

The ambiguity of social return policies in the Netherlands

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Abstract

Social procurement policies, which aim to create employment opportunities for vulnerable groups, such as the long-term unemployed and the disabled, have become increasingly popular in recent years. Despite their growing popularity, empirical research on this topic is limited. Combining insights from the social policy and public administration literatures, we explore the development and implementation of “social return” policies by the Dutch government. These policies are a form of social procurement that require private employers to spend a percentage of public tenders to hire individuals far removed from the labor market. Social procurement appears, by definition, to be a form of social investment. However, our analysis of the ideas underlying its use in the Netherlands suggests that significant contradictions exist, with evidence of neoliberal New Public Management tendencies, social investment, and the more recent form of public administration, New Public Service. Using extensive document analysis of parliamentary documents, discussions and evaluative reports from 2008 to 2014, we reveal the tensions inherent in the Dutch approach and discuss possible implications for our understanding of social policy and administration as well as social protection.

KEYWORDS

New Public Management, New Public Service, social investment, social procurement, social return, unemployment

1 | INTRODUCTION

The transformation of welfare states through a scaling back of government responsibility in the late 20th century led to what Gilbert (2002) termed the “enabling state”, where social protection is based on private initiatives supported by government (Gilbert, 2005, p. 6). These transformations are inherent to contemporary social investment states, aimed at sustaining knowledge-based economies and producing modernized social risk protection (Morel, Palier, & Palme, 2012). These “modern” forms of social risk protection are evident in various arrangements such as active labor market policies (Bonoli, 2012) or investments in early childhood education and care (Adamson & Brennan, 2014). A further form of modern risk protection that has received less attention in social policy is the concept of social procurement. Social procurement (as part of public procurement procedures) is the use of government purchasing to reach a social objective or provide social value (Barraket & Weissman, 2009). Such policies, while longer in existence (see McCrudden, 2004) have gained popularity in recent years. For example, in many countries, social procurement policies attempt to provide social value by creating private sector employment opportunities for vulnerable groups, such as the long-term unemployed and the disabled. In Northern Ireland, a pilot project requiring government suppliers to create jobs for the unemployed within procurement contracts was seen to be an efficient and effective means of creating sustainable employment opportunities (Erridge, 2007). Additionally, social procurement policies have been developed and implemented in Australia, Denmark, France, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom (UK) (Barraket & Weissman, 2009; Danson, Sosenko, Matthews, & Besemer, 2013). While governments have increasingly turned to the use of social procurement, research on the development, implementation, and consequences of these policies remains limited (Barraket & Keast, 2016; Barraket & Weissman, 2009; Lynch, Uenk, Walker, & Schotanus, 2016). The paucity of research on this topic is worrying because the development of social policy is not value-neutral (Béland, 2005, 2016). Policies are developed and implemented with dominant ideas about how to address social problems. Ideas are best defined as “causal beliefs”, thoughts that distinguish causal connections between related people or things and provide a road map for further action. They define our sense of social reality, our view of collective problems and the policy instruments available to address these problems (Béland, 2005, 2016). To improve research in this area, it is necessary to understand the dominant ideas behind the development and implementation of social procurement policies.

By definition, social procurement appears to be a form of social investment: a modern form of social protection better adapted to addressing risks in contemporary societies, such as long-term unemployment. But there is an uneasy marriage between public sector procurement and private sector provision, given the considerable differences in scope, values, and interests between these two sectors (Erridge, 2007). The tension arising from these differences could mean private sector attempts at social welfare will inevitably focus on private, rather than public sector concerns: efficiency and effectiveness through market competition. As a result, public concerns about social investment could be minimized or ignored. In fact, in other policy areas such as early childhood education and care, scholars critique the fact that private investment dominates social investment (Adamson & Brennan, 2014). “Rarely, do governments acknowledge that providing opportunities for private investment may run counter to their expressed goals of high quality provision and ‘social investment’” (Adamson & Brennan, 2014, p. 50). The use of social procurement policies to achieve social objectives can lead to similar tensions dependent upon the dominant ideas behind their development and implementation.

We address a significant lacuna in social policy and administration scholarship by exploring the ideas behind the use of social return policies, a particular type of social procurement used in the Netherlands. Specifically, we ask: Which ideas shape the development and implementation of social return policies? We do this by looking at the framing of social procurement clauses in Dutch government documents and parliamentary debates from 2008 to 2014. In the Netherlands, municipalities often rely on social return policies to improve the labor market participation of the long-term unemployed (McCrudden, 2004), previously the responsibility of public and/or private employment services or agencies. Social return policies aim to enhance the employability of vulnerable groups using two means: first, by reintegrating vulnerable groups directly, by having them hired on the tendered project on the employer's

payroll. In this manner, governments develop market relationships via processes of procurement because it requires employers to consider the added social value when tendering to provide publicly-financed services (Barraket & Weissman, 2009). A second form of enhanced employability occurs indirectly, by requiring employers to provide education or training placements to individuals far removed from the labor market, for example internships or allowing someone to gain a safety certificate necessary for working in the construction sector (Brouwer, Smit, Van Wijk, & Zwinkels, 2010).

