Who Organises the Community?

The university as an intermediary actor

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In Western Europe, since the 1980s, the differences between prosperous areas of the cities and deprived neighbourhoods have again visibly increased. Growing social and economic inequalities have resulted in a spatial polarisation; the spaces of the winners and the spaces of the losers have become more distinct. Almost all countries have responded to this spatial divide by the introduction of programs to stabilise their marginalised neighbourhoods. The reference point for these programs is segregated urban communities that have a spatial concentration of poverty, unemployment and migration, low levels of education, substandard housing quality and poor service infrastructure.

The heterogeneity of problems, social milieus, subcultures, values and religions in marginalised communities forbids one-dimensional approaches to neighbourhood renewal. The broad diversity of burdens, risks, challenges, prospects and beliefs in marginalised communities requires complex and cooperative strategies and policies rather than the traditional top–down strategies of municipal administrations. In the German city of Essen (population 580 000) the municipality was aware of the very complex situation of its deteriorating communities and therefore asked a local university institute to become an active partner in the conceptualisation, implementation and operation of the local community development programs. Out of this long-term university-community engagement evolved a specific neighbourhood management model. The major difference between this model and other community development processes in Germany is the establishment of a professional intermediary function. In Essen, this function is exercised by university staff.

This article highlights some of the possibilities, problems and findings surrounding the role of universities as intermediary actor in urban community development. Beginning with theoretical reflections on the need for professional intermediaries and their paradoxical tasks, the article goes on to introduce the Essen model of neighbourhood management and the specific tasks of intermediaries, showing how this model responds to some

of the challenges outlined above. After a brief description of the university institute as one example of universities' public service role, the article finishes with some conclusions on the implications for practice of this intermediary role.

WHY PROFESSIONAL INTERMEDIARIES IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT?

The overall aim of community development processes is to stabilise and improve the quality of life in marginalised neighbourhoods or urban districts that are struggling with the ordinary results of spatial segregation: a high percentage of low-income households and unemployed residents, a high ratio of migrants and people on welfare, lower educational degrees and a poor quality of public infrastructure (healthcare, schools, public transportation, housing, etc.). Powerful participation of community residents, local institutions, clubs and associations, as well as the local economy, is considered to be essential for a successful improvement of the local living conditions. But neighbourhood renewal also relies on a systematic linkage of the interests and issues of the local community with municipal departments, their professional knowledge and their resources. Community development requires experts in communication that on the one hand organise exchange and decision-making processes at the community level and on the other hand organise negotiations between municipal representatives and spokespeople for the interests of citizens. In the past, priests, teachers, nurses or local politicians were able to take over this intermediary function of managing dialogue, but over the last decades their significance has decreased. This calls for the assignment of professional intermediary players with an institutionalised responsibility for perpetually pushing the dialogue between the life-world in the local community and the administrative system of the municipality.

Intermediaries are able to combine the different principles of organisation and the different logics of acting to transcend the traditional boundaries between different departments and professions. They act as agents between different parts of society, between the more formal and bureaucratic world of the administrative system, the profit-orientated world of economy and the less formal, sometimes chaotic life-world of the community. The background and theory of the integrating function of the intermediary structure in progressive community development is outlined below.

Integrating Life-world and System

The core of 'traditional' community work is to search for the main issues of the people who live in the community and to activate the residents as broadly as possible in order to let them have a greater say on issues concerning the development and reshaping of their community. Community work supports and initiates community organisations with regard to the main interests and worries of the residents. These organisations and initiatives try

to enforce improvements in a variety of issues concerning their neighbourhood. They try, for instance, to increase the quantity and quality of local social services, challenge exaggerated utility charges for apartments in the community or rebuild run-down and neglected playgrounds. By activating and supporting these citizens' activities, community work tries to empower marginalised people.

