

# community engagement in planning - exploring the way forward summary report



**Summary of the Final Report of the INTERREG IIB  
Advocacy, Participation and NGOs in Planning Project**



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## summary report

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**Community Engagement in Planning – Exploring the Way Forward.**

**Summary Report**

Final Report of the INTERREG IIIB Advocacy, Participation and NGOs in Planning (APaNGO) Project

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# foreword

By Professor Sir Peter Hall

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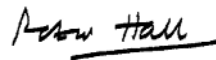
This is a hugely important and timely report – not only for planners and developers in the UK, where the Government is addressing an urgent need for more homes to meet the needs of a longer-living and growing population, but also in other EU Member States. Across the Union, from the UK to Bulgaria and from Sweden to Malta, it is no longer acceptable to make decisions from the centre and expect them to be implemented unquestioningly. The legitimacy of any planning decision will vitally depend on the quality of democratic input to the process; without that input, decision-making itself will be discredited.

But this raises very difficult questions of the right locus for decisions. Europe-wide and Member State policies for major developments will come face to face with the views of local communities, and at that local level one community may differ entirely in its view from another. We have to rely upon good planning to resolve issues and arguments of this kind. Cross-sectoral working, in which housing associations, developers, local authorities and communities all play their part, is vital to achieving successful outcomes.

This project therefore set out as a partnership between very different sectors, to address these challenges head on. It proceeds through a series of case studies in different Member States. In all such work, the devil is always in the detail, which makes these studies uniquely valuable in demonstrating how to attack the problems and reach viable solutions through better engagement and better dialogue.

The report's recommendations distil these lessons, providing a guide for central and local governments across the EU to reform and improve their planning processes in the interests of their people and of sustainable development generally.

On behalf of the TCPA, I commend the report and hope that its lessons will be widely read and enthusiastically adopted.



**Professor Sir Peter Hall**  
President, Town and Country Planning  
Association

# introduction

## Introduction to the APaNGO project

The APaNGO<sup>1</sup> project was devised as one of the first European Union action research projects on community participation in planning and development. Its underlying philosophy was the importance of fostering constructive community engagement in order to help deliver sustainable development on the ground.

The project's central purpose was to provide a better understanding of the practice of community participation as it relates to planning and development. This then formed the basis for making recommendations on how practice can be improved. Although derived from the experience of North West Europe, it is expected that the findings of APaNGO will be of interest to all EU Member States and other countries.

Perhaps because development and its impact is by its nature local and place specific, there has been very little exchange between Member States about appropriate engagement techniques and services. These are being developed largely in isolation to deal with the same kinds of participation and advocacy challenges. Furthermore, because of pressure on funding for the NGO (non-governmental organisation) sector, the provision of information for local communities on how to engage with planning and development effectively is few and far between. APaNGO aimed to help fill these gaps. One further important feature of the APaNGO project was its focus on planning and development of regional or city-wide significance. The larger and more significant a project or plan, the greater will be its impact on the community concerned. However, there is a common perception that, ironically, this is the scale at which it is hardest to engage local

communities. In this respect the project built on research conducted by the Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA).<sup>2</sup>

The APaNGO project was launched in December 2005 by Brusselse Raad voor het Leefmilieu,<sup>3</sup> (Belgium); Geuzenveld-Slotermeer, City District of Amsterdam (the Netherlands); Planning Aid for London (UK); Spectacle Productions Ltd (UK); and the Town and Country Planning Association (UK). The TCPA served as the lead partner accountable for the project to the main funding body, the European Commission's North West Europe INTERREG Secretariat.

The First Interim Report from the APaNGO project covered the findings from the first stage background research. This consisted of desk studies of the seven Member States in North West Europe (Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, the Republic of Ireland, and the UK) and analysis of the responses to an extensive questionnaire survey. **The First Interim Report can be downloaded from the APaNGO website at [www.apango.eu](http://www.apango.eu)**

The full version of the Final Report of the APaNGO project comprises essays on the individual demonstration projects from the UK, Belgium and the Netherlands written by the partner bodies concerned. They tell different stories but each relates to the central questions of APaNGO – how to successfully engage communities in planning and development. These four case studies each describe a major project, the participation processes employed, and the lessons learned. This Final Report Summary comprises the main recommendations and findings, followed by conclusions drawn from them on the conditions necessary for effective participation in planning.