Investigating social return in the Netherlands is interesting for at least three reasons. First, the Netherlands is often looked at for its unique approach to employment and social policy. Long considered a “Dutch miracle” (Visser & Hemerijck, 1997) for successfully fighting unemployment and economic decline in the 1980s and 1990s, the Netherlands has received attention for its approach to social security (Yerkes, 2011) and its flexible labor market policy (Visser, Wilthagen, Beltzer, & van der Putte, 2004). Second, the Netherlands witnessed a significant marketization of its activation and reintegration policies in the early 2000s. During the same period, responsibility for activating the unemployed and welfare recipients was decentralized from the national level to the municipal level. Consequently, the Netherlands is seen to have a “double quasi-market” for activation and reintegration policies, whereby national and municipal governments purchase activation and reintegration services on the private market (Considine, Lewis, O’Sullivan, & Sol, 2015). Critique of the new employment services market led to a reversal of marketization efforts while social return was in its infancy. At the same time, the economic crisis led to significant financial cuts to reintegration services, leading municipalities to increasingly opt for in-house services although people far-removed from the labor market generally remained difficult to activate (see Considine et al., 2015 for a detailed overview). It is within this dynamic market of reintegration and activation policies that social return was developed and implemented. A third and final reason for focusing on the Dutch case is their significant reliance on social procurement policies, with 79% of all municipalities using social return in public procurement and the use of social return in all national tendering processes over €250,000 since 2011 (Brouwer et al., 2010). Yet social science research on this process is very limited (Lynch et al., 2016; McCrudden, 2004). Our article contributes to the literature by providing a much-needed exploration of how politicians frame social return, thereby legitimizing its use.

2 | UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL PROCUREMENT: DIFFERING THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

To understand the ideas behind the development and implementation of social return in the Netherlands, we have developed a theoretical framework that reflects both the social procurement discourse of policymakers as well as key theoretical perspectives in social policy and public administration. Given the absence of social science attention for public procurement policies, studying social procurement requires us to draw from two literatures—social policy literature on social protection (i.e., welfare state policies) and the public administration literature (i.e., on public management and governance). The former is characterized by a contemporary focus on social investment (Hemerijck, 2017; Morel et al., 2012) and the latter by a contemporary focus on New Public Governance (NPG)/New Public Service (NPS) (Crosby, Bloomberg, & Bryson, 2014; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). These theoretical perspectives are particularly well-suited for studying both direct and indirect forms of social return. Social investment focuses on investment with a social value (e.g., indirect social return) and activation (e.g., direct social return). Indirect forms of social return, such as employer-subsidized training placement, could also be indicative of a marketization of services, rooted in NPG/NPS trends and their historic embeddedness in New Public Management (NPM). Direct forms of social return—job creation—may not immediately appear to be a form of marketization, and hence relevant from a NPG/NPS perspective. Yet social return is a government instrument used to oblige employers to hire people far removed from the labor market through the market tendering of public services (Brouwer et al., 2010). This obligatory nature of social return can therefore be seen as a marketization of job placement services and hence (in theory) related to NPM initiatives.

Despite criticism and debate about its conceptual clarity (Hemerijck, 2015, 2017), the social investment state currently dominates social policy trends in contemporary welfare states (Morel et al., 2012; Van Kersbergen & Hemerijck, 2012). With an emphasis on labor market participation and inclusive citizenship through paid work, the social investment state aims to improve primarily future generations' ability to prevent and mitigate social risks through high quality childcare and education, life-long learning, and active labor market policies. Supporters of social investment hope these policies will lead to a modernization of social risk protection, as well as a decrease in social inequality and intergenerational transfers of poverty. In managing the social risks of the current workforce, a social investment focus emphasizes the activation of benefit recipients through training and skill improvement, often as part of a package of active labor market policies (Bonoli, 2012).

NPS is, in many ways, the public administration counterpart to social investment. The term 'New Public Service' was first coined in Denhardt & Denhardt's 2000 seminal article, marking a shift away from the market-driven efficiency and effectiveness concerns that characterized NPM from the 1980s onwards towards a reliance on the big society (Crosby et al., 2014). NPS is seen as the most coherent of the NPG approaches (Robinson, 2015), and constitutes a move towards an interpretive and critical analysis of bureaucracy and society, leading to organizational humanism and discourse theory (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000), away from the narrowly utilitarian character of NPM (Baiocchi & Ganuza, 2016). In contrast to traditional public administration and NPM, NPS is based on inter-organizational and cross-sectoral relationships and efficacy of public service delivery systems (Osborne, Radnor & Nasi, 2013). In practice, this means government changes the choice of contractors as well as the nature of these contracts in order to *serve* rather than to *steer* with the aim of public interest. While NPS has become popular in the public administration literature, both NPM and NPS principles continue to be evident in public administration (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015).

