

On the Road Together. Bridging the gap between the public space and accessibility for people with disabilities in the Dutch Metropole area

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Abstract

Internationally, issues around equality and inclusion such as gender, race and religion have been the centre of heated debate. While these issues also still require close attention, it is striking that the theme of inclusion of people with disabilities seems to enjoy a position that is lower on the international agenda. This article advocates for rights of people with disabilities by addressing the theme of accessibility of the public space. The article critically assesses the accessibility of the Dutch Metropole area. It underscores the obstacles and opportunities for people with disabilities to participate in the public space in an equal manner. It analyses a case study called Samen op Pad (On the Road Together), an initiative that uses geographic information systems (GIS) to enhance the independent navigation of people with disabilities through the urban public space. This article evaluates the lack of accessibility in the current design of the urban space and calls for a localized approach for inclusive governance and service delivery for people with disabilities. Additionally, it explores the added value of the case study of integral and interdisciplinary cooperation across local government entities, GIS specialists, and people with lived experience to improve accessibility of the urban area through smart use of data. Lastly, the article calls for international knowledge exchange to increase awareness to join forces to normalize a public space that is user friendly and accessible to all.

Keywords: people with disabilities, inclusion, accessibility, public space, geographic information systems (GIS)

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Introduction

This paper elaborates on the quest to eliminate the “dis” out of disabled by making navigation in the public space more accessible to all. The topic is assessed through a case study of a pilot project that launched in January 2016 as a partnership between municipalities in Zuid-Holland, a coastal province in the Netherlands. Historically, the Netherlands has profiled itself as a tolerant and inclusive society for centuries. Over time, we managed to have major breakthroughs in terms of normalization of e.g. female rights and LGBTQ+ rights, allowing women to gain ground in the workforce and people to openly be in same sex or queer relationships. Although there still is a world to win in terms of these themes as well, it seems that people with disabilities remain the cuckoo in the nest. Working, travelling and practicing sports are still not naturally accessible to all. Despite the adoption by the Netherlands of the CRPD in 2016, putting obligations in place to promote and protect the rights of all persons with disabilities, progress to transform these obligations into practice is slow.

For people with disabilities, daily reality is filled with obstacles of which many take place in the public space. A person’s full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others is hindered by the way that the urban area is designed. As a consequence, many people stay home out of the fear of not being able to find their way in the public space. By taking away unnecessary obstacles, people can navigate more independently resulting in a fairer interaction in society. These obstacles can often be avoided by making small alterations in the public space and buildings or by an increased insight on the whereabouts of (accessible) utilities in itself. This case study focuses on the latter, yet paves way for the former.

This paper illustrates the added value of the pilot project “Samen op Pad” (On the Road Together) for local authorities and people with disabilities by making its project setup available for the inter(national) level. It maps out the origin of the partnership, it illustrates the added value of bringing in expertise of people with disabilities with policy making, and shares testimonials of policy makers and users alike to inspire and stimulate others to counter the gaps in accessibility of the contemporary public space.

Data driven inclusion

Originating at the yearly congress for geographic information systems for the Rotterdam and The Hague metropole region in 2016 in Zoetermeer, Samen op Pad is not a typical inclusion project. Instead of being born in an environment that overflowed with inclusion policy officers, the cradle of this pilot project is hard science. At the Geocongress, the participants were challenged by their host, former Public Space manager of the municipality of Zoetermeer, Peter de Visser, to “embark upon an idea that sticks”. Driven by the central theme of the event – urban development – a large group including data specialists and inclusion officers brainstormed on a variety of societal themes.

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has been an important stepping stone for Samen op Pad, with a thematic focus on improving the accessibility of the public space for people with disabilities. The population with lived experience of disability is increasing, as the public as a whole is ageing. People with disabilities, like anyone else, want to maintain the control over their own lives. As the current layout of

the public space often fails to accommodate this control, the freedom of people with disabilities is obstructed.

A first step in order to retrieve control, is an oversight of the accessibility of the public space. This is the essence upon which the idea has been built and carried out. The close inter-municipal cooperation between four municipalities in the metropole area – Capelle aan den IJssel, Rotterdam, The Hague and Zoetermeer – and Esri Nederland, a local intelligence supplier specialized in GIS software was an essential starting point. The project has an informal organizational structure, with representation of one or two people per municipality and one representative on the side of social entrepreneurship by Esri. The project's funding has been mainly invested by (geo)data management departments of the municipalities, supported by the inclusion policy department.. Together, they shape the steering committee of Samen op Pad, but they enjoy support from other municipalities for data gathering as well as they partner up with disability advocacy foundation Voorall.