<sup>1</sup> Advocacy, Participation and NGOs in Planning

<sup>2</sup> Baker, M., Roberts, P. and Shaw, R. (2003) *Stakeholder Involvement in Regional Planning. National report of the TCPA study.* Town and Country Planning Association, London

<sup>3</sup> BRAL, Brussels Environmental Association

# executive summary

## Introduction

The APaNGO project has operated in two linked phases:

- Phase 1 was a desk research and questionnaire survey of existing planning systems across North West Europe, the techniques currently being used for community involvement, and the infrastructure of support (the organisations and services available) for community involvement in planning. This research is fully reported in the APaNGO First Interim Report.
- Phase 2 was the establishment and reporting of a series of demonstration projects by the APaNGO partners:
  - An evaluation of Brusselse Raad voor het Leefmilieu's (Bral's) Brussels-wide work as an NGO supporting community-led campaigns for involvement in planning since the 1980s in the international quarter of Brussels.
  - The Amsterdam City District Council of Geuzenveld-Slotermeer's project to use 'branding' as a way of creating community identity and a focus for community participation in planning the regeneration of the Eendrachtsparkbuurt neighbourhood.
  - Spectacle's work in the UK and Brussels, using community-controlled media (especially video) for creating, supporting and documenting community participation in regeneration.
  - Planning Aid for London's (PAL's) work as an NGO providing planning aid services to community and voluntary groups and individuals across London; particularly the development of a toolkit for the Greater London Authority to support community participation in the sub-regional development frameworks of the London Plan.

The APaNGO Final Report focuses on case studies of these demonstration projects, and identifies some common themes from their work before drawing out a set of conditions for

successful participation in planning based on the experience of the APaNGO projects. This Executive Summary focuses on these common themes and conditions.

## Common themes across APaNGO projects

### *Who is involved?*

The APaNGO projects demonstrate ways of identifying the key sectors of society that need to be involved in planning, based on both the ethical principles of democratic planning (for example planning processes that are fair, inclusive, open and transparent) and the need to be effective in terms of the quality of the technical planning processes and outcomes.

The key issues arising in the APaNGO projects in relation to who to involve include:

- The need to start participatory working with a focus on the existing interests and motivations of local people, because they will then see the relevance of being involved.
- The need to find innovative ways of reaching all sectors of the community – for example young residents, minority ethnic communities and small business, and including the 'silent majority' as well as 'hard to reach' groups.
- The need to balance securing the involvement of all sectors of the community with avoiding further alienation of disadvantaged sectors of the community from mainstream society and the decision-making processes of planning by creating separate processes that isolate these groups.
- The need to tackle the 'voluntary exclusion' of the rich and powerful, who may bypass formal consultative structures that are established for the public and communities, and instead use privileged access to exert influence.

- Those who get involved in current participatory processes may have past experiences of community activism based on protest which will affect how they approach participation. However, the APaNGO projects have successfully created participatory processes that have brought a wide range of activists together to work productively.

### **Local focus for participation**

All the APaNGO projects were identified to illustrate regional planning issues, but their experience is that, in order to involve local people and local communities, issues need to be translated to a local scale to show local relevance. The relationship between local, regional and national planning is complex.

All the APaNGO projects demonstrate how what are seen as local planning issues have regional, national and even sometimes international implications, including the role of international institutions and the 'participation by stupefaction' that often accompanies high-profile, big-budget developments. Similarly, the projects show how regional and national planning policies impact on local communities and what that means for participation. The APaNGO projects found that working at regional level is not just about working at a different spatial level, but requires working in a fundamentally different way. Issues that have emerged include:

- Regional planning issues cross traditional geographical boundaries that affect any community sense of identity, and are also likely to cross the boundaries of existing organisations.
- Identifying the decision-makers is more complex at regional levels, where it is not always clear who makes key decisions or where accountability lies, which in turn makes it hard for NGOs and communities to identify appropriate 'targets for influence'.
- The sheer scale of regional work means that NGOs may need to work across large geographical areas, often with hundreds or thousands of active voluntary groups and organisations that may be difficult to reach and encourage to participate, even working through existing networks.
- There is a need for different involvement techniques for working with communities on regional issues, including new analytical and practical toolkits for planning professionals to enable them to identify the appropriate technique for the circumstances.

