Summary

Volunteering and support initiatives under the Social Support Act (Wmo)

An exploration of Wmo policy and practice in five Dutch municipalities

The Social Support Act (Wmo), which came into effect in the Netherlands on 1 January 2007, forms the statutory framework for the social support policy of Dutch municipalities (Staatsblad 2006). The purpose of the Act is to enable all Dutch citizens to participate in society. If they are no longer able to participate, for example because of physical disabilities, mental health issues or psychosocial problems, they must be given support (TK 2004/2005). The intention of the Wmo is that professionals should only be deployed to provide the support if informal support – provided by the recipient’s own network or by volunteers – proves to be inadequate. The legislator supports local authorities in formulating a local social support policy, for example through incentive programmes such as ‘New-style Welfare’ (Welzijn Nieuwe Stijl).

The Wmo gives local authorities the task of promoting volunteering and citizen initiatives. At the same time, people also put forward their own initiatives without being prompted. It is still unclear how the efforts by government (top-down) and those of citizens (bottom-up) interact with each other. That is the topic explored in this study. It forms part of the second evaluation of the Wmo by the Netherlands Institute for Social Research|SCP; the final report will be published in 2014.

In Part A of this report we describe how five Dutch municipalities shape their policy in relation to volunteering and what role welfare agencies play in that process. The research question addressed is:

1. What do local authorities and welfare agencies do to encourage volunteering, particularly in the form of citizen initiatives? What changes have occurred in this process as a result of the introduction of the Social Support Act (Wmo)?

We then investigate what citizens themselves (are willing to) do (Part B). We approach this theme in two ways, first presenting a general picture based on existing statistical material; the research question here is:

2. Are the Dutch willing to provide informal support? Do they actually do so in practice?

We then look in more depth at one specific form of volunteering, namely ‘support initiatives’, i.e.:
– local initiatives;
– predominantly on a voluntary basis;
– involving activities to support people with limitations that impede participation;
– which go further than facilitating meeting and recreation;
– and which are under local control (rather than implementing national formats).

The reason for this focus is that this type of initiative closely matches the spirit of the Wmo, the central plank of which is support. Moreover, a great deal of research has already been done on initiatives in a broad sense, but little thus far in relation to care and support. Tracking down completely informal groups proved to be problematic because of a lack of websites and registers. Consequently, the focus is on initiatives which we were able to trace using these methods.

We address the following research questions in this part:

3 Which support initiatives are there and what do they aim to achieve?
4 What relationships do initiatives have with other actors, and how do those involved assess those relationships?
5 What do those involved think the initiatives have achieved, and what problems have they encountered?

The overarching question is whether a link can be established between the Social Support Act (Wmo) and the support initiatives people take. Is there a kind of ‘funnel-effect’: from the Wmo at national level to local policymaking by local authorities, to implementation by welfare agencies and ultimately to citizen initiatives? Or are these different ‘levels’ relatively separate from each other in practice?

With the exception of question 2, we sought to answer all the research questions by means of a qualitative exploratory inquiry in five Dutch municipalities. In order to obtain the broadest possible picture, we chose municipalities of different sizes in different parts of the Netherlands. The municipalities are reasonably diverse: two rural depopulating municipalities, one in the north of the country and one in the south; two suburbs in large cities in the west of the country, one affluent and the other less prosperous; and a medium-sized city in the centre of the country. In the larger municipalities, we opted to focus on a single borough or neighbourhood in order to keep the level of scale comparable.

De Boer et al. (2013: 18) state that: ‘There is a plethora of initiatives by citizens in the Dutch care sector, whether or not backed up by professionals. However, it is also clear that the extent of these initiatives should not be overstated’. We can endorse this latter comment, in particular; ultimately, we managed with some difficulty to find 23 initiatives in the five municipalities.

