

Where We Stand: Risk Perceptions on Changing Neighborhoods in South Rotterdam

By Dr. Theresa Audrey O. Esteban, Thijs Heijmeskamp and Dr. Mahardhika Sjamsoeod Sadjad

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Introduction

Governments' strategies to address climate change challenges have become increasingly dependent on technocrats and experts' abilities to quantify and codify urban problems and solutions (Savini and Raco, 2019). In the early 2000s, the Municipality of Rotterdam adopted a climate change adaptation approach in its urban development planning and policies. Policies like Water Plan 1 and 2, which emphasized the importance of addressing climate change through adaptive measures, paved the way for more targeted and strategic policies like the Rotterdam Climate Initiative, Rotterdam Program on Sustainability and Climate Change, and Rotterdam Climate Change Adaptation Strategy (Esteban, 2022). Policymakers changed their perspective on flood risk management from 'working against water' to 'working with water'.

More recently, the Rotterdam Weerwoord was launched to address Rotterdam's six climate change issues: excessive rainfall, land subsidence, groundwater (reduction and/or increase), flooding, heat, and drought. The document was made accessible to the public by the municipality via a dedicated website that highlighted the demographic backgrounds of the various districts and neighborhoods, as well as climate change challenges depicted on maps and planned strategies for these areas. While many professionals, technical specialists, and academics are familiar with the municipality's climate change adaptation strategies through interactions or research, it is unclear if residents are aware of the city's climate change adaptation strategies or how they are impacting their living situations.

In this article, we will share our experience in conducting our research method 'Where We Stand' through a series of workshops in four South Rotterdam neighborhoods: Afrikaanderwijk, Feijenoord, Hillesluis, and Bloemhof with a total of 60 participants. We selected these neighborhoods as they have been considered disadvantaged areas in Rotterdam, and are also among the most vulnerable to issues such as heat (Rotterdam Weerwoord, 2024) and gentrification (Doucet and Koenders, 2018). The workshops were funded by the Resilient Delta Initiative (RDI) Continuous Kick-starter Grant in 2023. The aim of our research is to explore people's perceptions of risk, resilience, and vulnerabilities, through a method of collective self-inquiry, and to bring the often abstract concept of climate change closer to the individual (Esteban and Sadjad, 2023). Through this method, we explored a relational approach to understanding climate change adaptation strategies that cannot be separated from the challenges of urbanization and people's movement and mobilities (Sheller, 2018). As such, moving beyond a technocratic approach in climate change responses, we highlight people's observations of current changes in their urban environment.

The 'Where We Stand' Method

To explore people's perceptions of risk, resilience, and vulnerabilities, we were inspired by transformative methods of collective self-inquiry (Moriggi, 2021) to encourage dialogue and facilitate participants' mutual understanding and role recognition. Our workshops consisted of three segments: (1) a brief presentation that gauged participants' understandings of risks and vulnerabilities in regard to climate change and introduced existing climate change adaptation strategies in Rotterdam, (2) a collective self-inquiry exercise, and (3) focus group discussions to reflect on the exercise and revisit questions on climate change risks and

vulnerabilities that were briefly discussed in the beginning of the workshop. The workshop was originally designed and tested in English to an international audience in conferences and summer schools before adapted and delivered in Dutch for communities in Rotterdam South.

The workshops were attached to existing social activities, for instance a communal breakfast or a Dutch language lesson. This helped assure participants' attendance of the workshop, and this allowed us to explicitly position ourselves as invited guests. We opened our workshops by expressing our appreciation to participants for allowing us into their community spaces and tried our best to establish a more equal space for everyone involved. While this intention may seem straightforward, in practice navigating our positionality was not always easy.



Workshop 05 April 2024 Rotterdam Zuid

This was particularly challenging during the collective self-inquiry exercise.

