

Central-local tensions in the decentralization of social policies: Street-level bureaucrats and social practices in the Netherlands

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Abstract

European welfare reforms often involve the decentralization of social care services. This potentially creates central-local tensions for professionals implementing and delivering policies on the ground. Using the capability approach (CA) as a conceptual frame, this article compares local professionals' experiences in the decentralization of social work and care services in an urban and a rural mid-sized municipality in the Netherlands. It offers a missing insiders' perspective on central-local tensions, focusing on front-line workers' capabilities to effectively implement policy on the ground. It finds that perfect policy implementation is hardly achievable locally and that policies are translated through implementation and on-the-ground delivery. This leads to central-local tensions and the absence of reflective space for professionals to deal with normative dilemmas. We conclude that the CA is both useful for identifying these tensions as well as providing a normative framework to guide professionals in reflecting on and negotiating street-level issues.

KEYWORDS

capability approach, decentralization, policy delivery, policy implementation, street-level, welfare state

1 | INTRODUCTION

European welfare state reforms often involve the decentralization of social care services (Martinelli, Anttonen, & Mätzke, 2017). This shift in responsibility for the development and/or implementation of social policies from national to local governments increases emphasis on the interplay between centralized and localized policy (Kazepov, 2010) and

potentially creates central-local tensions for professionals implementing and delivering policies on the ground. The impact of such shifts is, however, context-dependent (Minas & Overbye, 2010) and should be understood within specific national-local policy contexts. While there is growing scholarly interest in the central-local interplay from a social policy perspective (Jensen, Møberg, Och, & Pfau-Effinger, 2017; Kazepov, 2010), and the effect of decentralization on the provision of social services (Martinelli et al., 2017), the ways in which the decentralization of services affects front-line workers and street-level bureaucrats (practitioners and policy professionals) and the implications of such tensions, are understudied (Ingold & Monaghan, 2016; Treib & Pülzl, 2006).

The impact of decentralization on practitioners and policy professionals as well as service users is potentially great. For professionals, increased responsibility in developing and implementing policy can restrict the reflective space available for policy and practice learning, particularly if national policymakers do not underscore the need for learning. In many countries, shifts in responsibility for social care services were accompanied by (stringent) austerity measures, increasing local responsibility but limiting capacity to address social problems (Den Braber, 2013, and also in the UK and Spain; Deusdad, Javornik, Giralt, & Marbán-Flores, 2017). Central-local tensions among professionals also arise given ambiguity in how central authorities view their role as service provider (i.e., *rowing*) versus regulator of services (i.e., *steering*) (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015). For service users, central-local tensions may increase social inequality (Nothdurfter & Hermans, 2018), for example, because individuals are not equally capable of taking on individual responsibility typical of late modern policies that emphasize autonomy and freedom of individuals over collective responsibility (Bannink, 2018, p. 119). Moreover, evidence suggests that combining decentralization and austerity measures can lead to decreased policy effectiveness, and/or limit local authorities' capacity to act, which can reduce individuals' access to adequate social care services (Deusdad et al., 2017; Yeandle, 2016).

Despite these potentially negative consequences of decentralization for professionals and service users, and calls for nuanced analysis of national contexts focused on the inclusion of more analytical levels in social policy research (e.g., Nothdurfter & Hermans, 2018; van der Tier, Hermans, & Potting, 2021), central-local tensions and their consequences remain understudied. Aiming to address this gap, we investigate central-local tensions in 'front-line professional practice' (Virtanen, Laitinen, & Stenvall, 2018) in an urban and a rural mid-sized municipality in the Netherlands. We define professionals as front-line workers responsible for policy implementation on the ground, who are, as street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980), deemed powerful actors in policy implementation and delivery (Nothdurfter & Hermans, 2018). We take a capability approach (CA) to understanding professionals' insider perspectives, tracing the processes through which potential tensions between decentralized and devolved central social policies and their local implementation (may) occur. Exploring and comparing how processes are experienced by professionals themselves may contribute to a more integral understanding of the opportunities and opportunity gaps between local contexts, arising from new governance structures and policymaking processes. Against this background, we seek to explore *what a capability approach reveals about central-local tensions from a street-level perspective and to what extent this approach can offer insights for solving these tensions*. Our analysis advances current scholarship by focusing on the central-local territorial dimension, highlighting intra-national similarities and differences. Additionally, we explore how a CA might offer useful insights for solving these central-local tensions. Before reporting on the front-line professional practices studied, we first expand on the concepts and research approach used in this study.

