Nederland participatieland?

_De ambitie van de Wet maatschappelijke ondersteuning (Wmo) en de praktijk in buurten, mantelzorgrelaties en kerken_

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Summary

This study concerns the consequences of the Dutch Social Support Act (Wet maatschappelijke ondersteuning, Wmo) for the relation between government, individuals and social structures. The analytical framework for this analysis is based on the institutionalisation-theories of Anton Zijderveld, Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, and John S. Searle. Their theories serve to describe participation in general. The concept of participation is analysed by means of the formula Searle introduces to define institutional rules: X counts as Y in context C. The analytical framework is further enriched by Herman Dooyeweerd’s theory on social institutions, thus making it possible not only to study participation in general, but also in specific social contexts. The specific behaviour and motives of individuals within a specific social setting are referred to as ‘practices of participation’ (participatiepraktijken).

The analytical framework is used first to analyse the Social Support Act in its juridical text form, and second to analyse the explanatory memorandum and other official texts that supported the introduction of the Act, in order to determine what the ambition of the law actually is. What concrete social changes is this so called ‘participation act’ aiming at? The Social Support Act turns out to concern many kinds of participation: The partaking of challenged persons in social relations; their contribution to more formalised societal initiatives; their contribution to local policy making; and also the contribution of all non-challenged citizens in the support of other citizens who need it.

Analysis of the law text and ambition shows a difference between the letter of the law and the original ambition as described in the explanatory memorandum and other relevant policy documents concerning the introduction of the Social Support Act. This difference concerns especially the types of participation which the legislator cannot directly influence: the contribution of all citizens, including the non-challenged, to support other citizens who do need this in order to participate in any desired way. In the laws text, regulations are included concerning a call on the individuals to take responsibility to tackle their own problems; but not prescriptions for other citizens to take responsibility to help others tackle their problems. This line of policy thought by the legislator, implying responsibility of all citizens for the well-being of others, stays hidden in the actual law text.

In the hidden line of thought, a key role is imputed to the phenomenon of ‘social cohesion’. The line of thought argumented by the legislator implies that an increase of informal social and more formal societal participation automatically leads to an increase of social cohesion, and that social cohesion, subsequently, leads to an increase of social and societal participation. However, the supposed relation between social cohesion and informal mutual support is kept in the dark and left unsupported by scientific evidence. The legislator probably adopts a variant on the contested crowding out-hypothesis, assuming that less governmental support automatically leads to more mutual support among citizens. The legislator does not argue why this assumption may turn out to be true, but suggests a positive outcome by picturing an attractive picture of an active civil society supporting challenged fellow citizens in such way they relieve the professional arrangements of part of its burden. But also this concept of civil society remains vaguely described. The Social Support Act, however, leaves local councils with the task to develop its own view on the way to achieve the expected shift from governmental re-
sponsibility to more individual and collective responsibility. The only relevant prescription to local councils is implied in the ‘field of achievement’ (dutch: ‘prestatieveld’) which the Social Support Act describes. The first field of achievement concerns ‘the activation of social cohesion and livability of society in villages, city divisions and neighbourhoods’. The fourth also refers to the hidden line of policy thought: ‘supporting informal care and volunteering activity’. Local councils pick and choose their own interpretation of these achievement fields while developing their own local Social Support policy. Desk research on their policy documents shows how they do so: some reflect the full ambition of the national legislator, others translate the prescription concerning ‘social cohesion’ merely as an encouragement to improve policy cohesion between local suppliers of professional care arrangement. Each local council, however, struggles with the formally undefined expectations of the also undefined civil society concerning social support. This struggle cannot be a surprise if taken in consideration that the civil society by definition is the non-governmental domain in society, implying that direct governmental influence is minimal. Even a top down policy perspective this struggle could be expected; from a grass root level perspective this struggle is even highly probable: the more informal social structures there are, and the more they are community based, the less they are interwoven with governmental institutions, and thus the less they are likely to be directable by formal governmental policy. This obvious but apparently largely overlooked problem in the line of policy thought is underlined in three case studies.

The three case studies describe the likelihood that the ambition of the Social Support Act is true to the nature of three specific ‘practices of participation’: neighbourhoods, informal care relations and churches. This likelihood is studied by analysing the actual nature of these social structures as a whole and the actual way individuals within these practices are motivated to act. The claim of this study is that informal social support is only likely to be found within practices of participation:

- that are characterised by a certain level of institutionalisation;
- that are intrinsically, by nature, motivated for and directed towards social support;
- and that are regulated by social rules that actually stimulate responsibility of its members for the well-being of others

The first case study on neighbourhoods show that they do not naturally represent practices of participation, because they do not automatically coincide with social communities. Therefore they do not automatically bring forth informal support among neighbours. Neighbourhoods can coincide with social communities, but do not automatically do so. Firstly, the nature of ‘neighbourhoods’ is not necessarily social; secondly, even if communities are found in neighbourhoods, they are not always and evidently aiming for social support (but, e.g., for social security or local spatial planning issues). Finally, neighbours use social rules that rather discourage people to ask and give mutual support instead of encouraging it. Empirical data in this case study show that even in neighbourhoods with a high level of social cohesion, people do assist their neighbours in odd jobs directly related to the physical aspect of housing. They do not easily and naturally give, let alone ask for, actual care issues. Recently published research results by Lilian Linders already showed that there is – fortunately - no relation between social cohesion and actual given informal care among neighbours. This case study accomplishes her argu-
ment by showing that also in neighbourhoods with a high level of social cohesion – unfortunately – this relation is not evident either. On the contrary, especially among relatively high educated, well informed neighbours, the norm that can be extracted from the used social rules is that people consider themselves and others ‘self-helping’ if they show to be successful in applying for professional care and only if they do not succeed their appeal to call out for their neighbours. The Social Support Act thus runs against commonly shared rules on how a ‘good neighbour should act; rules that are indeed shaped by the so far seemingly unlimited possibilities of the welfare state.

