

Bestuur aan banden : lokaal jeugdbeleid in de greep van nationaal beleid

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Summary

Limits to local government

Dutch local youth policy and the impact of national policy

1 Aim of the study and research questions

In Dutch youth policy, several layers of government are involved. National government sets the general framework, the provincial authorities implement the curative youth care services and local government is responsible for developing a more preventive policy. In carrying out their policy tasks, provincial and local government operate within the frameworks set by national government and contribute to the achievement of national policy goals. Local government is expected to fulfil a role as 'régisseur' or director of local policy and to focus primarily on fostering cooperation between sectors such as education, healthcare, police, welfare and childcare services. This role of local government in youth policy, and the way it relates to the policy of national government, forms the basis for this study.

The decision to give local government an autonomous role in youth policy is based on the belief that local government is in a better position to pursue an effective and efficient policy. In addition, they are more accessible to the public, who can therefore be involved more easily in policymaking. This in turn can have a positive impact on the legitimacy and effectiveness of that policy. However, there is a certain tension between the autonomy of local government on the one hand and the role of national government and the dependence of local government on that national government on the other. *What is the relationship between a decentralized youth policy and a simultaneous dependence on national government? Does local government occupy a relatively autonomous position with regard to youth policy, or is it mainly an implementing agent of government policy? What opportunities does local government have for pursuing effective youth policy within the assigned role division? What is the added value of national policy? This study seeks to provide an answer to these questions.*

The study is based on two central questions:

- 1 To what extent does local government prove to be able to establish an effective youth policy?
- 2 How does national government seek to influence local youth policy and what implications does this have for the opportunities of local government to establish an effective youth policy?

The study was carried out in 72 municipalities.

Is local government able to pursue an effective youth policy? This question is answered in two ways. First the results of local youth policy are examined; this is followed by an exploration of a number of conditions that are necessary for and facilitate effective policy.

Results of local youth policy

The study looks at three aspects of the results of local youth policy:

- 1 The trend in output and outcome indicators over time;
- 2 The intersubjective assessment of stakeholders;
- 3 The views of young people on the youth policy in their municipality.

– Output and outcome indicators

Output and outcome indicators were selected for a number of areas of youth policy. The aim was to gather information for both 1998 and 2001 to determine the developments in each municipality. For the majority of indicators, data are not recorded at central level, and therefore had to be obtained from local government. However, during the study it became obvious that only a very limited number of municipalities possesses data for both years. The study was therefore restricted to five indicators for which data were available from central sources for the two years in question. For four of these indicators, the changes between 1998 and 2001 in each municipality were generally small, and no correlations were found between the various policy characteristics and the development in the scores at municipal level. This may be connected with the relatively short period in which the policy was able to have an impact.

– Intersubjective assessment by stakeholders

Ten representatives of organisations that are typically involved in youth policy and the municipal official with responsibility for youth policy were interviewed about the results of the youth policy and the degree to which its objectives were being achieved. Both types of actors assessed the results of the policy as relatively poor, just around the mark. Moreover, they were often sceptical regarding the achievement of objectives: many actors think it highly likely that the objectives are being achieved only partially or too late. The actors involved in the policy are therefore fairly pessimistic regarding the effectiveness of local youth policy. It was noted that the views were somewhat more positive in municipalities that take on an active steering role in their youth policy.

– Young people on youth policy in their municipality

Young people in nine municipalities were interviewed about the local youth policy. In general, their opinions were critical. A very large majority feel that the municipality takes no account of their wishes and is inactive with regard to issues that they favour important, such as leisure facilities and safety.

– *Conclusion: scepticism regarding results and achievement of objectives*

Although the conclusions regarding the results of youth policy are not based on objective output or outcome data, it is clear that the actors involved, including young persons themselves, are very reticent on the results of youth policy. According to these stakeholders, local youth policy can generally not be considered as effective.

Conditions for effective local youth policy

This study also seeks to determine the effectiveness of local youth policy by examining whether the policy meets a number of necessary and facilitating conditions for effectiveness. These conditions are derived from the arguments used to support autonomy for local government in carrying out policy tasks:

- 1 *Integrated policy approach.* Social issues, especially those concerning young people, often demand an approach involving several policy sectors. Liaison and coordination are then needed in order to achieve an effective policy. Local government plays a key role here;
- 2 *Customisation.* Policy is more effective if it is geared to the specific case and to the local situation, problems and needs;
- 3 *Adaptability.* The effectiveness of the policy is improved if implementers are able to respond timely and adequately to changes in the (social) circumstances under which policy goals have to be achieved;
- 4 *Accessibility of local administration.* Opportunities for citizens and civil-society organisations to influence policy help create a more responsive and therefore more customized and thus effective policy.