The social investment state and the NPS approach to public administration share a neoliberal historical background. Clearly, NPS follows on from the neoliberal NPM approach to public administration. The social investment state, in turn, emerged from a combination of Keynesian and neoliberal traditions (Hemerijck, 2012). Prior to the shift towards social investment policies, welfare state reconfiguration was driven largely by structural changes involved in the neoliberal pursuit of NPM (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). In fact, critics of the social investment paradigm question whether it even represents a departure from the neoliberal paradigm (Hemerijck, 2012; Jenson, 2009). Consequently, social investment has been criticized as being ambiguous (Cantillon, 2011) and contradictory (Newman & McKee, 2005). Social investment combines "apparently 'progressive' goals [...] with the goal of reducing both present and future costs to the welfare state" (Newman & McKee, 2005, p. 664).

Despite these criticisms, "social investment" is an oft-invoked term in policy-making (Hemerijck, 2017). In the Netherlands, as well, policymakers and politicians use the term when talking about social procurement. Simultaneously, terms such as "efficiency and effectiveness", or "government facilitation of public-private initiatives", are used. The use of these terms does not necessarily mean that these ideas dominate the discourse around social procurement. To establish which ideas are present and underlie the use of social procurement, a critical and systematic assessment is needed. We do this by synthesizing these three concepts of social investment, NPS and NPM into a single framework, and building on previous work in this area (Crosby et al., 2014; Newman & McKee, 2005) to define them as expressed in ideas about: (1) the expected role of government agencies; (2) key objectives; (3) key values; and (4) mechanisms to achieve these policy objectives (see Table 1; Crosby et al., 2014). Steering is important in both NPM and social investment, but in the latter the focus is on long-term objectives related to improving education, training and hence employment across the life course. NPM centers on effectiveness and efficiency through market mechanisms; social investment seeks long-term, sustainable solutions. Further, whereas social investment relies on capacity-building mechanisms, NPS focuses more specifically on creating public value, emphasizing democratic and constitutional values and engaging citizens in achieving these objectives. In short, while a comparison of the expected role of government agencies, key objectives, values and mechanisms for achieving policy objectives reveals considerable overlap among these three approaches, there are clearly diverging ideas (Béland, 2005) about risk management in the welfare state.

TABLE 1 New Public Management, social investment and New Public Service compared

	New Public Management	Social investment	New Public Service
Role of government agencies	Steering for short-term objectives Reliance on markets	Steering for long-term objectives Reliance on markets and the "big" society	Steering and/or rowing Government facilitates, collaborates or stays hands off as needed
Key objectives	Controlling inputs and outputs aimed at direct results, based on politically-driven goals	Broad social objectives of preventing intergenerational poverty and social exclusion Delivery of policy outcomes related to the long-term improvement of education and training across the life course	Create public value in an effective way
Key values	Efficiency Effectiveness	Sustainable, long-term solutions that are effective and efficient	Alongside efficiency and effectiveness, a focus on the whole spectrum of democratic and constitutional values
Mechanisms for achieving policy objectives	Mechanisms and incentive structures through markets Standardized services to reduce costs Intervention	Mechanisms and incentive structures through capacity-building on cross-cutting issues Targeted services for effective use of resources Preparing people for employment (prevention)	Various alternative delivery mechanisms and incentive structures based on pragmatic measures, e.g., cross-sector collaborations and the engagement of citizens to achieve policy objectives

Source. Crosby et al., 2014; Newman & McKee, 2005.

3 | DATA, METHODOLOGY, AND OPERATIONALIZATION

We explore the ideas behind the development and implementation of social procurement policies through extensive document analysis in the period 2008–2014. Social procurement policies were first mentioned in Dutch parliamentary documents in November 2008, which forms the starting point of our analysis. Documents include parliamentary papers (*Kamerstukken*, 74 in total), consultation reports and parliamentary enquiries and responses.¹ In addition to these documents, we make use of available evaluative reports on the implementation of social procurement policies in the Netherlands, carried out on behalf of the government. These documents provide an important source of information on the ideas (Béland, 2005, 2016) behind the development and implementation of social procurement policies in the Netherlands and how these ideas are framed to legitimize the use of social return policies (Béland, 2016; Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010).

To identify and analyze the ideas behind social return policies, we have used the policy-scientific approach by Leeuw (2003). In this approach, ideas reflect behavioral mechanisms, which in turn suggest what political actors believe to be necessary to solve a problem. These mechanisms "drive the policies or programs and are believed to make them effective" (Leeuw, 2003, p. 7). Behavioral mechanisms were coded by identifying statements such as, "The best solution to unemployment is involving contractors through social return measures ...". The next step in the policy-scientific approach is rewriting these identified statements into "if ... then" statements, to identify causal links made by political actors.