According to the philosopher, Juergen Habermas, those citizens' organisations are the very heart of what is called 'the civil society': 'Civil society is composed of those more or less spontaneously emergent associations, organisations, and movements that, attuned to how societal problems resonate in the private life spheres, distil and transmit such reactions in amplified form to the public sphere' (Habermas 1996, p. 367). However, it is interesting to note that, although Habermas points out the importance of these grassroots civic movements, he is somewhat sceptical about the impact that these forms of collective action achieve: 'Such associations certainly do not represent the most conspicuous element of a public sphere dominated by mass media and large agencies, observed by market and opinion research, and inundated by the public relations work, propaganda, and advertising of political parties and groups' (Habermas 1996, p. 367).

Community organisations and citizens' networks are generally able to identify the problems and needs in the neighbourhood very precisely. But very often the signals they are sending are too weak to agitate or redirect the boards and bodies of political decision-making (Habermas 1996, p. 373). This leads to a dilemma: in order to stabilise and develop a disadvantaged community, municipal politics and administration depend on being supplied with informal public opinion from the life-world in the neighbourhood – because these opinions are wider, more sensitive, more expressive and less compulsive. But, on the other hand, the administrative system of the municipality is very likely to either absorb or, even worse, ignore the citizens' activities without adjusting or changing their policy.

Habermas' remarks make it obvious that professional support for the 'empowerment of the excluded' is not the only, nor necessarily the most appropriate, way to progressive community development. Aside from the organisation of the citizens, there is a need for intermediary structures that help to improve the interaction between the informal decision-making processes of the community residents and the much more formal procedures of decision-making in municipal administration and politics.

Integrating Citizens and Institutional Resources
Community-orientated programs face a general dilemma: on the one hand, they work with an empowering goal which considers the inhabitants of a certain marginalised neighbourhood to be, or to become, responsible members of their communities capable of increasing their participation, in order to have a greater say in local decision-making. On the other hand, these programs must

contend with a decrease in the resources of community residents (people in deprived communities become poorer and their school education downgrades) and an increase in general suspicion towards the residents – marginalised people are generally treated as a potential danger to children and potential welfare abusers. Activating citizens of deprived neighbourhoods to participate more in the development of their community can very easily become a cynical strategy under these conditions.

In view of the above, the success of citizen participation in community renewal should not rely only on citizens' commitment, and the strength of grassroots organisations should not be overestimated:

> It is not productive to support exclusively the small and often weak civic initiatives and self-help groups while, at the same time, following completely different criteria, e.g. economical ones, in the modernization of large social institutions and services … Is it really unavoidable, that hospitals, retirement homes, schools and other institutions still must be seen as 'social deserts' concerning participation of and cooperation with citizens …? (Heinze & Olk 2001, p. 23, translated by the author)

The crucial question for community development is not primarily about the number of residents who are actively dedicated to volunteer work and civic engagement. Far more important for the quality of the 'local civil society' is how well the institutions that influence the everyday life of the people are linked to the life-world and how open they are to influence and participation by the citizens: 'The options that a person has depend greatly on relations with others and on what the state and other institutions do. We shall be particulary concerned with those opportunities that are strongly influenced by social circumstances and public policy …' (Drèze & Sen 1995, p. 6). Activating the process of community renewal demands focus on the institutions and their resources, not just the citizens. Therefore, the task of professional intermediaries is to make institutions more sensitive to the needs of their users, to overcome institutional autism, and to open them up to the demands and opinions of the life-world. Professional intermediaries are the local agents or the local guards (maybe even the watchdogs) for *civic mainstreaming* of public institutions. They must be a permanent challenge, maybe even a permanent provocation, to these institutions by demanding and supporting their adaptation and openness to citizens' needs.

Integrating Community, City and Region
It was Nikolas Rose who most prominently pointed out the fundamental change and the dialectic that goes along with the current rise of community approaches: the idea of community was 'initially deployed in the social field as part of the language of critique and opposition directed against remote bureaucracy' (Rose 1996, p. 332). Nowadays, Rose criticises, community approaches have been transformed:

... into an expert discourse and a professional vocation – community is now something to be programmed by Community Development Programs, developed by Community Development Officers, policed by Community Police, guarded by Community Safety Programs and rendered by sociologists pursuing 'community studies'. Communities became zones to be investigated, mapped, classified, documented, interpreted … What began to take shape here was a new way of demarcating a sector for government, a sector whose vectors and forces could be mobilized, enrolled, deployed in novel programs and techniques which operated through the instrumentalization of personal allegiances and active responsibilities: government through community (Rose 1996, p. 332).

