

New mindsets to innovate activation

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Valorisation Addendum

This thesis was designed in light of the observation that what has often been missing in debates leading to and following the enactment of the 2015 Participation Act, which set out to harmonise a number of laws and increase labour participation, including for groups that face physical or psychological constraints, has been the point of view and the experiences of social assistance recipients. Assumptions have been made regarding their motivation, goals or skills. Subsequently, these assumptions have informed discussions on as well as the final design of the Participation Act. Yet, do these assumptions hold? If not, what does this mean for social assistance recipients – both in relation to the effectiveness of policies to support them to reintegrate into the labour market, and with regard to their well-being? I argue that this thesis has had societal impact not only in terms of the results that were created and disseminated, but also with regard to the process of how knowledge was generated in interaction with citizens and employees at the Social Services Maastricht Heuvelland.

First, this thesis provides valuable insights into how Dutch citizens experience living with a social assistance benefit. The way this thesis was designed puts citizens on centre stage and, in this fashion, deviates from a large part of the literature on the effectiveness of activation policy. Commonly, researchers and policymakers aim to make the impact of an activation policy quantifiable by looking at the number of recipients that leave a social assistance or unemployment scheme within a certain timeframe, and by trying to establish whether the outflow can be attributed to this policy. Yet, there are important dimensions beyond outflow – not only the quality and sustainability of jobs that citizens find, which is another aspect that still deserves further attention – but the well-being of citizens while they receive social assistance benefits. Moreover, this thesis does not only look at the individual citizen, but at how citizens form a society. This thesis provides important impetus to move away from an overly exclusive focus on the individual and his or her responsibility and to reconsider the respective rights and obligations of the citizen and the state. It sensitises policymakers, people working at the frontline, and the society at large to the impact that terminology and policy design can have on people's lives, and advocates for dignity-promoting policies.

Second, the results of this thesis are valuable for the Social Services Maastricht Heuvelland. They obtained detailed insights into how citizens experience living on

social assistance, including in relation to the policy instruments of the Social Services and to their interactions with caseworkers. For example, the satisfaction of social assistance applicants with the intake meeting (the first longer meeting with a caseworker) was explored, as well as their satisfaction with the services in the weeks after the intake. Sharing these results with the management team and caseworkers, and pointing towards leverage points for improvement and consideration, can contribute to improved services for citizens in the future. This is relevant in order to find more effective ways to support reintegration into the labour market and to promote citizens' well-being and capacity to act while they receive benefits.

In this way, the results of the studies were continuously used to provide concrete recommendations for the Social Services office and its employees. One example is the self-affirmative exercise that was developed and can be used by activation workers in intake meetings and potentially other meetings as well. If carefully applied, it has the potential to boost job search behaviour self-efficacy of social assistance recipients, which is an important building block for finding work. Additionally, the self-affirmation sensitises activation workers to the considerable challenges that accompany applying to and living on social assistance benefits not only financially, but also psychologically. Applications beyond the social assistance scheme are conceivable as well, for instance in relation to debt counselling or when working with young people. Another example was the importance of taking into account the complexity of the circumstances of social assistance recipients, who often have to juggle many tasks in addition to finding work. Acknowledging the mental effort that this involves, and comparing it to their own experience of stressful situations, can assist caseworkers in developing a more compassionate approach. These results could be incorporated explicitly into trainings for caseworkers. In fact, such training has to a large extent already been developed in the form of a workshop that was conducted with caseworkers to train them for the field experiment. The workshop introduced the results of the studies on how citizens experience living on social assistance in order to explain the rationale of the self-affirmation exercise. Based on the detailed protocol that was developed for the experiment, caseworkers could practice the use of this exercise in small groups during the workshop. The workshop materials could also be easily adapted to be included in other training or to form the basis for a day-long workshop that provides more room for reflection, for a toolbox of evidence-based practice, or as a basis for working with different target groups.

A further angle was added by providing insights into the role of caseworkers in the activation process that, contrary to other professions, is still being developed.