We conducted face-to-face interviews in each municipality with initiators, with a policy officer concerned with volunteering and citizen initiatives, and with welfare professionals involved in private initiatives. We spoke to representatives of the 23 initiatives, with six policy officials and with ten welfare professionals.
Local Wmo policy

What do local authorities do to promote volunteering, particularly in the form of citizen initiatives? Local authorities provide volunteer support to create the conditions to encourage people to volunteer. Examples include matching demand to supply, promoting volunteering, expressing appreciation for volunteers and supporting volunteer organisations to ensure that knowledge gained is not lost. This policy was already being deployed before the introduction of the Social Support Act (Wmo), and has continued with later national policy papers about volunteering.

The municipal context makes a great difference. Larger municipalities tend to have a larger civil service apparatus, which translates into more detailed and better argued policy plans. In addition, the support for urban volunteers is provided by differentiated organisations set up specifically for that purpose. In villages, by contrast, there is sometimes just one person who manages all relationships. The large municipalities are also distinguished from the two rural municipalities by the way in which they link volunteering to care and support. In the cities studied, promoting volunteering forms part of the effort to generate more informal help. There is every reason to do this: city-dwellers are less inclined to engage in volunteering and to provide informal help than those who live in the countryside (Steenbekkers & Vermeij 2013). However, it would be rash to conclude that cities place the promotion of volunteering entirely in a ‘self-reliance discourse’ while villages place it in a ‘community discourse’; in practice, we see a mix of arguments in all municipalities studied.

According to policy officers, residents of their municipalities mainly want to do flexible and interesting voluntary work. It remains to be seen whether all the voluntary work that they believe is necessary in order to meet the care need will meet these criteria.

The Social Support Act (Wmo) links volunteering to social cohesion. Policy officials endorse the principle of social cohesion, but consider it too vague for use as a policy concept. When local authorities think of social cohesion they think of mutual engagement – in social networks, neighbourhoods and civil society – which should lead to support. They thus do not narrow the concept down to the networks surrounding individual people with a disability, which receive a great deal of attention in Wmo innovation programmes such as ‘New-style Welfare’ and in the literature. The larger municipalities in our study are more inclined than the rural municipalities to see relationships between social cohesion, volunteering in support of people with a disability and mobilising isolated people. Rural municipalities refer more to notions such as neighbourliness and the role of local associational life.

Policymakers appear sceptical about the task assigned in the Wmo of encouraging people to take new initiatives. They feel that initiatives in which they take the lead are less successful than bottom-up initiatives. They also believe their ability to steer initiatives is limited. Yet a number of them do look for opportunities to launch new initiatives, especially in neighbourhoods or districts where they do not arise spontaneously. More generally, the municipalities studied tend to make funding available to encourage new initiatives for one-off activities, often in the form of a programme in which people can submit ideas for initiatives that are eligible for grants. The funding does not always come...
from the Wmo budget, but is sometimes drawn from neighbourhood action funds. People rarely submit proposals for support initiatives in programmes of this kind. Municipalities also occasionally provide funding for longer-lasting projects.

What changes have taken place in local authority policy as a result of the Wmo? Policy officers firmly believe that more attention is now given to volunteering within the care and support sectors. At the same time, they are fairly sceptical about how much direct influence the Wmo has. They feel that the driver behind many changes is not so much the Act itself, but rather the cultural sea-change brought about by the national movement that was associated with the introduction of the Act. Local authorities themselves report that they were already engaged in the proposed change trajectory when they first saw the principles for the Wmo proposed by the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport. Many of the changes envisaged in the Social Support Act and programmes such as New-style Welfare can however be recognised. First, these local authorities no longer describe the promotion of neighbourhood cohesion as an end in itself as they tended to do in the past. Now, they see it above all as an important ‘organisational framework’ for supporting vulnerable citizens. Second, a number of local authorities link their policy of promoting volunteering to their policy on supporting people with disabilities. They try to integrate volunteer support services into the same Wmo contact centres where people can apply for provisions under the Act – though this does not mean that volunteers are now put forward in all municipalities as part of the support packages provided. Thirdly, the coordination between professionals and volunteers is a focus of attention in all municipalities. These kinds of changes are often accompanied by cutbacks in spending on professional care and in grants for associations and initiatives. A number of policy officers are concerned about this.