Participants were asked to stand and respond 'yes' or 'no' in response to a series of 21 statements by moving on the left or right side of the room. We developed the statements based on existing literature and databases on the effects of climate change to urban environments. This allowed people to see how they stood in relation to the statements but also in relation to each other. Heijmeskamp facilitated all of the workshops, except for the first workshop in Afrikaanderwijk, which was led by a commissioned facilitator. What we learned during this process was that to successfully deliver the collective self-reflection exercise, the facilitator plays a key role to encourage participants to discuss and share their lived experiences, often by also sharing facilitators' own experiences. If the sharing of experiences was not seen as an active exchange between facilitators and participants, we found that the exercise could potentially become extractive rather than collective.

As some of the statements might potentially require facilitators and participants to share vulnerable experiences, participants were explicitly given the freedom to determine how they participated. Although the exercise involved participants taking up a position in the space, to indicate whether they felt a statement applied to them or not, some participants remained seated. In the case of the workshop that took place during a communal breakfast nobody stood, because the situation did not allow for it. Instead, participants partook through the means of (hand) gestures to signal their stance on a particular statement.



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Furthermore, participants were encouraged to openly interpret the statements. For example, the statement "If I want or need to, I can easily move houses" (Als ik moet of wil, kan ik met gemak verhuizen), was initially intended to refer to one's financial means to move in case climate change rendered their neighborhoods inhabitable or climate change adaptation strategies made living costs unaffordable. Most participants responded accordingly, as one participant said: "expensive, expensive, expensive, expensive" (duur, duur, duur, duur). However, a number of participants interpreted the statement in relation to them being rooted in their community.

One participant said: "I was born in Rotterdam South, and I will die in Rotterdam South" (Ik ben in Rotterdam Zuid geboren en ik zal sterven in Rotterdam Zuid). Following the collective self-inquiry exercise, the facilitator then organized focus group discussions by asking participants to respond to four questions on the risks and vulnerabilities that they and their neighborhoods faced. If the collective self-inquiry exercise asked participants to think about their individual lived experiences, the focus group discussion was designed to encourage participants' reflections as a group. Finally, after closing the workshop, the facilitator together with the research team filled in a debriefing form to document their observations and reflections about the workshop.

Perceptions of risks and climate change

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People's perceptions of climate change and the risk that it brings vary. When asked at the start of the workshop what the risks of climate change are, many participants pointed out flooding, heat, and a lack of greenery in their surroundings, all of which they have witnessed directly. Some participants also identified risks they saw on television or in the news, such as wildfires and droughts, and its impact on other people. For example, one participant said at the start of the workshop, "Farmers are also affected by this and vegetables and other products are becoming more expensive" (Ook de boeren hebben er last van en zo worden groente en andere producten duurder).



Workshop 21 May 2024 Rotterdam Zuid

The responses indicate the risks perceived by the participants are those that can be physically seen in their surroundings, such as too much water on the ground or too little, and those that can be physically felt, like heatwaves during the summer. In some ways, their responses indicate that the participants are aware of the risks of climate change based on knowledge acquired through education and media, but also through conversations with other people and lived experiences in their urban environment.

During the collective self-inquiry exercise, after participants responded to the statements, participants were encouraged to discuss their answers and share their lived experiences.

Here, common stories arose. Here, common stories arose. Extreme heat in the summer was found to be a common problem. Living rooms or bedrooms were unusable because of the temperature of the room. Some participants shared that they have been forced to limit their activities to only a small set of rooms or leave the house to find relief from the heat. Another common story was a strained relationship with the housing corporation. Many indicated poor maintenance and isolation, leading to problems like the aforementioned heat in the summer and drafts and coldness in the winter. Many participants knew someone that was forced to (temporarily) relocate, due to much-needed renovation or new construction.

Participants recognized silent inequalities, and at this point in the conversation, they identified underrepresentation of particular groups, individualism, loneliness, and inequality as risks. Some recognize their own living situations and worries about the future, the worry of being displaced because of land subsidence, the money needed to maintain the house they live in. One participant shared her concern for an elderly mother under her care, who would not be able nor willing to move if they had to. In sharing this experience, she emphasized the emotional costs of moving away from home, rather than the financial costs of doing so.