2 | CENTRAL-LOCAL TENSIONS FROM A CA

New developments in national-local governance structures paint a complex picture of changes in social service provision across Europe. Internal heterogeneity arises from various sources, such as territorial disparities (Greer, Elliott, & Oliver, 2015) and programme specific dynamics (Ciccia & Javornik, 2019; Trein, 2017). The territorial dimension of social policy is particularly relevant because policy and its instruments are often delivered and experienced at the local-level (Javornik, Yerkes, & Jansen, 2019). Thus, spatial dimensions and temporal contexts shape social

polymaking and implementation; by the time policy is implemented locally, it has moved through complex governance structures involving multiple actors and implementation processes, embedding them into local practices, specific and diverse regulatory frameworks, institutional traditions, and socio-economic and geographical conditions (Ciccia & Javornik, 2019). This explains why *intra-national* differences may be even larger than differences between countries (Dogan, 2004, p. 325).

Two key trends in central-local governance are visible: (a) the devolution of regulative powers from central government to local organizations (*vertical subsidiarity*); and (b) the multiplication of actors involved in designing, managing and implementing social policies (*horizontal subsidiarity*) (Kazepov, 2010; cf. Mätzke, Brokking, Anntonen, & Javornik, 2017). Territorial reorganization of social policies has created unprecedented cost containment and retrenchment, yielding new roles and responsibilities for regions and municipalities, increased involvement of private and public actors, and diversification of policy delivery and outcomes at local levels (Kazepov, 2010; cf. Mätzke, Brokking, Anntonen, & Javornik, 2017; Trommel, 2013). These processes have fundamentally altered the powers and autonomy of local authorities, and include national-level retrenchment in welfare state provision and other developments through which the national state awarded local authorities new powers but also imposed new constraints. Local-regional economic and social planning and investment arrangements have also changed, often emphasizing economic rather than social issues (Bentley, Bailey, & Shutt, 2010; Hildreth & Bailey, 2013).

Central-local tensions may arise from the supply side (e.g., access to services as a function of social service and benefit availability as seen from the perspective of social service providers); and the demand side (e.g., the perspective of users of social services, cf. Mätzke et al., 2017). Street-level bureaucrats operate in between these two perspectives, which can create significant moral dilemmas (Sabbe, Moyson, & Schiffrino, 2021), forcing them to operate as pragmatic agents (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2012). While vertical and horizontal subsidiarity may create tensions between central-level policy development and local-level policy translation and implementation, they also create opportunities for local responses and identifying user preferences and priorities at the grass roots level (Yeandle, 2016). Through citizen mobilization and activities, local actors, voluntary organizations, and interest groups can gain opportunities to influence and affect policy decisions about and developments in support of public services (Yeandle, 2016). In the social policy literature, this perspective is often taken in studies on income support and activation, personalization, and the use of individual budgets in adult and eldercare, child protection and homelessness (Nothdurfter & Hermans, 2018). Current studies usually focus on street-level bureaucrats, factors influencing the practices of street-level workers, and/or the effects of these processes on social policy outcomes (Martinelli et al., 2017; Nothdurfter & Hermans, 2018, p. 297). Thus, the impact of central-local tensions is often of a complex nature. Exploring how they are experienced by professionals themselves may contribute to a more integral understanding of the opportunities and opportunity gaps between local contexts, arising from new governance structures and policymaking processes.

The CA can be particularly apt for evaluating central-local tensions and opportunities arising in local policymaking and implementation. Developed by Sen (1990, 1992) and later Nussbaum (1987, 2011) and others (e.g., Robeyns, 2005, 2017; Yerkes, Javornik, & Kurowska, 2019), the CA takes a political philosophical and economic approach to understanding social justice and individual wellbeing in pluralist terms. Rejecting utilitarianism, the CA views individuals as desiring and valuing multiple life activities (Nussbaum, 1987, 2011; Sen, 1990, 1992). Individual wellbeing is therefore related to an individual's freedom to do and be what one has reason to value. Freedom inequality arises not only when individuals have differing access to resources (*means* in CA terms, e.g., social policies) but also as a result of differing individual contexts (*conversion factors* in capability terms) shaping individuals' ability to translate resources into real opportunities to achieve what they have reason to value (Robeyns, 2017; Sen, 1992; Yerkes et al., 2019).

Originally developed as a normative, evaluative framework (Robeyns, 2005, 2017; Sen, 1992), the CA can help to reveal implicit and explicit normative conceptions in social policies (Goerne, 2010; Kurowska, 2018; Sen, Hanžek, & Javornik, 2002; Yerkes et al., 2019), and, in the case of central-local tensions, provide a framework for understanding local social policy practices (Yerkes et al., 2019). First, at the street-level, professionals may not be able to use *means*

(i.e., resources in the form of social policies) following their own professional logic (Sabbe et al., 2021) because from a centralized point of view, policies are intended to function in a specific, standardized way. The CA can help clarify these contexts of policymaking and implementation, the operative local actors, and shed light on potential inequities users face in accessing social policies. Second, street-level professionals operate in the space between the supply of policies and services (*means*) and the demand for these services (end-users). They are therefore often acutely aware of factors that shape individuals' ability to translate policies and services into real opportunities to live a valued life (*conversion factors*). Applying the CA can thus highlight the potential normative dilemmas street-level bureaucrats face while operating within the space of central-local tensions, where they are potentially required to improvise and exercise their *agency*, that is, their ability to reflect on and respond within the professional space in which they operate. Third, the CA can guide the implementation of social policy on the ground, providing a normative framework on what constitutes equity and what causes inequity. These normative anchors can assist street-level bureaucrats in solving central-local tensions within the particularities of their daily practices (Brummel, 2017; Yerkes et al., 2019). In short, there is a potential double function of a capability-based social policy in relation to central-local tensions: (a) as a normative, evaluative framework for identifying central-local tensions and normative dilemmas arising within this space; and (b) as a guide for solving policy tensions.