Rose draws the conclusion that the mutation of community approaches indicates the shift of responsibility for social questions from society as a whole to local communities: 'Collective relations have been re-figured in such a way as to reduce the salience of "the social" in favor of "the community"' (Rose 1996, p. 337).

A quite similar critique argues that the growing popularity of policies which focus on local communities results in an 'over-spatialization' of social policies (Stern 2004). Community-orientated policies tend to lock the marginalised people in their neighbourhood. They enable residents to mutual self-help, but the disadvantaged community is not systematically integrated into the overall urban developments and discourses (Kessl, Otto & Ziegler 2002).

Michael Woolcock and Deepa Narayan (2000, p. 227) point out that the urban poor often possess a 'close-knit and intensive stock of bonding social capital that they can leverage to get by … But they lack the more diffuse and extensive bridging social capital deployed by the non poor to get ahead.' This 'bonding social capital' refers to the 'social glue' between sociodemographic homogeneous groups; 'bridging capital' characterises relations between different social milieus; and 'linking capital' indicates the relationship between citizens and the political–administrative complex (Woolcock 1998). What these critical objections add up to, is that what is needed in processes of neighbourhood renewal is less bonding and more bridging and linking (Hautekur 2010).

The current deformations and distortions of community approaches are accompanied by an oversimplification of the concept of community. This applies also to involved universities: 'A common failing of universities working with communities is the assumption that they can develop a single, uniform definition of who and what the "community" is, or that such a definition is necessary' (Holland & Gelmon 1998, p. 4).

The definition of 'community' is a difficult challenge. Therefore, very briefly, I want to bring to mind the quite complex and sophisticated conceptualisation of community which was developed at the Chicago School of Sociology in the 1920s. In their work, Park, Burgess and McKenzie created a highly differentiated perception of community, which can be helpful in overcoming

some of the present reductions of community approaches. Apparent even in the first edition of *The City* (1925), is how the authors looked at community as an embedded part of a larger urban structure and integrated social and geographic terms like community, natural area and neighbourhood. They also said that *community always means a collection of people and institutions*. And they went far beyond a spatial definition of community and pointed out the high significance of local institutions: 'The simplest possible description of a community is this: a collection of people occupying a more or less clearly defined area. But a community is more than that. A community is not only a collection of people, but it is a collection of institutions. Not people, but institutions are final and decisive in distinguishing the community from other social constellations' (Park, Burgess & McKenzie 1992, p. 115).

They also claimed that *community does not describe contained or separated spaces* and presented a remarkably perceptive view of the relation between local community and the city, which is useful in clarifying actual misconceptions of community: 'Every community is always part of some larger and more inclusive one. There are no longer communities wholly detached and isolated; all are interdependent economically and politically upon one another. The ultimate community is the wide world' (Park, Burgess & McKenzie 1992, p. 115).

The local community is always just a functional part of larger contexts. For community approaches, intermediary bodies are essential in order to avoid a focus on marginalised people without critically examining the strategies of conservation and monopolisation of power by the dominant social classes and milieus. Intermediaries can help to embed the deprivation of certain urban communities into the context and responsibility of the entire city and the institutional sphere. Thus, intermediary players make a substantial contribution to ensuring that community approaches do not degenerate to simple 'poor people's approaches'.