In the next step of our analysis, we reconstructed the argumentation captured by these “if ... then” statements, categorizing them into first-order frames² which highlight the “because” part of an argument. For example, we identify a frame “the targeting of vulnerable groups”: *if the government invests in social return, then vulnerable groups will participate more (because without this help, they will fail to return to the labor market)*. These first-order frames were later revisited and categorized into higher order frames, for example, first order frames such as sustainability, activation and targeting vulnerable groups were grouped under a social investment frame. To ensure reliability and validity, coding was done independently by both authors, and findings were then discussed and frames were adjusted if necessary (following Mouter & Vonk Noordegraaf, 2012). In a final step, all identified statements and frames were analyzed to assess the logical consistency (frequency) and empirical content (changes over time), as suggested by the policy-scientific approach (Leeuw, 2003). Following the coding procedure, we categorized the statements and frames on the basis of the relationship to the presumed role of government agencies, key objectives, values and mechanisms for achieving policy objectives outlined in Table 1.

4 | RESULTS

Our analysis reveals significant tensions and contradictions in the development and implementation of social procurement policies. We identified various inconsistencies in the ideas regarding the role of government agencies, the key objectives and values of social return, as well as the mechanisms for achieving these policy objectives.

4.1 | Role of government agencies

Our analysis suggests that politicians view the role of government agencies in implementing social return as helping people far-removed from the labor market into employment from an NPM perspective. NPM rests on mechanisms of privatization as a means of achieving two key objectives: increased effectiveness and efficiency (Crosby et al., 2014). From an NPM perspective, the role of the government shifts from provider of services (rowing) to regulator of services (steering), specifying to varying degrees which outcomes must be met (Sanderson, Allen, Gill, & Garnett, 2017). Our analysis reveals the consistent use of an NPM approach by Dutch politicians, desiring public steering and private rowing in social return policies (Borghgi & Van Berkel, 2007; van Berkel & de Graaf, 2011; Wright, 2011). By steering social procurement, policy-making and implementation are separated, and incentive structures are introduced (such as social return policies) to ensure market actors will contribute to realizing the policy objectives of the government in the short term (de Krom, 2011). The framing of social return in this manner is consistent with earlier developments in the Netherlands in the broader context of activation and reintegration policies, where the withdrawal or lessening of state involvement in social risk protection led to the central steering of market actors (Borghgi & Van Berkel, 2007).

We did not find evidence of long-term steering, rowing or hands-off management in social procurement, more consistent with social investment (Newman & McKee, 2005) or NPS (Crosby et al., 2014) during the initial years of developing social return policies. At this stage, a short-term steering mechanism was seen to be crucial for the effectiveness of social procurement policies in typical NPM fashion. As this quote from the Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations shows, in 2011 the focus was entirely on inputs rather than outcomes, “Given the importance the cabinet places on creating extra work (experience) placements, the cabinet has consciously chosen for a minimum requirement [of 5% of the tender] rather than a self-regulating system of performance [e.g., indicators and rewards]” (Donner & de Krom, 2011). Steering is achieved in social procurement by defining what social return is and what its goals are, without dictating precisely how these objectives are to be achieved. For social return, a dominant means of steering has been the use of a “5% rule”, where 5% of the total tender cost must be invested in the social procurement target group. However, more recent applications of social return introduce other percentages dependent on the sector involved or the type of project involved. For example, lower percentages are applied in the construction

sector, with high material and low personnel costs, whereas higher percentages are applied in cleaning services, given high personnel costs.

4.2 | Key objectives

While the role of government agencies reflects ideas related to NPM, the primary objective of social return policies is clearly related to social investment: enhancing activation and participation, particularly for vulnerable groups, a point we return to below. Activation and training/skill development are central concepts in the social investment paradigm (Bonoli, 2012; Morel et al., 2012). Dutch policy documents show that policymakers broadly frame social procurement as a means to guide target groups back to employment through education and on-the-job training, as illustrated by the following statement from the Deputy Secretary of Social Affairs and Employment, "People are not obliged to work, but are given the opportunity to gain work experience in the context of social return" (Tweede Kamer Der Staten Generaal, 2013b). The objective of enhancing participation was explicitly outlined in the 2012 inaugural statement of the cabinet, desiring that all members of society participate in employment, ideally working "to their capacity" (Tweede Kamer Der Staten Generaal, 2011d). These ideas were cemented in the Participation Act, implemented in 2015, which replaced three previous laws aimed at enhancing the employment of disabled workers and other individuals with a distance to the labor market (Ministry of Economic Affairs, 2014).