3 | THE DUTCH SOCIAL POLICY AND DECENTRALIZATION CONTEXT

The Netherlands is a relevant case study as the recent welfare state shift from the central to the local-level in social care services yields serious issues around the professionalization of front-line workers, critical public deliberation and an unrealistic emphasis on individual self-reliance as the main policy aim (Tonkens & Duyvendak, 2018). Decentralization has also been far-reaching in other European countries, such as the UK, Spain and Germany (Deusdad et al., 2017; Martinelli et al., 2017; van der Tier et al., 2021; Yeandle, 2016), placing context-dependent experiences in a broader perspective of social policy decentralization.

Decentralization of social care services in the Netherlands started in 2007 with the introduction of the Social Support Act, gradually transferring responsibilities to the municipal level. In 2015, a new Social Support Act (SSA 2015) spurred far-reaching decentralization. With the SSA 2015, the national government decentralized policies regulating the provision of care and wellbeing services, local community development and social inclusion. Municipalities became responsible for service delivery related to self-reliance and the participation of people with a disability or a chronic (psychiatric or psychosocial) condition (e.g., sheltered housing, social support), as well as older people and others in need of 'lighter' forms of support. The SSA 2015 additionally defined the regulatory conditions for municipal social support, outlining the steering role of the central authority (regulation), and the rowing role of local authorities (service provider). Municipalities in the Netherlands are now directly responsible for the delivery of most social support services for socially vulnerable residents living in socially vulnerable circumstances *and* their families, as well as disadvantaged areas.

The SSA 2015 is part of a larger, systemic transformation of Dutch social policy towards a reinvented civil society (Trommel & Boutellier, 2018), including the reform of long-term care, youth care, social assistance and employment reintegration efforts. Within this policy context, municipalities have a high degree of freedom in developing service provision models. Consequently, neighbourhoods became the dominant space for policy implementation, with new collaborative models and interdisciplinary configurations developed at the level of municipalities (Jansen, Pijpers, & De Kam, 2017). A '*social support team*' model emerged (Van Arum & Van den Enden, 2018), with a collaborative configuration in which community-based workers from various disciplines (often from different organizations) deliver integral social support matching clients' needs. At its peak in 2018, 87% of municipalities worked with social support teams (Van Arum & Van den Enden, 2018). Other municipalities organized integral social support and wellbeing services using alternative models, such as improved collaboration between existing service providers (Van

Arum & Van den Enden, 2018). For comparative purposes, we explore the experiences of professionals in one municipality working with the social support team model, and one not employing this model.

4 | DATA AND METHODS

This article draws on two studies in the Netherlands that Erik Jansen and Annica Brummel conducted for other purposes, using participatory action research on local innovations in social policy and service delivery in the municipalities of Venlo (2015–2019) and Lingewaard (2018–2020). All authors are familiar with the circumstances of the original data generation and processing, which allowed for a deeper analysis of the data. Our secondary analysis re-uses and re-analyses two existing qualitative datasets to address a new research question (Payne & Payne, 2004). We adopt a ‘retrospective analysis’ (Heaton, 1998) of rich qualitative datasets to explore professionals’ insider perspectives of potential central-local tensions. This reduced the need to re-interview original participants or recruit further subjects. Overall, our approach allows wider use of rich data from difficult-to-recruit, busy respondents, such as professionals (Heaton, 1998). Given the diversity in data sources, a detailed formal comparison between cases was not feasible. Therefore, we explored each case using thick description (Geertz, 1973), detailing local settings in which actors needed to translate and implement policies developed at the central level. We constructed these thick descriptions using the lens of the CA, paying particular attention to the tensions arising in the space between policies (*means and conversion factors*) at the national level and the use of these services at the local-level, and street-level professionals’ *agency* when operating within this space.

Data were originally gathered for participatory action research studies. All respondents participating in interviews provided formal consent to use their data for research purposes. The participatory action research also included meeting minutes and collaborative documents, such as manifestos and partnership statements. Before participating in these studies, participants were informed and aware of the engagement of university researchers and their gathering of data for the purposes of developing the policy practices involving participants, and the education of future social work professionals. Researchers were experienced in conducting action research and participants were given the opportunity to opt out of meetings or discussions throughout the process. Given these considerations, and the potential for this article to contribute to the education of future social work professionals, as intended with the initial study, we deemed it ethically sound to re-use the data for the purposes of the current study.

