of *all* communities' commitment.

Secondly, our observations confirm the mandatory role of intermediaries in supporting effective community empowerment. Design experts, such as landscape architects (Heerlen, Eupen), are also needed. However, intermediaries can appear too influential, as in Genk, where Labiomista's strong involvement (together with the city social services) in the wagons' project may have limited the community decision capacity:

'Nomadland, that's also an idea from [Artist from Labiomista] (...) It's not like the community can decide what happens at Nomadland; we still work together with Labiomista, the city of Genk and the community' [GE-1-a;b]

These actors should have perhaps made a step back to let the community organise itself and avoid conflicts.

Thirdly, the instruments used in the projects may be inappropriate to reach inclusive empowerment. Workshops were organised either by the municipality (Liège, Eupen) or the citizens themselves (Heerlen), often with the help of consultants. Citizens' ideas were gathered, discussed in thematic groups, confronted with constraints and selected quantitatively based on their success. Such a process requires entrepreneurial skills that can be difficult to mobilise in deprived neighbourhoods (Williams et al., 2020). In our cases, the workshop attendees did not represent all communities and needs of the neighbourhood (see, e.g., the overrepresentation of associations in Liege). Including young adults or people with a foreign background in such forms of participation is constrained by language and cultural barriers, lack of self-esteem, and reluctance to be mixed with people with a higher economic capital:

'Enter a circle with people who speak well, who express their ideas clearly, but they fear they will be there and do not understand anything or not knowing (...) Not any public can identify with another public (...). For example, I know it's a bit of a cliché, but the poor with the rich, well, it's difficult to mix. If already we know, in that street, the richer live, and we are the poor, we will not go...often, it remains very difficult to put these people around the same table to discuss.' [EU-1]

Furthermore, apart from the N-power budget, the projects used various funding sources (e.g., sponsoring). Some of them benefited from a neighbourhood budget provided by the municipality, such as the Gebrookerbos fund in Heerlen, which stimulated citizens' initiatives. Similarly, in Genk, citizens' involvement (e.g., to build the wagons) allowed reducing costs, and looking for resources by themselves was part of the empowerment process (e.g., GE-3). These elements illustrate again the institutionalisation of empowerment in Genk and Heerlen.

6 CONCLUSION

Community empowerment has become central to the urban regeneration of socially deprived urban neighbourhoods. Local governments have facilitated the implementation of empowerment goals by allowing citizens' active participation in urban development. However, this process requires specific actors to achieve desired outcomes. We analysed the actors' roles in four neighbourhood-empowerment projects

– in Eupen, Genk, Liege (Belgium) and Heerlen (the Netherlands), four cities of the Euregio Meuse-Rhine –, and we assessed their interactions based on empowerment variables. Our observations show contrasting approaches to empowerment according to the cultural and institutional contexts (further institutionalised planning in the Netherlands and in Flanders than in Wallonia, connections with religious institutions in the German-speaking community of Belgium). Those affect the actors' roles and interactions in community empowerment processes. The cases cluster in two groups: (i) cities where institutionalised empowerment is implemented through a project-based approach (Genk, Heerlen), and (ii) the ones where empowerment is little-institutionalised and which embrace a neighbourhood-based approach (Eupen, Liege).

The first group illustrates an enabling state making advanced forms of empowerment happen, through projects involving a broader network of citizens, who are in the conditions to develop civic skills and become active in public policy. This implies for local governments to have actors, governance structures and instruments dedicated to community empowerment in neighbourhoods (e.g., neighbourhood budgets). Intermediaries, despite their essential role – e.g., as group leaders to launch certain projects –, must find the right involvement balance to let citizens develop their decision capacity when they are ready to do so. Irrespective of the context, intermediaries are key to connect citizens and local governments, consistently with Arnstein's (1969) concept of trusted third parties. However, they should step back at the right moment and let the community organise itself to reach higher levels of community empowerment. Hence, an enabling state helped by appropriate intermediaries allows moving towards collaborative planning based on power decentralisation and co-production in urban neighbourhoods.

In contrast, local governments of the second group primarily facilitate participation with consultants and third-sector associations through consultation instruments. Beyond legitimating public policy and fostering power asymmetries, such an approach makes it difficult to include vulnerable communities. What differentiates the cases in this group is the neighbourhood committee, helping citizens develop entrepreneurial skills. Without a committee in an institutionally-fragmented context (Liege), the role of third-sector associations becomes central, with the benefits and drawbacks it entails. When a neighbourhood committee exists (Eupen), its connections with local (religious) communities involved in urban renewal favours shorter pathways towards the local political level. This group shows how moving from personal to community empowerment takes time but may be accelerated by appropriate actor networks and well-established communities. The Liege case also exemplifies the importance of social identity in a large-scale urban regeneration context.

Overall, this study contributes to understanding how specific actors interact to enhance community empowerment in urban renewal operations and how different approaches to neighbourhood governance influence the empowerment process. Although our analysis of actors is not exhaustive as regards their functions and roles in such processes, it critically points to the need for intermediary actors to bridge the gap between local governments and citizens and strengthen interactions based on trust and co-production. Our findings result from a cross-border comparative case study combined with participatory action research and provide concrete outputs and opportunities for generalisation. We acknowledge, nonetheless, the

methodological bias related to the limited number of citizens interviewed in this study, which takes part in the broader evaluation of the action-research process. Future research based on a broader empirical spectrum will be helpful to explore empowerment outcomes in urban neighbourhoods. Nevertheless, we genuinely hope that these results will encourage practitioners' self-reflection on their roles and the way they help citizens moving towards community empowerment, using long-term, innovative and inclusive methods based on collaborative planning and governance.

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