Implementation by welfare workers

What do welfare agencies do to promote volunteering, especially in the form of citizen initiatives? Like local authority policy officers, welfare workers regard ‘social cohesion’ as a fairly abstract notion. There is clear evidence of volunteering being promoted. Since the introduction of the Social Support Act, welfare agencies have had their activities carried out independently by volunteers, pushing the traditional community work and development structure more to the background. Professionals now support volunteers rather than the other way around. It may indeed be the case that welfare agencies are becoming a sort of ‘facilitating agencies for citizen power’, as suggested by De Boer and Van der Lans (2011: 54). They are guiding and supporting the social transition towards greater responsibility for citizens. Welfare workers offer training to volunteers to improve their coordinating skills, to learn to deal with specific target groups or to identify problems in those target groups. As regards encouraging meeting and social cohesion, all five municipalities studied try to bring vulnerable and less vulnerable people into contact with each other with a view to engendering informal help. Most municipalities limit the number of meeting places and give the remaining locations this new focus.
In the more urban municipalities, welfare work has the explicit task of targeting the weaker members of society, and this is reflected in the projects they initiate. This is much less the case in the two rural municipalities studied, possibly partly because of the greater social control there. More generally, welfare work in these rural municipalities plays a much smaller role in promoting social cohesion and initiatives. Welfare workers point to a number of pinch points in their work, such as the unclear status of informal carers and the shortage of professional supervision of initiatives due to spending cuts. For example, they argue that it is a misconception to believe that more volunteering means less work for them. Urban municipalities, in particular, also stress the need for continual professional supervision of some initiatives. In their view, not everything can be achieved through volunteering; professional support remains important.

What changes have taken place in the activities carried out by welfare workers as a result of the introduction of the Social Support Act? Examples include the shift in target groups and the change in working methods used to support and facilitate initiatives. For example, welfare workers now prepare volunteers to carry out more coordinating tasks. A major change is clearly taking place in the welfare sector, with agencies relying less and less on professionals and having to guide the process of social change towards increased responsibility for the citizen. Welfare agencies are still very much linked to specific communities, but community centres are functioning more and more as support centres for vulnerable people. In addition, welfare agencies are acting as launchpads for network creation in neighbourhoods to a greater extent than in the past.

Informal support: national picture

Are the Dutch willing to provide informal support? The willingness to help others with things such as checking the post or looking after plants during holidays, doing shopping or even taking on domestic work such as cleaning is considerable: more than half indicate that they are willing to do this.

Around four in ten respondents agree with the statement that help for people with a long-term illness or disability should as far as possible be provided by family, friends or neighbours. A large majority prefer to receive help from family, friends or neighbours when this is needed. At the same time, a very large majority (93%) believe that someone who needs long-term help also has a right to professional help, even if they are already being cared for by family, friends or neighbours.

Do the Dutch actually provide informal support in practice? Estimates of the number of volunteers providing care range from 450,000 to between one and two million. More than half of them work for voluntary organisations, though informal groups, of which around one in three Dutch people are members, also help each other by providing practical support, for example with moving home or doing odd jobs, and sometimes with emotional support.

It is very striking that people who receive domestic help at least once a week because of their own or their partner’s health problems predominantly receive this from home care
services (58%), followed by privately purchased help (23%) or family, friends, neighbours or acquaintances (20%). Volunteers working through an organisation or institution play a very small role here (4%).

As regards citizen initiatives, we know that roughly 20% of Dutch respondents in surveys report that they have done something for their own neighbourhood during the last two years. Most of these initiatives relate to improving the traffic situation, cleaning up the residential environment or organising all kinds of activities. If we combine these data, we see that many Dutch people work as volunteers, both in their residential setting and in the care or support sectors. In the latter case, much of this work is related to increasing welfare: providing personal and nursing care is largely a matter for informal carers and professionals.

Support initiatives

What support initiatives are there and what is their purpose? The 23 initiatives studied here can be divided into four themes:

1. Professional care and neighbourliness;
2. Individual services provided by volunteers;
3. Eating together;
4. ‘Swap-shop’ services.

