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DOI

[10.1080/03003930.2022.2110077](https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2022.2110077)

Publication date

2023

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Local Government Studies

License

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[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Verhoeven, I., & Tonkens, E. (2023). Enabling civic initiatives: frontline workers as democratic professionals in Amsterdam. *Local Government Studies*, 49(4), 821-840. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2022.2110077>

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Enabling civic initiatives: frontline workers as democratic professionals in Amsterdam

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ABSTRACT

For more than fifteen years, frontline workers in the Netherlands have facilitated civic initiatives by practicing a ‘modest approach’ that can be seen as an example of democratic professionalism as developed by Albert Dzur. In this paper we empirically explore the understudied topic of how the implementation of this modest approach affects frontline workers. Based on a case study in Amsterdam, we find that frontline workers’ face a tension between sharing authority while retaining professional responsibility, which manifests itself as active support versus stepping back to leave the initiative to citizens, and as being present versus other daily work or private life. If frontline workers do not succeed in dealing with these tensions, democratic professionalism ceases to exist. Reflecting on this tension between sharing authority while retaining professional responsibility may help to develop a richer understanding of democratic professionalism.

KEYWORDS Frontline workers; democratic professionalism; civic initiatives; modest approach

Introduction

In several European welfare states, local governments interact with civic initiatives¹. German local governments facilitate ‘Bürgerkommunen’ and ‘Bürgerinitiativen’ (Rosol 2010), whereas English local governments look for ways to provide supportive relations, expertise and guidance through bureaucracy, as well as funding opportunities for civic initiatives (Healey 2015). Italian municipalities advance civic initiatives on the basis of the Constitutional Reform Act, which stipulates that governmental bodies ‘shall promote the autonomous initiatives of citizens (...) in carrying out activities of general interest, on the basis of the principle of subsidiarity’ (<http://www.labgov.it/about-labgov/labsus>). Local governments in the Netherlands have supported civic initiatives in various ways since the mid-2000s (Hurenkamp, Tonkens, and Duyvendak 2006; Bakker et al. 2012; Edelenbos and van Meerkerk 2016; Tonkens and Verhoeven 2018; Oude Vrielink and

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Verhoeven 2011). All of these examples suggest that in European welfare states, a great deal of space and opportunity is developing for citizen initiatives at the local level.

A growing body of literature considers civic initiatives as forms of 'blended action' in which civic engagement and governmental support come together (Bakker et al. 2012, 396; Lichterman and Eliasoph 2015, 806; Tonkens and Verhoeven 2018, 3; Verhoeven and Tonkens 2018, 3). In this blend, local governments can function as 'enablers' that facilitate or stimulate civic initiatives (Siriani 2009; Bakker et al. 2012; Verhoeven and Tonkens 2018). However, enabling civic initiatives requires governments to rethink their ideas and behaviour from the perspective of no longer being the main deliverer of goods and services (Healey 2015). Especially in the Netherlands, many local governments have engaged in such rethinking processes, resulting in the gradual development of a 'modest approach' in which frontline workers are supposed to offer support without taking over the initiative (Bakker et al. 2012; Denters et al. 2012; Oude Vrielink and van de Wijdeven 2008; Oude Vrielink and Verhoeven 2011).

While much has been written about the modest approach as a policy concept (Bakker et al. 2012; Van de Wijdeven 2012), and about how frontline workers are supposed to facilitate civic initiatives through this approach (Denters et al. 2012), there is scarce knowledge about how the actual implementation of this approach affects frontline workers. Implementation studies indicate that frontline workers are always confronted with top-down pressures from policymakers and bottom-up pressures from citizens (Lipsky 1980; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003; Van Loon and Jakobsen 2018). Related to the modest approach, top-down pressure comes from policymakers that expect frontline workers to treat civic initiators as equals, akin to ideas about democratic professionalism as proposed by Albert Dzur (2008, 2019). Bottom-up pressure develops when this more democratic professional practice induces new expectations of frontline workers amongst civic initiators. Hence, our aim in this article is to provide more empirical insight into the underexplored challenges that frontline workers experience as a result of expectations that policymakers project onto them and the expectations that civic initiators develop of them when they implement a modest approach. This leads us to our research question: *What challenges do frontline workers face while implementing a modest approach to civic initiatives?*

Our empirical analysis of these challenges will focus on the 'neighbourhood approach' that the City of Amsterdam developed to improve the quality of life in underprivileged neighbourhoods. We draw on our rich data gathered between 2008 and 2010, consisting of a survey among 289 civic initiators, 49 in-depth interviews with a selection of these initiators, and 15 interviews with frontline workers who supported them. Given the fact that the policies and practices were introduced between 2008 and

2011, and became institutionalised in the current system, we argue that our data still provides valuable insights into frontline workers' implementation practices.

