

PROOF

## **Part IV**

# **Governance and Implementation – Tensions between Standardization and Individualization**

PROOF

# 10

## The Local and Street-Level Production of Social Citizenship: The Case of Dutch Social Assistance

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### 1. Introduction

Much of the literature that analyses the impact of activation policies on the social citizenship of unemployed people focuses on the substantial aspects of these policies as these are regulated in national legislation. These analyses assume that national legislation provides us with sufficient insight into the nature and content of social policy programmes as these are actually delivered to unemployed people at the level of policy implementation. This would mean that the impact of activation policies on social citizenship is mainly 'shaped' by national policy programmes and their characteristics, and that the answers to questions concerning, for example, the profile of activation instruments or concerning the access to these instruments for specific groups of unemployed people can be found by studying these national policy programmes. The central argument developed in this chapter will be that this approach becomes increasingly problematic. Changes in national legislation concerning the substantial characteristics of social policies do not give us a complete picture of how welfare state reforms affect core dimensions of social citizenship and individual autonomy. The treatment of the target groups of social policy programmes, the nature of the support and services they receive, the accessibility of support and services – these and other aspects of social citizenship are not simply regulated in national programmes and subsequently implemented by administrative agencies. They are actively produced in increasingly complex governance and organizational contexts that involve a large variety of agencies and agents in policy making, policy delivery and service provision processes. Because of this, we argue that in investigating trends

in social citizenship, a social policy perspective should be supplemented with a governance perspective as well as an organizational perspective.

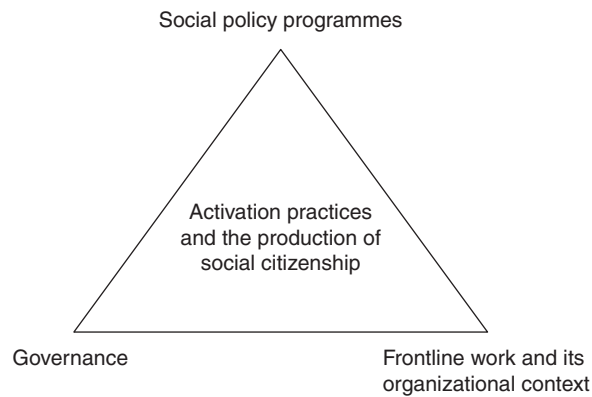
As far as the governance perspective is concerned, new public management and new governance reforms have influenced the ways in which income protection and activation programmes are governed and how their implementation is organized and managed (Considine, 2001; Sol and Westerveld, 2005; Borghi and Van Berkel, 2007; Van Berkel, 2010). They have an impact on the actors involved in policy making and policy delivery, on how the actions of these actors are steered and coordinated, on how responsibilities between them are distributed or on how relationships between them are structured. Governance reforms are not neutral in terms of their impact on the ways in which the unemployed are treated, the accessibility of services, the nature of services offered to the unemployed (see Bredgaard and Larsen, 2009) – and, thus, in terms of their consequences for what social citizenship practically means. Some of these governance reforms are advocated with a direct and explicit reference to dimensions of social citizenship: They are expected to increase the quality and effectiveness of services, to improve the accessibility of services for groups of unemployed that used to be excluded from them and to make services more flexible so that they can be better tailored to the needs of the unemployed (Van Berkel and Valkenburg, 2007; Mosley, 2009).

With respect to the organizational perspective, the argument developed in this chapter is that the roles of frontline workers and the organizational contexts in which they do their work are of importance in determining how they provide activation services to unemployed people, in decision-making concerning what services are provided to whom, in shaping the actual activation processes and so on. This is related to the fact that the activation approach in social policies potentially (though not necessarily) makes the work of frontline workers less administrative and more focused on people-changing rather than people-processing social technologies (Meyers et al., 1998). Here, we may refer to studies of public service organizations and street-level bureaucracies that have shown that these organizations and their workers may have considerable discretion (in the context of activation, see Brodtkin, 2007). Of course, discretion is not an all or nothing issue. In the context of activation policies, Jewell's study (2007) revealed that frontline discretion may be considerable when diversity in activation programmes exists. In addition, we can argue that discretion will increase when individualized, tailor-made and deregulated rather than uniform, standardized and fully regulated activation processes are

pursued. The issue of discretion brings us back to Lipsky's famous argument about frontline workers' contribution to citizenship: 'Street-level bureaucrats implicitly mediate aspects of the constitutional relationship of citizens to the state. They hold the keys to a dimension of citizenship' (Lipsky, 1980, p. 4). If it is not rules and regulations that guide the daily decisions of frontline workers regarding their clients, then what does? And how does this affect social citizenship?