Typically, most initiators were already involved with the theme that forms the subject of their initiative before embarking on their project. They were thus already familiar with the world of professional care, or possessed knowledge and skills that are useful for starting a citizen initiative.

The level of complexity is an important distinguishing criterion. Complexity is reflected both in the professionalism of an initiative and in the degree of institutionalisation. Some initiatives are on a small scale, have only a few members or participants, have virtually no budget and have aims that can be achieved with little specialist knowledge. Meal services and swap-shop groups are good examples of this. Other initiatives are virtually the polar opposite, especially those focusing on professional support and neighbourliness. Organising professional care requires particular knowledge and skills and a more structured organisation; such projects are highly complex compared with other initiatives.

Generally speaking, larger initiatives (in terms of both members and budget) encounter more government regulation and are more dependent on grants than smaller initiatives. Two-thirds of these initiatives receive grants, which often form their main source of income. Most initiatives have a legal form (an association or foundation) and, possibly in addition to many hundreds of members or users, have around twenty active members or administrators.

Another way of classifying initiatives is according to their primary target group. We draw a distinction between initiatives focusing primarily on the initiators’ own group and
those focusing on others. The latter are often individual voluntary services, sometimes aimed specifically at people with a low income or a disability. In initiatives that focus more on the group’s own members, reciprocity appears to play an important role: sooner or later, members expect to be able to make use of the organised services themselves.

Relationships with other parties
What relationships do initiatives have with other actors? The extent to which the various initiatives are in contact with other organisations and parties varies. The relationships between initiatives and other parties can be described as partly supportive and partly collaborative. Some initiatives report that they would not be able to operate without advice and support from welfare organisations or the local authority. Others place more emphasis on their independence and approach the local authority and professional organisations as partners in the implementation of their project. Even these more independently operating initiatives sometimes receive support from the local authority, however, for example in the form of project funding. Initiatives like to be treated as serious and equal partners, especially in relation to professional organisations in the area of welfare, care and housing.

The relationships between initiatives and other parties are connected to the views that people have about distribution of responsibilities. Larger projects, in particular, in which the activities are aimed directly or indirectly at the members of the initiative, place great emphasis on members’ own responsibility. By contrast, members of projects which are primarily focused on others are not willing to take on all the responsibility themselves, but see the activities they have developed mainly as a supplement to the professional services. This reticence is also reflected in comments concerning the scope for expanding the care tasks taken on by members of the initiative.

Policy officials appear to link the term ‘responsibility’ mainly to individuals in need of support, who have a responsibility first to seek help from their own network before approaching the local authority. When it comes to making volunteers and initiatives explicitly responsible, they are a good deal more reticent. It is also striking that policy officials in the two rural municipalities set clear limits as to what can be left to citizen initiatives, possibly because of the more intensive themes addressed by citizens’ projects in these municipalities.

How do those directly concerned with initiatives assess these relationships? In the main, those involved in initiatives are satisfied with the cooperation with other parties, though this is more problematic where the projects are larger. Cooperation with other parties appears to go more smoothly where there is a longer tradition; in the case of new plans and projects, there is a degree of reticence among both professional organisations and local authorities to collaborate with initiators. According to initiators, professionals have doubts about the sustainability and viability of their initiatives in the long term and therefore keep their distance. They also feel that professional organisations sometimes regard initiatives as competitors. On the other hand, the presence of a sympathetic contact within a professional organisation or local authority is described as very important by several initiators.
Problems and outcomes
What do stakeholders believe the initiatives have achieved? The initiators refer in the first instance to the concrete services and activities that are organised and which have been developed over time: day activities, lunch groups, summer schools, swap-shops, helping with moving home and doing odd jobs, jumble sales, etc. They also point to the growing number of people who use the services and projects developed. And while the social activities and contacts may not be the chief aim of the activities studied, they often bring important added value. Most initiatives promote social contacts and thus increase social cohesion. Other positive outcomes cited include the growing confidence in the initiative among participants and the increase in the organisational capabilities of the group. Initiators also referred to the positive publicity generated by their project. It is striking that the willingness to develop complex and time-intensive projects is substantially greater for those initiatives which initially target members of the initiative itself. Developing these initiatives is often a day job. From the responses by initiators, it is apparent that they see this largely as an investment in the sense that they will themselves sooner or later benefit from the activities of the initiative. The idea of reciprocity within the community thus appears to play an important role in the time and effort that people are willing to invest in these large and complex initiatives. People appear to be more willing to invest if they see this as being in their own interests as well. Moreover, the initiators often already have professional experience in the fields of organisation and care. This could offer pointers for encouraging further initiatives.