Before we unpack our findings, we first discuss how the modest approach can be understood as a form of democratic professionalism, followed by an explanation of our case study and methods. In our empirical sections we first briefly present how the modest neighbourhood approach is practised by the City of Amsterdam, followed by analyses of frontline workers becoming partners of civic initiators, meeting their demand for attention, and dealing with the bureaucratic demands and backlash they encounter. We end by presenting our conclusions.

The modest approach as democratic professionalism

The modest approach

After many decades of top-down organised deliberative processes of citizen participation (Michels and de Graaf 2010), in the early 2010s the national Dutch government developed policy ideas for local governments to adopt a 'modest approach' to civic initiatives (Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid 2012; Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken 2013). Such a modest approach recognises that civic initiatives pragmatically define public issues and choose their own preferred courses of action. Local governments are expected to trust civic initiatives and leave them substantial space to act on the public issues of their choice. They should avoid co-opting civic initiatives or making them instrumental to governmental policy goals. This means that local governments' approach to civic initiatives depends on initiators' conceptions of public issues. Local governments are presumed to see themselves as facilitating already existing and stimulating new civic initiatives (Oude Vrielink and van de Wijdeven 2008; Oude Vrielink and Verhoeven 2011; Van de Wijdeven 2012; Bakker et al. 2012; Denters et al. 2012; Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken 2013).

A modest approach primarily requires that local governments restrain their own ambitions and inclinations to be in control. Local governments do not lead, but instead function as a partner to civic initiatives, trying to cater to the needs of civic initiators (Oude Vrielink and van de Wijdeven 2008; Oude Vrielink and Verhoeven 2011; Van de Wijdeven 2012; Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken 2013). In practice this approach is translated into a *reactive* civic enabler strategy, focusing on facilitating pre-existing civic initiatives when needed, and into a *proactive* civic enabler strategy that focuses on stimulating new civic initiatives by offering budgets and assistance for citizens that are willing to take action but somehow have not done so yet (Denters et al. 2012).

Democratic professionalism

An interesting concept to more deeply understand professionals as civic enablers can be found in Albert Dzur's (2008, 2019) ideals of *democratic professionalism*. According to Dzur, democratic professionalism is practiced by 'reform minded innovators' who 'do professionalism democratically' (Dzur 2019, 1). With the concept of democratic professionalism, Dzur aims to pinpoint what it means for professionals to promote the involvement of citizens in ways that empower them by giving them genuine influence in whatever it is that professionals used to consider as their own span of control. Such civic involvement in professional tasks, Dzur argues, should be more than occasional and advisory: it should occur on an everyday basis and empower citizens, instead of being limited to incidental, merely advisory deliberative forums or mini-publics. To create such genuine civic involvement, professionals should open up their own domains and share tasks with citizens. To be clear: this does not mean that professionals make citizens responsible for solving public problems and then withdraw themselves. Instead, they should continue working as professionals that take their professional responsibility and authority seriously, whilst improving their skills and expertise as civic enablers. The fundamental change is that they share their power and authority with citizens (Dzur 2008, 2019).

Democratic professionalism is important because power sharing with citizens may improve the quality level of services, while at the same time empowering citizens as coproducers. Organisational pressures and institutional structures tend to encourage hierarchical, bureaucratic, non-collaborative procedures by concentrating power, by labelling, classifying and ordering, by managing moral choices, and by creating distance between people (Olsen 2008; Thompson and Alvesson 2005). Most of the work in institutions – including, but not limited to, professional work – is very complex and physically removed from the public and from officials not directly involved (Olsen 2008; Thompson and Alvesson 2005). Dzur (2008, 2019) argues that such bureaucratic institutions need to be corrected by outside influences, preferably by those who are subjected to their power and directly affected by their actions.