– *Integrated policy approach*

An answer was sought in several ways to the question whether there is an integrated policy approach. First the substantive scope of youth policy was examined. The average number of themes covered by youth policy was just under six out of a total of eight possible themes in 2001, compared with 4.5 in 1998. From the perspective of an integrated policy approach, this can be regarded as a positive development. There is also evidence of an integrated policy approach in the many networks that exist around local youth policy, in which various actors from different sectors generally participate. Many municipalities thus do not approach youth policy from the perspective of a single policy sector.

A policy vision is an important instrument in steering networks. It can promote policy integration by creating cohesion, and from this basis it gives direction to the actions of policy actors. Most municipalities have a vision, which is generally perceived by the organisations involved as giving direction to their actions. Policy vision is also a key steering instrument for creating consensus. Consensus between local government and community-based organisations means there is less chance of deviations from the formulated policy. There is a positive correlation between how actively local government steers policy and the policy network on the one hand, and

the opinions on that policy and its results on the other. Nevertheless, most organisations regard the steering by local government in terms of content as inadequate.

Internal coordination and cooperation are also important for an integrated policy approach. The cooperation between politicians and officials is generally limited, despite the presence of a coordinating alderman. In addition, youth policy is often coordinated at the level of council officials, but cooperation between officials is by no means the norm in most municipalities. Many council officials also hold the view that relevant local government departments pay little attention to youth policy.

The coordination between local youth policy and (provincially administered) curative youth care services deserves specific attention. Youth care services supplement general youth facilities. If these general facilities prove inadequate to tackle specific problems of young people, they are referred to the youth care services. In 1998 the coordination between local policy and the youth care services proved to be problematic in many municipalities. In 2001 in most municipalities there was no joint vision shared by local government and youth care services on how local youth facilities and the youth care services could cooperate most effectively.

In summary, the degree of internal coordination and cooperation in most municipalities is limited, while the policy is in most cases broad in terms of its content. The network structures around youth policy are large and complex in many municipalities. The majority of municipalities have a policy vision which gives direction to the cooperation with local organisations, but those organisations are reticent on the content-based steering of the policy. The coordination with provincial youth welfare services is problematic in many municipalities.

– Customisation

Although there are some differences between municipalities as regards the content of their youth policy, their main characteristics are rather similar. The same applies for the age groups that are targeted by the policy. The main differences between municipalities relate to the degree of policy development and the extent to which young people are involved in that process. In terms of content, more and less urbanised municipalities differ in their degree of attention for 'risk groups'. The strongly urbanised municipalities undertake more than the less urbanised localities in this regard, probably because of the relatively large group of problematic and/or at-risk young people in these municipalities. The policy choices made by local government also appear to depend in part on the ambitions and intentions of national government. We shall return to this later in this summary.

In order to tailor policy to specific local circumstances, information on those circumstances is needed. As mentioned with regard to output and outcome data, in many municipalities only limited statistical information is available. Other sources

are therefore important, such as actors working with young people and young persons themselves. Involving young people in the policy is high on the agenda of local government. The extensive networks that are formed around that policy guarantee the involvement of local organisations in the development of youth policy; only one in seven municipalities does not have such a network. The other municipalities have three or four networks on average. In two-thirds of these municipalities there is at least one network that is involved in policy formulation. The generally broad composition of the networks means that these municipalities have access to diverse information. In roughly half of all municipalities no networks are involved in the formation of policy, and information in these municipalities has to be gathered in a different way. If local government has developed a policy view – which is the case in around 70% of municipalities – local organisations are almost always involved in its development. Local government thus at least attempts to develop their youth policy interactively. This does not however mean that the information is necessarily used in an adequate manner.

Organisations and council officials were asked for their opinions on the extent to which customisation is achieved. Of all the aspects on which local organisations were asked to express a view, this aspect was evaluated most positively, or perhaps more accurately, least negatively: the average score comes barely up to the mark. Youth policy officials are also relatively positive in their opinions on the achievement of customisation.

To summarise, it is difficult to say whether local government achieves customisation. They appear to make reasonable efforts to develop youth policy interactively by gathering information from both local organisations and young people. However, young people themselves are not impressed by the responsiveness of local government. Local organisations, by contrast, especially those that are involved in policy formulation, generally give local government the benefit of the doubt on this point. The policy choices by local government do however appear to be partly influenced by the agenda of national government.

