Twenty years ago, Amsterdam’s Bijlmermeer neighbourhood spent months in the throes of a conflict surrounding the European Commission’s URBAN programme. Some talked of a ‘black revolution’. Local (‘black’) groups felt overlooked by the programme’s decision-making structure, and demanded the opportunity to have their say. They used a black-white dichotomy as a lever to enforce a breakthrough within URBAN Bijlmermeer, but, more than this, they were seeking to achieve the emancipation of the ‘black’ population and bring about an actual improvement in their situation. Ultimately, their efforts were successful: not only was the structure of the programme drastically revised, but progress was also made with respect to increasing participation by the local population in the district on the whole.

The summer of 2015 marked the 20-year anniversary of this conflict. In commemorating it, a heroic role was ascribed to the Zwart Beraad (sometimes translated as ‘Black Consideration’, ‘Black Deliberation’, ‘Black Assembly’ or ‘Black Caucus’) group in particular. However, it is unclear to what extent the outcome of the conflict can be attributed to the URBAN programme or the Zwart Beraad group.

The URBAN programme: funding for disadvantaged areas

In 1995, Amsterdam’s Bijlmermeer neighbourhood was assigned funding by the European Commission as part of the URBAN
Community Initiative as a contribution to the socio-economic regeneration of this section of Amsterdam Southeast, which was described as a ‘disadvantaged area’. The neighbourhood consisted exclusively of high-rises, and housed a population of approximately 50,000.

This area-based urban programme involved a considerable sum of money. Amsterdam was assigned 4.8 million euros in subsidies from two of the European structural funds (the European Regional Development Fund and the European Social Fund). However, the condition for this subsidy was that co-financing had to be found. The Netherlands Ministry of the Interior, which was responsible for the co-financing, therefore doubled this sum from the funding pot set aside for the so-called big cities policy (grotestedenbeleid) that was in effect at the time. At the same time, regional and local government, public institutions and private individuals also invested in the programme. The condition of the co-financing applied at the project level as well: a project was only eligible for URBAN funding if a co-financier could be found. The URBAN programme was able to leverage total investments to the tune of around 66 million euros. At the local level, the financial responsibility for how the URBAN funds were to be distributed fell to the City of Amsterdam. The district of Amsterdam Southeast was responsible for the development of the programmes and projects.

The funds had to be used by the end of 1999, and an organisation had to be set up to allocate the money to projects that fitted within the European policy framework. To be eligible for URBAN funding, project proposals could be submitted that were then assessed according to a number of different criteria. The decision-making structure that was established to this end, in line with European guidelines, consisted of two committees: a Supervisory Committee which was in charge of the implementation of the programme, and a Steering Committee which was authorised to assess the project proposals that were submitted and allocate the URBAN funding. Ethnic, religious and neighbourhood organisations were not represented on these
committees. This was striking, as local participation, including residents’ organisations, was an important condition of the URBAN programme.

Protest from below and the threat of a ‘black revolution’

Shortly after the start of the URBAN Bijlmermeer programme, a storm of protest was unleashed among some sections of the population of the Bijlmer, who felt that the organisational set-up of the programme did not take their interests into consideration. On 6 February 1996, a number of ‘worried Bijlmer residents’ organised a protest meeting to debate the organisational structure of the URBAN programme. Their criticism was mainly centred on the decision-making structure, not so much because of the under-representation of the local population in general, but above all because of the under-representation of ‘black’ people. At this meeting, which was attended by virtually the entire district administration, the non-white district councillors came in for strong criticism. They were accused of having seriously failed to live up to their responsibility to voters – non-white voters in particular – in having unquestioningly accepted the flawed way in which the URBAN programme was organised.

Although the URBAN programme was the catalyst for the conflict, the root cause was much deeper. Quite apart from the organisation of the URBAN programme, there was criticism of the lack of any participatory structure for ethnic groups in decision-making processes in the Southeast district, of the under-representation of the black population in all important positions within the district administration, and of the inadequate communication between the district administration and migrant groups. In addition, many felt that the socio-economic problems that Bijlmer residents were struggling with, such as unemployment, debt (including rent arrears), crime, drug abuse and the deterioration of the neighbourhood, were being insufficiently addressed.
The (‘black’) councillors took the criticism to heart, and joined forces in what became known as the *Zwart Beraad*. The group soon came into conflict with ‘white’ district councillors who did not share their point of view. This so-called ‘black and white conflict’, then, was not only a conflict between the local population and the district administration – within the administration, too, a fierce battle erupted. The tensions ran so high that the URBAN programme ended up being put on hold for months to allow the conflict time to calm down.

