

Client and Stakeholder Perspectives on Dutch Decentralizing Trends

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Abstract

Decentralization tendencies have always been a distinctive aspect of Dutch administrative relations, but have accelerated since the 2007-08 financial crisis. Beginning from 2021, the Dutch government intends to further decentralize responsibilities for homelessness services and supported housing towards lower levels of government. Since 2015 to 43 larger municipalities, and from 2021 onwards in phases to all 355 municipalities. It is assumed decentralizing those services will lead to more integrated, efficient, and democratic approaches of public service delivery. However, the policy intention and the pace of the upcoming decentralization of the social domain has on both the national and local level been anticipated with anxiety by governmental and non-governmental stakeholders. It is feared that necessary institutional and financial preconditions for a successful decentralization are not met, which may result in insufficient care for the most vulnerable groups in society.

Although many theoretical studies on the Dutch decentralizations in the social domain have been published in the last decade, academic empirical research of the perspective of relevant stakeholders has generally been scarce. This study aims to fill this empirical lacuna by examining how recent and intended decentralization tendencies in the social domain are evaluated from the perspective of clients, and governmental and non-governmental stakeholders in the field of homelessness services and supported housing. Based on 130 semi-structured qualitative interviews, among which 58 client interviews that were conducted together with trained experts-by-experience, we identified levels of support and resistance for the upcoming decentralization.

First findings indicate all participants expect, to varying degrees, homelessness services and supported housing to become more accessible, (cost-)efficient, flexible and smaller-scale. Moreover, the decentralizing tendency is considered a positive development by clients, and governmental and non-governmental stakeholders, as it allows clients to stay in touch with their local social network. However, also concerns about the current level of public services, and the access and local expertise of these services are unanimously shared. Furthermore, non-governmental stakeholders fear that decentralized services become too fragmented and might intervene with transitioning clients to independent housing and continuity of care. Contrary to this, governmental stakeholders argue decentralizing service responsibilities might further facilitate transitioning to independent housing. Finally, governmental stakeholders identify close cooperation, collaboration and involvement of municipalities, care providers and local residents as necessary conditions for the success of the intended decentralization.

Taken together, these results provide valuable insights in the levels of support and expected consequences of the intended decentralization. Relevant for other European trends that align with the Dutch decentralization tendency, policy implications are formulated that focus on the conditions necessary for a successful decentralization of the responsibilities for homelessness services and supported housing.