Against this background, the central hypothesis that will be explored in this chapter is that governance reforms and organizational as well as frontline work characteristics exercise considerable influence on what activation policies practically mean and, thus, on the dimensions of social citizenship (see Figure 10.1). Although the chapter focuses on a national case study (social assistance in the Netherlands), our research question goes beyond this national case. Of course, we do not want to pretend that the specific impact of governance reforms and frontline work characteristics that we find in the Dutch context can be generalized to other countries – they cannot. However, we do think that from a more analytical point of view, the Dutch case can be used to illustrate the general theme elaborated in this chapter. In Scheme 10.1 'social policy programmes' refer to national, regional and local programmes regulating the substance of, for example, activation policies and services; the concept of 'governance' refers to the roles and responsibilities of actors involved in policy-making and policy implementation processes, as well as their interrelations (for example, as service purchasers or providers). 'Frontline work and its organizational context' points at the actual policy delivery practices and the organizational conditions under which these take place (for example, nature of frontline work, caseloads, management strategies).

In the context of this chapter, the case of social assistance in general, and of Dutch social assistance in particular, is interesting for several reasons. Firstly, in many countries social assistance schemes are – in terms of governance – characterized by combinations of centralized and decentralized rules and regulations, given the important role of municipalities in social assistance. As will be elaborated below, the Dutch social assistance scheme underwent far-reaching processes of decentralization as well as deregulation in the area of activation policies for social assistance recipients. Secondly, the role of frontline work in social assistance schemes has always been of more importance than in social insurance schemes such as unemployment benefits (Lødemel and Schulte, 1992; Eardley et al., 1996). Partly, this is related to the specific nature of social assistance schemes as safety-net provisions that make



*Figure 10.1* A framework for analysing the production of social citizenship in the context of activation policies

eligibility criteria more complex and open to discretionary decision-making; partly, it has to do with the fact that many social assistance schemes combine income protection with the provision of social services. In the Dutch case, frontline work in the agencies responsible for implementing social assistance (local welfare agencies) was transformed into an almost completely administrative task focused on social assistance administration rather than social work during the late 1980s and 1990s (see Van Berkel and Larsen, 2010). With the increasing responsibilities of Dutch local welfare agencies for the activation of social assistance recipients (see below), the issue of how frontline work in these agencies should be designed gained importance.

This chapter will be structured as follows. In the next section, some general characteristics of Dutch social assistance will be discussed. In the following section, the impact of activation on social citizenship will be analysed. This analysis will be structured along the three dimensions of social citizenship that are distinguished in this book: Quality, access and status, and participation and commitment. Our discussion will focus on those reforms of Dutch social assistance that are most directly related to activation policies. Because of that, it should not be seen as a full account of all social assistance reforms since 'active' welfare state reforms started in the Netherlands in the late 1980s. In the analysis, the three perspectives distinguished above will be applied:

- The social policy perspective: Changes in formal rights and obligations of social assistance recipients and their consequences for social citizenship;

- The governance perspective: Changes in the policy-making and policy delivery structures and their impact on social citizenship;
- The organizational perspective: Changes in the frontline delivery of social assistance and activation services and their effects on social citizenship.

The chapter ends with a discussion and a look at the future.

## 2. Reforms of Dutch social assistance: A brief overview

### 2.1. History and core data

When social assistance was introduced in the Netherlands in the 1960s, its main objective was not to provide income to long-term unemployed people. Long-term unemployment hardly was an issue in that decade. Instead, the introduction of social assistance aimed to decrease interdependencies within families, especially the dependency of poor people on financial support from their children, and of divorced women from relatives or their former husband. This was also exemplified by the fact that at the time of its introduction, social assistance was a responsibility of the Minister of Social Welfare, and not of the Minister of Social Affairs, who was responsible for social insurance arrangements. The character of social assistance, as well as the social assistance population, started to change significantly during the late 1970s and 1980s, when the economic crisis led to a sharp increase of unemployment. More and more, social assistance became an income provision for unemployed people: On the one hand, the long-term unemployed who exhausted their unemployment benefit entitlements, and on the other, the young unemployed without a work history to make them eligible for unemployment insurance. Single parents (usually mothers) with young children were still treated as a 'special category' in the sense that they were not seen as 'unemployed' – a social construction of single parenthood that would start to change in the 1990s as a consequence of the introduction of the activation strategy. Until 1996, when a new Social Assistance Act was introduced, Dutch social assistance even had two separate sub-schemes: One for the unemployed and one for other social assistance recipients, mainly single parents with young children under 12. The sub-scheme for the unemployed, in particular, saw a sharp increase in the number of recipients: From 99,400 in 1980 to 319,100 in 1994 (Teulings et al., 1997).

The following tables provide some core characteristics of the Dutch social assistance population. Table 10.1 shows the development in the

Table 10.1 Numbers of social assistance and unemployment benefit recipients, 1999–2009

Year	SA recipients (<65 years of age)	UB recipients*
1999	363,190	274,230
2001	322,080	183,210
2003	335,700	209,070
2005	328,000	323,160
2007	273,980	243,240
2009	280,800	177,610

\* The figures present the number of recipients in the month January of each year.  
 Source: <http://statline.cbs.nl>.

numbers of social assistance recipients during the 1999–2009 period, showing (roughly speaking) a gradual decline in the numbers of recipients, although this stopped in 2009; since 2010, the number of social assistance recipients started increasing.