The analysis is based on two local municipalities (cases) in the Netherlands, described below: Venlo (case 1), a mid-sized urban municipality, and Lingewaard (case 2), a municipality consisting of multiple rural communities.

4.1 | Case 1: Social support teams in Venlo

The municipality of Venlo (100,000 residents), located in the south of the Netherlands, was one of the first places in the country to develop multidisciplinary, neighbourhood-based ‘social support teams’. Pilot-experiments with these teams started prior to the SSA 2015. The municipality adopted the model in 2015 for all town areas, incorporating it into its formal decentralization agenda. Initially, the Venlo-model comprised 12 social support teams spread out over 12 town areas. Teams’ main task was to act as a social support and wellbeing services broker, conducting needs-assessment interviews in users’ homes and developing social arrangements to meet the needs of socially vulnerable residents (e.g., elderly, individuals with a chronic condition). Such social arrangements were intended to be, as one participant put it, ‘*as light as possible and as elaborate as necessary*’. In 2017, local expenditures exceeded budgets in the social domain by 24 million euros; in turn, a series of austerity measures and a second (revised) round of implementation were introduced. Resulting reorganization reduced the number of social support teams from 12 to 6: 5 area-based teams and a municipality-wide intervention team for clients with complex problems.

Erik Jansen followed the implementation of the neighbourhood social support teams over a 5-year period, advising on the development of new practices, and worked with team members and team leaders to develop a training and professionalization programme. Numerous regular meetings were held with key policy professionals, discussing professionalization and implementation activities. Erik Jansen also facilitated an action learning network (seven participants) comprised of mid-level managers from local civic organizations and mid-level municipality civil servants, who reflected on local policy innovations to stimulate cross-organizational development. Data from this case include outputs from professionalization sessions with six social support teams, and meeting notes from: multiple sessions with social support team leaders and specialized policy professionals; a strategic policy officer and team leader of the policy professionals; an innovation network group; and Erik Jansen's field notes and reflections spanning 2016 to early 2019.

4.2 | Case 2: Formal–informal collaboration in Lingewaard

Lingewaard is a municipality with less than 50,000 residents consisting of multiple rural communities (five villages) in the south-east of the Netherlands. Unlike Venlo, the municipality chose not to work with social support teams because of the geographic spread and small-size scale of the rural communities. Rather, it stimulated collaboration between local professional organizations and developed a local information desk in each village for residents to ask questions about social support and community participation. Lingewaard focused on three major themes in applying the SSA: prevention, area-based approaches and integral collaboration. An area-based approach is a bottom-up type of local policy implementation focused on a specific territorial area, for example, a neighbourhood, in which a municipal government collaborates with residents to develop tailored measures tackling local social issues. Annica Brummel undertook participatory action research of which the first phase (May 2018–May 2019) focused on exploring formal–informal collaborations in area-based service delivery before moving to a more action-orientated phase. Data analysed here were gathered in this 1-year window. The purpose of the participatory action research was to gain insight into and implement effective mechanisms and strategies for local area-based service delivery. Our current analysis focuses on one neighbourhood within a larger village and one small village in the municipality.

Six group meetings with various organizations were held in the period under study. In the initial two sessions in which participants set the collaborative agenda, *formal–informal collaboration in area-based working* was articulated as an overarching theme. This central theme was discussed further with volunteers in neighbourhood platforms or other local groups in the remaining four meetings. Group meeting sizes varied between 7 and 70 street-level participants, including volunteers and professionals. Each meeting produced a list of professionalization issues, and meeting notes were taken by Annica Brummel. Additionally, social work students (Erik Jansen and Annica Brummel's university) conducted 12 in-depth interviews (January–June 2019) with professionals and volunteers in Lingewaard. Data for the Lingewaard case also included Annica Brummel's meeting notes from sessions with municipal policymakers; sessions with volunteers and informal organizations and a neighbourhood platform; and sessions between students interning in the two towns in Lingewaard and their supervisors.

The data from both cases were subjected to an axial and selective analytical strategy (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). In the initial analysis, formal transcribed interviews and informal real world data (documents and logs from the action research process) were coded to yield inductive open themes. In a second analysis, these key themes were confronted with three common concepts from the capability literature (Robeyns, 2017) applied to the street-level bureaucrat perspective: *means* (the use or availability of resources), *conversion factors* (contextual influences and circumstances), and *agency* (autonomy and freedom). This enabled the identification of tensions and dilemmas from a street-level perspective that involved the interaction of these concepts. Erik Jansen and Annica Brummel were responsible for the preliminary phases, and consulted Jana Javornik and Mara A. Yerkes in several iterations on the application of the CA concepts and the interpretation of the tensions.

5 | RESULTS

We first provide the thick description for the two Dutch cases, identifying central-local tensions in each case before comparing these results to arrive at more general patterns.