Despite participation being a key social investment objective, there is a tension between investing in people's participation and emphasizing individual responsibility, consistent with the neoliberal ideology underlying NPM. As the Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations states:

People also have an individual responsibility, and part of that responsibility is the idea that those capable of finding work on their own must do so. For those people for whom this is not possible, the government has the task to support them in entering the labour market. The governments' application of social return, making agreements in procurement policies to help those at a greater distance to the labour market get a job or work experience, is part of that [task] For this reason, the Cabinet—in its Inaugural Statement—includes the idea that for the investment in and procurement of services, the government should pay attention to internship and learning positions for vulnerable groups. (Tweede Kamer Der Staten Generaal, 2011a)

Similarly, the use of the 5% rule described in the steering of social return above demonstrates how inputs and outputs are managed to achieve the desired result of activating people far-removed from the labor market, an NPM objective. Tension such as this between neoliberal ideas and social goals—such as enhancing the participation of vulnerable groups—is exemplary for the development and implementation of social return.

4.3 | Key values

We identified two contradicting values in the development and implementation of social return policies: sustainability and efficiency. A focus on sustainability suggests viewing social procurement in relation to long-term economic gains and productivity, a central social investment value (Adamson & Brennan, 2014). Yet whether the sustainability of social return is viewed in social investment terms is not clear, as significant ambiguity exists in the use of this term in relation to social return. The initial adoption of social procurement by the state was primarily focused on whether the national government should also implement social return in procurement processes. Social return is deemed "sustainable" given the perceived success of such policies at lower levels of government. An example of such success mentioned in parliamentary debates refers to a social return agreement that led to the realization of a school for people far removed from the labor market during the construction of a highway in the province of Limburg. The project was financed through social return and public tenders in the region, helping about 75 individuals annually for the duration of the project (see Spies, 2012). One interpretation of this framing of social return in sustainability

terms is that social return policies are viewed as *financially* sustainable. Under this interpretation, few conditions were attached to the application of social return in procurement and the 5% blanket approach was taken. This focus differs from government ideas after 2012, where sustainability is invoked in two ways: (1) social return policies are sustainable *if* they lead to lower unemployment; and (2) a long-term sustainable means of lowering unemployment can be achieved *if* social return policies are implemented. In the latter, social return policies are still being framed as financially sustainable. But additionally, social return is now framed as sustainable if productivity levels are increased.

The framing of social return in this manner is more indicative of a social investment approach. By framing social return in relation to *productive* sustainability, it required the explication of conditions under which social return should be implemented. First, these conditions shifted the focus from a broad application of a singular requirement (i.e., the 5% rule), towards flexibility in the application of which percentage of the total procurement amount must be used to create jobs for the unemployed to achieve sustainable employment. The percentage required is generally higher in sectors where most public procurement costs go to personnel costs (e.g., service sectors), than in sectors where most material costs are higher (e.g., construction/building sector or production sector).

Second, this social investment-style application of social procurement made the use of social return policies conditional on the avoidance of revolving-door effects (i.e., simply moving people temporarily out of unemployment for the duration of the social procurement contract), and crowding out (placing unemployed people in jobs at the expense of those currently in employment) (Tweede Kamer Der Staten Generaal, 2014). Two quotes illustrate these concerns, "If crowding-out is a realistic probability, then the state agrees that the percentage [of public procurement funds required to be spent on hiring workers] must be adjusted or [in that case] social return will be dropped altogether" (Tweede Kamer Der Staten Generaal, 2015). These sentiments are echoed by a parliamentarian for the Labour Party, "Social return is now often being used in a way that leads to a carousel of people in and out of 'card boxes.'¹³ That can't be its purpose" (Tweede Kamer Der Staten Generaal, 2014).

The shift to the use of a social investment frame stems from the publication of several evaluations of the implementation of social return policies at lower levels of government, demonstrating what did and did not work (Brouwer, Andriessen, & van Wijk, 2011; Brouwer et al., 2010; den Hoedt, Schofaerts, & Turmel, 2014). Social return on the national level is thus inspired by lower levels of government. Most municipalities exhibited a short-term vision for social return. Their aim was to maximize the number of benefit recipients placed in employment, with little to no attention for the sustainability of these job placements (Andriessen, Giesen, & Van Wijk, 2012). One of the authors of a 2012 evaluation warned politicians at a parliamentary discussion on social return later that year, "At the moment, with a poor economy, social return is leading to the crowding-out of skilled workers, whom companies already have a difficult time attracting and retaining. It [social return] is not sustainable" (Tweede Kamer Der Staten Generaal, 2012). Such statements and evaluations created a need to emphasize the sustainability of social return. The shift to a social investment frame further reflects the government's own experience in applying social return policies in its role as employer. By taking a social investment approach to developing a sustainable means of lowering unemployment, the Dutch government is seeking political legitimacy for the use of social procurement policies.