Figure 1. Lilian Harteveld, A group picture of Samen op Pad's initiators, 2019.

Framing the field

Samen op Pad informs policy makers and inhabitants of the municipalities through a free online user-friendly application which pinpoints useful information for navigation in the Dutch metropole region. The objective is to contribute to an improved accessibility of the public space for people with disabilities through smart (re)use of digital information. The experience of the members of Samen op Pad as well as the evaluation by The Netherlands Association of Municipalities (VNG) indicate that the Netherlands has made progress in the field of accessibility in the last couple of years.¹ However, this progress is slow and the evaluation states that The Netherlands still has a long way to go. This conclusion is underlined by the recent investigation of the Social and Cultural Planning Bureau (Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau) which states that our country is “far

¹ Ministry of Public Health, Wellbeing, and Sports, *Eindrapportage 2021 Onbeperkt meedoen!*, p. 105.

from accessible”.² The involved parties in Samen op Pad facilitate and organize clear information and applications. They are gathering freely available data of the municipalities themselves as well as that of third parties that are relevant to the theme of accessibility. Through transparency of the data, users are empowered to move more confidently and independently while navigating the urban environment.

The project team exists of policy makers of the municipalities with knowledge of policy as well as of geographical information systems. Naturally, they operate in close collaboration with people with disabilities which enables an efficient way of targeting accessibility barriers in the public space, together pointing out the missing links encountered on a daily basis. Hence, working together on a solution to bridge barriers. The information tools of Samen op Pad, mainly created from smart reusage of management data on public spaces, opts to increase the quality and accessibility of public facilities while providing better opportunities for persons with disabilities to live independently and navigate the urban environments with greater autonomy. In addition, the innovation also seeks to inspire local governments and other stakeholders to address accessibility in general.

Nothing about us without us

It is rather unusual to come across someone that denies the importance of practices that endorse an accessible public space. Yet, the grand majority of public spaces function almost like an obstacle course for people with disabilities. How can this be?

Many municipalities that start working on a Local Inclusion Agenda are struggling with raising the right questions and prioritization when drafting policies to enhance the accessibility of the public space. An important factor that is often overlooked is the lack of representation of people with disabilities and organizations that advocate for them in the decision-making process of urban development plans. Surprisingly enough, citizen participation of this sort remains to be categorized as a pioneering practice. At Samen op Pad, the co-creation process makes up a core building block. The steering group has incorporated strategies and mechanisms to ensure meaningful participation as a key factor in their plan of action. The motto “Nothing about us without us”, which has become the slogan of the global movement to accomplish full equality and opportunity for, by and with people with disabilities. The pilot project also relies heavily on the principle of participation.

As mentioned earlier, the main partner that enables the initiative to involve people with disabilities in various components of the project is the Voorall Foundation of The Hague. The foundation was established in 2006 with support of the municipality of The Hague and the Ministry of Education and Culture to advocate for inhabitants with a disability. Voorall works with and for people with a physical or psychosocial disability, chronic illness or a combination thereof as well as for organizations that advocate for their rights as well as those that don’t have this agenda yet but should be involved. The foundation has a large pool of volunteers that include people with a wide range of disabilities, congenital as well as acquired at a later stage in life.

The volunteers are involved in various ways such as:

- testing areas on accessibility level to obtain data

² Vermeij and Hamelink, *Accessible? Not by a long shot*, p. 2.

- the production of advisory reports as well as
- advisory positions for strategic decision-making.



Figure 2. Voorall Foundation, An accessibility test of a theatre entrance.

The fact that the foundation's volunteer pool is extremely popular indicates that many people, especially people with disabilities, feel the need to endorse a more accessible public space. Early involvement of people with disabilities in urban development plans are an efficient way to work towards an inclusive city plan. Research from the World Bank indicates that building in line with the inclusive design principle renders a mere one percent increase of costs compared to the current status quo.³ Strikingly enough, the involvement of people with disabilities within urban development projects is still rather unique and remains a world to win.

