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Case study for discussion in the Masterclass Polyvocal Policy Making *The Story of Ali*

Free Dutch lessons

Ali is president of Together Foundation, in the heart of the city. The foundation is committed to connecting residents with and without refugee backgrounds and making xenophobia and populism discussable. Together also has projects for lonely elderly and people on the margins of society. Ali has lived in the city for years, since fleeing Lebanon. His personal story moves him to work for others. Not only out of solidarity but also because he knows that his life has put him in a position in which he understands other people's experiences well. He also knows his way around society well and has built a relevant network.

For example, he has seen and felt how the integration policy of recent years has caused problems for many people around him. Incidentally, he is certainly not alone in this observation: there is now a consensus that things must change. In the existing policy, the responsibility for integration lay with migrants and refugees. This did not produce the desired results. According to some parties, this is mainly due to the newcomers: They show too little interest in integrating and learning the language if they are able to do so at all. On the other hand, there is also much criticism of the policy itself, and studies show that market forces have had a negative effect, especially on language provision.

Meanwhile, the city council has also decided to do things differently: The integration policy prescribed that migrants had to organize a language course and pay for it themselves, but now the municipality is eager to offer support. Everyone in the city who does not speak Dutch will receive free language lessons for 10 weeks.

Ali initially welcomes this decision. But then the project begins. People from his neighbourhood receive an invitation to report to language class three weeks later. The municipality asks Together to accompany the residents. Ali notices that the invitation comes late, and many people don't really know what is meant or how to arrange childcare for their children. Two people, Mr. F. and Mrs. M. report to Ali's foundation with the letter (in their own language). Ali knows them well because both have volunteered to help at various events, with cooking and room management. The first few times they were very quiet, but he saw them slowly become more confident and take up more space at the foundation. Both speak almost no Dutch and Ali is glad they are getting this opportunity from the municipality. There is only one problem: they cannot read the letter. Nor the translation into their own language, which is in the flyer. In their work for the foundation, reading or writing was never necessary. The people from Together explain what the letter says so that Mr. F. and Mrs. M. are promptly seated at the first language lesson in the community center down the road.

But when Ali visits them after 3 weeks, they tell them they are not going anymore. Ali understands, after talking for a long time, that the language class has been a severely humiliating experience for them. The teaching method did not take into account the possibility that participants cannot read or write. Mr. F. and Ms. M. look a little dull in their eyes, looking broken and full of shame. 'When the teacher writes something down on the board and asks a question, everyone can see that I can't read' says M. Because of this experience, Mr. F. and Ms. M. feel lonelier than ever, they have become more insecure and seem to crawl back into their shell. They also no longer want to go to the foundation.

This cannot be the intention. Ali asks around and it turns out that F. and M. are not the only ones who can't take the language class and feel increasingly insecure about it. He knows exactly how it feels to lose self-esteem when you're constantly being addressed on something you can't do, the things you fall short on. While F. and M., like many others, can do and give a lot; he had seen and experienced this himself. These hidden possibilities and talents are expressed in an environment such as Together. Surely, with a little effort on the part of the government, this potential could also become visible to the municipality and the rest of society. That very thought drives Ali to make a point of this. After all, this situation is emblematic of something he has seen around him all his life in the Netherlands.

Wandering through the municipal labyrinth

Who am I to hold the municipality accountable for this? That thought followed his initial impulse to write an email directly to the municipal department. He has no direct entrances and no recognized position as a professional. Yet Ali knows many people who may have entrances. He taps into his entire network, hoping that there is someone out there who knows someone who can do something about this situation. This takes a lot of energy and offers little prospect. Earlier he had gone with F. to his contact person at the municipality. The latter was willing to discuss this with his supervisor. But Ali wonders how likely it is that this will accomplish anything. Meanwhile, Ali hears council members from the more right-wing parties asking questions in the city council about the high dropout rate in the free language classes. F. and M. and others like them are now undoubtedly on record as 'failing' and 'showing no interest in learning the language'. This will further diminish the benevolence of the council and fellow residents to learn to look at them from a different perspective.

Room for polyvocality?

Until, unexpectedly, an opportunity does present itself. Ali has been invited to a symposium titled 'Integrating as a two-way process' to participate in the panel. Ali notices that the people speaking next to him at the symposium have no refugee background and that most of the invited professionals and experts are white Dutch, which makes him feel like he has to fill the spot of "colour" at the table. He wonders how much room there will be to propose a topic of his own that does not seamlessly fit the organizers' focus. But he goes anyway. And luckily: The meeting organizer is willing to grant him a slightly longer speaking time. The senior policy officer for integration and language provision attends the meeting. When Ali speaks, he speaks passionately about how a well-meaning gesture from the municipality backfires if the intervention is not attuned to people's needs and lifeworlds and how it feels as a citizen to constantly get the message that he has fallen short. He explains that it takes a different lens to see how these people can participate in society. Within environments like his foundation, small steps are made, with great potential. Free language classes are a missed opportunity in this context. Ali invites the municipality to work with him and other experts by experience to figure out how things could be done differently.

It's a success. The senior policymaker says she is deeply moved by Ali's story. She invites him in and tells him that his signal is taken seriously, but that the municipality is wondering exactly how many people are involved and how broad the problem is. After all, the examples he brought up of people are very specific and the cases of people who cannot read and write may be exceptions. Therefore, the municipality decided to have a professional research institute look into the matter.

He is never contacted by the research institute. He wonders which people the researchers will talk to and whether they will hear the honest stories that people might only share with him, because of the bond of trust he has with them. The research institute works quickly and efficiently: after 5 weeks, they finish their report, a report from which Ali can see that they missed many of the stories he knows. Or perhaps interpreted them differently than he had. In any case, this report, with a number of predictable recommendations, does not help the municipality see the problem clearly and make relevant steps to solve it.

Ali also does not know exactly what the solution is with language classes. But he does know the effect of policies that do not connect with the lives of citizens. He has seen a whole generation of young people grow up with parents who have mentally withdrawn rather than blossomed, a spiral that well-intentioned short-term policies from above sometimes actually reinforce. Who knows what contribution these people could have offered the Netherlands if we let policy match their talents, skills and knowledge?

A seat at the table

Ali has been doing this for years and he still believes in it. In individual lives, in specific families, he also makes a real difference. Partners and contacts see that too: How often does he get an invitation to contribute to meetings, meetups or kick-offs? In these places, new energy always seems to emerge. But he himself feels exhausted. Because despite all the connections and appreciation, the "real game" always seems to take place out of his reach in places he can't go. He regularly catches that there are consultations, and tables where NGOs and research institutes are invited to think along, but he does not have a structural place at those tables. He would like that: a place that he can fill in a formal way, with everything he brings and where he doesn't have to fit into the narrow box of other people's expectations and conditions.