PROFESSIONAL PARADOXES OF INTERMEDIARIES

In order to be able to take over an intermediary function in community development, trust needs to be developed with all parties: politics and bureaucracy on the one hand and the community residents on the other. If not, the public mandate will be lost. Intermediaries need top–down as well as bottom–up legitimisation. They also need to be connected sufficiently with the life-world of the people in the community as well as the politicians and the administrators. However, at the same time, intermediaries need to be relatively independent of those actors in order to be able to help make their conflicts productive. Therefore, intermediary professionals should not be staff of the local political or administrative sector; they should be independent of the reasoning and agendas of large bureaucracies. Intermediaries can, and should, be publicly funded, but the local government should

not have direct control over them: '… such structures might be "co-opted" by the government in a too eager embrace that would destroy the very distinctiveness of their function … The goal in utilizing mediating structures is to expand government services without producing government oppressiveness' (Berger & Neuhaus 1977, p. 7).

In order to cope with their mediating function between the private sphere of the life-world and the spheres of the economy and the state, intermediaries should have sufficient autonomy from these spheres. Thus, neither private companies nor local governments seem to be suitable providers for professional intermediaries. Jenny Onyx (2008, p. 103) gives a hint as to who could be an appropriate provider: 'The process may be facilitated by a neutral, but trusted, third party who is able to mediate and negotiate some of the politically sensitive issues that divide. Universities sometimes play that role.'

Intermediary bodies have to be aware of their potential for causing antagonism – though they are able to contribute to a better connection between the life-world and the system, they may equally achieve the opposite effect. The establishment of professional intermediary bodies does not necessarily indicate an increasing openness of the political–administrative system towards the citizens. By their mediating action professional intermediaries are in danger of acting like a buffer between the citizens' opinions and the opinions of the political–administrative system, thus weakening the impact of communications from the life-world to the system. The existence of specialised intermediaries can be either an expression of the inability and unwillingness of large organisations to communicate with the citizens or part of an attempt to increase their sensitivity towards the needs and interests of the citizens.

THE ESSEN MODEL OF NEIGHBOURHOOD MANAGEMENT

The City of Essen used to be the former 'capital' of the Ruhrgebiet, which is a region whose booming development started with the beginning of industrialisation and was founded on coal mining and steel industries. The Ruhrgebiet is still the area with the highest population density in Europe (population of 4.5 million). Essen today faces a lot of structural and economic problems due to the decline of its main industrial sectors. This has resulted in an unemployment rate of 14 per cent and a high social and ethnic spatial segregation. The two local communities that participate in the community development program each have 30 000–50 000 residents.

The practical experiences of the university-community engagement over the last two decades have led to the development of a unique model of neighbourhood management. The Essen Model of Neighbourhood Management tries to respond to the necessity to integrate different actors, professions and institutions, and to integrate different budgets and different sectoral thinkings,

goals and rationalities, in order to stabilise and improve the living conditions in marginalised communities. The model (see Figure 1) consists of three intertwined professional action levels that dovetail the broad variety of people, resources, services and sectors (Grimm, Hinte & Litges 2001):

—the local community (neighbourhood)
—the municipal administration
—an intermediate level to connect community and municipality.