Navigating through the public space

Effective implementation and monitoring of the acquired data and adequate accessibility standards across public spaces, takes shape in two freely available tools:

- the Samen op Pad app, and
- the Samen op Pad Hub.

The Samen op Pad app is an online application fit for usage on computers as well as mobile phones through which users with different types of disabilities can find their way through towns and buildings. The app has been developed by the municipality of The Hague in cooperation with the Voorall Foundation. Users can navigate through the application by filtering on their own profile as well as on aspired themes. You can install preferred findings corresponding to your own profile by filtering on characteristics that apply to you, e.g. physical disability, hearing or visual impairment. Additionally, you can

³ The World Bank, Design for All, p. 5.

filter whether you would like to find results in the categories of leisure, healthcare and wellbeing, municipal information or within the field of education and jobs. The matching results are presented in an online map that indicates accessibility qualities of buildings and facilities surrounding you. Whereas the pilot project is currently taking place in The Hague, the application with its corresponding data is freely available and can be used anywhere.

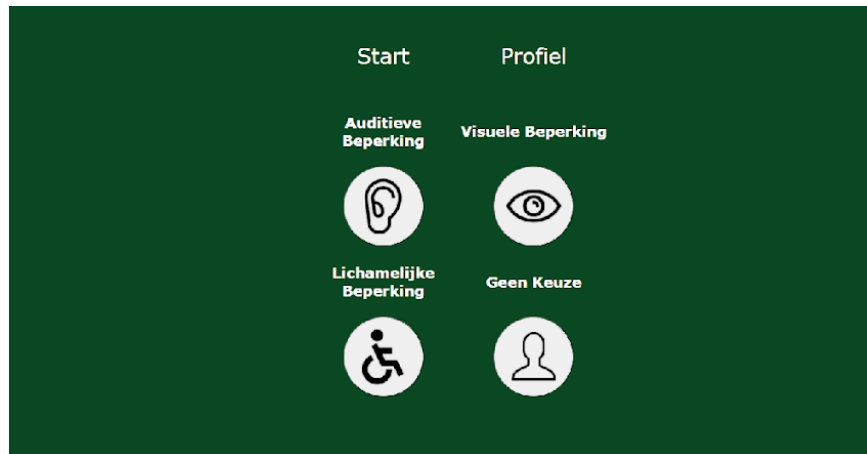


Figure 3. Samen Op Pad, filter options for preferred profile selection, 2022.

The online Hub is a webpage (www.samenoppad.info), currently only available in Dutch, where relevant data and information of various cities are shared through digital maps. To use limited resources as effectively as possible, the webpage is currently focused on four elements: public restrooms, accessible parking spaces, guidelines for blind people, and public playgrounds.

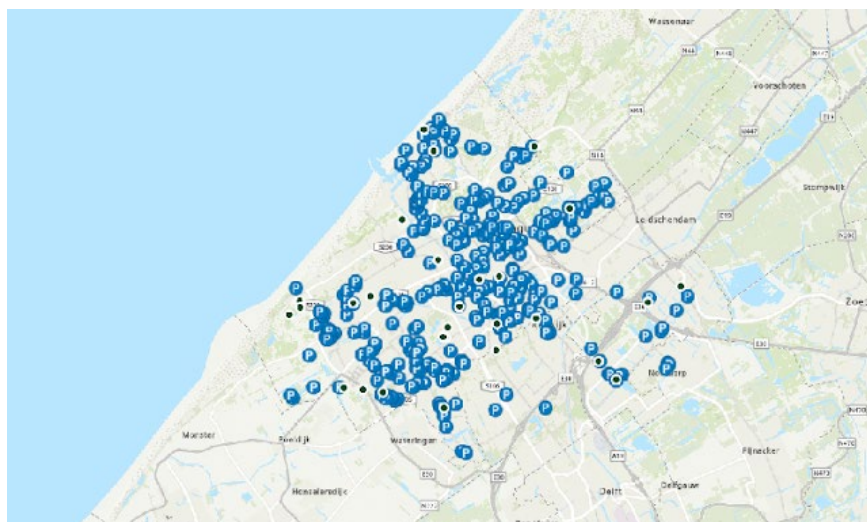


Figure 4. Samen Op Pad, A spatial overview of accessible toilets in the Hague, 2022.

