

CITIZENS FIRST: FGDM PROMOTES CITIZENSHIP

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FGDM is a procedure that enables citizens in vulnerable positions to assume responsibility for their own life and problems. In the Netherlands it has proved to be effective over one thousand times since the year 2001. Even in difficult circumstances, citizens appear able to work with their family and friends towards effective solutions and safe plans. This is a simple, effective, and not very expensive approach.

It is also compatible with the times in which we are living today. It echoes what is intended by modern legislation in child care and welfare with regard to ‘participation’: stimulating people to devise solutions for problems that arise in their own social environment and to be in charge of their own autonomy. The Youth Care Act also emphasizes the coping capacity of families. At the heart of this legislation is reinforcing the position of the client and ensuring that help is based on the client’s request.

Though these objectives sound good in theory, professionals



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continue to dominate the implementation of these laws. Despite the intentions of legislators, it is not easy for clients — or rather citizens — to maintain control over their own problems and conflicts. Their say in the matter is all too easily taken over and solved by professionals and their organizations applying their knowledge and expertise. Meanwhile, the resources and talents that citizens and their networks have at their disposal are often passed over. After all, the professional usually has no knowledge of these resources and talents and knows even less about the citizen’s environment in which these are to be found.

Expertise in social and welfare services these days is highly developed. Is Eigen Kracht (Dutch for FGDM, family group decision making) a plea for abolishing the professional system? On the contrary, people who are confronted with problems want the best level of social and welfare services they can get. They want access to the best available expertise and the most appropriate solution. But the one thing they want above all is to retain control over their situation. When this happens, professional help has a better chance of success.

Eigen Kracht conferences have been employed in many different situations and cultures and have often resulted in amazingly simple solutions arrived at by those who are most closely involved. Independent coordinators, who are preferably from the same cultural background as the family, help prepare and facilitate the conference. These ‘lay people’ help to secure that it is not going to be an intervention in the lives of the family.

Thus an Eigen Kracht conference is not a source of assistance, not an intervention or help, but a decision-making process that makes citizens active. It has been shown that anywhere a decision or plan or strategy is necessary, citizens can be easily encouraged to take action.

Eigen Kracht is a democracy-promoting process: It gives citizens a voice! It provides citizens with a multifaceted method of not only recognizing but also taking responsibility for public interests.

It should become normal again to encourage citizens to use their own capabilities and their own strengths. Therefore, before any plans devised by outsiders are employed, put Eigen Kracht to work first.