### **Implications of 'community'**

The APaNGO projects show that there can almost never be any easy assumption about the nature of communities, even in clearly defined neighbourhoods. They found that:

- Diverse groups from many different backgrounds (with different cultures and languages) may be rooted in neighbourhoods in different ways, requiring particular participatory opportunities to enable them to be involved.
- The 'community' that will live in a regenerated area may be different from the current residents, some of whom may be participating in the design of a future neighbourhood they will never live in: there are different 'communities of time' with different roles in participation.
- 'Community memory' affects participation in two ways:
  - the collective sense of local identity that exists among local people (or is created through mechanisms such as the City District of Geuzenveld-Slotermeer project's 'branding'); and
  - the memory of previous failed participatory activities that have undermined trust in such processes – APaNGO projects such as those run by Bral and PAL explicitly built trust in some circumstances to overcome past failures by other institutions.

Planners have a particular role in bringing communities of time, space and social relationships together in participatory processes that can contribute to appropriate planning as well as to the desired social outcomes (for example strong and cohesive communities).

### **Levels of involvement**

The APaNGO First Interim Report found that the great majority of community participation in planning takes place at the 'lowest' level of participation – information provision and minimal consultation. However, the depth and nature of involvement does largely depend on the different focus, legal structures, processes and systems for participation in planning in different countries. The experience of the APaNGO projects shows that:

- There is significant interest and commitment in all the partner countries in deepening community participation in planning, and the APaNGO projects have been able to develop within this positive context.



- Community capacity-building, often provided through the support of NGOs (and public authorities), helps local groups to develop the confidence and skills that contribute to deeper and more effective participation. Such capacity-building includes helping these groups to understand how planning processes work and how they can be influenced.
- Communications and cultural activities have been particularly effective at building capacity – whether through ‘branding’ to create identity; artistic and cultural activities; or the use of communications media to capture and share the cultural and political resonances of participation.
- Information provision, although seen as a ‘low’ level of participation, is a vital element of all participatory activities. Where appropriate information has not been forthcoming from official sources, finding out and communicating relevant information has been a core strand of the work of several of the APaNGO projects.

### **Timing of involvement**

Much participation in planning takes place at a stage at which communities can merely comment on highly developed plans or proposals. Participation at this stage tends to generate negative input, because the focus is on stopping what is not wanted rather than on making proposals to include good new ideas. The APaNGO projects show that:

- One-off, shallow consultation with tight deadlines does not gain effective or positive community participation. The APaNGO projects show the value and importance of early involvement followed by long-term relationships in creating effective participatory processes and planning outcomes. The projects found that longer-term relationships between support organisations (NGOs and public authorities) and local communities could be developed without requiring enormous investment of resources at all stages.
- Support by NGOs for participation in planning tends to be funded project by project, which limits the potential for longer-term relationships (although ways can be found of overcoming this problem). Longer-term investment in the voluntary sector infrastructure of support could help support these longer-term links more effectively.
- Continuous involvement brings problems for community organisations, as long-term vigilance on planning issues is time-

consuming and demanding, causing ‘burn out’ among committed activists. However, this continuous involvement is what is sought by communities and NGOs, and with effective support the demands can be made more manageable.

### **Linking participation and decision-making**

The gap between the development of national policy promoting greater participation in planning and practice on the ground remains most apparent where participation processes meet decision-making structures. This gap can undermine the trust of communities in participatory processes by weakening the clarity of the influence of these processes on decisions and action. The APaNGO projects found the following:

- Formal consultative structures can provide useful mechanisms for continuing dialogue between communities, NGOs and authorities, but are only effective when linked directly into decision-making processes. Participatory processes are undermined if there is no clear link to decision-making. Openness, honesty and transparency in these processes is vital.
- It is not the role of NGOs or community groups to be representative: they usually represent particular interest groups in the wider political process in which decisions are made by democratically elected authorities.
- For communities, it is often the action that follows planning that is the most important motivation for their involvement: the plan is merely a mechanism leading towards the desirable outcome on the ground. Community groups will often experience ‘consultation fatigue’ if all their involvement does not lead to any change or action on the ground.
- Increased capacity-building is needed among public authorities to enable them to achieve the cultural change necessary to value the input from local communities as highly as the input they traditionally receive from professional and academic sources. New skills are also needed to enable authorities to assess and integrate data from these different sources to contribute to better-quality planning outcomes.

