

A democratic supermarket in Moerwijk, area in The Hague, Netherlands

Before lunch starts in the neighborhood center the Buurtkamer, I go for a walk. Behind the brightly painted support pillars of the tenement flats hide empty shops. The shops that are stocked are hairdressers, a liquor store, a pet store, and a snack bar with a few crates of onions and potatoes in front of the door. I walk into a small shop, where they mainly packaged and canned food in addition to mobile subscriptions. The shopkeeper is busy on the phone and doesn't look up or back from my presence. I leave the store and cross the street, where the word 'SUPERMARKET' is written in large letters on the façade. I must stand on my tiptoes to peer into the dark room because the store is closed. Empty shelves. At the supermarket on the next street corner, it's the same story: a note says, 'closed due to circumstances'.

Reason for an investigation

After a decade of talking about the lack of a good supermarket in the neighborhood, residents around Jan Luykenlaan in Moerwijk presented a petition to the municipality of The Hague in April 2024 asking them to establish an affordable supermarket in the neighborhood.

The text of the petition shows that there is more going on than just a lack of a supermarket in the vicinity. The petition also shows a shared vision of a livable, accessible, and thriving neighborhood. A local supermarket is not only seen as a place where groceries are done, but also as a meeting place where social interaction takes place. The local supermarket must offer healthy and affordable products that stimulate the local economy and strengthen social cohesion. Such a facility will improve the quality of life, enrich the neighborhood, and could be a shining example of citizen participation and community spirit.

In response to this petition, Feedback EU asked Guusje Weeber to conduct a study into what the residents mean by healthy and fair food. Because the petition was organized in the Buurtkamer, a neighborhood center located at the Jan Luyckenlaan in Moerwijk, she interviewed visitors to the Buurtkamer.

People in poorer neighborhoods are often blamed for their poor health or obesity, while supermarkets with their supply can dictate what is bought on a tight budget. The research is part of the Healthy Food Healthy Planet-funded project in which Feedback EU collaborates with six organizations in Europe in the Food Voices Coalition. “Our Food, Our Choice” is a project that aims to make healthy, fair products affordable and accessible to everyone. Feedback EU wanted to know what assumptions, needs and underlying values residents of Moerwijk have about food and what roles supermarkets and local actors and chains can play in the future food supply.

According to the Food Council of The Hague¹, there is an elevated supply of fast food, and unhealthy food is in general cheaper. A healthy food environment will encourage the consumption of healthy and sustainable products and thus promote health. We used [Liane Lankreijer's theory](#) on the positive spiral as a guideline within the participatory research due to its connection with the vision expressed in the petition. This theory assumes that food can connect and be a starting point to reverse the negative spiral of poverty.

The research is qualitative in nature and the examples given do not always represent a general opinion or experience. However, they do show what it is like to live in Moerwijk and to have to deal with an insufficient food supply every day, what the needs and underlying values are, how the choice of food is determined and the feeling of being excluded.

¹ The Hague Food Council <https://ons-eten.nl/project/8670/voedselraad-den-haag>

What residents mean by healthy and fair food

Residents in Moerwijk expressed the opinion that for themselves healthy food in general means fresh fruit and vegetables, and preferably unsprayed food, food that comes directly from the land or from short chains. This is in contrast with the canned, pre-packaged, and fried food that can now mainly be found in the Jan Luykenlaan. The residents prefer to cook themselves above taking away fast food. Most of the residents interviewed have a complicated relationship with food, due to an eating disorder, illness, or economic cause. This testifies to the gravity of the situation and the community's awareness thereof.

The concept of 'fair food' has many sides. Fairness for the people of Moerwijk means within reasonable walking distance, also for the elderly and people with limited mobility. It also refers to fairness in terms of price because food is a basic need that should be affordable for everyone. An honest supermarket therefore has good offers, a lot of choice of fresh products, and does not entice the consumer into bad habits by, for example, placing unhealthy products at eye level. Fairness also applies to the chain behind the food: a fair price for the farmer, not harmful to the environment, and preferably unsprayed. Finally, honesty also refers to transparency and the provision of information about what is happening in the neighborhood.