– Adaptability

A degree of freedom in the implementation of policy is important for an adequate response to changing circumstances. Many organisations report that they have a (reasonably) high degree of freedom in implementing the policy. This does however not mean that they can simply go their own way. In most cases agreements have been made on what is expected from those implementing the policy. Evidently these are often agreements about what should be achieved, rather than how this should be done, and in this sense policy implementers are given the freedom they need. Nonetheless, in 40% of cases it is unclear or insufficiently clear to the policy implementing body what local government expects. This puts the achievement of policy goals in jeopardy.

The lack of interim evaluations is also not helpful here. A majority of organisations report that these do not take place. Fairly little attention is paid to the progress of policy implementation. To some extent this increases the policy freedom of organisations, but on the other hand there are few incentives for them to critically review their own policy and to make adjustments where necessary.

The inefficient and excessive network formation does also not contribute to the adaptive power of actors. In most municipalities a large number of actors are involved in networks, but the network structure is often less than clear-cut. The division of tasks between different networks is not always clear, nor is the position occupied by networks in the policy process. As a result, some organisations participate in several networks. Although organisations that are involved in strategic policy networks report that these generally function well, they also relatively frequently report that they are rather unproductive. Organisations are therefore critical in their judgment of the coordination and cooperation between local organisations and the steering of policy by the municipality. There appears to be a degree of tension between the desire for an integrated policy and the ability to develop and pursue an effective policy. The breadth of the policy domain, the many actors involved and the desire for a cohesive approach hinder the ability to act with adaptive power.

– Accessibility

Local government attaches a great deal of importance to involving young people in the development of policy, but this is not translated into a sense of genuine involvement among young people. In each of the nine municipalities where young people were interviewed, a majority (sometimes a very large majority) reports that local government takes insufficient account of their wishes and problems. Moreover, few young people participate in the formation of youth policy, also in comparison with the participation rate of adults. It also has to be concluded that large parts of youth policy remain obscure for most young people. Young people are mainly interested in sharing ideas on issues that relate to leisure time and safety, and are less interested in the entire breadth of youth policy. Moreover, young people want to be represented above all by young people who are already actively participating in politics.

– Conditions for effective policy: conclusions

In most municipalities, youth policy meets the conditions for effective policy only to a limited extent. When it comes to customisation, our conclusion is cautious. Although local government does a great deal to gather local information, there is certain policy uniformity across the different municipalities. A good deal of effort is also invested in creating an integrated policy, but the effects are unclear. Several factors can hinder effective action, including the integrated implementation of policy. Finally, young people are involved in the development of policy to only a limited extent. It is therefore not surprising that there is a degree of scepticism regarding the results of youth policy.

Does local youth policy then actually matter? The answer is positive. An active steering role of local government, expressed in the development of policy, network formation, a policy vision and consensus between local government and local organisations, correlates positively with the views of local officials and local organisations on the results of local youth policy. Although the influence is limited, it does make a difference.

3 National policy and its influence on local youth policy

Is there a correlation between the findings on local youth policy and the attitude of national government? Does that attitude influence the ability of local government to pursue an effective youth policy? In order to answer these questions, national policy in the period 1998-2001 was studied. An assessment framework was developed for this. The starting point is that a national policy should support the position of local government as the key actor (director) in a complex local policy arena. To the extent that national government gives direction to local youth policy, this should be limited to the main lines of policy, with maximum policy freedom being left to local government and other local actors for customisation.

Objectives of national policy

A relatively high proportion of national government objectives are formulated at output or outcome level. These policy objectives in principle don't affect the freedom of action of local actors. Outcome objectives are often accompanied by output objectives. National government thus fulfils its role of setting frameworks not only by demanding local actors to realize social changes, but also by requiring actual policy achievements. Throughput objectives, which relate to the policy process, almost all concern the municipal role as a director. Since these objectives are generally expected to be achieved through communicative and therefore non-compulsory policy instruments, this does not present a problem for the policy freedom of local actors.

National instruments and customisation

Far and away the majority of national policy instruments increase or have no effect on the ability of local actors to deliver customisation. Economic policy instruments (incentives) in particular tend to increase the freedom of action of local actors. In most cases use of these incentives is not compulsory and, within the set frameworks, most of these incentives leave scope for customisation.