### **Recommendations**

The issues raised from the experience of the APaNGO demonstration projects have led to the APaNGO partners identifying the

following six key conditions for successful participation in planning:

• **Recommendation 1**

The APaNGO partnership recommends that both voluntary sector bodies and government should recognise a responsibility to provide independent resources for community participation in planning in all major development areas.

• **Recommendation 4**

The APaNGO partnership recommends that statutory rights in planning for those most affected should be maintained and that agreements on development with communities should be legally recognised wherever possible.

• **Recommendation 2**

The APaNGO partnership recommends wider take-up of the use of community media, branding techniques and street-based and cultural activities where communities judge these appropriate or helpful.

• **Recommendation 5**

The APaNGO partnership recommends that responsible authorities in charge of community participation set out as a priority what can and cannot be changed as a result of the dialogue of participation or involvement.

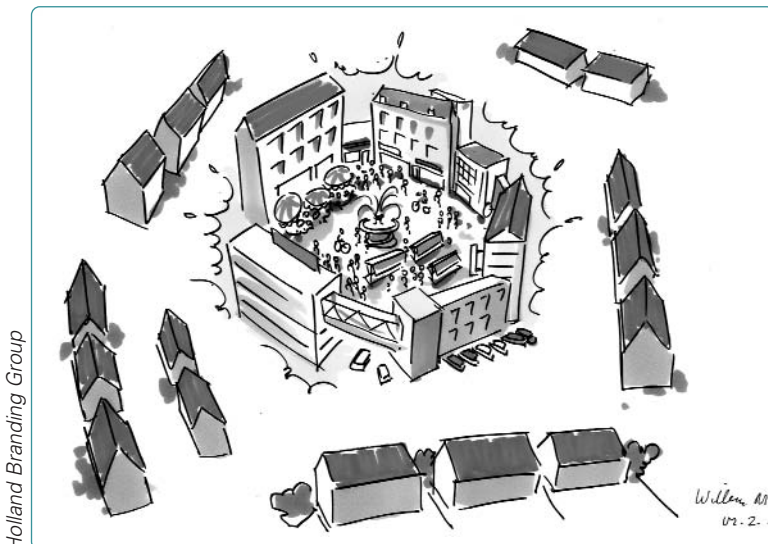
• **Recommendation 3**

The APaNGO partnership recommends that public authorities appreciate the value of community views which are generated in various ways through the participation services it supports. As a result government bodies should better integrate community input in its different forms in the decision-making process.

• **Recommendation 6**

The APaNGO partnership recommends that all those engaged in participation in planning and development should recognise that decision-makers must consider evidence which represents best the variety of interests of current and future communities, including taking into account representations from specific interest groups with particular knowledge.

The APaNGO partners consider these conditions and recommendations to be essential for effective participation in planning, both in terms of creating better-quality planning decisions and outcomes, and in terms of principles of fairness and transparency – all of which are essential in supporting the contribution of planning to sustainable development.



Holland Branding Group



Rob Bakker

**Above**

APaNGO partners meeting in Brussels

**Left**

Output from an Amsterdam City District Geuzenveld-Slotermeer branding workshop

# conclusions and recommendations

Edited by Gideon Amos and Diane Warburton

The detailed findings from the APaNGO demonstration projects set out in the full version of the Final Report, alongside the conclusions from the APaNGO First Interim Report, suggest that there are six key conditions for successful participation in planning. These form the basis of the project's conclusions and recommendations and can be summarised as follows.

## The need for appropriate support and techniques

The APaNGO research suggests a continuing and growing need for investment in the infrastructure of support and in appropriate techniques for community participation in planning.

The APaNGO projects showed the value of such support being independent from decision-making processes, so that the focus can be on empowering communities. Such support processes can be provided effectively by public authorities, but it is also essential that there should be more long-term investment in this infrastructure with the voluntary sector providing support, advice and expertise to communities to support their participation in planning.

### Recommendation 1

**The APaNGO partnership therefore recommends that both voluntary sector bodies and government should recognise a responsibility to provide independent resources for community participation in planning in all major development areas.**

Appropriate support requires investment in capacity-building by NGOs, working with communities, to enable local people to better understand planning and political systems and to participate more effectively. Capacity-building is also needed within public authorities so that they can better understand the principles, processes and value of community participation in planning – both in terms of improved quality of plans, developments and programmes and

in terms of strengthening democratic systems through greater public involvement.