5.1 | Venlo

Several themes emerge in the Venlo case in relation to central-local tensions. One key theme is a tension in the discretionary space experienced by professionals, balancing the *means* for service delivery made available to them within local policy frameworks, against underlying client needs. What appears necessary for a client cannot always be provided, despite the promise implicit in needs-assessment interviews (*'We cannot just give them what they want!'*).

Within this discretionary space, street-level professionals' agency to reflect and respond is limited by several other tensions. First, although collaboration is key to well-functioning social support teams, local settings often do not provide the conditions required to collaborate with other team members and/or the local network of service providers, reducing street-level professionals' ability to be agentic within the discretionary space. For example, team members were allowed to use desk space at community centres, but lacked dedicated office space; clear directives, policy frameworks, or procedures were often missing; and individual caseloads were heavy, leaving little room for meeting and discussing with colleagues. Second, professionals experience a tension between the professional knowledge, expertise and skills they possess and the skills and expertise now needed given the complex client cases they face, limiting their agency. Third, as a consequence, they experience issues with the positioning, recognition and identity of themselves as social support team members and the trust invested in them by the municipality and local organizations. This positioning does not align with the material and social working conditions experienced in the decentralized context: they experience hypocrisy between the central policy message of being key players in the network, while being inadequately facilitated at the local-level. As one team member remarked: *'I sometimes feel torn between being a member of the organisation that pays my salary, and being a member of the social support team'*. Finally, they report having too little space and time for joint reflection and mutual learning, crucial aspects of agency. In the words of one team member after a reflection session: *'What we discussed today is what we should discuss regularly or at least had started with earlier on'*.

As a result, the thematic evolution during the professionalization trajectory under study suggested decentralization caused a shift from a focus on instrumental questions about professional methods (*how*) towards more fundamental and existential questions on what the ends of policies (as *means* to foster citizens' wellbeing) actually are and professionals' own role in implementing them (*why*). This shift diminishes professionals' agency to operate within the discretionary space created by central-local tensions, potentially giving way to moral dilemmas. Professionals hardly feel empowered or self-confident about their own expertise and face management-based strict and instrumental interpretations of rules and regulations. As a result, while professionals become aware of factors limiting individuals' ability to access or use local policies and services, they lack the agency to reflect upon this awareness sufficiently to address these inequalities. One policy officer responsible for the professionalization and training of the teams concluded that service delivery (in light of decentralization) was approached too instrumentally: *'We do not allow ourselves enough time to discuss with the teams why we have been doing all this'*. Participants of the development and innovation network drew similar conclusions, sensing their network meetings allowed them to reflect on policy and practice from a more collaborative and objective position in contrast to daily experiences of having to act pragmatically. This required trust and the ability to speak openly about dilemmas and fundamental questions, and a trust-based, collaborative learning climate was later outlined in a group manifesto. Moral tensions between policy rule compliance versus professional logic and an awareness of client-side *conversion factors* were also salient in the inter-visit meetings in which social team workers discussed their dilemmas in working with clients, for example, when a

social worker felt restrained by policy directives but concluded: *'I am not supposed to but I am going to allow provision of this service, because this girl just needs it!'*

These tensions and collaborative efforts emerged in a context in which the implementation of the SSA (2015) was more a function of the myriad interactions and micro-politics between actors and events at the local-level than a conscious operationalization of central or local policies. As such, the SSA forms a backdrop against which local professionals in Venlo sought guidance on how to interpret decentralization in their daily work. Remarkably, during regular work meetings, they did not discuss the notions central to the SSA, but rather dealt with operational or practical issues (the *how*). In the deliberative sessions of the action research, however, space for reflection (and hence agency) was created, yielding two key themes. First, consistent with central SSA policy aims, professionals regard the wellbeing of Venlo residents as the ultimate end of their work, and each professional should determine what this means for their actions based on the particularities of the complex client situation, that is, the client characteristics at play (e.g., age, gender, ethnic background). Second, professionals experience a tension between what is asked of them versus *how they are enabled* to deliver services, thereby referring to the poor conditions for their own professional agency and their inability to overcome the conversion factors potential users of these services face. Overarching these themes stood the firm belief that (new forms of) collaboration and learning at the local-level are essential for implementing policies consistent with their personal moral convictions, but the space to develop these felt too limited.

