

Transforming the welfare state: the role of voluntary solidarity initiatives

Trudie Knijn & Marit Hopman

Interdisciplinary Social Science, Utrecht University

Abstract

Recent reforms in the Netherlands are announced as a paradigmatic turn from the post-war and hybrid Dutch welfare state into the so-called “participation society”. Lots of confusion exists on what this “participation society” means or will mean as it actually combines a neo-liberal connotation telling that all citizens are expected to take care of themselves, a communitarian version saying that people should organize mutual help in their own social networks, and a social democratic version explaining that participation of all benefits everyone; social solidarity. Comparable to developments in the United Kingdom and the idea of the “Big Society” (Blond 2010) the Dutch participation society equally emphasizes a smaller government, decentralization of care and welfare services while calling upon solidarity among (groups of) citizens. Social initiative should belong to society unless it becomes clear that it cannot do without the state’s support or interventions (Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2013: 16). At the same time however, as a result of austerity measures, cuts were made on public budgets for care and welfare services. By consequence, the established welfare state provisions have changed in two ways: 1) Publicly subsidized provisions have been decentralized to local levels or outsourced to markets, while applying severe budget cuts at the same time, and 2) volunteers perform previously professional work. These shifts have also led to some concerns among those active in voluntary initiatives.

A main concern is that because of differences in wealth and political orientation between municipalities, this transition will lead to regional and local differences, and even inequalities in care, welfare and wellbeing (e.g., Bredewold et al., 2018). Secondly, local voluntary initiatives are now responsible for addressing social needs from which the state has withdrawn. A related concern is the lack of skills of volunteers who are not fully equipped to address the social needs they are responsible for nor can take responsibility for omissions in the fulfilment of needs. As part of SOLIDUS—a Horizon 2020 research project that aims to analyse intersectional case-studies at the crossroad of categories (age, gender, class, ethnicity and religion) and domains (housing, education, health, employment and civic engagement)—this paper presents findings of research on how voluntary solidarity initiatives relate to social and political expectations regarding their role in resolving particular social needs (poverty, integration and care).