

*Track: Social Entrepreneurship - Entrepreneurship and Innovation in the Not-For-Profit Sector*

*Alternative Track: The Entrepreneurial City*

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## **Back to school: triangulating city entrepreneurship**

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### *Extended abstract*

For a long time, the entrepreneurial efforts of cities were either minimal or directed towards businesses, e.g. in the form of public-private partnerships. In recent times, and coinciding with the advent of social entrepreneurship, the entrepreneurial interest of cities has turned towards citizens, e.g. via cooperation with communities of citizens. Experience proves that the latter form of entrepreneurship is hampered by the lack of clear organization from the part of the citizens and by the inherently internal focus of the city's administration. Through explorative cooperation with the University of Amsterdam, the city of Amsterdam has successfully addressed its internal focus, at the same time creating new approaches to the channeling of citizens' diffuse preferences. This article reports on this cooperative experiment, leading to more general conclusions regarding citizens-oriented entrepreneurial projects. One of its main conclusions is that successful city entrepreneurship requires a change of attitude in the cooperation of the city with communities of knowledge such as universities.

In the Spring of 2004, the city of Amsterdam engaged in a cooperation with the University of Amsterdam. Around 40 students that represented closely the city's multicultural population enrolled in a Master's course "Information management in practice". All students were taking part in joint city-university projects. The explicit goal of the cooperation was to triangulate city entrepreneurship by confronting the city's internal focus on what is politically *feasible* and

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the students' innate inclination to exploring what is *thinkable*, preferably leading to *achievable* citizens-oriented results. Students were unequivocally *not* engaged in a work placement program with the city, in order for them to be fully independent from the internal focus of the city administration, so they could retain their necessary critical attitude and external focus. Examples of projects dealt with were the enhancement of social cohesion in a multiracial district via the application of IT, the investigation of citizens-directed applications of glass fiber infrastructure, the multimedia interaction of citizens and the fire brigade prior to the arrival of firemen at the seat of the fire, the translation of the individualization of the practice of sports into an adequate reservation system for a sports accommodation etc. In total, ten projects were selected. The initiative was unambiguously supported by the mayor and aldermen, as well as by the city manager.

The initiative was set up as a learning experience, where all participants involved (citizens, administrators, civil servants, students, teachers and external experts) were members of the learning community. To this end, we applied the Learning by Sharing model (Huizing, Maes & Thijssen, 2004), as developed at the University of Amsterdam. This model is passing over the traditional teacher/student dichotomy by discerning the interacting roles of teacher, researcher, student and practitioner; each participant is supposed to play a number of, but ideally *all* roles throughout the learning life-cycle. Through weekly joint meetings and an intensively used QuickPlace digital learning environment, participants were urged not only to learn from but as well to actively intervene in each other's projects. There were no predefined classroom sessions, as knowledge was brought in on demand. The intensive dual coaching from the part of the university and the city's project leaders was complemented with coaching by external experts; the main guideline followed (and stressed again and again) was the complementary nature of *feasible* and *thinkable*, stretching each project to and sometimes beyond its boundaries.

The shared belief behind this endeavor was that social, citizens-directed entrepreneurship and innovation as engaged by the city is seriously frustrated by the focus on political feasibility in all phases of project realization. Through this joint venture, we concentrated on widening this unilateral focus during the conceptualization and/or design phase of projects previously selected and initiated by the city administration. This limitation appeared to be helpful in addressing the internal focus as already crept in during prior phases, yet encumbering in engag-

ing citizens in the projects. It appears that, in order to be successful in the latter sense, participation from the very first project initiation on is necessary.

The results, as fully discussed in the paper, were beyond expectations. A majority of projects were either immediately brought into the realization phase or considered as extremely prolific, mind-expanding contributions to the city's decision-making process. Above all, the effects on the major participants involved were salient: (1) the public servants felt challenged by the confrontation with the community of knowledge formed by the students, the teachers and the external experts; (2) the students felt challenged by the appeal to match *feasible* with *thinkable* and above all to produce *achievable* results. The overall project was experienced by all parties involved as *organized disruption*, a true watermark for entrepreneurial innovation.

In the paper, the lessons learned and pitfalls, both at project level and at city level, are fully explored and analyzed, though they are beyond the scope of this abstract. They basically pertain to (positive and negative) tensions between *feasible*, *thinkable* and *achievable*. Critical success factors were the combination of bottom-up approach and top level support (with a need to work outside-in from the very beginning to engage citizens), the situation of *organized disruption* created by the initiative and above all the triangulation of the citizens-city relationship through the introduction of the community of knowledge. It was experienced in practice that openness towards the *thinkable*, a necessary attitude for entrepreneurial innovation, can substantially be boosted through this type of cooperation.

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