The APaNGO research showed the value of particular techniques and approaches, including community development, cultural and creative activities, the use of community media to support and develop participation, 'branding' to create an identity for a neighbourhood, and long-term consultative structures. These techniques bring some new opportunities for creative and positive community participation in planning. New techniques will always be needed and are being developed to meet the changing needs and structures of society.

### Recommendation 2

**The APaNGO partnership therefore recommends wider take-up of the use of community media, branding techniques and street-based and cultural activities where communities judge these appropriate or helpful.**

As with all participatory techniques, the main success factor is to use a technique that is appropriate both to the purpose and to the context of the participatory process. This obviously requires clarity about the objectives of the participatory process, what it is trying to achieve and the context and history within which it will operate. The demographic make-up of community and its previous experience of participating in the planning process will be important factors in making this judgement. Techniques are merely tools to achieve a particular outcome and should never be the first decision in designing any participatory process.

## Cultural change in decision-making bodies

As the APaNGO projects have demonstrated, a key problem currently lies in the interface between participatory processes and decision-making structures.

In practice, the problem is largely about lack of understanding and recognition of the value of participatory ‘products’, whether they are ideas from communities, video films, alternative proposals, contributions to visioning events or comments on draft plans and strategies. Current representative democratic structures are not designed to recognise or integrate community input in the variety of forms in which it may be presented. They are more commonly-used to dealing with input from elected representatives or in the form of analysis and recommendations from professionals and academics.

A key condition for successful participation in planning is a cultural change so that a community’s input is supported through enabling participation in planning and its views are welcomed and valued as highly, and taken as much account of, as professional guidance from officers and academic research. Each of these may have particular value in providing data on different elements of the final political decision. Communities may be able to provide valuable input on community history, lay knowledge, public values and opinions; officers may be able to provide information on technical issues, precedents and wider policy considerations; and academic research may provide insights from experience elsewhere or new experiments with new techniques. Neither community, nor professional, nor academic input can escape inevitable flaws, and none should be regarded as inherently more valuable.

New methods of assessing and integrating these different sorts of data from different sources can be found if there is a willingness in public institutions to do so – it is there that the cultural change is needed if future participation is to be effective.

### Recommendation 3

**The APaNGO partnership therefore recommends that public authorities appreciate the value of community views which are generated in various ways through the participation services it supports. As a result government bodies should better integrate community input in its different forms in the decision-making process.**

### Rights and legal recognition of agreements

Agreements reached between communities and authorities as a result of participatory processes need to be formally recognised so

that they cannot be ignored if they become inconvenient later (possibly through legal formalities such as those developed in the Netherlands). There should always be the potential for re-negotiation but that should be done on the basis that there is an agreement that needs to be renegotiated. Statutory rights in any planning process are a fundamental part of building trust in development decisions. This approach allows communities to trust agreements when they are made, and move on to more positive activities rather than simply watching to check if previous agreements are being ignored. These rights significantly contribute to increasing trust and respect between authorities, communities and NGOs.

### Recommendation 4

**The APaNGO partnership therefore recommends that statutory rights in planning for those most affected should be maintained and that agreements on development with communities should be legally recognised wherever possible.**

### Open, transparent, challenging and fair processes

Participatory processes need to be clear, open, transparent, and fair to those involved and the rest of the (possibly uninvolved) population. Ideally, processes need to be able to challenge both the explicit proposition being considered and the underlying assumptions about the benefits of the final outcomes, although not all processes should or could always cover every related issue. The key condition for success here is the need for clarity about the boundaries of the participation, and what it is (and it is not) possible to change as a result of the participation. Much of the frustration among participants in planning processes from communities and NGOs is about lack of clarity, and a sense that they have been mis-led about what the participation is supposed to achieve and what the limits of their role are.

### Linking participation to action

There is no point having a participatory process if nothing is going to change and nothing is going to happen. Action may require communities themselves to do something, or it may be that public authorities or private developers are going to carry out development. The main motivation among participants in any participatory process is that they will be able to influence or change these outcomes for the better. The alternative, just talk, is unlikely to inspire communities or NGOs to take part.

**Recommendation 5**

**The APaNGO partnership therefore recommends that responsible authorities in charge of community participation set out as a priority what can and cannot be changed as a result of the dialogue of participation or involvement.**

**Representation**

Community groups, NGOs, business groups and other specific lobby groups rarely represent whole communities; nor is that usually their role. They can take part in a process that aims to be representative of all local interests, but that process is the responsibility of those running it. A political decision then has to be made in the interests of the whole community (whether at local, regional or national level). Representative processes that value the interests of minority groups are key for effective participation in planning as whole communities are affected by planning decisions. It is a key role for planners and for local government decision-makers and it can be achieved with appropriate techniques and clear responsibility for the balance of interests represented at different points in the process.