In contrast to the social investment value of sustainability, politicians also clearly value efficiency. Efficiency is central to NPM (Hood, 1991). Efficiency in social procurement is based on the concept of MEAT (Most Economically Advantageous Tender), regardless of any social aspects stipulated in the tender. Discussions around the development and implementation of social procurement in the Netherlands show a complex search for the best way to achieve this efficiency. When social return was first implemented at the national level in 2011, politicians primarily framed social return as a universally applicable requirement using the 5% rule described above, regardless of which sector was involved, or whether it involved product delivery, public works, or services. This universal approach to achieving a social objective through procurement was piloted during the period under study, whereby 40% of the tenders met the prerequisites (>€250,000 and >6 months in duration) for involving social return.

Following these pilots, discussions clearly reveal dissatisfaction with the universal approach, not only in terms of sustainability, but also in relation to efficiency. An evaluation of the pilot concluded that, "It should be decided what the best applicable form of social return is for each individual tender" (Brouwer et al., 2011). The universal approach

was seen to be unable to differentiate between product delivery, public works or services and the ability to meet the social return requirements. The framing of social return therefore shifted from efficiency by any means to efficiency through customization. Customization, the sense of being customer-driven in business (Gilmore & Pine, 1997), is another key aspect of NPM. As applied to the public-private division of responsibility for social policy, customization refers to the idea that decentralized levels of government are generally better equipped to respond to the peculiarities of complex social problems (e.g., given local or regional complexities), hence providing *tailor-made* responses to unique individual, local, or regional situations.

4.4 | Mechanisms for achieving policy objectives

We find multiple NPM, social investment and NPS mechanisms present in the framing of social return, which are presumed to achieve the policy objectives of activating the unemployed. The first two mechanisms are seen to go hand-in-hand: customization, and the targeting of policies for vulnerable groups. The social investment approach broadly aims at investing in vulnerable groups to ensure their participation in society and employment (Betzelt & Bothfeld, 2011). The vulnerable groups mentioned in Dutch social return documents include those individuals who are assumed to have a distance to the labor market (e.g., the disabled, particularly disabled youth, and lower-educated individuals), and the long-term unemployed. If individuals in these groups are on some form of social benefits, their reintegration into the labor market is assumed to be assisted or improved through social procurement:

We discussed the pilots aimed at incorporating social return in government procurement. It is a good way to encourage companies to employ people with a needs assessment^[4] such as the *Wajongers* [young disabled] and *WSWs* [individuals in sheltered employment]. So I encourage this initiative, but I note that vulnerable groups, the *Wajongers* who have fewer opportunities, should benefit from this. (Tweede Kamer Der Staten Generaal, 2010)

Targeting vulnerable groups was also a key position of the government as outlined in the inaugural plans of 2012. The framing of employment as an individual responsibility and the use of targeted social policies to increase individual responsibility (i.e., the welfare state is a trampoline into employment rather than a safety net) is a central idea in the social investment paradigm (Morel et al., 2012).

From 2012 onwards, the targeting of vulnerable groups, a social investment mechanism, was seen to require a tailor-made approach, an NPM mechanism. As the Deputy Minister of Social Affairs and Employment argues, tailor-made solutions are needed for the success of social return:

Regarding the conditions for success, research shows that there are a number of critical success factors when using social return. For example, a gradual application is a prerequisite for success because the government needs to gain knowledge and experience, and take account of regional labour market disparities. The practical implementation of social return is the responsibility of the contractor, and this will usually be done by liaising with municipalities and/or the UWV [Employee Insurance Agency]. This guarantees an important condition for success, namely customization. (Tweede Kamer Der Staten Generaal, 2011b)

Politicians discuss customization in terms of providing the flexibility needed to achieve an effective solution to helping vulnerable groups back to the labor market, but regard this to be especially applicable to the lower levels of government, "Because municipalities and provinces have a better overview of local and regional labour markets, they are able to use social return flexibly with projects where they expect the greatest effectiveness" (Donner, 2011).

Politicians aim to achieve an efficient implementation of social procurement through customization, yet the desire for some level of standardization remains. Thus the idea of customization may be deemed necessary given the variation in vulnerable groups (and their labor market position) across localities and regions, yet customization makes it more difficult to provide the returns to scale that a universal approach can provide. What emerges is the

idea that for the most efficient implementation an understanding of the type of tender, what works and does not work for social return (e.g., based on pilots) is needed in order to adopt similar thresholds for similar tender procedures. Hence customization should not mean only working on a case-to-case basis for all social procurement policy implementations, but rather using the available experiences to define what works and why, with the goal of balancing customization and widespread, slightly more universal implementation.