When asked who they believe are most at risk, a clear theme emerged: the impoverished and unemployed, the elderly, and the young. The participants recognize people in their communities and neighborhoods, who need further assistance. Some also see their own families like their grandchildren and wonder what will happen to the next generation. Almost every session ended with an expression of concern not for themselves, but for the generations that followed, as one participant asked, "What will happen to my grandchildren in 20 years?" (Wat gebeurt zal er met mijn kleinkinderen gebeuren in 20 jaar?).

After the exercise, during the focus group discussion, participants were again asked, what climate change risks are there? Did it vary from their answers at the beginning of the workshop? While the participants still referred to the physical risks of climate change – floods, heat, land subsidence – many if not most related these to changes in their own neighborhoods. The development of new housing stock that has been changing the composition in participants' neighborhoods was perceived as a threat to some participants. They witness infrastructure developments in their areas and understand the need, but also question whether this will impact residents' abilities to afford living in their neighborhoods. One participant expressed concern that, "[some people] are unable to pay for climate adjustments" (Niet kunnen betalen van klimaataanpassingen). The focus group discussion suggested that the self-inquiry exercise broadened participants' perception of climate change risk beyond physical risks to also include social and economic risks, bringing the issue closer to home.

As the session came to a close, we wanted to put everything together to see what the participants thought could be done. A consistent topic emerged: connection. Whether through education and awareness campaigns or social relationships, participants emphasized the need of starting conversations within communities. Participants consider this as a step toward bringing the community together, as well as helping municipal employees understand residents' diverse position.

Conclusion

The discussion on climate change is often abstract and is told as an apocalyptic story about a future that some people might find difficult to relate to. What is often neglected are people's observations of changes in their experiences of the climate now.

In this study, we start from the premise that experiences of adapting to climate change are relational and contextual. Despite the common trope that climate change has put 'us all' at risk and we are all on 'the same boat', climate change adaptation is intrinsically spatial, and people's resilience and vulnerabilities are structured along socio-economic lines (Arsel, 2022). This is relevant to the theme 'together in diversity' that Atlantis Magazine is exploring this year. Rhetoric that climate change is a global problem that requires collective action has become ubiquitous.

However, the diverse socio-economic make-up of Rotterdam's neighborhoods mean that policies addressing climate change do not affect people equally. While infrastructural responses to ensure the adaptability of urban spaces in response to the changes in our climate is necessary, we cannot neglect the people that live in these spaces. Government responses to climate change must also take into account how people experience and are affected by climate change adaptation strategies in order to avoid further augmentation of socio-economic inequalities.

The 'Where We Stand' workshops offered a space for communities to discuss and share their experiences of both climate and infrastructure changes in their neighborhoods. During these workshops, we uncovered participants' observations of neighborhood changes. They see the installation of climate change adaptation infrastructure and constructions of new buildings, often in sites where there were older social housings. While these constructions are framed to address climate change and housing shortages in Rotterdam, a common question that arose was: who are these changes for? In some cases, these new buildings push members of participants' networks out of their neighborhoods as rent, electric and gas bills become increasingly unaffordable. Beyond financial concerns that come with these experiences, there are also emotional ones: emotional bond to people and places, and fear of having to move. The workshops revealed participants mixed emotions when encountering changes in their neighborhoods, such as uncertainty, loneliness, and loss of community.

It was also worth noting that by organizing these workshops in attachment to existing social activities, we engaged groups that have already self-organized around similar class or ethnic backgrounds. While the project engaged diverse communities overall, the people in the room during the workshops mostly had shared or similar experiences with one another. The 'Where We Stand' method allowed us to reflect on the diversity within the room and bring people's longing for meaningful connection to the forefront of discussions on climate change. However, it is important to remember that acknowledging we are diverse, is not the same as bringing us together.

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