Figure 1: Neighbourhood management – areas of responsibility and organisation
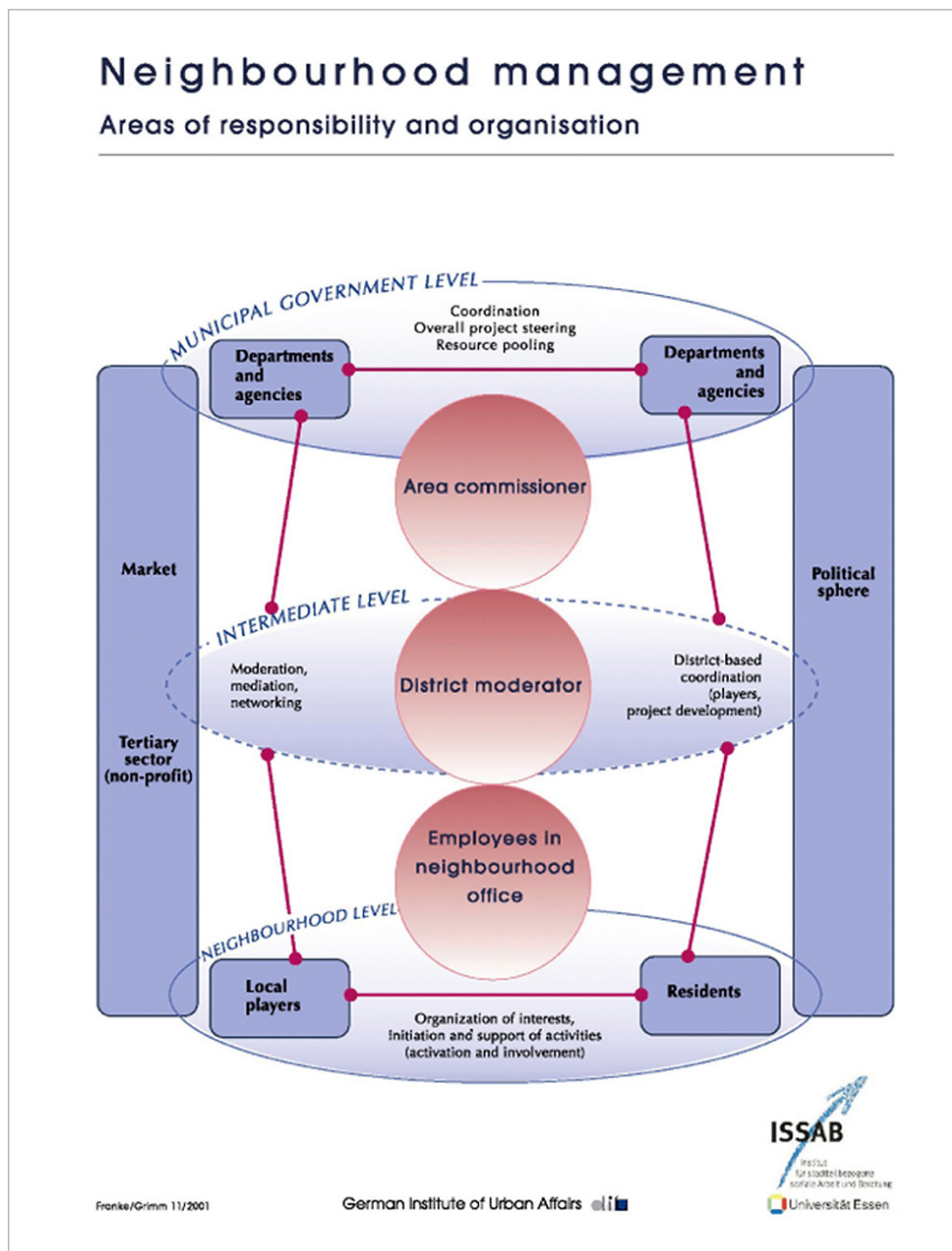
The *neighbourhood* level is where 'traditional' community work takes place. Community workers are located in neighbourhood offices and are either employed by the municipality or by NGOs. They initiate, organise and counsel citizen activities and grassroots interest groups at a community level. On the *intermediate* level district moderators bundle human beings, needs, ideas and resources. They develop and manage projects concerning the community. Their special task is to link the sometimes very open and chaotic processes at the community level with the much

more bureaucratic and standardised processes in the municipal administration. In Essen, the district moderators are staff of the university institute. At the *municipal* level there is a municipal area commissioner in charge of the overall project-steering, combining different resources, agencies and departments of the municipality.

Like 'elevator lift boys', these intermediaries connect with and mediate between the local community and the municipal government. Professional intermediary bodies help to ensure that the activities of the people in the community find resonance in the municipal political–administrative system. Through this mediation the neighbourhood management encourages the bundling of resources from different disciplines and different parts of the administration, economy and community stakeholders and concentrates them on certain communities in order to reconnect the development of the local community to that of the overall city. The intermediary professionals act as a mediating structure between the administrative level, where the entire development process and the financial budget are coordinated, and the neighbourhood level, where community workers activate and support people in the organisation of their self-interests.