Table 10.2 shows some characteristics of the social assistance population in 2009. The figures show an over-representation of women in

Table 10.2 Characteristics of the Dutch social assistance population, 2009

Characteristics	Percentage of total SA population
<i>Sex</i>	
Male	43
Female	57
<i>Household</i>	
Single	61
Single parent	25
Couple	14
<i>Duration of SA dependency</i>	
Less than 1 year	24
1 year or more	76
<i>Age</i>	
<25	6
25–35	18
35–45	25
45–55	27
55–65	24

Source: <http://statline.cbs.nl>.



social assistance, partly related to the fact that 25 per cent of social assistance recipients are single parents (mostly all of them are women). The figures also illustrate that most social assistance recipients probably are considerably distanced from the labour market: 76 per cent have been dependent on social assistance for at least one year, and half of all social assistance recipients are 45 or older.

As far as the proportion of immigrants in the social assistance population is concerned, the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment (SZW, 2008) calculated that in September 2008, 40 per cent of all social assistance recipients were non-Western immigrants. In 2000, when figures concerning the ethnic origin of social assistance recipients were estimated for the first time, this percentage was 32.

## 2.2. Activating Dutch social assistance

During the 1980s, the increasing numbers of young unemployed people dependent on social assistance triggered a debate on the impact of social assistance dependency on labour market participation: According to some, social assistance prevented rather than promoted labour market participation, especially for a group of young people denoted as 'workshy riff-raff'. This discursive strategy of creating an image of a specific subgroup of social assistance recipients as 'undeserving' would continue to play a role in justifying social assistance reforms.

Eventually, the debate on the 'workshy' young unemployed resulted in the first activation projects targeted at young people (see Spies and Van Berkel, 2001). On the one hand, young people's (people under 23 years of age) social assistance entitlements were curtailed; on the other, experiments (which eventually resulted in legislation: The Youth Employment Act of 1992) were introduced with what would later be called workfare programmes: Obligatory participation in work experience programmes. These first steps towards an activation strategy for young unemployed people stood in sharp contrast with the 'de-activation' approach, which was still widespread where older unemployed people were concerned. During the 1980s, many older (mainly male) workers exited the labour market through disability benefits and early retirement schemes, reducing the labour market participation rate of men 50–64 years old from around 65 per cent in 1984 to around 58 per cent in the early 1990s (CPB, 2005).

Since the late 1980s and following the introduction of activation programmes for the young unemployed, numerous reforms took place in Dutch social assistance, both in terms of policy content and in terms

of governance (see, among others, Van der Veen and Trommel, 1999; Terpstra and Havinga, 2001; Van Berkel, 2006). These reforms eventually led to a new Social Assistance Act, which was introduced in 1996, and an act regulating the activation of unemployed people (the insured and the uninsured) in 1998 (Jobseekers' Employment Act), which integrated several regulations on activation introduced earlier in the 1990s, including the Youth Employment Act. Nevertheless the efforts of local welfare agencies to activate social assistance recipients remained behind the expectations of national government. For example, in 1996 about half of all social assistance recipients were *de facto* released from the work obligation: Even though officially they were expected to look for jobs, no monitoring of their efforts to find a job took place (SZW, 2000). This made the issue of how to ensure that local welfare agencies would strengthen their efforts in activating social assistance recipients a major issue for national government. The introduction of new rules and regulations was a clear attempt to realize this. However, in the late 1990s national government started to change its strategy: Rather than relying merely on new rules and regulations as a way to stimulate the implementation of an activating social assistance system, it started to introduce new governance instruments, which were based on, as some authors called it, an 'incentive paradigm' of governance (Van der Veen and Trommel, 1999) – rules as a steering instrument made way for financial incentives. For example, in 2000 performance agreements were concluded with the municipalities, which made funding for activation dependent on the numbers of social assistance recipients municipalities would enrol in activation programmes, and on the numbers of participants that managed to find a job: The so-called Agenda for the Future. Gradually, national government also increased the financial responsibilities of municipalities for social assistance payments, which used to be fully reimbursed by national government.

Far-reaching governance reforms were introduced in the year 2002, which saw the introduction of the privatization and marketization of the provision of activation services, which until then was a public task mainly taking place under the responsibility of the Public Employment Services. This so-called *Structure of the Administration of Work and Income* (Dutch abbreviation: SUWI) reform ended most of the public provision of activation, as it obliged local welfare agencies (as well as the Unemployment Benefit Agency) to contract private, often for-profit providers, for activation. At the same time the so-called Centres for Work and Income were established, which were meant to perform as gatekeepers to the Dutch social security system, and were made

responsible for collecting information needed to determine benefit eligibility; for determining unemployed people's labour market distance and for the activation of the unemployed during the first six months of unemployment.

Two years later, in 2004, another new social assistance act was introduced, the Act on Work and Assistance. On the one hand, a far-reaching deregulation regarding activation services took place, giving municipalities significant freedom in deciding the content of activation services they wanted to offer to social assistance recipients. National activation programmes regulated by national law no longer exist in the Netherlands. In addition, the obligatory outsourcing of activation by local welfare agencies was abolished: Municipalities can now decide whether they want to outsource activation (either to private or public providers) or provide activation in-house. In fact, many municipalities use a mix of these options nowadays, and the proportion of activation funds spent on services provided by private providers has gradually decreased (Divosa, 2007). On the other hand, the new act decentralized the financial responsibilities for social assistance payments by introducing a budget mechanism for funding. That is, each municipality receives a yearly grant for paying social assistance payments to recipients. If the municipality spends less than the budget, it is free to spend the surplus. But in case of budget shortages, municipalities will have to find alternative financial resources. This made reducing the numbers of social assistance recipients in order to keep expenses under control a primary concern of municipalities.