National instruments and an integrated and effective policy approach

Many economic policy instruments, and to a lesser extent legal instruments (regulations) limit the local opportunities for an integrated and adaptable local policy, usually because of the highly regulatory nature of such instruments. In addition to substantive and financial accountability requirements, requirements are often set

regarding the way in which the local policy process must be organised. Further, a considerable number of so-called indirect instruments are focused on actors other than local government. Changes in the functional frameworks within which these other actors operate can complicate the steering task of local government. At the same time, these indirect instruments often strengthen the position of those other actors, increasing their autonomy. Indirect instruments thus have a double-edged effect: bad for integration, good for the adaptive power.

Furthermore, it is plausible that the 'export of ministerial compartmentalisation' complicates the municipal steering role and therefore has a negative impact on the ability of local government to pursue an integrated policy. Differences in the deployment of policy instruments between the various ministries involved increase the variety of administrative regimes within which local actors have to make their contribution to youth policy.

The ability to pursue an integrated and adaptable policy is strengthened by communicative policy instruments (information). Local actors can use these instruments without obligation, and they fit in perfectly with the supporting role of national government. The local youth policy project by the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG), which provided intensive support for the steering role of local government, is a good example.

National policy overall

The amount of national policy produced between 1998 and 2001 is extensive, especially in the fields of education, childcare and safety. Changes in childcare regulations followed each other rapidly. The number of financial incentives was so large that local administrators must have had difficulty seeing the wood for the trees. Communicative policy instruments were used intensively. There are some grounds for asking to what extent the sheer volume of national policy with which municipalities were expected to 'do something' posed a threat to the integration and adaptability of local youth policy. However, two further comments can be made on the large extent of national policy.

In the first place, much of this policy was not directed at all municipalities. In the main, youth policy designed to address problems contains instruments focusing specifically on municipalities where those problems are thought to be relatively widespread. These mostly larger municipalities are confronted with a considerable volume of national policy.

Secondly, there is the *semblance of policy*. Whole rafts of policy measures are summed up in policy memoranda and policy papers, creating the impression that this is 'new' policy. On closer examination, this proves not always to be the case. In fact, it is sometimes a matter of the repackaging or rearranging of existing policy in

new policy programmes, creating the impression of a plethora of policy initiatives. Another manifestation of this semblance of policy is less common: presenting policy measures as bigger than they are in reality. Typical examples of this are experiments in a very limited number of municipalities, which are sometimes presented in policy memoranda as if they are policy programmes that are being deployed on a large scale. Finally, the *new-style administrative agreements* can be mentioned in this connection. These are often portrayed as important policy instruments in youth policy, as examples of initiatives in which the various layers of government commit themselves to joint agreements. While it is true that these agreements fit in with the new steering philosophy of 'governance' and do influence local policy, they are in no way binding for local government, contrary to the impression that is often created.

– Conclusion: *double-edged national policy*

National policy is double-edged. On the one hand national government shows an awareness of its role in setting the frameworks for local youth policy. It leaves scope to local actors and, mainly through economic policy instruments, seeks to increase the local capacity for custom solutions. The government also deploys a considerable number of communicative policy instruments to strengthen the steering role of local government and to increase the autonomy of the individual actors. On the other hand, many instruments are highly regulatory in their effect, and consequently tend to limit the local ability to pursue an integrated and adaptable policy. Moreover, the strengthening of the functional frameworks within which some actors operate makes it more difficult for local government to steer in what is already a complex administrative setting. Finally, it is likely that the large amount of national policy with its many accountability rules and process requirements limits local government in formulating an integrated and adaptable policy.

4 *Consequences of national policy for the effectiveness of local youth policy*

In the previous section, we focused on the presumed effect of national policy on local youth policy. What can be said about the real influence of national policy on local policy? Is the assumed double-edged action of national policy reflected in local policy?

Youth policy on the agenda of local government

The idea of an integrated youth policy under the control of local government really began to take off from the moment that national government explicitly began pursuing policy to this end. The number of municipalities with a specific youth policy has accordingly increased sharply in the last decade. It is highly plausible that national government initiatives have contributed to this.

Determination of policy content by national government

National policy explicitly aims to influence the content of local youth policy. The

fact that the more urbanised municipalities focus more on youth problems than less urbanised municipalities can be explained partly by the focus of national policy on addressing problems. The impact of national policy instruments can also be observed from another perspective. The strong financial incentives offered to all municipalities in the area of childcare probably explain the fact that this is the most frequently cited priority of local youth policy. Other national incentives and regulations are also high on the agenda of local government. The fact that only a small number of municipalities devote attention to themes such as employment and income and youth housing is probably due to the fact that there is little national policy focusing on these themes. In conclusion, it is very likely that national policy heavily influences the content of the local youth policy agenda. In this regard, national government succeeds in its frame-setting role.