Most data available in this database derives from the tests executed by Voorall. While the available information is not entirely complete, already 900 locations in the Hague

have been tested and trialed by the volunteer groups. Samen op Pad aspires to expand the themes and data cases in the future, including for instance a filter for older persons, or insight on the available transportation methods. Right now, the application indicates the route from one point to another and available transportation methods, however, there is still a gap on the accessibility of the public transportation on site. After finalizing the pilot in The Hague, the project sets out to map out the entire country with the free data tool, and to cross pollinate the available information across-provinces.

Plant a seed, build a forest

A core strength of this project is the interdisciplinary expertise centred in the initiative. In particular, the participative decision-making process with close involvement of people with lived experience. In order to bring all this knowledge together, an online hub was created. Whereas the data-driven approach and origin forms a core strength of Samen op Pad, it is simultaneously part of its Achilles heel. As the initiative originates from a shared ambition of individuals from various parties that happened to meet at the Geocongress rather than from an already existing municipal priority on the agenda, it remains difficult for the involved partners to anchor the project in their organizations. Subsequently, the initiative lives on without a solid program budget to fall back on. In sum, the initiative is actually carried by a group of people that are ideologically connected. Out of personal conviction, own time and effort they invested into a theme that should be the new norm. Nevertheless, despite the multitude of challenges faced by the project, small steps are taken to achieve major changes. Within the limited capacity, the group has sparked the attention of colleagues with the integral collaboration across departments. As a slow chain reaction, the initiative is being noticed and supported by municipalities outside of the Metropole area more and more, as well as receiving increased acknowledgement of local (inter)departmental peers.

Parallel to the specific goals sought after by Samen op Pad, the seed is planted for the broader goal to integrate accessibility in the public space in all municipal plans. The steering committee has noticed that the topic of accessibility for people with disabilities is increasingly accounted for by colleagues across departments in local programs, budgets and policies related to public spaces in the urban area. Step by step, the way to accessibility as the standard for infrastructural projects is improved.

One step at a time: local to national to global

The team is aware that the current capacity only allows one step at a time. Moreover, Covid-19 measures have had major impact on the ability to do test-runs on location with the volunteer groups. Nevertheless, the ambition is very ambitious.

First, they want to map out the current state of affairs within the municipalities of the core groups on the focus topics through the pilot that has been kicked off. Once this data is available and clearly communicable, the next step will be taken towards adjustments of the physical public space. In this manner, little by little, it will become easier to pinpoint the bottlenecks of urban development in terms of accessibility and to tackle them.

Parallel to the pilot, lobby and advocacy for the theme is needed to maintain the topic on the agenda, locally as well as globally. To maintain societal relevance, the project has tweaked its goals and objectives in 2021 for the upcoming period. How to provide

continuity and improvement for the future usage of the information tools? How to gain more awareness on the availability of the initiative, getting as many organizations and municipalities on board to increase the impact of the project, and eventually extinguish the necessity of the Samen op Pad tools for the future in the coming three years?

The plan of action that was drafted for the period of 2021-2024, is now under implementation. In the spring of 2022, the app has been launched in the Hague. This version 1.0 is still under construction. National promotion for the app and the hub is planned for fall 2022.

The hub is under shared maintenance of the partner municipalities and a data lab of the local College “De Haagse Hogeschool”. In September 2022, students will be invited to work on the hub. A connection has already been made with the city Deal on public space within the developmental team “data-driven steering”. This team will provide a presentation on accessibility as a focus when working on integral area development with special attention for the digital support thereof using GIS. This momentum will be used to seek affiliation of the Netherlands Association of Municipalities (VNG).

Call to action

It is important to give small and young initiatives such as Samen op Pad the right stage, and the space to grow. VNG International encourages local governments and local government associations alike to stimulate the elevation of the theme of accessibility of the public space on policy agendas. Increased awareness will stimulate the support of initiatives such as Samen op Pad on their way to go the extra mile, and for its roots to grow in municipal frameworks. This is a call to action to local governments and local governments associations to learn from the valuable lessons that are shown by these case studies and initiatives alike. And to support them in any way possible and to share their knowledge with the world to strive together towards a new norm of inclusive urban development. Towards a more socially and physically sustainable society in which everyone can participate.

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