What problems do they encounter? Policy officers, welfare workers and initiators are agreed that care and support are difficult areas for which to find volunteers. They are probably thinking mainly of tasks such as providing personal or nursing care. Someone who provides care and support has a less public profile than someone who does something for the neighbourhood, for example. In addition, certain activities in the area of personal care and domestic help are less attractive. On top of this – and this certainly applies for the larger initiatives – this is a complex domain in which developing projects is a lengthy process. Professionalisation is often a prerequisite. A number of respondents also commented that lack of time and commitment on the part of volunteers is a recurrent problem, which means that a great deal comes to rest on the shoulders of the board or committee, or that there are too few people available to carry out activities.

The influence of the Wmo

The overarching question is where the interface lies between the efforts of local authorities, welfare agencies and support initiatives. We regard the Wmo policy of encouraging new initiatives as a top-down perspective, which involves a translation from national to local policy and finally, via implementation by welfare agencies and others, into possible effects for citizens. On the other hand, there is also the bottom-up perspective of people taking initiatives of their own accord. How do these two perspectives come together? In fact the interaction between these two perspectives is limited. With the occasional exception, support initiatives generally play no role in the local chain of different forms
of support offered by local authorities to people with disabilities. Of itself, this need not by definition be contrary to the ideas behind the Social Support Act; a support chain can potentially also be organised entirely outside the local authority and professional agencies. In practice, however, we did not come across this situation, even though we deliberately looked for municipalities in which several support initiatives exist alongside each other.

From a bottom-up perspective, we have already seen that there are several elements that put people off taking support initiatives. As regards the top-down perspective, it is notable that programmes in which people are able to submit ideas for new initiatives with a view to obtaining grants did not generate any support initiatives in the municipalities studied. The initiatives that were developed were mostly linked to projects intended to improve liveability. In their present form, therefore, such measures appear to be of little use as a mechanism to encourage support initiatives in the field of care and support. The question of whether government funding is necessary for initiatives can be answered in several ways. On the one hand, reducing the level of provisions can motivate people to ‘do it themselves (if no one else is)’. On the other, both initiators and welfare workers fear the negative consequences that any spending cuts may have for the development of initiatives. Welfare professionals emphasise that further spending cuts in their work will jeopardise the professional guidance they can offer to citizen initiatives. And while most municipalities appear to prefer directing spending cuts at welfare agencies rather than at associations and initiatives, initiators also fear for the progress of their projects.

Initiators say they have noticed little impact of the Social Support Act. They are familiar with the Act and can generally see a link between the activities and services provided by their initiative and the issues covered in the Wmo. Yet the majority feel the Wmo is nothing more than a new label for the available grant funding and has had no substantive influence on the launch of their initiative and its activities. This need not be problematic; initiatives could enjoy benefits from the Wmo, without knowing of its existence. At the same time, virtually all initiatives have relationships with the local authority or with welfare agencies. Unlike initiators, these relationships are very clearly linked to the Wmo in the eyes of the latter two stakeholders. We therefore need to adjust the top-down perspective slightly, and look not only at the influence of the Social Support Act as such, but also at the influence of the local authority and welfare agencies in a more general sense. One task of the Wmo is to encourage new initiatives and to ‘align’ with existing initiatives. Based on our exploratory study, we can conclude that, although the present working methods appear to make it problematic to steer the creation of support initiatives through municipal policy, local authorities can do several things and can make a number of choices which promote the further development and realisation of projects and ideas. Examples include providing funding, accommodation and advice, and offering help in scaling up the initiative to other neighbourhoods or municipalities.