The corrections of bureaucratic institutions must be done by democratic professionals working with citizens on collaborative projects (Dzur 2019, xii). These professionals can make sure that 'institutions open up to citizens and think and act with and through them'. (ibid 2019, 41), so that institutions become more humane and better attuned to what citizens really need. Democratic professionals must be 'alert to the ways their organisations and institutions reflectively disempower the agency and trivialise the knowledge' of citizens (ibid 2019, 41) and push back against pressures of hierarchical, bureaucratic, non-collaborative processes by

making 'direct changes to their institutional domains piece by piece and practise by practise' (ibid 2019, 6). The knowledge and agency of citizens is crucial in this reform process. In order to do justice to citizens' knowledge, democratic professionals aim to understand the world of citizens on citizens' own terms, and listen carefully to their problems and to their experience of how the services involved work for them (or fail to do so). For this purpose, democratic professionals 'seek out opportunities for collaborative work' (ibid 2019, 6) and consider how crucial tasks can be altered so that citizens can take part. In this process they may look to share knowledge with citizens and stimulate debate between them (Dzur 2008).

Frontline workers and integrative governance

The ideals of democratic professionalism have strong relevance to frontline workers, who need to be able to read a situation, improvise, reflect on action and engage in very context-sensitive forms of citizen empowerment (Durose 2011; Van Hulst, de Graaf and Van den Brink 2011, 2012). Such frontline workers are the most logical types of professionals to practice democratic professionalism since they directly engage in governance contexts in which they collaborate in all kinds of ways with citizens to make policy work.

In addition, there is an overlap between the ideals of democratic professionalism and proposals for integrative governance, which critique most existing governance theories for explaining collaborative processes through rational-choice based assumptions on hierarchy and competition. Integrative governance aims to radically revise theories on collaboration, by advocating a more open-ended approach to power in which actors '(...) co-create *power-with* one another' instead of sharing *power over* others (Stout and Love 2019, 30). Integrative collaboration draws on situational authority and emergent leadership to allow citizens and other actors to be involved in governance processes on an egalitarian basis. Situational authority entails that the particulars of a situation determine who has authority over functions, while emergent leadership allows for the emergence of different people to do what the situation requires (Stout and Love 2019, 168–169). In these circumstances administrators practice facilitative coordination, by being 'on tap' instead of 'on top' to support collaboration among all actors and bring out the best in others through constant learning and feedback (Stout and Love 2019, 164–165).

Supporting civic initiatives democratically

Ideals of democratic professionalism fit perfectly with the modest approach to civic initiatives, as frontline workers are expected to practice facilitative

coordination by enabling citizens to take responsibility for issues they deem important in their communities, without taking over. Depending on the topics on which citizens propose initiatives, frontline workers aim to share power with these civic initiators over what was previously considered local governments' expertise. As such, frontline workers do not only support civic initiators to take responsibility but also intend to realise 'co-ownership of problems' (Dzur 2019, 6) that were previously the main responsibility of professionals.

In these more democratic interactions, civic initiators are also confronted with bureaucratic demands that frontline workers can mitigate or neutralise for them, as we will see below. Research by Van der Steen, van Twist, and Bressers (2016) amongst Dutch civil servants indicates that only 7.7% support a modest approach to civic initiatives, while 82% adheres to traditional bureaucratic values and finds the modest approach too risky. Instead they prefer to be more in charge and at best consult other actors in their policy-making or policy-implementation practices (Van der Steen, van Twist, and Bressers 2016, 401). Although these results were found amongst civil servants working at the national level, they do suggest that frontline workers and civic initiators at the local level may need to overcome considerable pushback from more traditional bureaucrats (Bartels 2017, 2018).

Case study and methods

Amsterdam was on top of the list in a 2008–2011 programme by the national government to 'socially recapture' forty underprivileged neighbourhoods in eighteen towns and cities. A key element of the programme was to stimulate civic initiatives through professional support based on the modest approach, which makes Amsterdam a critical case (Flyvbjerg 2006, 229–231) to study how a proactive approach to enabling citizens' initiatives affects the professionals providing support. Our empirical research in Amsterdam builds on an analysis of policy documents and political speeches to capture the policy ideas of the modest approach, a face-to-face survey amongst 289 civic initiators that received financial support from a district budget system, semi-structured interviews with 49 of these civic initiators, and 15 interviews with frontline workers that provided support.