The most recent reform took place in 2009 with the introduction of the Act on Investing in Young People. This act obliges municipalities to make all young unemployed under 27 who claim social assistance a work or education offer. When participation in this programme provides young people with insufficient income, municipalities will give them additional income support, so that their income reaches the social assistance level (regulated in national law) that applies to them. Table 10.3 provides an overview of these reforms.

### 2.3. Frontline work

As we elaborated elsewhere (Van Berkel et al., 2010) frontline work has changed significantly as well over the years. The traditional social work approach in frontline work had already started to erode in the 1980s, as a consequence of increasing caseloads and a more 'business-like' approach of clients. Frontline work gradually evolved into bureaucratic-managerial work (Terpstra and Havinga, 2001): The emphasis was on

Table 10.3 Activation reforms in Dutch social assistance\*

Year	Name	Brief description
1992	Youth Employment Act (JWG)	Obligatory activation of young unemployed social assistance recipients
1996	New Social Assistance Act (nABW)	Strengthened, among others, activation and labour-market participation obligations of social assistance recipients
1998	Jobseekers' Employment Act (WIW)	Act regulating activation programmes for insured and uninsured unemployed; replaced Youth Employment Act
2000	Agenda for the Future	Performance agreements between national government and municipalities concerning activation
2002	Act on the Structure for the Administration of Work and Income (SUWI)	Privatization/marketization of activation services; establishment of the Centres for Work and Income as one-stop shop for the unemployed
2004	Act on Work and Assistance (WWB)	Introduced, among others, decentralization and deregulation of activation, plus increased financial responsibilities for municipalities
2009	Act on Investing in Young People (WIJ)	Obliges municipalities to make young unemployed people under 27 an activation offer

\* Dutch abbreviations of the acts are given in brackets.

applying rules related to social assistance eligibility to individual cases. Together with high caseloads as well as a lack of qualifications of frontline workers in the area of activation, this 'administrative' legacy of frontline work made the implementation of the activation strategy more difficult. Against this background, the marketization and obligatory outsourcing of activation in the early 2000s released local welfare agencies from the need to introduce far-reaching processes of organizational change in order to reform their 'core business' from social assistance administration into activation. However, outsourcing had an important disadvantage: Local welfare agencies lost control over what happened with their clients in activation processes. Because of that, a de-marketization process of activation took place after the abolishment of obligatory outsourcing, and frontline workers in local welfare agencies started playing an increasingly important role in activating their clients. This was accompanied by processes of redesigning frontline

work that involved both de-bureaucratization and re-professionalization (Divosa, 2008). In the context of this chapter, one of the most important consequences of ongoing changes in frontline work is that frontline workers are gaining autonomy in deciding on individual activation processes. Frontline workers' decision-making in activation is guided less and less by rules and regulations. More emphasis is put on professionalization. In organizational terms, this implies less hierarchical control, more autonomy for frontline workers, more fraternal consultancy. At the same time, the profession as such is still in its infancy, which is why frontline workers involved in activation can still be characterized as professionals without a profession (Van Berkel et al., 2010). Besides the professionalization trend, performance indicators are gradually becoming more important as guidelines in frontline workers' jobs. Performance can be related to the proportion of frontline workers' caseload involved in activation programmes (output), or the number of social assistance recipients that frontline workers manage to reintegrate into the labour market (outcome). As is the case with professionalization, performance management is still in the early stages of development (Van Berkel et al., 2010).

In the following section we will have a closer look at what these reforms imply in terms of citizenship.

### **3. Reforms of social assistance and their implications for dimensions of social citizenship**

#### **3.1. Quality**

When raising the question how the activation strategy has had an impact on the quality dimension of social citizenship, two issues can be addressed: The quality of jobs social assistance recipients are expected to accept, and the quality of activation services offered to them.

In terms of the quality of jobs that social assistance recipients have to accept, trends are clear. Until 1996, the concept of 'suitable job' was used in the Social Assistance Act: Job offers made to social assistance recipients had to match their work experience and qualifications. The 1996 Social Assistance Act abolished the concept, and replaced it with the concept of 'generally accepted' work. From then on, social assistance recipients have had to accept practically any job offers (and not only suitable job offers) made to them, irrespective of content, working hours or duration of contract, and irrespective of the match with qualifications and work experience of the unemployed. In this respect, social assistance recipients are confronted with a stricter regime

than unemployment benefit recipients, who are only confronted with less autonomy in job selection after a period of benefit dependency. Of course, the way in which the 'generally accepted job' regulation is implemented is dependent on local and frontline decisions. In our own research in local welfare agencies, we found that some frontline workers enforce it quite strictly, whereas others try to match job offers with work experience or qualifications because they think that this will promote the sustainability of labour market re-entry (Van Berkel et al., 2010).

