

NEWS

PROJECT

WESH –
We.Service.Heerlen

📍 Heerlen, The
Netherlands

TOPIC

Digital transition

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BY HARALD WOUTERS,
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WESH: relying on the ‘wisdom of the crowd’ in managing the city

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We have interviewed Mr Kurt Isik, Innovation Advisor at the Association of Dutch Municipalities (VNG) and partner in the We.Service.Heerlen project.

Over the past years, governments on all levels have been setting their antennas towards regional clusters and collaboratives. Looking for promising bottom-up initiatives, hopeful grassroots innovations and the holy grail of the citizen-centred approach. The We.Service.Heerlen (WESH) project has the potential of becoming an eyeopener to other urban authorities. The Association of Dutch Municipalities looks eagerly as the experiment unfolds in which citizens are performing public space maintenance tasks. “To us WESH shows the necessity for local governments to take a new stance in the information society,” Kurt Isik states. “The project illustrates the beginning of a new era; where governments rely on the ‘wisdom of the crowd’ and citizens assist them in managing their city more efficiently.”



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More interaction and less social deprivation

Kurt emphasizes the curiosity of the Association of Dutch Municipalities in WESH: "This project is definitely having our full attention. We see a lot of communities and neighbourhoods in the Netherlands with limited interaction between different groups. WESH has the ability to improve these relationships, simply by having people fixing up their own surroundings and thereby helping each other within the community." Stimulating more interaction and understanding between groups of people is on the governmental agenda all over Europe. Since Heerlen has been coping with social disadvantages for decades, the city has become a leader in creating innovative solutions for social improvement. "Heerlen is a special case," Kurt adds. "First of all, there is a can-do mentality here. Plus there are some tech-savvy people working at the municipality. That makes them resourceful in finding new ways to manage the city properly." Due to its population decline and resulting housing demolition, an increasing acreage of public space came under the city authority's responsibility. "In that sense WESH is a brilliant, bottom-up idea. The project uses technology to bridge the inventive nature in both Heerlen's spatial and social policy spheres."

Understanding the role of public authorities

“A disadvantageous part of the local mentality is the low civic engagement,” Kurt points out. Low trust in governmental institutions is apparent in cities that can have a sense of neglect by authorities, such as former industrial areas or distant places. “Just look at the relatively high number of populist votes in Heerlen during last elections,” Kurt says, as he details both factors: “Although the closure of the state mines is almost half a century ago, you can still sense that the national government did not do enough to compensate. And, although this might sound funny when you look at the size of the Netherlands, the seat of the national government in the Hague is definitely far from Heerlen.” For Kurt WESH at least has the ability to create more understanding in the role and functioning of public authorities: “I think WESH can help to create awareness among citizens in what a local government actually does for the city, for their community and for them as individuals. Municipalities on the other hand are increasingly looking for ways to open up to their citizens and consult them in their needs and preferences. Having the community join in and perform a few of the city’s service tasks is a really interesting way to do so.”