In addition to the tension between the social investment and NPM mechanisms of customization and targeting, the means for achieving policy objectives of social return reveal a tension between NPM and NPS ideas. Public-private partnerships are a key NPM mechanism for achieving politically-driven objectives, whereas cross-sector collaboration is a key NPS mechanism for achieving public value (Crosby et al., 2014). Public-private partnerships are seen as a crucial means of achieving the government's goal of improving both labor market participation and social participation. "The success of the Participation Act (*Participatiewet*) depends on public-private partnerships" (Tweede Kamer Der Staten Generaal, 2013a). The government clearly seeks closer collaboration with market partners in NPS style. For example, rather than just implementing social return as a requirement in procurement procedures, the government independently consults market partners to explore their views on social return and what might work in that specific sector. Subsequently, tender procedures are adjusted to meet these needs. "The implementation period and the activities with regards to the embedding of social return within the procurement policies of the Dutch government, and collecting the necessary sector-specific knowledge, will continue this year" (Spies, 2012).

In addition, following initial pilots with social return whereby large companies were the primary partners, the government more actively sought collaborative efforts to include smaller partners, such as social enterprises. "I value the advancement of real social entrepreneurship and a good compilation of social return, social procurement" (Tweede Kamer Der Staten Generaal, 2013a). What this cross-sector collaboration is missing, however, is a focus on citizen engagement for achieving social objectives (Crosby et al., 2014). This partial use of an NPS mechanism suggests a full framing of social procurement as an NPS idea remained absent.

Lastly, we find evidence of an NPS mechanism in the bottom-up development of social return policies. Politicians have the idea that social procurement will be successful for targeting vulnerable groups based on experiences with social procurement policies at the local level. Hence, the national government embraces the bottom-up nature of the social return initiative. The success of social return in the province of Limburg discussed above inspired a dialogue within the national government to use similar policies. The evidence for social return being a bottom-up initiative can also be found in the chronology of the implementation of social procurement policies. Local governments first used social procurement at the end of the 1990s, and the national government followed, adapting social procurement policies to the specific national context (e.g., requiring social procurement only for tenders of €250,000 or more, the European tendering threshold). NPM presumes decentralization to lower levels of government is necessary for an efficient and effective implementation of many policies. In the case of social procurement, however, the direction of policy development is reversed, starting with municipal policy and administration. Municipalities such as The Hague and Dordrecht developed and implemented social procurement policies as early as 1998 (Coolen, Van Ekel, & Van der Suys, 2006; Gemeenteraad Den Haag, 1998). Our analysis shows politicians at the national level drew on these experiences when discussing the possible advantages of social procurement at the national level. On the one hand, local labor markets are seen as being important for the successful implementation of social procurement policies, even at the national level. The status of the local labor market can be evaluated by consulting target group employers before formulating the social procurement requirements in the tender. On the other hand, the government clearly feels that social procurement should be implemented at all levels of government in order to be effective (Tweede Kamer Der Staten Generaal, 2011c). Tenders requested by municipalities, provinces, regulatory water boards (*waterschappen*), etc. should all contain social procurement requirements, especially following the successful implementation at the municipal level. The government invited local politicians to present their experiences with social return, which helped confirm the potential success of social return. For example, Rotterdam alderman Louwes was present in Parliament in 2012 and advocates, "As a client for [the tendering of] work and services, municipalities have already been successful in making targeted agreements of at least 5% for this target group. It

would be wonderful if the Government and provincial governments were to do that on a larger scale" (Tweede Kamer Der Staten Generaal, 2012).

5 | CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This article attempted to unpack the ideas behind the development and implementation of social procurement policies by the Dutch government. Focusing on the Dutch variation of social procurement called *social return*, we sought to understand why political actors are turning to such policies and what the potential consequences are for social protection. Returning to the theoretical framework presented in Table 1, we must conclude that multiple ideas shape the development and implementation of social return policies. The role of government agencies aligns most with NPM, with no evidence of long-term steering, rowing or hands-off management. Key objectives align with social investment, aiming for long-term improvement of training. However, social return is usually based on controlling inputs and outputs to achieve the desired results, an NPM objective. Individual responsibility is also emphasized, a central theme in the neoliberal ideology underlying NPM. Key values of social return show a mix between NPM and social investment. Sustainability (durable placements, cost-containment) and efficiency are deemed important. The two approaches are integrated into the idea of tailor-made responses, in which enabling people (social investment) and efficiency (NPM) combine. Lastly, the mechanisms for achieving policy objectives are a hybrid of the three theoretical perspectives. Social return policies show NPM mechanisms as incentive structures through which private employers are encouraged to invest in interventions that help people far removed from the labor market. However, this could also be interpreted as social investment, a targeted service using government resources to prepare people for employment. In the broader perspective of interventions aimed at people far removed from the labor market, social return policies may be considered an expression of governmental pragmatism as well as an NPS-style cross-sector collaboration between public and private actors. This is particularly true in the later stages of its development and implementation, where tailor-made approaches consider the specific needs and demands of employers in various industries.