Healthy food in Moerwijk is not easy to find and that is perceived as an injustice. It is unclear why there is so little communication about the developments in the district. Moreover, they experience that the ideas from above do not match their needs. This feeling of injustice partly translates into distrust of initiatives that come from above and outside.

According to the residents, a fairer food supply in Moerwijk could also indirectly lead to more justice: a promising neighborhood for young people, a safer feeling for the vulnerable, and more connection between residents from diverse groups. From this, they hope that more collaborations will arise between the various stakeholders (residents, entrepreneurs, and municipality), creating room for participation from the neighborhood. Not from above, but from collaborations with the residents themselves. In general, there is not much trust in outside initiatives like food banks as they are perceived as patronizing, but neither is there much trust that their own voices will be heard.

Link to structural causes

The petition text shows that the residents recognize that there are links between food supply and the structural improvement of the neighborhood: "[it is difficult to] become a thriving and vibrant neighborhood."

There are few examples of large supermarket chains that are open to a radically different concept of supermarket than we are used to in the Netherlands. That is why other forms should also be considered, such as cooperation with local supermarkets elsewhere, because these entrepreneurs are less tied to the mechanisms of the large supermarket chains. A way to work on structural problems is by, for example, deploying young people from the neighborhood in this supermarket.

People with the lived experience of these circumstances are the best people to share their stories. The presumption that low-income groups lack knowledge of healthy food, and carry the sole responsibility of their own mental, physical, and financial well-being, is no longer relevant. The current food system was not designed with the health of the consumer in mind.

A healthy and fair food supply system in Moerwijk can only crystallize when the neighborhood's structural problems are tackled. Symptom control has proven ineffective, and the negative spiral of poverty and food insecurity will only deepen. Prior solutions such as the food bank and similar initiatives simply will not work without trust.

Conclusion

Moerwijk is a multicultural neighborhood with around 150 different nationalities living there and a neighborhood where life expectancy is extremely low. This is not a coincidence, but the result of structural mechanisms of inequality. The connection between groups is there, in specific places such as the Buurtkamer, but is still too little visible in the larger story of structural change. To realize a social supermarket in the context of diversity, connections must be made between the diverse groups of residents, youth organizations, entrepreneurs, and other stakeholders. It is important to include this in the plans for a new supermarket: for which group is that supermarket intended? Is it really for everyone? Moerwijk is not uniform, but a patchwork of diverse needs and assumptions. This research has only shown a small part of that, and this calls for more attention. In this way, a better food supply can not only contribute to daily convenience, but also to structural changes. Further research is needed into how a better food supply can contribute to structural change, so that Moerwijk can serve as an example for similar neighborhoods, in the Netherlands and abroad.

Residents have a lot of knowledge about food. The residents know that fresh fruit and vegetables are important for health and that organic food is healthier than processed and sprayed food. Some find it more difficult to get unsprayed food in the Netherlands compared to the countries where they grew up. The link between diseases or eating disorders and an unhealthy food supply is clear to them.

There is a difference between what the residents want to eat and what they eat. A short chain is given priority over packaged green beans from Vietnam, because people do not know what is happening in the chain. In the current supermarket system, it is difficult for consumers to know exactly what they are eating due to a lack of transparency about the chain. There is a need for this transparency.

The affordability of food is the most important consideration for people in Moerwijk regarding benefits, state pension, or minimum income. Health and sustainability are secondary motivations for a better food supply, but nevertheless present, in some more than others.

Next steps

The findings of the study will be shared with the residents in the vicinity of the Buurtkamer, during a Neighborhood Day in September, and the researcher will discuss this with them. This will be followed by a workshop: "Design your ideal supermarket". After this session, de Buurtkamer hosts the weekly world cuisine. Many people will eat or pick up a healthy meal. They will be invited to add their comments. Finally, a video recording will be made that can be used to stimulate discussion about what a healthy, fair, and affordable food environment can look like in a certain context.