**Recommendation 6**

**The APaNGO partnership therefore recommends that all those engaged in participation in planning and development should recognise that decision-makers must consider evidence which represents best the variety of interests of current and future communities, including taking into account representations from specific interest groups with particular knowledge.**

**Conclusion**

The APaNGO partners consider these conditions and recommendations to be essential for effective participation in planning, both in terms of creating better-quality planning decisions and outcomes, and in terms of principles of fairness and transparency – all of which are essential in supporting the contribution of planning to sustainable development.

**APaNGO – a transnational partnership project part-funded by the European Union’s INTERREG IIIB programme for North West Europe (NWE). The INTERREG programme encourages closer co-operation and integration through transnational spatial development initiatives that promote sustainable development.**

### **priorities and scope**

INTERREG IIIB project areas must fall within the scope of the following five priorities:

- A more attractive and coherent system of cities, towns and regions.
- Accessibility to transport, communication, infrastructure and knowledge.
- The sustainable management of water resources and the prevention of flood damage.
- Stronger ecological infrastructure and protection of cultural heritage.
- Enhancing maritime functions and promoting territorial integration across seas.

The APaNGO project was approved under the first priority, and its aim was to find ways of increasing community involvement in spatial planning processes, particularly at regional level.

### **objectives**

The APaNGO project had six objectives:

- To develop an understanding of the techniques, systems and infrastructure that are available in different member states to help the general public and community groups to engage constructively in planning and development decision-making at regional level.
- To test and implement methods and processes for involving local people in regional planning.
- To set up a standing transnational forum between a variety of NGOs which provide community representation in forward planning and development processes at city, regional or (with the emergence of the European Spatial Development Perspective) European level.
- To enhance skills and resources for community involvement in planning.
- To produce a good practice guide aiming to disseminate best practice in community involvement in local and regional planning issues.
- To provide an enduring resource for community involvement in planning for Europe.

**For further information on the APaNGO project, visit the APaNGO website, at [www.apango.eu](http://www.apango.eu)**

## APaNGO project partners

The project involved five partners, with the TCPA in the lead role:



The **Town and Country Planning Association** (TCPA) is an independent charity campaigning for decent homes in well-designed neighbourhoods, community empowerment and a sustainable future. It works to inspire government, industry and campaigners to put social justice and the environment at the heart of the debate about planning policy, housing and energy supply and use. [www.tcpa.org.uk](http://www.tcpa.org.uk)



The **Brusselse Raad voor het Leefmilieu** (Brussels Environmental Association – Bral) is a non-profit, independent network of residents' committees and active citizens interested in helping to shape their city. Its members have a broad interest in the environment, mobility and urban renewal. [www.bralvzw.be](http://www.bralvzw.be)



**Planning Aid for London** (PAL) is a registered charity that provides free and independent town planning related advice for individuals and groups unable to afford professional consultants. It assists people in drawing up their own planning applications or helps them to comment on other people's applications. It also offers advice on fund-raising strategies, community development and consultation methods. [www.pafl.org.uk](http://www.pafl.org.uk)



**Spectacle Productions Ltd** is an independent, London-based television production company specialising in documentary and community-led investigative journalism. The company distributes independent videotapes, provides facilities for independent producers, and runs training workshops on media studies, production and community-based media. [www.spectacle.co.uk](http://www.spectacle.co.uk)



**Stadsdeel Geuzenveld-Slotermeer** (City District Geuzenveld-Slotermeer) is one of the 14 city district authorities in Amsterdam. Established in 1990, it has around 40,000 inhabitants and has recently initiated a large regeneration project. To address various problems and to meet new challenges for city life, it aims to improve the environment in which people live and work, create incentives to stimulate social and economic activities, and work together with housing corporations to provide a large variety of new homes. [www.geuzenveld.amsterdam.nl](http://www.geuzenveld.amsterdam.nl)



**APaNGO** was supported by the UK Department for Communities and Local Government and the EU INTERREG IIIB funding programme. Its aim was to establish a North West European network of skills and resources to aid community engagement in regional planning processes. The three-year project began in April 2005 and was completed in October 2007.



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