During this period, the City of Amsterdam subsidised a total of 1,211 initiatives, undertaken by 745 citizens, out of which we managed to reach 472 potential respondents for our survey. A total of 183 of these 472 respondents did not want to participate, leaving us with 289 respondents and a response ratio of 61%. Amongst this group of 289 respondents we ended up interviewing 49 of them in their homes, based on a selection of their answers to key variables in the survey, a spread over neighbourhoods, random sampling amongst those fulfilling the same criteria, and due to us being

unable to reach some civic initiators. In addition we asked these 49 civic initiators for names of the frontline workers who had played the most important role in supporting their initiatives (regardless of the quality of their support), resulting in a list of 30 names, which was reduced to 15 because of a lack of contact details or the frontline workers being too busy to participate in the study. For all the interviews we used a topic list to guarantee structured comparison, while also leaving some space to go into more depth on interesting topics that came up during the conversation. The interviews lasted between 45 and 120 minutes. For all interview data, we performed open coding followed by axial coding, both with ATLAS.ti (Bryman 2012). All respondents we quote have been anonymised. Initiators we list as I1, I2, I3 and onwards, and frontline workers as F1, F2, F3 and so on.

Our combination of methods yielded a large amount of rich material. However, there are also limitations. The most important limitation is that we only talked to residents who had been granted a district budget for their initiative. This possibly gives a positive bias, because these residents had been able to do what they wanted to do. Due to gaps in municipal data, we were unable to interview civic initiators who had not been awarded a budget in order to detect possible dissatisfaction. Another limitation is that we did not talk to civil servants who guided these residents, or to those who worked in the back office.

Before we present our data, we first briefly explain Amsterdam's modest neighbourhood approach that was initiated in 2008 and gradually became institutionalised. In this explanation we integrate data from our survey to give an overview of who supported civic initiatives during the application for budgets and with the execution of the initiatives that were granted a budget.

Amsterdam's modest neighbourhood approach

Between 2008 and 2011 the Municipality of Amsterdam received 17.1 million euros from the national government to develop a neighbourhood approach aimed at empowering people and improving the quality of life in underprivileged neighbourhoods. Key to this process was the engagement of civic initiatives, stimulated through district budgets and supported by frontline workers (Gemeente Amsterdam 2008, 2009). Professional support was performed through a modest approach, which put residents in the lead for making neighbourhood improvements. This modest approach was advocated by successive aldermen:

They are in control. My role in this is mainly: make it possible, make it easy.
(Alderman Tjeerd Herrema cited in Gemeente Amsterdam 2008, 5)

By trying out new methods and sharing knowledge and experience we see more residents becoming active to enhance their neighbourhood. What strikes me as well is that these initiatives have been started by self-assured citizens (...) who dare to ask professionals for support to really implement their ideas and make them part of the neighbourhood approach.

(Alderman Freek Ossel cited in Gemeente Amsterdam 2009, 2)

From the beginning frontline workers implemented the modest approach by setting up information campaigns to explain the opportunities of district budgets and invite residents to take initiatives. As shown in [Table 1](#), frontline workers of local government and community work were the most important in drawing attention to and supporting applications with neighbourhood budgets. However, during the execution of civic initiatives, support from frontline workers decreased while support from local residents, relatives and friends increased.

Our quantitative material also indicates that the modest approach had remarkable results in terms of representation. The initiators were more often women (61%), with a low- or mid-level of education (50%), younger than fifty (48%), and belonging to first- or second-generation migrant groups (40%) and to low-income groups (30%). These numbers run counter to selectivity biases towards higher-educated, older white men in top-down organised processes of citizen participation (for a more extensive discussion see Tonkens and Verhoeven 2018; Verhoeven and Tonkens 2018).

Even after national government funding was terminated in 2012, civic initiatives remained important. In 2015, the modest approach was dispersed throughout the city under the name of 'area-oriented work' (de Rijk 2016), while more recently frontline workers continue to be available to provide support, indicating that a modest approach has become deeply engrained in how the City of Amsterdam deals with civic initiatives (Gemeente Amsterdam

Table 1. Dynamics of interactions before and during initiatives in percentages.

	<i>Information source</i> N=423 ^a	<i>Help with application</i> N=449 ^a	<i>Help with realisation</i> N=701 ^a
Local government	27%	38%	20%
Community work organisations	16%	18%	13%
Housing corporation	5%	7%	7%
Resident organisation	12%	11%	9%
Local entrepreneurs	-	3%	7%
Church members	-	1%	3%
Mosque members	-	1%	2%
Local residents	9%	8%	19%
Friends/family	4%	4%	10%
Media	11%	-	-
Other	16%	9%	10%
Total	100%	100%	100%

(Source: Tonkens and Verhoeven 2012: 54).

^aResults of multiple-response questions; respondents could indicate more sources of information or of support during their initiative.