National limits on steering role of local government

The fact that many municipalities have difficulty in achieving an integrated and adaptable youth policy can be explained from the extent and nature of national policy, which has a limiting effect on the ability of local government to steer local policy. Local policy is characterised by large, complex network structures, local organisations regard the steering by local government as generally inadequate, and the coordination of policy within local government itself turns out to be difficult. The constraining influence of national policy on local government steering is also reflected in the views of organisations involved in youth policy. They point to a number of factors that lie outside local government as being rather constraining in comparison with other factors: the inadequate capacity of youth care centres, the different methods of funding organisations and compartmentalisation at national government level. Youth policy officials within local government broadly share these views. The perception that barriers between national government departments impede local policy reinforces the idea of the export of ministerial compartmentalisation. This confronts local government with coordination and integration problems for which national government offers no solution - the 'decentralization trap'. The administrative complexity surrounding local youth policy results among other things from the different ways of funding organisations. Some of these are organisations in which local government has no say and which are governed within a functionally organized, sectoral framework. This pinch point reflects the tensions that exist between integral, territorially organized administration and functionally organized administration.

Conclusion: local administration constrained

It is more than plausible that national policy affects local youth policy rather strongly. It has helped ensure that many municipalities have developed a specific youth policy. In addition, national policy influences the substantive policy agenda of local government, while at the same time it frustrates local policy processes. A further (unintended) effect of national policy is that the local policy arena is greatly

interfered with the fact that local actors are steered along both territorial and functional lines. While local government has been attributed a key position in youth policy, national policy at the same time undermines the local ability to pursue an effective youth policy.

5 *The administrative role division in youth policy*

While it is true that the administrative role division that is advocated by national government involves a degree of interweaving of the policy of the various layers of government, this interweaving is in theory limited. National government, with the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport playing the coordinating role, sets the frameworks, and within those frameworks local government is given scope to develop its own policy, supported by national government. Has the advocated role division actually taken shape empirically? Is national policy organised in such a way that local government really enjoys a relatively autonomous position, or does it function mainly as a tool of national government? And to what extent is policy at the two levels of government interwoven?

It would be an exaggeration to suggest that local government is treated merely as implementing agent of national policy; its formal position is too independent for this. Nonetheless, this independence is greatly undermined by national government policy, which is greatly concerned - and in great detail - with the implementation of policy. This is promulgated in an overwhelming amount of policy measures that is moreover inadequately coordinated. National government is stretching its role of setting the frameworks, and as a result the advocated administrative role division, with its fairly clear formal division of responsibilities, is failing to materialise to any substantial degree. The relationship between the two layers of government can therefore be characterised as highly interwoven. Responsibilities are not clearly defined and there are strong mutual dependencies. The resulting complexity is further increased by differences in the degree to which responsibilities are interwoven in the various youth policy domains.

Two scenarios to reduce complexity

Broadly speaking, two scenarios can be imagined to reduce the complexity surrounding youth policy. In the first scenario, the emphasis is on strengthening policy integration. Local government is responsible for an integrated youth policy; in order to reinforce their capacity to steer and control policy, national government remains in the background as much as possible. Its involvement is limited to defining the areas where local government has to develop policy or provisions, for example via a Youth Agenda. Specific grants from national government are pooled as much as possible and freed from implementation rules, or they are absorbed into the freely disposable municipal funds. Local government is 'horizontally' accountable for its youth policy, i.e. to the local community. Municipalities are compared with each

other by monitoring policy developments using a limited number of indicators. These indicators measure the social position of young people rather than policy achievements and can be established jointly by local government and national government. National government is accountable if the social results are insufficient all along the line. In addition national government has a supporting role. Taking this first scenario a step further, serious attempts have to be made to reduce the administrative complexity surrounding local youth policy. The tension between territorially and functionally organized administration, which creates problems for local government as the steering actor, should be reduced.

In the second, more pragmatic scenario, the ambitions concerning integrated policy are lowered and youth policy is concentrated on a number of urgent themes. This scenario takes the highly interwoven administrative relations for granted. Local youth policy is limited to a number of key problems concerning young people, such as early school dropout and juvenile delinquency. A solution to these problems is sought by relevant parties, under the control of local government or otherwise. The remaining themes in youth policy are given shape in the traditional policy sectors. The involvement of national government is expressed in the functional frameworks set for these traditional sectors.

It is particularly the importance that is attached to an integrated youth policy that determines the choice between the two scenarios. This study makes clear that in the current administrative relations around youth policy it is difficult to realize an integrated local youth policy.