The introduction of intermediary bodies as an additional action level in the process of community renewal must be seen as a supplement to traditional community work. It does not mean giving up support for and empowerment of citizens' action. It merely widens this task by trying to extend institutional sensitivity to the informal opinions of the life-world of the citizens. To act as an intermediary in the context of community development offers the possibility to double the direction of activation. The activating function of the Essen Model of Neighbourhood Management draws on two directions:

—citizens' activation: stabilising the situation in the community by communicative and organisational improvement of the local civil society in coping with internal and external conflicts

—institutional activation: a cooperative–conflictual matching of the work of local institutions to the particular needs of the community.

IMPLEMENTING THE FUNCTION OF THE PROFESSIONAL INTERMEDIARY

The core function of intermediary bodies in processes of neighbourhood renewal is to establish extensive stable communication networks and cooperation both within and outside the community. Their special challenge is to initiate dialogue and cooperation between persons and institutions that are not used to working with one another or are not able to understand each other's very different rationales, purpose and actions.

The intermediary role can be described as 'change agent', 'lubricant', 'bridging-instance', 'bypass-organisation' or 'hinge-function'. But the function of intermediaries does not involve settling disputes. Their task is not to avoid conflicts but to make conflicts productive.

A significant task of intermediary bodies is to ensure that not only top–down enacted community development programs determine what can be discussed on site and what cannot. The specific value of intermediary work lies in the fact that it helps to represent logic, ideas and interests that (sometimes) differ from those of local politics and administration. Through residents' meetings, backyard conversations, home visits, intensive interviews, staircase meetings, district festivals, etc., intermediary bodies help to keep the floor open for unexpected demands by community residents that do not necessarily match the current agenda of urban development. The task of intermediaries is to keep the possibility open for questions such as:

—In whose interest and for which population groups should the community development program operate?

—Who has the power to define what the main problem is? Should the top priority be easy access to the nearby motorways, like the local retailers claim? Or should emphasis lie on a more sensible traffic calming, like the elderly and the parents of young children think?

—Should the community development take place for the people who live here now? Or for the people you would like to live here in the future?

Part of the intermediary function is the creation of mutual comprehension and transparency. Unlike the tendency of traditional community work and community organising to focus only on the community residents, intermediaries not only prepare and coach the citizens for dialogue but all participating actors (Lüttringhaus 2000, p. 140). And intermediaries do not cultivate one-sided movements of 'the have-nots against the haves'.

Intermediary actors manage dialogues in different kinds of directions:

—between (conflicting) interests of the residents in the community

—between competing departments of the municipal administration

—between community-based organisations and the bureaucratic world of the administration or profit-orientated economic sector.

Aside from horizontal networking, the introduction of intermediary bodies emphasises the necessary vertical network dimension of community renewal: bridging and connecting the deprived people in marginalised communities with resources and capacities they lack, which might be located 'outside' the local community.

The municipal administration cannot fulfil its function without feedback from the citizens. In order to overcome communication problems between the system and the life-world the municipality is in need of intermediary professionals acting as 'interdisciplinary interpreters' between these spheres. The professional interpreter's first task is to understand the different modes, logic, pace and constraints of both and their second task is to translate and transport these 'strange' rationalities in a way that is comprehensible to the actors in both the life-world and the system.

Intermediaries serve as information brokers and are a social early-warning system for the municipality as well as the community. They are 'not the mouthpiece of the citizens, but they help them to raise their voice. They are not a mere puppet of the municipal administration, but they help them to become more citizen-centered and by this means more effective' (Hinte 2001, p. 174, translated by the author). Intermediary players do not have legitimate power; at best they have influence. They do not try to change the system directly (because then it would refuse); but with their accumulation of valuable and reliable information they can gather influence which allows them to irritate the system and encourage change.