2020). This gradual institutionalisation of the modest approach is striking because municipal governance structures have been radically reorganised (de Rijk 2016). One explanation for the modest approach' survival is that its successes were clearly noted and not obscured or belittled through the lenses of other public administration paradigms, as so often happens with processes of social innovation (Bartels 2017). Another explanation may be the declining dependency on available funding. After the national funding was terminated in 2012, the Municipality of Amsterdam found ways to maintain a support structure that practices the modest approach, while spending far less money on subsidies for civic initiatives (de Rijk 2016).

In the next sections we go back to our qualitative material on the early days of this modest approach, to see how frontline workers became partners of civic initiators, how they had to meet their demands for attention, and how they dealt with bureaucratic demands and backlash.

Becoming partners

Our qualitative material suggests that civic initiators started to see frontline workers as partners in their initiatives, calling them by their first names and telling us about their frequent, rather informal contacts. Two elderly women who frequently met with a frontline worker explain:

Initiator 1: You have to do it together.

Initiator 2: Yes. And-and

Initiator 1: We do that. We have a new one [frontline worker] now, called X. He comes to our meetings and we tell him things. Together we did an inspection of the neighbourhood.

Initiator 2: It is good if you work things out together.

(I392, dual interview with both initiators)

Another example is A, who during all stages of his initiative had intense interactions with a frontline worker:

She is just a woman who wants to be at the coalface; she does not sit in the office, no, she comes to check out every project, before she gives permission. (...) She is just a marvellous woman that is interested in everything. She checks out what is going on and encourages people and that is exactly what they need.

(I438)

These expectations of partnership are reflected in how the frontline workers practiced the modest approach. Most frontline workers strongly believed in the modest approach because they saw many initiatives blossom, with a wide variety of people dedicated to improving their neighbourhood. One frontline worker nicely summarises this attitude:

(...) you need faith, hope and love. Love in the sense of authentic interest. And uh ... faith. You have to really believe that social initiatives have added value (...) and trust them too. And hope (...) you have to be optimistic and you also have to be patient. (F13)

The aspect of seeing the relevance of initiatives and trusting civic initiators is important to practice professional modesty and to establish a foundation for partnership with civic initiators. By showing professional appreciation for initiatives and trust in initiators, frontline workers open up to Dzur's ideal of giving citizens genuine influence on an everyday basis, and to facilitative coordination, as advocated by Stout and Love. Other important ingredients of providing civic initiators influence within partnerships can be found in how frontline workers avoid taking over the initiative:

Leave the initiative with residents, especially do not take it over, make sure the organisation is with the people themselves, make sure you are clear about your part (...) and execute that very well. (F8)

We try to let residents do as much as possible themselves even though it sometimes takes more time because when he or she has not done exactly what you want (...) you have to say: 'Hey, do it this way or that way'. You do see that people become more self-assured and learn something from it. (F10)

The partnerships between frontline workers and civic initiators are usually forged during the budget application process. Many residents need help applying because they have no clue how to further develop their idea for an initiative, or because they have not developed a concrete plan or written out a budget. Hence, most frontline workers take the time to help residents further develop their initiative:

You really need to take some time with the person making the application. Really. Because most of them are not project writers. What they want to do, or what the intent is, is sometimes written down in two sentences. So you really have to take a moment to just talk to that person [and ask them:] What do you really want? (F2)

So I was co-responsible from the start, because I had encouraged those people into becoming active. So then we would make a plan: 'Well, nice that you want to do it, do you already know what is involved? We need to have a project plan, have you ever done that?' 'No, I have never done that'. Well (...) then you sit down and write it together. (F14)

After a budget is approved, the initiators can execute their initiatives. This is the moment when frontline workers become more cautious in their support. Some argue that their work is done and the initiators now need to continue on their own: 'They totally take responsibility themselves. That is actually in the conditions we have, that people have to carry it out by themselves' (F2). These frontline workers cease to function as democratic professionals as

promoted by Dzur, as they stop sharing tasks by disengaging from civic initiators.

However, other frontline workers continue to act as democratic professionals by primarily adopting a reactive civic enabler strategy. For example, they make a space available, or lend out items that residents need. Or they assist initiators with tips and tricks: 'In principle we always ask people if they can do it themselves, but we do show the way' (F1). Sometimes more support is needed in acquiring things or in applying for permits. In such cases, frontline workers do become a bit more involved in the execution of an initiative, but they remain modest by assisting and not taking over from civic initiators. They remain engaged as democratic as professionals.