The issue concerning the quality of activation is more complex. As was mentioned before, the 2004 Social Assistance Act devolved decision-making regarding activation to the municipalities. The act regulates that social assistance recipients should cooperate in activation processes and should show a sense of individual responsibility for finding work and becoming independent from social assistance, but is 'thin' when it comes to regulations regarding the content of activation. Theoretically, this creates a situation in which inter-municipal diversity can be significant. Because of that, it is also difficult to provide a profile of the instruments and programmes used in activation. What makes things even more complex is that local welfare agencies are free to decide how to organize the provision of activation (in-house or outsourced). Of course, there is no direct relationship between the nature of the service provider and the quality of provided services. But we can argue that it plays a role in quality, for example, through the ways in which local welfare agencies regulate outsourcing to external providers and the attention paid in contracts to quality issues. For example, in the first period of the marketization and privatization of activation services, many local welfare agencies gave the private providers quite a lot of room in deciding what individual activation services looked like, giving these providers an important role in determining the quality of activation. It turned out that externally provided services were often highly standardized, which could be interpreted as a counter-indication for quality as the heterogeneity among social assistance recipients would require more individualized services. Furthermore, private activation providers during that period complained that competition focused more on price than on quality, so that the emphasis in service provision was on cheap rather than high-quality and innovative services. This was strengthened by the fact that many providers were contracted for relatively short contract periods, which made them less willing to invest in quality (Mallee et al., 2006; De Koning, 2009).

Thus, several factors that are open to local decision-making potentially influence the quality of activation. What is more, defining quality in itself is subject to local decision-making: Municipalities and their local welfare agencies may give more or less priority to sustainable labour market participation, may attach more or less importance to tailor-made services and service differentiation, may take clients' work experience and qualifications more or less into account when making activation offers and so on. Nevertheless some more general trends may be identified, despite decentralization and deregulation. The fact that all municipalities now make decisions concerning activation under a financial regime in which they have increased financial responsibilities for social assistance payments is one factor explaining trends of convergence; practices of 'programme copying' as a consequence of disseminating 'best practices' is another.

The following trends related to quality may be observed. First, many local welfare agencies now focus on activation services that promote quick labour market reintegration: According to Divosa (2009), municipalities invest less in education and social activation (promoting social participation in unpaid work, mainly focused at the most difficult-to-reintegrate groups of clients), and more in job search activities. Secondly, so-called Work First programmes seem to become increasingly popular among municipalities, especially for the activation of new social assistance claimants. Work First means, that people are placed in an activation programme – often involving some kind of work experience project – right at the beginning of social assistance dependency (instead of allowing them some time to find a job themselves). About 88 per cent of municipalities had implemented Work First projects in 2008 (Divosa, 2009). As Table 10.4 shows, the number of municipalities where Work First is used has increased (67 per cent in 2005, 85 per cent in 2006). In addition, new recipients are increasingly confronted with Work First programmes: In 2006, almost half of the municipalities consider new recipients as the main target group of Work First projects.

For those already receiving social assistance, the diversity of activation programmes has increased. Two remarks should be made in this context. First, programmes are focused more exclusively on participation in the regular labour market. Other outcomes (participation in subsidized work in the public sector, or in unpaid forms of work such as voluntary work for the hardest-to-reintegrate social assistance recipients) are seen nowadays as stepping stones towards regular labour market participation, whereas in the past they could – for certain subgroups of unemployed – also be ends in themselves. For the more difficult-to-reintegrate social

*Table 10.4* Target groups of Work First (percentage of municipalities focusing Work First at the mentioned target groups)\*

	2005	2006
Young recipients	17	12
New recipients	31	46
Other	20	27
None	33	15

\* These figures represent 40 per cent of all Dutch municipalities; 65 per cent of all Dutch social assistance recipients live in municipalities participating in the research.

*Source:* Divosa (2006).

assistance recipients, wage subsidies – for public or private jobs – are frequently used as activation instruments (Divosa, 2008). Secondly, the profile of programmes has changed in the sense that we see more ‘behaviour-dependent’ approaches in the design of activation programmes. Many municipalities nowadays develop specific programmes for ‘unwilling’ or ‘unmotivated’ groups of unemployed (see below).

Through the years, local welfare agencies have changed the way in which they contract external providers – which, of course, was also influenced by the abolishment of the obligation to contract private providers for activation. For although the proportion of the activation budget spent on private providers is decreasing (56 per cent in 2005, 40 per cent in 2007; Divosa, 2006, 2008), many agencies still contract them. But they tend to buy more individualized services, and they monitor the progress of social assistance recipients who are referred to private providers more closely. It is hard to say how this affects quality. Given the financial regime the welfare agencies are confronted with, it is likely that they will be more concerned with the contribution externally provided services make to the social assistance exit of their clients. Other quality aspects that are expected to relate positively to this overall concern (such as tailor-made and individualized services) will probably be valued positively as well.