The conflict, which was widely reported in the local and national media, appeared to spread beyond the boundaries of the city district. The Dutch government was concerned that tensions would escalate, and the National Security Service (BVD, now the General Intelligence and Security Service, or AIVD) monitored the developments closely. The possibility of ties with radical separatist organisations in the US was considered. The Black Consideration group fed this fear with highly combative rhetoric. It referred to the ‘anger’ that existed among the lower classes in the Bijlmer. The neighbourhood, they said, was a powder keg and a time bomb. There was said to be intensive contact with black politicians in The Hague and Rotterdam in order to broaden the row to a national level. The movement was said to be striving for ‘Black Power’, and there were predictions of war breaking out in the Bijlmer when the Netherlands became President of the European Community on 1 January 1997. In other words, a black revolution appeared to be imminent.

**The URBAN Bijlmermeer programme reformed**

In order to resolve the impasse, substantial changes to the organisational structure of the URBAN Bijlmermeer programme were proposed at the administrative level. The Steering Committee was replaced with the *Uitgebreid Bestuurslijk Overleg Bijlmermeer* (Bijlmermeer expanded administrative consultation, or UBO), and seats were reserved on both the UBO and the Supervisory Committee for
representatives of ethnic minority groups and religious organisations. Projects that were submitted had preferably to be developed from the bottom up and to reinforce the multi-ethnic community.

The URBAN Bijlmermeer programme has often been described as an important catalyst for the project of emancipating the local population. It is unequivocal that the programme heralded an increase in civic participation in the neighbourhood. However, this is only partly thanks to the programme. After all, where the European Commission had praised the programme for the scope it gave for participation by the local population, the initial decision-making structure proved otherwise. In addition, the stringent framework of the URBAN initiative turned out to be too restrictive for grassroots initiatives, with supplementary forms of funding being needed in order to realise these.

The meaning of ‘black’

One final question remains: to what extent can the increase in local participation in fact be attributed to the efforts of the Black Consideration group? Without attempting to downplay the significance of their role, the group’s image does require some nuancing.

First of all, there was not really one united ‘black’ front. In reality, multiple groups that portrayed themselves as the representatives of the ‘black’ Bijlmer residents were involved in the conflict: the ‘worried Bijlmer residents’ (who later came together in the ‘Allochtonen Breed Overleg’, ABO), the Black Consideration group and the Platform Bijlmer. These different ‘black’ groups had their own agendas and fought against the local establishment, as well as with each other. The members of the ABO and the Black Consideration group were predominantly Afro-Surinamese and, with one exception, male. The members of the Platform Bijlmer came from a range of different ethnic groups.

An interesting point that should be mentioned separately in this context is a problem that many of the people involved in the black-and-white conflict struggled with: their political loyalty
versus their ethnic loyalty. This loyalty problem led to rifts within local political parties. In 1994, the representation of D66 in the district council was pulled apart along ethnic lines. The party’s national executive threatened to disband the local branch and the D66 group in the Southeast district council, though ultimately this did not happen. The ‘black’ faction continued under the D66 banner, while the ‘white’ faction became part of Leefbaar Zuidoost (‘Liveable Southeast’). Within the Labour Party (PvdA), too, there was the risk of a rift between the ‘black’ faction, who were part of the Black Consideration group, and a mixed group led by party luminary Wouter Gortzak. The ‘black’ members from the latter group primarily viewed themselves as PvdA members. Within the centre-right VVD party, on the other hand, the black-and-white divide did not play a role.

Secondly, the meaning of ‘black’ was not unequivocal, but highly diverse. Juxtaposed with ‘white’, ‘black’ was shorthand for colonial suppression, disadvantage, discrimination and a certain approach to conducting politics. In addition, ‘black’ referred to ethnic groups from a range of different countries of origin; there was a normative distinction between the ‘right’ and the ‘wrong’ black people (token black people, ‘Bounties’, etc.), and other political divides often lurked behind the term ‘black’.

Finally, support from constituents was considerably less substantial than was being suggested. ‘Black’ parties had found in each other a common rhetoric that created the suggestion that an unprecedented popular revolt was under way – when in fact, the movement remained restricted to a relatively small, though very active and politically engaged, group of participants.

This goes some way towards qualifying the role of the Black Consideration group. However, this does not mean that the conflict, in which it played a fundamental role, was a mere rhetorical battle, yielding no real results. On the contrary: the organisational structure of the controversial URBAN programme was modified to include representatives of ethnic groups; there was a significant increase in the number of ‘black’ politicians on the district council after the district elections thanks to preferential
votes within the regular political parties; the district council got its first ‘black’ president in 1998, and promoting participation and the ‘multiculturalisation’ of the administrative organisation became key policy priorities.

**Greater attention must be paid to local diversity**

In principle, intervention from Brussels at the local level presented unexpected possibilities for the socio-economic regeneration of Amsterdam’s Bijlmermeer neighbourhood. If the conditions for participation in the programme’s decision-making structure had been more attuned to the cultural diversity of the area, the time, money and attention that had to be expended on resolving the conflict may have been better directed, for example toward the implementation of the programme.

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**Further reading**

Parts of this essay have been published earlier in