Acting as partners on the basis of a modest approach did not come naturally for most frontline workers. They needed to learn how to do this by trial and error, often by first doing too much and later on leaving more to civic initiators:

And when I look back I think (...) he came up with the plan and I was working on the execution. (...) And what I also notice is that you want a plan to succeed too. If you believe it's going wrong, well, is it your task to say: 'it is going wrong here and we have to adjust'? Or is it indeed also instructive for such a resident to think: 'I have to ask my neighbour for help here or I have to look for another group here?' (F15)

I think what it does to my vision is that I start to think of myself as less important, that I am convinced that the most essential task is to facilitate (...). You will see that residents are capable of a lot. They can do it themselves; more than I thought before. (F6)

Frontline workers also struggled with the degree to which they should identify with a project. Democratic professionals practice proximity, Dzur (2019, 21–23) argues, but how close should they come?

So when I was in that guidance meeting saying, 'oh yeah, nice', you know, she was also kind of like, 'oh, I am doing it right'. Then it was rejected and she fell into a huge chasm. And I felt so guilty. (...) Then I said to myself, I'm never going to be in a project like that again (...) I just have to be neutral. (F2)

As we can see, it was not easy for frontline workers to restrain themselves. They had to practice modesty and gradually learned to leave room for initiators and not to take over the initiative, no matter how tempting that sometimes was for them on the basis of their knowledge or previous experience.

At the same time, frontline workers could not just leave room for civic initiators to act. They sometimes had to intervene, for example in situations where initiators made unreasonable demands on participants in their initiatives or on organisations that they required for the realisation of their initiative. Professional intervention was sometimes also needed to tone

down plans that were too big and financially unfeasible. In addition, frontline workers had to deal with initiators who turned out to be difficult people:

Yes, difficult residents. I have often had residents ranting on the phone. Some of them have an attitude that makes me think, you know, if it [a proposal for an initiative] is rejected, I will just write the rejection letter right away. (F2)

How do you prevent residents trying to exploit the situation? Residents who hire their neighbours [for their initiative] when it is simply a set-up to make some money, or residents who start appeal proceedings against a rejection that you have made. (F10)

Becoming a democratic professional in line with Dzur's ideas, is thus a trial and error process.

It is about sharing power, as Dzur claims, but not about a complete transfer of power. Frontline workers behave cautiously and on an equal footing, but occasionally intervene. In most cases they are on 'tab', but sometimes they need to be on 'top'. This is contrary to the notion of facilitative coordination proposed by Stout and Love, but it is in line with democratic professionalism: democratic professionals do not stop being professionals and they retain some responsibility and power, even though they share these with citizens.

Meeting the demand for attention

The partnership that many civic initiators experience during the application for budgets creates a demand for attention during the execution of their initiatives. Once budgets are approved, frontline workers have less time for them and limit their support. However, civic initiators often have different expectations. For them the partnership is about establishing a relationship based on co-ownership of problems, as Dzur observes. Hence civic initiators actually expect frontline workers to stay involved and show interest in their initiative:

You [frontline workers] need to mean it, so you also have to feel it and observe it, have an opinion about it and say what can be improved or what is done well. So, you really have to engage in conversation with people (. . .). It needs to be lived through, it needs to be well embedded in such an organisation [district authority] and you [frontline workers] should not say: 'well, this neighbourhood participation project is done.' (I103)

Frontline workers recognise this demand for attention by civic initiators, as one of them observes:

It is 80% relationship management, and of course that starts with attention (...). And if you do not pay attention or you do not let them hear from you (...) you are already in trouble. (F13)

This attention is particularly expected when civic initiators give presentations, or when they have a success to celebrate, which is often in the evenings or during the weekends. Policymakers probably did not anticipate this demand for attention, as they tend to think that the neighbourhood is citizens' public, while in fact, for civic initiators, frontline workers are their main public (Tonkens and de Wilde 2013).