### 3.2. Access and status

The access to activation support as well as the status of various groups of social assistance recipients in activation are relevant issues in several respects. First of all, an increasing proportion of the social assistance population has been subjected to activation, turning the status of most recipients into ‘normal’ unemployed. Three groups have been affected



most by this development: Single parents with young children, older recipients and the most difficult to reintegrate people.

Before 1996, single parents with children under 12 were exempted from the work obligation. In practice, this implied that they would not be obliged to participate in activation, but also that they would not have access to activation, as activation was only targeted at people with a work obligation. In 1996, this was changed so only single parents with a child under five were exempted. In 2004, all categorical exemptions from the work obligation were abolished, so that all single parents with young children now have a work obligation, though childcare should be provided. However, the former government (in which two Christian parties were participating) has attenuated the work obligation for single parents with children under five: Single parents may ask for an exemption from the work obligation, but will retain an obligation to participate in education. Similar status shifts can be observed in the case of the older unemployed. Before 2004, many municipalities categorically exempted the older unemployed (older than 57.5 years of age) from the work obligation. The new act of 2004 no longer allowed this, which means that all unemployed people younger than 65 now have a formal work obligation. We have no data to answer whether or not older unemployed people find it more difficult than younger unemployed to gain access to activation services. However, it is likely that local welfare agencies will not prioritize the activation of older people. For example, even though 63 per cent of municipalities recognize that older people are the most vulnerable group in times of economic crises, only 28 per cent intended to increase their efforts for this group in 2008 (Divosa, 2009).

Whereas in the first years of activation, national activation programmes were targeted at groups that were defined in a relatively straightforward way (young people, long-term unemployed people), target group definitions as well as diagnosis procedures have become more complex during the 1990s. Determining the labour market distance of social assistance recipients and categorizing them in labour-market distance groups that should guide decision-making regarding activation offers became common practice. Initially, a distinction was made between four or five labour-market distance groups; later this was reduced to two: Unemployed people that could be reintegrated immediately and those who needed activation support. This initial 'screening' is followed by a more extensive diagnosis of the unemployed in need of activation support, which takes place in local welfare agencies. Since 2009, no national protocol exists for the screening process; the diagnosis is the responsibility of local welfare agencies. This means that

the procedures and instruments to distinguish between various labour-market distance groups may vary from municipality to municipality (RWI, 2009). Besides this deregulation and decentralization of screening and assessment procedures, definitions of target groups of activation programmes have become more complex to operationalize. For example, target groups may contain more behaviour-related and therefore potentially subjective criteria, such as 'willingness to participate in activation', 'job motivation' or self-efficacy. A telling example of this is the following definition of a target group of an activation programme for hard-to-employ clients in the city of Rotterdam (Van der Aa, 2009):

- Accumulated singular and/or multiple complex problems (among others, related to social situation, housing, psychological or physical health, ways of spending one's time, financial situation and social skills);
- Insufficiently accessible and/or motivated for support and coaching;
- Insufficient competences for societal participation and/or no or limited work experience;
- Insufficiently able to activate/reintegrate and/or enter an activation/reintegration programme independently.

Criteria like these are difficult to test for frontline workers (as a matter of fact, they are hardly qualified to do so), and are even harder to understand for the unemployed. This shows how the process of making activation more tailor-made runs a considerable risk of making the unemployed dependent on complex, non-transparent and hard-to-fathom assessment processes that may have important consequences in terms of the kind of activation programmes they are allowed – or not allowed – to participate in. This issue is even more important as local welfare agencies can design their own programmes and define their own target groups. Thus, especially for the unemployed who cannot be integrated into the labour market immediately, it has become increasingly opaque and unpredictable how local welfare agencies will decide their activation:

- Activation programmes may differ from municipality to municipality;
- Target group definitions have become more complex;
- Screening and diagnosis procedures may vary as well;
- And the same goes for how the individual unemployed and activation offers are matched.

Irrespective of how local welfare agencies operationalize labour market distance, ever since active welfare reforms started, the activation of the most difficult to employ social assistance recipients has been problematic, a fact that was also recognized by the association of directors of local welfare agencies (Divosa, 2005). Often, these recipients are portrayed as a 'multi-problem' group, as their situation is characterized by more than 'mere' unemployment: Health problems, housing problems, social problems, debts, addiction and so on. In the 1996 Social Assistance Act, local welfare agencies were allowed to start so-called social activation experiments, which were aimed at these groups of recipients and tried to promote and support their participation in society through unpaid work and voluntary activities. Although often on a limited scale, many municipalities started these experiments, which often were aimed at promoting social inclusion in a broader sense than mere participation in the labour market (Serail and Van der Pas, 2002). In later years, the nature of social activation changed in several respects. First, most of the experiments in the late 1990s were voluntary. In later years this started to change: The obligations to do something in return for receiving social assistance were strengthened for everyone, including the most vulnerable groups. Secondly, social activation became increasingly seen as a stepping stone towards participation in paid-work-oriented activation programmes, or towards labour market participation. So although the access to activation for the more vulnerable social assistance recipients improved, they also were confronted with a more obligatory and exclusively labour-market-oriented approach. A similar story goes for subsidized jobs that were created during the 1990s for the hard to employ. Even though national government hoped that these subsidized jobs would function as stepping stones to regular labour market participation, in practice few people moved from subsidized into regular jobs. When national funding of these jobs was abolished with the 2004 Social Assistance Act, municipalities started to reduce the numbers of 'permanent' subsidized jobs: In 2004, they spent 55 per cent of their activation budgets on these jobs (Divosa, 2006), in 2008, 34 per cent (Divosa, 2009). Finally, the reforms during the 2000s contributed little to improving the access of the hard to employ to activation services. Evaluations of the marketization process show that private service providers find it difficult to develop adequate services for this group (see De Koning, 2009). And the new funding regime for social assistance made municipalities inclined to focus on the easiest to reintegrate: In 2004, 63 per cent of local welfare agencies prioritized the easiest to reintegrate