In order to exercise their mediating function, intermediary professionals are dependent on trust from both the life-world and the system. This confidence, in turn, can only arise if the intermediaries themselves are familiar with both of these spheres. Intermediaries therefore seek contact with players from the system and the life-world. The operational competence of intermediary bodies is based on their knowledge of and access to the local community, as well as to the broader city. This ongoing acquisition of relationships and information by the intermediary bodies takes place in two steps (Fehren 2008, p. 194):

1   *Building relationships in the local community.* The basis of intermediary action is to permanently relate to and take notice of the people in the community, their issues, their fears and their beliefs. Detailed knowledge about events, developments, new risks and prospects concerning the community is generated and updated by a variety of access paths to the community. These include initiation of community-related working groups (professional and non-professional); dealing with 'hot topics' of the community (for example, housing, education, jobs); regular background discussions with multipliers such as priests and imams, local politicians, club presidents, district social workers and local retailers; meetings with the community workers in the local community centres, which have (like a seismograph) a very good sensitivity regarding the community because of their daily contact with the citizens; and attendance at community meetings and meetings with community organisations.

2   *Building and updating relationships and access to the municipal government and administration.* While access to the local community is the 'standing leg' of the intermediary, access to local decision-makers and controlling authorities in government, administration and business is the 'free leg'. This second pillar is based on regular meetings with representatives from the municipal administration; background discussions with city council politicians; participation in municipal working groups; and project-related contact and cooperation with actors who operate beyond the community range, such as

communal business development, volunteer agencies, welfare associations and the companies as 'corporate citizens'.

One example, addressing the issue of different religious groups living together in the same neighbourhood, might be helpful to illustrate some aspects of the intermediary function. In a local community with a high Muslim migrant population the old 'backyard mosque' burned down and the Muslim parish was planning a new and prestigious mosque with a minaret. This raised concern amongst native (Christian) residents in some parts of the community that they may become 'strangers in their own neighbourhood'. The Muslim residents, meanwhile, were concerned that their freedom of religious expression would be overlooked. The intermediary 'district moderators' immediately set up a local planning group. This group consisted of a broad collection of institutional, local and municipal opinion leaders: representatives from the churches and mosques, local politicians and administrators, retailers and houseowners. One effect of the immediate establishment of this group was that the political parties were not tempted to develop any ambition to politicise the arising conflict in the upcoming election campaigns. The group agreed on the right of the Muslim parish to build a mosque in the community and also decided to seriously address some of the fears and worries of the native residents. Lots of public meetings took place, where people were invited to raise their concerns and to concretise them. Close contact was established with the press media, which covered the issue several times. As a kind of 'paradoxical intervention', a theatre group was invited to draw public awareness to the plans for the new mosque. They exaggerated the issue by setting up short plays in which crusaders and jihad fighters attacked each other. These took place at the weekly farmers' market and got the market visitors to engage in the topic in a very lively and non-threatening way.

As a result of the nuanced approaches of the intermediaries to integrate the various actors and milieus of the community in the public debate, a property for the mosque was found which, as a compromise, was neither in the very centre of the community nor on its outskirts. Nowadays the new mosque is a fully accepted, integral part of the community.

INSTITUTIONALISING INTERMEDIARIES

In Essen, the university institute, ISSAB, performs the intermediary function for the processes of local community development. The intermediary professionals, who are called 'district coordinators', are employed by the university institute, but the municipality pays their wages. The university contributes the expertise of two professors and, in addition, its students do their practical year in the community development projects.

What does the municipality of Essen get out of this cooperation? As a relatively independent institution, the university is able to give incorruptible feedback to City Hall. The district

coordinators from the university point out what the decision-makers in the municipality neglect, miss or misunderstand. They act as an early-warning signal in the political arena and help to hold the local government accountable. At the same time, they support and challenge the municipal administration.

ISSAB's community engagement is not an additional task but is at the very core of its research and action. The institute consists of four different branches that are all connected to the institute's practical engagement in the local communities. ISSAB engages with the community in the following ways:

—It acts as a provider of professional intermediaries for the municipality – four of the institute's staff are fully engaged in the local community development programs.

—As part of the BA study program for Social Work, the institute offers a three-semester in-depth project – studies in theory and practice of community work and social space orientation. For a maximum of 50 students theoretical/academic components of courses are linked with community-centred practice that is embedded in the local community development projects.