In sum, the framing of social procurement is fraught with contradictions. A mix of NPM, social investment and NPS approaches characterize the Dutch government's approach, combining a deepening of existing public-private partnerships (NPM-NPS), customization (NPM) in an effort to target vulnerable groups (social investment), and embracing a bottom-up initiative (social investment). One possible interpretation of these contradictions is that it reflects politicians' desire to achieve market principles of effectiveness and efficiency while framing it as "social" in order to ensure political legitimacy (Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010). There is a more plausible interpretation, however. First, the tension we find in our analysis is related to the ambiguity of social investment noted by supporters and critics alike. Following an analysis of policy shifts in the UK, Newman and McKee (2005, p. 664) concluded "the social investment state is itself a site of ambiguity and contradiction". We find similar contradictions between the "social" objectives and values of social procurement and the means to achieve them. Second, these contradictions are the result of the presence of a hybrid form of activation and reintegration services in the Netherlands arising from the political struggles about whether to have more state or market influence (Considine et al., 2015).

Our analysis thus shows the development and implementation of a policy embedded in rapidly evolving ideas about the role of the state, market partners, and the big society in a dynamic policy field of reintegration and activation policies. When social return was first discussed in 2008, a mixture of NPM and social investment objectives and mechanisms were present. As the crisis took hold, and the idea of NPS became more accepted in policy fields such as activation, the way in which politicians framed social return changed. Our analysis does not suggest a full shift towards NPS ideas has taken place. NPS assumes policymakers and politicians aim to create public value in an effective manner. Although social return potentially creates public value (Barraket & Keast, 2016), the documents analyzed do not demonstrate that creating public value is a key objective. Rather, social procurement is a politically defined goal, relying on a mix of public-private partnerships and cross-collaborations to target vulnerable groups.

Our reliance on social investment, NPS, and NPM as a theoretical framework has advantages and disadvantages. One crucial advantage is by linking political discourse on social procurement to key theoretical perspectives in social policy and public administration, we are able to critically and systematically assess the ideas underlying the development and implementation of social return policies. Additionally, we have been able to pull together two separate but related literatures from social policy and public administration, demonstrating their effectiveness in evaluating contemporary policy developments. Given the related nature of these literatures, it was necessary to clearly differentiate distinct theoretical mechanisms behind social investment, NPM, and NPS, as we have done in Table 1. As our empirical discussion shows, however, these theoretical distinctions are often less clear cut. Moreover, our analysis highlights problems related to the ambiguity of social investment, placing this in the context of public administration debates about the shift towards NPS. Given the interrelated nature of social investment as a social policy approach and NPS in the administration of policies, there is a great need for further comparative work on this topic.

It will be essential to continue to follow the development of social return policies in the Netherlands to determine whether the long-term goals sought after are achieved. For while politicians may seek social objectives such as the activation of vulnerable groups, the central focus on paid employment ignores issues such as non-market work (Saraceno, 2015) or other participation barriers, which can lead to seriously negative redistribution effects in social protection (Cantillon, 2011). Unfortunately, our study is limited to the period in which social return was developed and piloted, and is therefore unable to address such issues. We also note that we have relied on written documents. Interviews with politicians and/or policymakers could shed further light on these issues. Moreover, we have not focused on the content of social return agreements, except as discussed in evaluations. An analysis of these agreements may shed light on the ambiguity of social return policies and the simultaneous presence of social investment, NPS, and NPM values, objectives, and mechanisms.

Despite these limitations, our study provides key insights into the development and implementation of social procurement policies. By using social procurement policies, a shift in the division of responsibility for social protection takes place. By invoking social return policies, political actors shift some responsibility for social problems such as long-term unemployment, to private sector employers. This shift in the division of responsibility fits with previous attempts of the Dutch government to roll back state responsibility and find alternative means of providing social risk protection (Yerkes, 2011) as well as shifts in responsibility for the activation and reintegration of vulnerable groups (Considine et al., 2015). This development also aligns with the broader political climate in the Netherlands, with an emphasis on cost-containment in the welfare state as well as stricter activation requirements for people not in paid employment (Considine et al., 2015). What the consequences of this effort to involve private sector employers in risk protection means for the long-term division of responsibility in social risk protection remains to be seen.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None declared.

ENDNOTES

¹ All documents are publicly available online at https://www.eerstekamer.nl/begrip/kamerstukken_2. For a full list of documents and their sources, please contact the authors.

² For space reasons, this list is not included here but is available from the authors upon request.

³ The term “card boxes” (*kaartenbakken*) is a Dutch saying, which refers to an old registration system of index cards where information was kept on individuals receiving social assistance. The policymaker here is suggesting social return is simply a reshuffling of the assistance people are receiving, without addressing the underlying problem of unemployment.

⁴ Needs assessment, or *indicatiestelling* refers to the outcome of the assessment of the services needed by various vulnerable groups of individuals, based on which group they are a part of, such as the young disabled, those on social assistance, etc.

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