in activation; only 1 per cent prioritized the difficult to employ and long-term recipients (Divosa, 2005).

To conclude this analysis of access and status, we can say the following:

- ‘Traditional’ status groups have disappeared (with the exception of young unemployed and single parents with children under five), and have been replaced by status groups defined on the basis of employability;
- Access to activation has increased, at least officially: In the sense that larger proportions of social assistance recipients are subjected to activation nowadays than in the past;
- For those considered difficult to reintegrate, access to activation is most problematic;
- For clients, it is non-transparent as to which activation services they do have access and to which they do not, as this depends on a range of local and frontline decisions.

### **3.3. Participation and commitment**

Formally speaking, local welfare agencies usually inform social assistance recipients about their rights and obligations. This information is provided through leaflets, websites and is often also mentioned in the ‘reintegration contract’. However, information about rights and obligations is often provided in a general way. For example, recipients will be informed that they are required to participate in activation, or to accept job offers. But what these rights and obligations mean practically depends on local conditions, including the local labour market situation and locally available activation programmes, and is determined in the interactions that individual recipients have with their frontline workers, who – depending on organizational choices – may have more or less discretionary room for making decisions about the content and provision of activation.

What exactly happens in the interactions between frontline workers and recipients is something we know very little about: We know a lot more about ‘official’ policies than about policy practices. At the same time, these interactions are quite important from the point of view of recipients. In these interactions, decisions are made concerning the nature and content of activation, the assessment of people’s situation, the evaluation of their behaviour, sanctioning and so on. These decisions are, of course, structured by national and local policy

decisions. Nevertheless the discretionary room that frontline workers have implies that their decisions are never merely an implementation of official rules and regulations, especially where decisions concerning activation are at stake.

This also raises the issue of the participation of recipients in decision-making processes. Official rhetoric is rather ambivalent in this respect: On the one hand, it is recognized that activation will be more successful if unemployed people are motivated to participate in activation and if activation offers meet their needs and wishes; on the other, the responsibilities of the unemployed to become independent of social assistance are emphasized more and more. Nationally, no regulations exist concerning the ways in which the unemployed social assistance recipients should be involved in decision-making processes. This is in contrast with the situation of recipients of unemployment benefits, who have a nationally regulated option to make use of a so-called individual reintegration agreement, which allows them to develop their own activation plan and select their own service provider (see Sol and Westerveld, 2005). Although this plan needs to be approved by the benefit agency, it gives unemployment benefit recipients a formal instrument to exercise voice and choice in activation. A similar regulation does not exist for social assistance recipients. Local welfare agencies may decide to introduce a similar option for social assistance recipients, but recipients do not have a guaranteed right to claim use of this instrument. Even when local welfare agencies introduce it (which only 31 per cent of them did in 2007; Divosa, 2008), this does not mean that all social assistance recipients in these municipalities are entitled to make use of it. Given the resources spent on this instrument (€1.4 million in the 73 municipalities participating in the Divosa 2009 monitor study), its quantitative significance seems to be very modest.

The fact that social assistance recipients have no legal instruments at their disposal to exercise voice and choice in activation does not mean that in practice they do not participate at all in decisions about their activation process. In our own study of local welfare agencies we found that frontline workers may decide to take the needs, wishes and ambitions of social assistance recipients seriously, for example, because they think that it promotes the successfulness of activation, or because they believe that taking people seriously helps to create a relationship of trust that may stimulate them to cooperate in activation (Van Berkel et al., 2010). But since social assistance recipients cannot extort voice and choice, they are dependent on the importance frontline workers attach to it.

This once again raises the issue of transparency of rights and obligations. In a formal sense, rights and obligations are clear: That is, in as far as they are formalized. But in a practical sense, they not only depend on official law, but also on local decisions, organizational decisions and frontline workers' decisions, and may differ from municipality to municipality, from local welfare agency to local welfare agency, and from frontline worker to frontline workers. At least in the Dutch context, frontline workers have considerable discretion although a strong professional basis and/or some form of institutionalized client participation in decision-making that might guide the use of discretion, are absent (Van Berkel et al., 2010; also see Adler, 2008).

#### 4. Discussion and outlook

In this chapter, we explored the consequences for Dutch social assistance recipients' social citizenship of social policy and governance reforms and of organizational and frontline work changes. Several conclusions can be drawn from our findings.