5.2 | Lingewaard

Four themes emerged in the Lingewaard case. First, professionals felt they lacked knowledge on all local areas within the municipality, knowledge that was deemed crucial for coordinated, area-based service delivery and employing social policy as a *means* to do so. While some organizations aggregated information, resulting overviews were not shared between local partners: *'We lack a shared perspective on the area, every organization now walks their own path'*. Similarly, efforts at creating a shared data platform were unsuccessful; after initial pilots, no further action was taken to make data accessible, nor was it used extensively by the few accessing organizations. The absence of such information aggregation also hampered thorough evaluation of the impact of joint efforts in the area. Second, professionals felt insufficiently able to meet decentralization goals towards a local, inclusive society. The professional methods used for needs assessment mainly reached active neighbourhood volunteers: a relatively homogeneous group of middle-aged, native community residents, which led to potential inequities among residents. Therefore, current procedures for developing area-based activity plans in Lingewaard appear to fail to acknowledge the contextual factors in which individuals are embedded, and thus fail to cater to the diverse community population that includes migrants, people with a disability, or youth. Both volunteers and professionals were unable to identify *conversion factors* limiting or preventing the use and access of services. They therefore had no idea how to reach these groups, with one professional saying: *'We tried to reach out to youth, but they just won't come to our meetings'*. This ironic tension between active citizenship advocated in the SSA and its absence in local social practice was a source of distrust between residents and the municipality. Third, local stakeholders experienced tension between the need for collaboration and the compartmentalization of knowledge and financing (and hence existence of boundaries) between local organizations. Whereas local professionals see merit in interdisciplinary collaboration, the systems they work in often prevent them from doing so. Together, these tensions serve to limit the agency of professionals within the municipality.

The limited agency of professionals is evident within a contentious context, with data revealing implicit micro-political tensions among local stakeholders. In one neighbourhood, various organizations co-produced a new collaborative method in area-based working, leading to a system of dedicated project groups to deal with a select number of local issues. Use of this method led to a plethora of subgroup meetings and professional structures, logic, language and systems thinking. As a result, volunteers complained their activities effectively turned into 'jobs' and that

professional decision-making was too slow. As one of the volunteers put it: '*When I retired I thought it would be nice to get active in the neighbourhood. But since the municipality's stimulation of area-based working, I have more than a full-time job as a volunteer. It is almost a way of life*'. In the other neighbourhood, volunteers were afraid of being overshadowed by professionals, and therefore an alternative organizational procedure was employed. This led to some professionals feeling excluded and unrecognized in their expertise.

5.3 | Tensions in comparative perspective

Comparing the experiences across these Dutch municipalities, several observations stand out. First, temporal and spatial variation is evident. In Venlo, professionals struggled with their positioning and identity within governance structures impacted by decentralization. They felt they missed crucial skills necessary to help residents meet their complex needs, and felt they lacked the reflective space needed and desired for policy learning, an issue not (yet) arising in Lingewaard, where professionals were less able to identify the complex needs of residents. The absence of discretionary space means professionals are unable to reflect on the normative dilemmas that arise in the implementation of decentralized social services (Venlo). In Lingewaard, professionals struggled with the perceived recognition of their skills amidst formal and informal collaborations. In the latter smaller municipality, there was a concern of exclusion, and a lack of agency, perceived as an inability to address the needs of a diverse population. This inability stems from the absence of reflective space to be able to identify and address the conversion factors of residents in Lingewaard.

Despite local variations across cases, there is an underlying common element: Professionals regard being able to locally discuss social policy themes as a key factor for their professional agency and adequately addressing clients' needs, as well as being able to identify and address both entrenched inequalities and inequalities arising from decentralization efforts. Such deliberation, however, requires both a collaborative space and a common conceptual language. This collaborative space was absent in both municipalities. Professionals in Venlo and Lingewaard similarly expressed that the decentralization of social care services required greater collaboration at the local-level but local governance structures do not equally facilitate such collaboration. Professionals in Venlo and Lingewaard also experienced a similar disconnect between policies developed at the central level and their implementation at the local-level. Respondents experienced tension between social policy as a resource (*means*) and the underlying, complex needs of users (the *conversion factors* that prevent users from translating policies and services into real opportunities to live a valued life).

The CA lens applied here shows the tensions arising from a central SSA policy that encourages citizens to participate actively in social support provision, in line with policy concepts such as 'active citizenship' and 'network support' and with the notion of agency as being able to pursue one's own conception of the good life. Local implementation of these concepts presupposes the presence of strong and productive collaborative network relations as resources (*means*), enhancing professionals' agency, allowing them to identify and assist residents in translating policy and services into real opportunities to live a valued life, thereby enhancing citizens' wellbeing. However, as shown in Lingewaard, this does not come naturally. In the implementation process, professionals tend to revert to their standard organizing mode, demanding professional skills (debating, discussing, meetings and knowledge) and relying on professional-level resources (time and facilities), which hampers productive collaboration with informal partners. Moreover, residents facing greater disadvantage (e.g., with social problems such as stigma or not understanding the language) are structurally less involved at the local-level. Consequently, their perspective remains underrepresented and under-identified in local discourse, potentially biasing the supply of services in favour of the already advantaged, and thus introducing new social inequalities as a consequence of decentralization. Because professionals lack reflective space, normative dilemmas appear absent. Whether professionals are aware of social inequalities or even able to address them depends, largely, on professionals' ability to be agentic and reflect on more fundamental and existential questions on what the ends of policies actually are and their own role in implementing

them (*why*), as noted in the Venlo case. Our comparative data suggest that in spite of contextual differences across municipalities, street-level workers have a strong urge to deliberate local implementation and shape their practices collaboratively with local stakeholders while being sensitive to the local context. Such collaboration would allow for reflective space, and potentially the identification and resolution of normative dilemmas.