On top of broader discussions at a national level (for instance led by the Dutch knowledge institute on social issues, Movisie (e.g. Spierts & van Rest, 2017), or the association of Dutch caseworkers, BvK (e.g. Polstra & Bakker, 2017)), Social Services Maastricht Heuvelland has gone through several transformations over the past years. Currently, a large project is underway that aims to put citizens at the heart of its work. According to the Social Services office's vision for the future, this requires, along with organisational changes, changes in caseworkers' attitude, behaviour and culture (Sociale Zaken Maastricht Heuvelland, 2018). This thesis thereby responded to current needs and questions of the Social Services office in several ways. It set the work of caseworkers in relation to how citizens experience activation policy and how it can affect citizens' well-being and agency; it developed a self-affirmative instrument adapted to the local context that could also be used for facilitating reflection processes on the part of caseworkers; and it provided an initial quantification of the relative importance of different factors on caseworkers' decision-making. Concretely, the Social Services office were recommended to use these results to initiate discussions among activation workers, for example during a workshop, regarding their role understanding in the context of the demands that are put on them by the written law, the organisational context (such as budget considerations and internal targets), and their own convictions.

Third, an important element was that this thesis did not only produce results for the Social Services, but with them. The early involvement of the Social Services office during all stages of the research not only facilitated but also made these studies possible in the first place. The direct interactions with employees, in the form of formal and informal talks and meetings, presentation of results and workshops, have also created awareness among both the management and activation workers of how social assistance recipients experience activation policies and what this means for policy design and implementation. The development of the self-affirmative exercise in cooperation with the Social Services office guaranteed that it fitted current work processes and consequently could be directly implemented without further adjustments. Ample attention was given to create support at the working level – by convincing activation workers about the potential benefits – in addition to the support from the senior level of the organisation, i.e. the management. Equally, the content of the factorial survey experiment was developed in close collaboration with activation workers, quality assurance employees and team managers, in order to reflect their day-to-day decision-making as closely as possible.

Fourth, an objective of all studies was to think about the conditions under which

different policy instruments worked or did not work. By analysing the effects of different types of activation instruments, and by taking into account heterogeneous responses of citizens, it is possible to reflect to what extent these results would carry over to other contexts. This could include, for instance, different types of meetings, other municipalities, or various target groups. External validity, that is, the extent to which the results of a study are valid beyond the specific study context, is a particular concern for policymakers, who need to understand and decide whether these results have implications for their own organisation. In the Dutch reintegration context, municipalities are asked to uniformly implement a number of obligations for citizens, such as work and reintegration obligations, or a *quid pro quo* requirement as applicable. Beyond that, however, municipalities have important leeway with regard to the reintegration activities that they offer. It is thus crucial to discuss the effects of specific instruments, as undertaken in this study, so that policymakers or frontline workers in other municipalities can reflect on their relevance and feasibility in their own organisation. Moreover, the results are relevant beyond the borders of the Netherlands, as activation policies have gained particular prominence in most countries of the Organisation for Economic Development and Co-operation (OECD) since the mid-1990s. Beyond that, the results may also speak to developing and emerging countries, where interest in combining anti-poverty policies with supporting individuals in finding more sustainable income sources has increased as well (Malo, 2018). As there has recently also been more attention paid to the experience of shame and stigma in the context of anti-poverty programmes, as well as their potential to increase dignity, this thesis provides interesting leverage points to consider for both research and policymaking in these contexts (Roelen, 2017).

At all stages of the thesis, results were disseminated widely with different audiences and in appropriate formats. For example, results were shared with study participants and Social Services Maastricht Heuvelland in the form of policy briefs and reports, as well as in the form of presentations to the management team of Social Services Maastricht Heuvelland. In addition, I plan to further explore the extent to which results can be shared more widely with networks of activation workers and managers in the Netherlands. On the academic side, I have presented papers at international conferences, including at the International Conference on Welfare Conditionality (2018), the Human Development and Capability Association Annual Conference (2016) and the Association for Public Policy Analysis & Management International Conference (2016). Furthermore, I plan to publish the studies in international, peer-reviewed journals. Finally, the experimental data will be shared with the research community to ensure that results can be replicated.

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