The central argument of this chapter was that if we want to analyse the impact of active welfare reforms on citizenship, we should not focus on reforms of the content or substance of social policies only. The consequence of reforms for citizenship are created in a complex interaction of social policy reforms, governance reforms and local implementation or, more accurately, 'policy production' practices – and the latter are especially important in a context of decentralization, deregulation, and discretionary service provision and interventions. The Dutch social assistance case makes clear that the shift from a highly regulated income protection system towards an emphasis on deregulated and far more discretionary service provision in the area of activation has considerably strengthened the role of local welfare agencies and their frontline workers in determining what social citizenship means for individual social assistance recipients. Put differently, the Dutch reforms implied a process of localization (or municipalization) and individualization of citizenship.

This does not mean that national social policies are not relevant anymore; they certainly are. As we saw, they define some important parameters of social citizenship. These include an increasing emphasis on the individual responsibilities of social assistance recipients and related obligations; more intensive and consequential practices of

monitoring and evaluating individual behaviour; less individual autonomy for recipients to make their own choices regarding labour-market and other forms of participation, the nature of jobs they want to participate in, the content of activation; and more emphasis on shortening periods of social assistance dependency. Furthermore, the decentralization of financial responsibilities for social assistance payments has provided a strong incentive for municipalities to actually implement these new principles of citizenship in an active welfare state context. Of course, we should be careful not to romanticize the amount of individual autonomy social assistance recipients had in the pre-activation period. In addition, especially for the hard to employ one can argue that forms of activation support are necessary to provide more opportunities for individual autonomy. But as we saw, the groups that potentially could benefit most from activation are, in practice, served least.

Nevertheless the social citizenship parameters as laid down in national regulations and the financial incentive structure in which municipalities operate, still leave unprecedented room for local, organizational and frontline work decision-making in the area of activating social assistance recipients. In principle, this has advantages as it allows individual needs, circumstances and ambitions to be taken into account when deciding about specific interventions. But there are no checks and balances that actually ensure that individual needs guide decision-making processes at the individual level: Other considerations, such as financial concerns, organizational capacities or frontline workers' resources, may be more important or even dominant. As we saw, in most cases social assistance recipients have no formal entitlement to exercise voice and choice in order to make case managers take their points of view seriously – which, obviously, would contribute to their individual autonomy in activation. To an important degree, unemployed social assistance recipients are 'at the mercy of' their local welfare agency and their frontline workers where potentially far-reaching decisions concerning the quality of, and access to activation, the status of recipients and their participation in decision-making are concerned – although we should add that this is a legally justified and legitimate situation.

The message the Dutch social assistance system conveys to recipients is clear: When you have no sources of income, we will provide you with a decent safety-net provision, but we expect you to make all possible efforts to become independent from social assistance as soon as possible, and to cooperate fully in any initiative the local welfare agency

takes to promote independency. At the same time, for the individual social assistance recipient it is not very transparent what this practically means. What efforts are expected? What initiatives will the local welfare agency take in individual cases? However, despite the far-reaching consequences these reforms may have for individual people, they do not raise much public and political debate. The citizenship principles underlying social assistance reforms meet wide support from political parties and the public. This seems to have been the case in the period in which the reforms started (see Van Oorschot, 2000); and the reforms that took place during the 2000s also did not meet much public or political resistance (the most controversial issue being the work obligations of mothers with young children, which traditionally meets resistance from Christian political parties). At the same time, little is known about the specific experiences of social assistance recipients with the implementation of the reforms in specific local contexts (apart from the occasional 'incidents' that manage to attract national attention) – and as a social group, social assistance recipients are hardly organized so that few instruments for collectivizing experiences are available for them. In fact, the issue that most frequently raises public and political debate concerns the effectiveness of activation services. With some regularity, examples of supposedly 'useless' or even 'ludicrous' activation projects (tarot card reading or swimming as part of an activation trajectory, for example) or of 'incredibly expensive' activation services get media coverage and fuel the debate on the usefulness of the 'activation industry'. Significant cuts in the activation budget have been introduced already: Compared to 2006, the 2009 budget was €100 million less, which corresponds to a budget cut of about 6 per cent (Divosa, 2009). On the one hand, there seems little point in investing public resources in services that have no demonstrable positive effect. On the other, activation services are a rather new type of publicly funded social services, and it seems reasonable to expect that promoting the professionalization of these services will take quite some time – nevertheless initiatives in this area have remained rather fragmented until now. Furthermore, the alternative – and its consequences in terms of citizenship – is not quite clear. Given the current political climate, it is certainly not likely that we will return to a social assistance scheme that will confront unemployed people with less obligations – apart from the issue of whether this would be a desirable development in terms of promoting social citizenship. More probable is the development of a social assistance regime that puts even stronger emphasis on individual responsibilities and initiative, merely providing financial incentives to 'stimulate' this –



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without providing supportive services that promote employability and enable social assistance recipients to be individually responsible. Raising questions about the effectiveness of activation services is legitimate, of course. But abolishing these services because they are not worth our public funds may have more far-reaching consequences for citizenship than merely promoting a sensible way of spending citizens' taxes.

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## Chapter 10

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