Professionals in both cases explicitly voiced a need for moral anchorpoints underpinning the SSA 2015 to facilitate reflective processes. The open and underspecified nature of the CA as a normative framework seems particularly suited for professionals to engage in such a deliberative process. It combines normative reference points with a theoretical rationale for identifying the complex local mechanisms and causal loops that create (in)equity between citizens. This can be exemplified by the street-level bureaucrats in Venlo responding enthusiastically to the CA workshop, explaining it provided them with a much-needed framework to address the integral complexity of their clients' actual lives (*conversion factors*) in relation to the lives they valued to live. In short, the CA was found to not only provide a conceptual framework for identifying the central-local tensions, but also to have potential in facilitating meaningful reflection and thereby fostering professional agency of the street-level bureaucrats.

6 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

European countries are facing extensive processes of social policy devolution and decentralization, oftentimes with far-reaching consequences for the implementation of policies at local levels (e.g., Martinelli et al., 2017). Within this context, we sought to explore and compare central-local tensions experienced by professionals in two Dutch municipalities.

Our study leads to three main findings. First and foremost, the central-local tensions emerging in the cases generally materialize as operational or practical issues rather than being perceived as policy tensions. Second, creating space for reflection opens up possibilities for increased professional agency and collaboration among various stakeholders and meets the need for local discourse and moral reflection. Currently, numerous street-level bureaucrats experience a lack of space for such moral reflection because of the central-local tensions/space in which they operate. The limitations to professionals' agency are a barrier to professional reflection on the normative dilemmas professionals face in the decentralized central-local context as well as the identification of conversion factors that prevent citizens from translating policy and services into real opportunities to live a valued life. Third, policy implementation involves translating higher level policies into concepts and principles (*means*) that resonate locally.

Some elements appear to be context-specific (cf. Minas & Overbye, 2010), for example, the way in which professionals position themselves or their skillset within a local context. Yet overarching patterns indicate (a) a disconnect between policies (*means*) developed at the central level and local-level implementation; and (b) the absence of governance structures necessary to facilitate collaboration and reflection at local levels. The latter indicates that professionals recognize the need for collaboration but lack both the structures and agency necessary to develop collaborative working arrangements, as well as the power to implement them. This leads to central-local tensions around power dynamics and policy interpretation on the ground, creating moral dilemmas, which street-level bureaucrats neither have the space to reflect on nor the power or capability to change.

These findings have several implications for theory and practice. Our finding that professionals perceive central-local tensions in terms of conflict (relational tensions) or as practical impediments implies that what is defined as a central-local tension from an academic perspective is not necessarily perceived as such by professionals. Rather, they appear to act upon the micro-political tensions they encounter in dealing with new regulations, procedures and routines. That is, they are *bothered* by having to do things differently. Thus, professionals often do not act strategically but instead act tactically or pragmatically within the new limits and opportunities for local operationalization of central social policy (see Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2012), which may lead to new moral dilemmas, for instance if this results in supply not being able to meet demand for street-level services. This finding also sheds new light on the consequences of vertical and horizontal subsidiarity in social policy: at the street-level, decentralization trends result

in complex structures and power dynamics, forcing local actors to renegotiate roles and responsibilities. Confronted with new complex configurations, professionals need to improvise (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2012; Trommel & Boutellier, 2018) and negotiate (Jansen, Baur, De Wit, Wilbrink, & Abma, 2015) local resources and constraints in a specific time and space. From a capability perspective, local professionals lack the means, agency, and in some cases, power, to improvise and negotiate within this context. Central social policy should, in principle, offer resources for providing social support (means; cf. Kurowska, 2018; Robeyns, 2005). In practice, implementation dynamics interact with conversion factors at multiple levels, hampering the ability of end-users to translate these resources into real opportunities for full participation and inclusion and for professionals to facilitate this process (Brummel, 2017). Practically, this implies that professionals merely act in terms of local (horizontal) tensions and accept vertical tensions as given, unless confronted with the necessity and opportunity for a central policy perspective.

Extending this finding, reflective space for professionals may be provided by ongoing collaborative learning processes that enable them to interpret issues within the broader and substantive central policy frame and solve the moral dilemmas they encounter in practice. Professionals who reflected on the consequences of social policies for service delivery felt preparing for such reflection should have been the first (rather than subsequent) step of decentralization. If unnoticed and unresolved, such underlying central-local tensions end up being dealt with in a superficial and ad hoc manner while trying to neutralize local micro-political issues instead of solving the real moral issues at hand. Here, the notion of discretion is crucial: are professionals aware of discretionary space (e.g., Lipsky, 1980)? More importantly, from a capability perspective, do they have the agency needed to be aware of this discretionary space, as well as to use it for the effective implementation of central policies and the enhancement of citizens' wellbeing? Based on our results, it appears several barriers exist limiting the agency of local professionals.

