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ENTERING A CULTURE

When I first encountered anthropology, I have read an article that stroke me; it was about a well in an African village. An NGO worker went to a remote village in Africa with great ambition to improve the life quality of the locals. Soon he has discovered that the water resource was very limited in that area, and the local women had to walk for a few hours every day to get water. Noticing that, he dug a well close to the houses of those villagers' residence. Strangely, not soon after that, he has discovered that some big rocks and muds blocked the well. He could not understand why it happened, so he removed all the rocks and muds. However, a few days passed, the well was blocked again. The NGO worker decided to observe near the well hoping to find out who was the "evildoer." One day, he discovered that it was those women who blocked the well all along. He felt confused because those women were supposed to be the ones who benefit the most from that well. After a long procedure of engaging with the locals, he understood that in fact, the local women were usually stuck into heavy house chores due to poverty, and the time when they walk for a few hours for getting the water was one of the few moments that they could enjoy their social lives with their friends. The well solved the problem of the lack of water resources, but it also took away the precious opportunity for those women to engage with others.

Similar mistakes like this often happen in the domain of policymaking. Though people may have good intentions when they propose their ideas, they make decisions **for** the others but did not think along **with** the others. This positional issue is especially important in the cultural field when it comes to policy designing.

More often than not, we encounter an awkward situation when cultural events are created within the culture of the locals; it is at the same time, hindered by the influence of the policies made by people outside of this community. To tackle this testing situation, the policymakers are expected to engage with the local culture.

Engaging with the local culture is the only way to understand it truly. Hereon, engaging does not refer to merely observing, but participating in the events and immerse oneself into the culture to understand how the culture has been formed, why it has been formed in this way and what it stands for. Most importantly, to know those other people who participate in the

cultural activities on a personal level and think **with** them. Because they are the ones who created and coexisted with this culture.

During my visit to some of the activity centers in the district of Lombok, Utrecht, where asylum seekers and refugees are the people who naturally form the predominant group, I often encounter the scenario in which Kind-hearted Dutch people try to engage with the refugees by putting forward somewhat intimidating questions; and when the asylum seekers and refugees are genuinely seeking for a decent conversation, Dutch people respond in a way that again alienates them. For instance, while asylum seekers or refugees were having a conversation with Dutch people who were new to the community, the topic always tended to circle back to the hardship of their journey due to the blunt kindness of the Dutchies, rather than having an equal and neutral conversation like those between two people who just met each other. In this case, Dutch people are showing their benevolence but at the same time drawing an invisible line between the two parties. They mind not notice that when coming to cultural activity, refugees do not necessarily want to mention their life stories repeatedly. Moreover, focusing too much on one perspective of the predominant group in that culture does not really help to build up the culture. In the end, it is hard for people to know each other personally in this way.

However, I have also encountered some remarkable cultural activities in Lombok. For instance, the Taal Café and Open Stage events in De Voorkamer. De Voorkamer is a place that is designed “By & For” the participants. Their fundamental approach is co-creation, the programme initiators develop ideas alongside participants and volunteers, and vice versa, that the participants and volunteers may also introduce and develop their ideas in De Voorkamer. In this case, the programmes are always designed around the participants’ interests and then stimulate greater participation.