—The institute's research activities adopt an action research approach. Research is done in close cooperation with the local protagonists and results are passed to them as soon as possible in order to support their action. The focus of cognitive interest is on how local communities can be organised with the help of social space orientated forms of social work and what (organisational) forms of professional competence and material resources are necessary (see www.uni-due.de/issab/).

—Based on this knowledge, the institute counsels municipalities in Germany, Austria and Switzerland that want to improve the contextual sensitivity of their public services or reorganise their whole administration to have a local community orientation. In addition, the institute offers training and qualification for staff in these municipalities.

CONCLUSIONS ON THE PRACTICE OF THE UNIVERSITY AS INTERMEDIARY

Relative Autonomy

Intermediaries in community development processes can and should be funded publicly, but at the same time they must be protected from direct interventions by the local government. In order to perform their mediating function between the sphere of privacy (life-world) and the field of economy and state (system), intermediaries should have sufficient autonomy in these spheres. Universities as providers of an intermediary function in community development seem to be a very suitable institutional setting: they combine maximum municipality independence with strong social legitimacy, and thus have an influential social position.

The university institute is beyond partial interests. Of course, it does have self-interest (that is, keeping the community

projects as research and practice fields for the students). But unlike regular providers of social services (like welfare associations), the university is not in need of expansion in this particular field and does not compete with other providers. This is a very important foundation for being an intermediary: the university institute is not part of the market game of social services in a municipality. Therefore, it is less tempted to ingratiate itself with the municipality in order to secure further orders.

Advisory groups at community and municipal level critically evaluate and monitor the university-community partnership. They support improvement in the relationship and guard against inappropriate developments. This initiative ensures that the institute's staff is trustworthy and loyal to the municipality and at the same time critical of – and sometimes annoying to – political decision-makers and the municipal administration.

Clear Mission and Purpose

Research on campus-community partnerships shows that 'having a clear identity of purpose and goals' is crucial to the success of university engagement (Bringle & Hatcher 2002, p. 507). This is especially true of the ambivalent field of the intermediary. The duality of activation, which means activating both the citizens and the institutional sphere, requires a mandate from the municipality. The declared will of the political–administrative system to deal with professional intermediaries is essential to tackling the sometimes uncomfortable criticism of the intermediaries.

The engagement of the university institute in Essen has nothing to do with charitable activities on a voluntary basis. Quite the contrary. The entitlements of the university are contracted with and paid for by the municipality. The contract with the municipality runs for an unlimited period of time. Only this long-term contract makes it possible for the university to take the risk of hiring extra staff and setting up an extra study program.

Emphasis on Implementation

University engagement should not be viewed as using the community and its problems merely as study subjects. 'Those very communities … resent being treated as an experimental laboratory for higher education …' (Holland & Gelmon, 1998, p. 105). The communities instead require those forms of academic-practitioner collaboration that have a practical outcome: '… implementation (i.e. successfully putting ideas into practice) is the test of knowledge' (Benson, Harkvay & Puckett 2000, p. 25). This demands an active involvement that many academics still feel uncomfortable with. In Essen, the institute itself is an agent for transformation of local communities and public policies. This active engagement of universities in local development suggests the employment of skilled staff: 'Campuses may need to hire professional staff skilled in understanding communities and acting as liaisons among diverse constituencies' (Bringle & Hatcher 2002, p. 508).

Universities can be a very suitable institutional setting for taking over the ambivalent intermediary role in community renewal processes. They dispose of relative autonomy from the local government and are connected in numerous ways with both the city and the region. The dual perspective of doing research on community development strategies on the one hand and engaging in the local community development programs on the other can create a fruitful interaction and tension between theoretical and empirical knowledge and practice of community development. If universities are able to expand their traditional academic mission by becoming a provider of intermediary functions, they can overcome the academic-practitioner divide and serve their region in helping to resolve the growing complexities of today's social tensions and challenges.

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