The demand for attention provides extra work, outside office hours. It is not part of frontline workers' job description. Hence they struggle with how to respond to it. Some go the extra mile to be present, in line with the idea of democratic professionals who share tasks and practice proximity:

Look, I'm a participation broker so I'm expected to be present at events. But I often do that at the weekends, in the evenings, in my own time. Visiting initiatives is just (...) instinctively part of me. (F2)

(...) an essential part of the whole process is being respectful to the person taking an initiative, to thank him or her with your presence by showing an interest. (F14)

Others point out that they cannot be present everywhere because of other work meetings or deadlines, or they cherish their free time. Therefore, they try to temper expectations:

So I say in advance what can and cannot be done. (F12)

And I do recognise it, and I always try to explain it: 'guys, I cannot be everywhere; it's just not possible.' (F4)

Civic initiators' demand for attention is more often frustrated in their interactions with back-office civil servants. When executing a civic initiative, residents sometimes need to contact these back-office civil servants, for instance when an initiator is starting a vegetable garden in a square that requires help from a planner and employees of the public gardens department. Civic initiators recount that they missed the partnership spirit and the care and attention that comes with it among these professionals:

You need to work at such an institution or be related to it to be able to talk to them. (...) We often experienced that they [civil servants] (...) did not have time or had the idea that they were not responsible. (I63)

During the opening, there was a woman (...) from the district authority (...). She held a speech and she never introduced herself to me in advance. She knew nothing about me, and (...) I thought: 'Hey, what is she talking about?' So, I found that very troublesome from the district authority. (I747)

In Dzur's view, this is where a democratic professional must intervene and open up closed-off, unwelcoming institutions such as local government to citizens. Frontline workers are thus necessarily liaisons who support citizens in their search for task sharing, but also struggle with this role, as they are not in a position to correct their colleagues' behaviour.

Dealing with bureaucratic demands and backlash

The district budget system demanded that civic initiators first wrote an application for a budget and, once granted, used the budget for the execution of the initiative and were accountable for how the money was spent. This procedure turned out to make complex bureaucratic demands on civic initiators. For example, writing the application was difficult for some civic initiators since they did not have the required expertise:

(...) but when I look at the form I think: wow, for a layperson that is terrible. (...) you have to apply for a permit, it is such a lot of paperwork, you have to fill in all kinds of questions. I had to make a sketch where everything was placed, I could not do that. (I724)

And then you have to make a plan, completely drawn with everything on the square. Well, I can do a lot, but this went over my head. (I760)

These sorts of tasks were often inescapable. Most frontline workers assisted civic initiators with the paperwork.

City districts differed in their accountability regimes once the budget was granted. Some districts were rather strict and formal. In these districts, the frontline workers tried to soften things for the initiators by taking on the administration:

(...) The administrative handling (...) it takes a lot of time, the invoices (...) I do that partially and our department does that too. (...) That is something you have to take into account. Every initiative costs capacity internally, so to speak. (F15)

Frontline workers struggled with both sides of bureaucracy here: how should they make the policy accessible as well as accountable?

Certain people, of course, find it very difficult to do all that writing and things like that, and at the same time, as a local authority, you have a responsibility for how that money is spent. (...) How do you make this kind of thing as accessible as possible, without losing that (...) controlling role? (F8)

Supporting civic initiators in dealing with bureaucratic demands is another example of Dzur's democratic professionalism, which is also about helping citizens to deal with organisational pressures and professional incentives that involve hierarchical, bureaucratic, non- collaborative procedures. However, while Dzur (2019, 6) suggests that democratic professionals must also push

back against such pressures and ‘make direct changes to their institutional domains’, we argue this is not always possible nor desirable. Irritating as they may be, bureaucratic requirements cannot be erased, nor can they always be reformed. In such cases, we propose that democratic professionals can only be boundary workers who juggle contradictory but legitimate demands of accessibility and accountability.

It was more clearly desirable for frontline workers to make changes to their institutional domains when they were faced with other civil servants who did not like the district budget system and the care and attention for civic initiatives at all. Frontline workers had to deal with cynicism around, trivialisation of and at best an instrumentalist perspective on civic initiatives:

But what I find most annoying is the cynicism of (...) ‘oh yes, those are the residents who want to earn a little extra’. Well, there are people who really do an awful lot for that neighbourhood for a pittance, and some of them are really on a minimum level. Or the trivialisation of ‘uh, they cannot do it, they are well-intentioned amateurs who only cause problems’ in advance. And the instrumentalisation by the local authority, in that it almost seems as if reasonably paid civil servants think up what citizens should do in their free time. To me, that also has to do with power. Because in the long run, you just need fewer civil servants. So it is also about [protecting] established positions. (F13)

This type of backlash reflects the negative attitude found by Van der Steen, van Twist, and Bressers (2016) amongst the large majority of Dutch civil servants in their research population that adheres to traditional bureaucratic values. Such values relate to forms of government that operate more hierarchically than what is expected within the modest approach and also within integrative governance (Stout and Love 2019). The different requirements of more traditional civil servants and frontline workers who practice modesty are nicely explained by one of our respondents:

Civil servants (...) are not recruited and selected on the basis of these [frontline worker] qualities. (...) Yes, so (...) people often ask for a feeling for administrative-civil service relations, but it never says anything about a feeling for societal relations. So this is often seen as something extra. (F13)

In these situations, making institutional changes as indicated by Dzur can be more desirable, although it would of course first demand a change of perspective amongst these ‘traditional’ civil servants. However, frontline workers usually do not have the power to achieve such changes of perspective. Dzur work does not seem to be of much help here, because he focuses on power in the interactions between professionals and citizens, but neglects the issue of how democratic professionals can exert power in their own organisation towards other professionals.

Conclusions

Over the last decade, local governments in several European welfare states have become enablers of civic initiatives. Especially in the Netherlands, frontline workers employ a modest approach during interactions with civic initiatives based on trust, restraint and support. The implementation of a modest approach illustrates a change in professional work in the direction of democratic professionalism (Dzur 2008, 2019) and towards facilitative coordination as an important aspect of integrative governance (Stout and Love 2019). Practicing democratic professionalism through a modest approach is hard but gratifying work for frontline workers as they see many civic initiatives develop.

The main challenge for frontline workers is that working with a modest approach creates a tension between sharing authority while retaining professional responsibility. Sharing tasks as a key tenet of democratic professionalism does not necessarily lead to sharing responsibility, hence the tension. This tension occurs in two ways (see below), and involves risks for frontline workers and civic initiators. It is important to note these manifestations of the tension and concomitant risks, as Dzur does not pay much attention to either. Reflecting on them may help to develop a richer understanding of democratic professionalism. Moreover, when frontline workers do not get the balance right between sharing authority and responsibility, they may become too dominant and demotivate civic initiators. When this happens, democratic professionalism ceases to exist and facilitative coordination becomes a fiction.

A first manifestation of the tension between sharing authority while retaining responsibility is between active support and stepping back to leave the initiative to citizens. This tension occurs because even though the modest approach requires that frontline workers let the civic initiators do as much as possible themselves, civic initiators often need resources, technical assistance and other forms of practical support, and front line workers must act as administrative brokers to make civic initiatives accessible and accountable. Additionally, the necessity to deal with backlash caused by more traditional civil servants who are less enthusiastic about civic initiatives, triggers a more active attitude by frontline workers which may reflect on their relations with civic initiators. As a result, front line workers risk to unintentionally dominate civic initiators, while civic initiators become dependent on frontline workers for financial, emotional and practical support. This can also harm the relations of civic initiators with other citizens: civic initiators may focus on their relation with frontline workers, at the expense of their relations with fellow citizens for whom these initiators organise their activities in the first place.

The second manifestation of the tension, is between being present and other daily work or private life. The demand for attention requires the maintenance of a relationship in which frontline workers are present at moments that civic initiators deem important. These moments may not fit with other

work that frontline workers need to do or may be beyond working hours and interfering with private life. This creates the risk that front line workers become overburdened. The role of administrative broker is already time-consuming, while responding to the demand for attention often also requires investing private time, thus fitting a public sector pattern in which innovations frequently happen after official working hours (Baines 2011).

Practicing democratic professionalism raises new questions for frontline workers and researchers: how to deal with the risks of becoming overburdened and civic initiators becoming too dependent and taking their eye off fellow citizens? When is proximity to an initiative required and when is distance more desirable? How does being a partner fit with the need to put a halt to an initiative or to correct civic initiators? How can sharing tasks include sharing responsibility? Though Dzur did not identify such questions, it can be argued that they are constitutive of what it means to practice democratic professionalism. Working on these questions may also support experimentation with the egalitarian governance practices as advocated by Stout and Love's perspective on integrative governance. Democratic professionalism and integrative governance are promising but complicated ideals that need further experimentation and reflection. We hope this paper contributes to this important endeavour.

Note

1. Elsewhere we defined civic initiatives as 'collective, informal, social or political activities by citizens as volunteers that aim to deal pragmatically with public issues in their communities' (Tonkens and Verhoeven 2018, 1596).

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the reviewers and Louise Reardon for their very helpful comments and suggestions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This research was supported by the Directorate for Housing, Neighbourhoods and Integration of the Dutch Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, and by the Program Bureau for The Amsterdam Neighbourhood Approach of the Municipality of Amsterdam.

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