The second case study on informal care relationship shows that these relationships are indeed aiming for care and support, but governmental policy insufficiently takes into account the very nature of the relationships. Informal carers do not primarily act according to professional care goals or formal policy. They primarily respond to the rules and goals of the original, care-less relationship between (...) individuals. Local councils unfoundedly assume a certain ‘ideal’ type of informal care, capable of dealing with several contexts of participation at the same time, if need be also dealing with conflicting goals of these contexts and conflicting expectations concerning their own roles. They are able to do so without neglecting their own needs and motives as well as the needs and motives of others involved in the caring relationship. This ideal type of informal carer additionally wants to stay involved in the care-giving himself (or more often: herself) as much as possible and are able to deal with some if not much bureaucracy. In reality however, other types of informal carers are also found. One probably large group consists of informal carers not capable of dealing with the described complexity, because they are not highly educated in care professions or not informed on the available professional arrangements. On the other hand, another probably large group of informal carers are sufficiently informed and educated on the available arrangements and therefore only willing to stay involved in care themselves for the few tasks left to them that are not (yet) met by these arrangements. Both described groups are insufficiently taken into account by local policy makers. The first group should be taken into account more explicitly in order to prevent them from falling into health problems themselves. Policy adjusted in this sense however will not likely result directly into cost reduction. Cost reduction is more likely to be found by adjusting policy concerning the second non-ideal group of informal carers. This implies a change in the social rules they apply, that are indeed shaped by the welfare state.

The third case study on churches show that churches have indeed the aim to care. They do so formally as an institution, as well as informally as a community. Churches and church members take care for fellow church members and for others. But care is not the only aim of churches and the aim of care cannot be isolated from the other aims of divine worshipping, faith witnessing and mutual care among fellow believers. The extent to which the aim of caring is emphasised, varies between and within formal religious associations. All churches correspond on the point of their being influenced by the welfare state: the rules they apply imply they help people as long as they are not able to get help from the government. For churches the ambition of the Social Support Act thus implies a huge change. Churches show they realise some of the implications: they institute local platforms to enable cooperation as churches and deliver a representation themselves formally in policy circuits. Local churches as well as local civil councils meet several dilemmas concerning the role of churches in social support. Do churches have a formal role in social support as an institution, or do church members only have a role as
a community? Do churches take a role in informal care only if they can pursue their other aims, including bringing their gospel, at the same time, or are they not willing to (themselves) or allowed to (by the government)? Are church members motivated to give care to fellow church members only or to others as well? Every church will pick and choose its own direction in these dilemmas. Local governments do not have many means to force churches to follow governmental policy goals, but do have means to allow churches to develop the activities they by nature are motivated to develop.

The three case studies show it is not evident that wherever governments withdraw, civil society fills in. They also show that social cohesion does not generally imply informal care giving. To generate more informal social support, it is not sufficient to aim policy at social cohesion as a general feeling of togetherness in society as a whole. Actually, there is not such a ‘thing’ as society-as-a-whole. Society is composed of several interwoven contexts of participation, each with its own nature, aimed at its own goals, regulating behaviour of individuals by its own social rules. The local society is not a participation context. ‘Participation’ is therefore not to be simplified as ‘every person (X) in this city area (C) counts as a responsible citizen taking care of other citizens (Y)’. Society consist of several contexts of participation (several C’s), each with their own definitions of X and Y. Government does often not direct who has which social role or what rules apply. Government, however, can allow more space for whatever already happens within these contexts. In order to do so, they need to re-evaluate social work as an intermediate profession, connecting individuals with the context of participation, connecting participation contexts amongst each other, and connecting participation contexts to governmental institutions. In this sense ‘field of performance 1’ should be translated into local policy: the empowerment of all kinds of communities and other participation contexts, especially those that by nature aim at care and support. This could be, but is not necessary, empowering neighbourhoods.

Accordingly, an answer is formulated to the central question of this study: does an increase in participation represent a viable alternative to support formerly provided by professional welfare arrangements? The answer is that participation only represent a viable alternative if local policy translates the ambition of the Social Support Act into a challenge to all non-challenged citizens, not only to the so called ‘challenged’ ones. These non-challenged citizens are likely to be activated when asked so in their actual roles in there often self chosen participation contexts, especially if these participation context by their own nature are aiming at giving care. Only if local policy effectively puts this challenge into place, it is likely that the original ambition of the Social Support Act can be achieved: not only more responsibility of challenged citizens for their own problems, but also more responsibility of all citizens for others. In this sense, an increase in participation is not only the goal of the Social Support Act, but also the means to achieve this goal. ‘Participation’ explicitly should mean the challenging of non-challenged citizens to be involved in the support of the challenged. Participation should not be limited to contributions of citizens to policy goals or policy development. It should not be translated either into forcing policy goals into non-governmental and voluntary organisations. This would imply a subordinancy of civil society to governmental institutions. Civil society cannot be owned by the government. It cannot be directly commanded by government either. It can be influenced though, empowered, challenged and convinced, if sufficiently appealing to goals citizens pursue themselves already. Any challenge on behalf of the
government should appeal to the motives and goals of relevant contexts of participation and their participants. If governments do not restrict themselves to this approach, they easily turn ‘more participation’ into growth of governmental participation contexts, even in a domain thus far known as non-governmental. This interpretation of the Social Support Act as a ‘participation act’ would mean increased governmental influence instead of reduced collective costs.