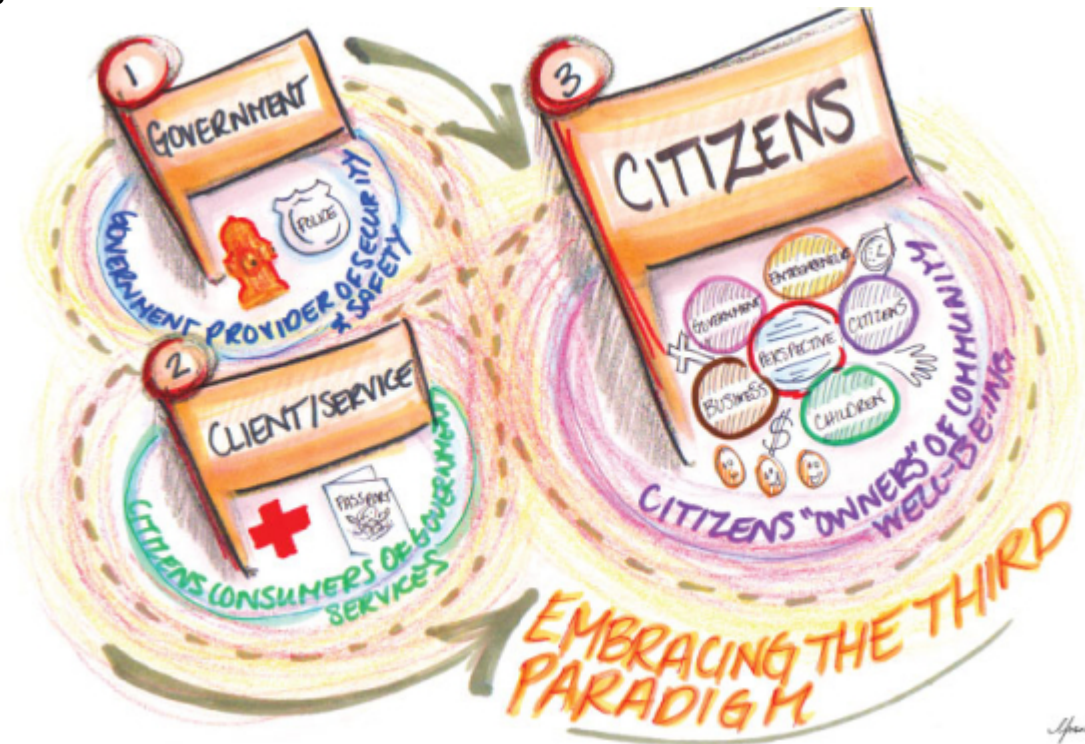


The Third Paradigm for Local Government

Image



Belgian municipalities experiment with new model for addressing resource constraints and creating a thriving community

In the municipalities of Olen and Houthalen-Helchteren, Belgium, citizen demands are increasing and resources to meet those demands shrinking. In the face of these challenges, local government leaders are becoming more open to experimenting with the addition of a new paradigm to their current ways of working.

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Arno Vansichen

Like so many other jurisdictions, these governments have traditionally seen increased efficiency and effectiveness as the only possible response to the resource and demand problem.

Recognizing a window of opportunity in the current challenges, Arno Vansichen, a life coach and organizational development (OD) consultant, and Hans Bouwen, also an OD consultant, have introduced a different possible answer. So far, they've experienced a favourable response.

A Modest Government

Inspired by the thinking of German political author Geert Schmitz Arno outlines three paradigms of local government proceedings:

- That of government as primary authority, where citizens have the least amount of influence, especially relevant in the case of security and safety programs.
- That of government as a provider of services, with citizens acting as clients.
- And finally, the third paradigm, that of citizens as the “owners” of the community’s well-being and government as a “modest” entity, acting in support of those initiatives.

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All three paradigms are important and necessary, Arno points out. But the third paradigm has largely not been recognized or embraced.

Olen and Houthalen-Helchteren

Two weeks ago, the municipality of Olen, with the backing of the local government leaders, held a one-day citizen gathering centred on creating a collective dream for the municipality’s future by 2020. In small groups that included children, citizens then identified specific projects to help realize that dream. The gathering came at the proposal of Hans to the municipality council.

An energizing moment in the gathering occurred when the priest of a local church that has historically taken a conservative stance in relation to the community stood up and made a public invitation for his church to be a site of community gatherings and projects. “That was a surprise and a beautiful moment,” says Arno, who co-hosted the gathering with Hans.

About a dozen projects have been identified through this gathering and are to be launched over the next few months, including the development of a bicycle corridor between the three jurisdictions of Olen. All of the projects are to be citizen-led, with

the local government taking the role of supporter.

In October, Arno will be introducing a three-year effort in Houthalen-Helchteren that falls into this same third paradigm — that of local government acting as a “modest” supporter of citizen-led initiatives. A Houthalen mayor observed Arno lead an organizational development process and caught a glimpse of the possibilities in that process for his village. “He was so surprised at what I had achieved through an Appreciative Inquiry summit with a local social-profit organization and he said, ‘I have to do something like that’,” Arno says.

Success Factors

The three-year commitment is important. Not only is that the length of the mayor’s term, but a citizen-engagement effort of this kind must be given time. “It needs a natural speed, you can’t force it,” Arno says. “It has to keep going to a deeper level and that needs time.”

It is also important that the gatherings include not only citizens and government but local entrepreneurs, those who are able to bring the economic and business perspective.

“On the local level, when there are a few strong entrepreneurs in the room, the people of the local government will also be very keen to also be in that room,” Arno says.

In hosting the gatherings, Arno and Hans use a number of dialogic and community development processes, namely [Appreciative Inquiry](#), [asset-based community development](#) and the [World Café](#) methodology. After learning of a community-building, dialogic effort in Peterborough, Ontario, the [Peterborough Dialogues](#), Arno is interested in adding elements of [Peter Block’s Six Conversations](#), which confront the issues of citizen accountability and commitment.

People Change When There is Urgency

Embracing the third paradigm is not necessarily an easy or intuitive exercise for local government. But especially in times of financial desperation, there is a new openness to different ideas. “People change when there is urgency,” Arno says.

On the citizen side, people are saying “now is the time to, as a community, bring our gifts out into the community. It’s not only the government who has to do these things.”

We know other efforts are underway elsewhere in which local and municipal governments are taking the stance of enablers of citizen-led initiatives. We’d love to hear about those. Please contact the newsroom at [michelle\(at\)axiomnews.com](mailto:michelle(at)axiomnews.com).