A question raised by this finding is what street-level professionals need to substantively guide them in navigating their discretionary space. Previous research suggests that the CA provides a sufficiently broad and normative framework for engaging in deliberative processes and navigating discretionary space (Alderliesten & Peters, 2019; Javornik et al., 2019). With agency limited, professionals generally react or fail to act strategically. When discursive space was created, policy re-interpretation took place in formulating collaborative manifestos and local agenda-setting with strong moral overtones, which suggested local expertise was fusing with central policy ideas to yield local and co-created normative anchorpoints, such as prioritizing the wellbeing of individuals and focusing on empowerment.

The practical implication of this finding is that effort should be placed in actively creating realistic opportunities for joint reflection on the dilemmas of the day, consisting of both the (mental and physical) space and the conceptual language for deliberation, where it is not readily available in everyday practice. Team leaders have an important dual role in this process: facilitating space for reflection in a systematic way, and establishing connections between central policies and local issues, and vice versa (Cooper & Kitchener, 2018; De Waal, 2017). With this process, professionals increasingly need to demonstrate a 'phronetic attitude' (Flyvbjerg, 2001), whereby the practical wisdom of local professionals is included in local policy. Translating policy into locally resonating concepts and principles is largely done by local professionals familiar with and sensitive to local dynamics and local historical dependencies (Trommel & Boutellier, 2018). These professionals incorporate micro-political negotiations into local policymaking, which helps to avoid local political processes eventually overshadowing the political decisions underlying central policies.

Our findings resonate with examples from other countries, such as the UK, where far-reaching decentralization of social care service provision has taken place in a manner similar to the Dutch situation. In a small-scale scoping study (Yerkes et al., 2019), five professionals were interviewed who work with policy target groups, including employers, service users and residents to enhance expert knowledge about how CA principles resonated in the local policy implementation processes. All acted as liaisons between central government policymakers and citizens/residents/members and were involved in central and local policymaking processes at the design and implementation stage. Respondents identified central policy language as exclusionary ('*cumbersome policy speak*'). While involved in central policymaking, they found the vocabulary distant, disempowering and silencing towards professionals. Perceptions of distance seemed to affect their attitudes towards central levels, suggesting both the risks and potential of street-level discretion in practice, and neglecting local moral dilemmas. Our participants used discretion in their role

as policy actors on the ground and presented comprehensive frameworks to explain its use when addressing these moral dilemmas in their public service (cf. Nothdurfter & Hermans, 2018). Moreover, they felt central policies were developed with insufficient understanding of the complexity of individuals' lives. As one of them stated: '*There are 100 things that impact one's life and influence on what they can do. The role of support agencies is to support people in their engagement with policies, in trying to live the life they have reason to value*' but '*there is no one direction and each individual is different*'. They generally felt an explicit CA-based approach could provide them with a framework allowing for the recognition of this diversity while still adhering to central policy principles. In sum, just as in our current findings these UK-based professionals felt the central-local disconnect could be resolved by adopting an overarching integral framework as the CA thereby providing the normative anchor points they needed. Further research in similarly decentralized contexts, whereby a capability-based approach is developed in practice, would be a next step in developing concrete strategies for solving the central-local tensions identified in the Dutch cases.

To conclude, our exploratory study offers some key lessons but we note some limitations. First, our secondary analysis was conducted on data collected with a different research question in mind. Although we could discern some clear patterns, primary research focused on central-local tensions may reveal further nuance. Second, our cases may not be ideal for comparative analyses given variation in data collection and timing; studies employing most-similar or most-different case study comparisons may produce different results.

These limitations notwithstanding, our study provides important insights for a better understanding of the central-local tensions arising as a result of decentralization processes. Creating deliberative space among professionals to reflect on the normative ends of central social policies, that is, enhancing their agency, appears to be essential for local policy implementation, reducing the potential for normative dilemmas and solving central-local tensions (Jansen et al., 2015). Collaborative learning processes are pivotal in local policy implementation for dealing with the ambivalences intrinsic to the work of social professionals (Hortulanus, 2011) and the complexities central policies introduce. They allow professionals to understand and deal with the fluid dynamics between actors in the local playing field (Engeström, 2007).

By and large, our study illustrates a growing need for a new overarching framework to evaluate and guide local implementation processes and to solve tensions that may be the essence of the central-local social policy divide. These processes are essentially local negotiations, with varying outcomes leading to local policy variation. Such a framework should provide local stakeholders with a platform on normative issues. The CA provides a framework that fits these requirements and also allows for street-level workers to politicize issues on-the-ground. The alternative is that they continue to approach local social policy instrumentally, merely carrying out central policy ideas. We argue that applying a CA framework is a promising way forward for enabling local professionals to deliberate the ends and means of social policy in dealing with central-local tensions, thereby negotiating local conditions and collaborations to supporting clients in living the lives they have reason to value.

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