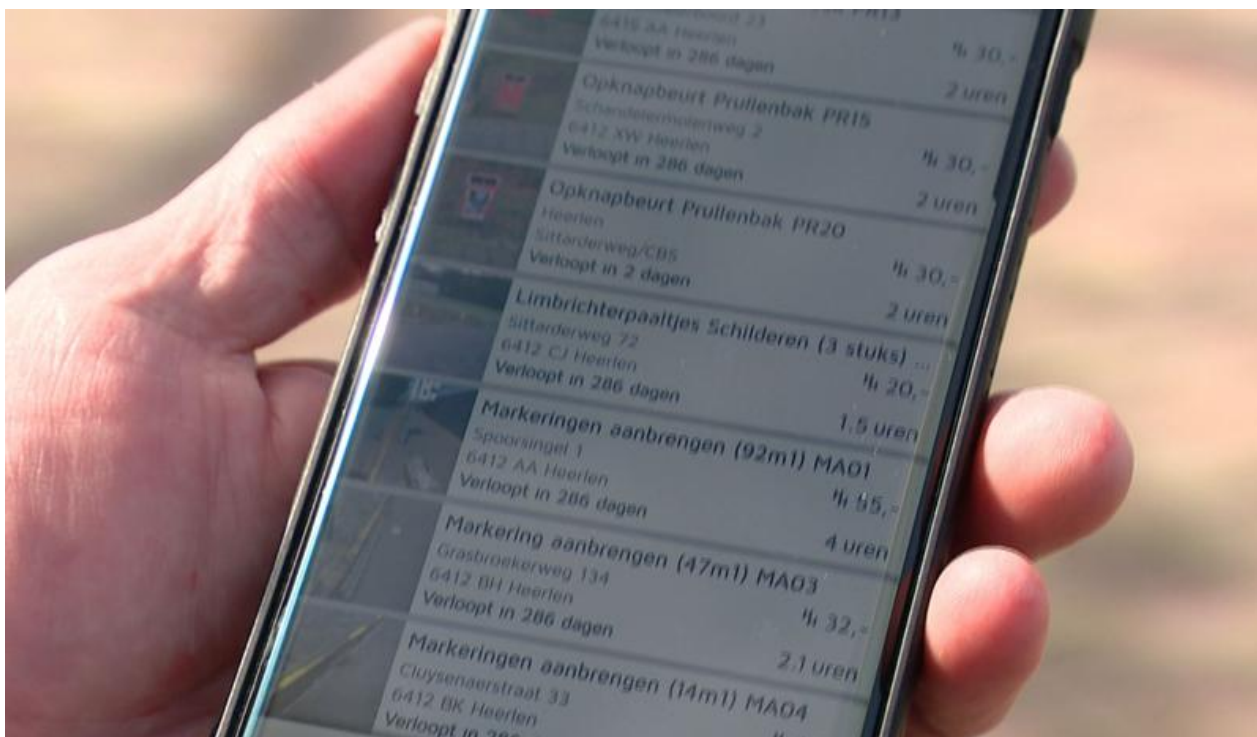
Quote

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Potential impact of local innovations

According to Kurt the Association of Dutch Municipalities is very aware of the potential impact of local innovations: “Recently we have adopted a new strategy, in which we take a clear focus on regional innovation collaboratives throughout the Netherlands. Utrecht for example, is interesting to us for its Healthy Urban Living programme on liveability. Eindhoven is at the forefront on digital urban planning with its Urban Development Initiative.” Kurt underlines Heerlen’s Public Services Lab at the Brightlands Smart Services Campus being a prime centre in developing new-style public services: “We deliberately choose to participate in Heerlen’s campus, in order to see which great ideas we can scale up to other municipalities. It really helps us to capture and spread collaborative knowledge from a local to a national level.” Scaling up to other parts of Europe is a logical next step for Kurt: “The network of [European Digital Innovation Hubs](#) that the European Commission is currently developing, is perfectly suitable for spreading this type of knowledge transnationally. Our association is

developing one of these Hubs with the forenamed ecosystems, including the Public Services Lab in Heerlen.”



Raising fundamental questions

For Kurt the experimental nature of WESH still raises fundamental questions now and then: “We look at any possible threshold or hurdle for future plans of scaling up of the initiative. Therefore I believe the source code of the platform software should become publicly available, under the [European Open Source Software Licence](#).” This vision is in line with the European Commission’s idea of creating open standards in order to avoid vendor lock-ins. The Commission made that very clear on several occasions, for example in the [European Digital Strategy](#). “For the partner of WESH it is important to understand the reason behind that perspective of the Commission,” Kurt continues. “I believe we can tackle this by making the right appointments with each other. Platforms have really changed public-private collaborations. Of course technology partners can profit as a company, but not in a way that all public bodies will have to pay the same subscription-based fee in the future. If that is negotiable, I think WESH can really make a difference.”

Quote

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Citizens don’t follow administrative boundaries

In regard to WESH the Association of Dutch Municipalities generally takes a leap into the future. “Our role is to look at how we can make this initiative last. To make it durable and implementable in different areas.” With around 350 municipalities in the Netherlands alone Kurt is realistic: “Let’s be honest, are we really going to create all sorts of different municipal cryptocurrencies? So we can trade Heerlen Heitjes for neighbouring Sittard Somethings?” For Kurt the Association of Dutch Municipalities is not really in favour of context specific, microlevel solutions: “EU Member States said goodbye to exchanging currencies two decades ago when they created a pan-European currency: the Euro. If we apply a digital form of money, we should look for standardisation right away.” For WESH Kurt likes to think of the next phase: “Maybe we should look at a regional level for a digital coin and the ability of having people from elsewhere earning them. In WESH the currency is only available to local citizens and local shops. Of course to stimulate the local economy. But if there is one thing we’re sure of, it is that people don’t

follow administrative boundaries for urban amenities or work.”



Civic participation and local entrepreneurship

The Association of Dutch Municipalities already learned by participating in WESH: “The municipality really took a facilitating role on the digital platform and in the project itself. That is really unconventional to most projects where municipalities participate in.” Ingredients to a successful digital platform are creating user-engagement and providing the right content. For Kurt this is certainly the case for WESH: “By putting citizens and local entrepreneurs at the centre of attention, both the aim of the project and the scope of the platform remained clear: stimulating civic participation and local entrepreneurship.” But still there are pitfalls once the WESH platform was launched early 2021. “Honestly, the number of users and participating shops is still rather low. Of course that is mainly due to the whole covid situation,” Kurt points out. “But the team still has a lot of work to do in creating more engagement in the coming months.” The hopes are that the numbers will catch up once restrictions are loosened or people are vaccinated. “I can assure you, our association will help the municipality of Heerlen to make a huge success out of WESH and Heerlen’s Public Services Lab,” Kurt concludes.

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