



# Policy Brief

NUMBER 2, 2016

## Overview

The Participation Act, introduced in the Netherlands in 2015, puts into practice the idea that every individual has to make a contribution in a participatory society. The Act includes aspects of income support, compulsory activities in return for benefits, and labour market reintegration. Drawing on 45 interviews, we provide insights into interactions between the individual financial and social situation, an individual's position in society, and reintegration activities. The narratives show the fundamental need for individual freedom and societal meaning, recognition, and appreciation, as well as the complex circumstances in which social assistance recipients make decisions. Conflicts between those needs and the Act lead to the question of how personal and societal objectives can be reconciled.

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## *Limits of Freedom? Experiences with the Participation Act*

UP UNTIL NOW, THERE HAS BEEN RELATIVELY LITTLE RESEARCH ON THE motives of social assistance recipients and the crucial factors influencing their choice – or the extent to which there is a choice – between participation and non-participation, specifically within the scope of the Participation Act. Our research intends to fill this gap: First, what economic, psychological and contextual factors influence reintegration-related decision-making of social assistance recipients? Second, how do individuals experience the reintegration activities of the Social Services department? A better understanding of the underlying motives and factors can contribute to an enhanced analysis of individuals' life situations and form the basis for their effective support in view of societal expectations and social policies. A related question is how reintegration activities can be refined by taking into account insights on the behaviour of recipients and their reactions to different incentives and interactions with the Social Services department.

## Research method

Between October 2015 and May 2016, we conducted 45 semi-structured interviews with social assistance recipients in Maastricht-Heuvelland. A qualitative approach allowed us to gain detailed insights into recipients' authentic experiences with living on social assistance, the meaning of work, job search activities, and their experiences with the reintegration activities of the Social Services department. The objective was to gain a nuanced understanding of peoples' experiences from their own perspective and to identify links between different factors such as finances, social life, and the meaning of work and societal participation.

## Main findings

The onset of a period of social assistance receipt was typically connected to one or more far-reaching life events that entailed some sort of loss – loss of job or enterprise, of partner or good health, or even of home country in the case of refugees. These losses and the subsequent need for social assistance led to profound, painful changes in daily lives, which were often experienced as a reduction in personal opportunities, autonomy and freedom or intrusion in one's private life.



### *Experiences with living on social assistance*

Nearly all respondents reported that the benefits were sufficient to provide for all basic necessities such as rent or food, yet did not cover any extras or unexpected expenses, let alone savings. The extent to which individuals managed to cope well with limited resources was often related to the financial space people had enjoyed in the past. Likewise, we observed a large range of feelings and changes (or no changes) in the social life related to social assistance receipt. In general, the question was to what extent people maintained a feeling of societal belonging.

In view of major differences in personal experiences, it is sensible to investigate links between the individual financial and social situation, someone's place in society, and re-integration activities. Some respondents immediately reported on the consequences of constrained financial resources on their social interactions and named a range of social activities that they could no longer engage in. These feelings were described as awful experiences and a gradual process towards social isolation. At the same time, others noted no changes in their social networks due to social assistance receipt or even reported enlarged social networks – either because they had more time to engage with others or because they participated in volunteer or participation activities.

Several respondents also established the instrumental link between eroding networks and efforts to reintegrate into the labour market in the form of finding a job or setting up a new business. Some interviewees who had previously been self-employed explained how rapidly

their professional networks fell apart after they had to stop their activities. Hence, in addition to limited financial resources, the exclusion from professional networks further limited their entrepreneurial ambitions.

Feelings of exclusion from society also emerged for individuals based on their employment status. Some respondents referred to the fact that being out of the labour force was synonymous with not being part of society. For others, the role of work as division between different parts of society became visible when individuals spoke about their participation placement or volunteer work as providing a feeling of societal belonging, usefulness and contributing to a collective purpose. Finally, several respondents told about current or past feelings of shame or negative feelings about having to depend on the state. Others had been confronted with other people's views on social assistance recipients as free-riders or parasites who were lazy and simply chose not to work.

### *Meaning of work*

The meaning of work comprises aspects beyond financial motives and, as a result, independence. Respondents valued work because of the social contacts that this enabled. People emphasised some sort of collective purpose they sought, such as helping other people, being of significance for others and making a societal contribution. Furthermore, interviewees reported on the importance of being active and structuring their day, getting satisfaction and meaning from work and being valued for it.

In addition to those functions of work that have been well established in prior research (1), our

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respondents stressed two more aspects that contributed to the value of work for them. Work had to be right for oneself in terms of being appropriate regarding previous work experience and education, own interests and preferences, current physical or psychological health, or caring responsibilities. Furthermore, people were looking for challenges in their work and wanted to keep on learning and developing themselves in order to create future perspectives.

#### *Job search activities*

The most common channel to look for job vacancies was on the internet (jobsites or homepages of possible employers). In addition, people used their personal or professional networks. Some interviewees were enrolled at temporary employment agencies; others passed by potential employers to ask about vacancies or to apply. Approximately half the respondents used a mix of different channels.

The intensity of job search activities varied in accordance with largely two factors. On the one hand, respondents set their activities in relation to their individual circumstances, for instance when care responsibilities rendered it impossible to dedicate major time slots to job search activities. On the other hand, interviewees who had already received social assistance for an extended period described a process of declining motivation and intensity of activities as time passed by. They spoke about frustration and disappointments as a result of constant rejections as well as an emerging sense of hopelessness.

#### *Obstacles in the job search process*

Respondents indicated four

factors that constrained job search from their point of view. Health was named most frequently, including both physical and psychological problems. The second factor was care for relatives. Third, lack of different types of qualifications was experienced as limiting, for instance in terms of previous education, diplomas, drivers' licences, or work experience. For individuals with a foreign background, lack of a Dutch diploma and/or work experience in the Netherlands or missing Dutch language skills were sometimes problematic. In some cases, respondents had to deal with several of these obstacles simultaneously.

Nearly all respondents who were 44 years or older identified their age as one of the most important constraint in their job search process. Equally, interviewees frequently described a lack of appropriate jobs in the labour market; a constraint that applied to highly educated individuals, but was also felt by people with lower levels of educational attainment. In summary, there was a general very low outcome expectancy with regard to reintegration.

#### *Experiences with volunteer work and participation placements*

Many aspects that people valued beyond financial motives were also created in the context of volunteer work or participation placements: being in contact with others, contributing to a societal purpose, having a meaning for and being valued by other people, being active and structuring one's day, and keeping on learning and developing. Yet, this was only true under the condition that the activity matched individuals' interests and experiences, took into account individual constraints, and enabled the application of existing or the

#### *Acknowledgements*

We would like to thank all participants in our interviews who shared their experiences openly and honestly with us.

We would also like to thank the employees of the neighbourhood centres (De Boeckel, Malberg, Mariaberg, and Wittevrouwenveld) where we conducted many interviews as well as employees of the Social Services Maastricht-Heuvelland for their cooperation, administrative and financial support and granting access to anonymised administrative data.

Finally, we thank Fred Zijlstra and Eleonora Nillesen for their valuable input.



development of new skills.

Hence, many respondents were satisfied with their volunteer activities or participation placements which many of them had actively shaped or sought by themselves. However, our interviews also confirmed prior research (2) that volunteer activities can jeopardise the objective of ultimately reintegrating into regular employment. Finally, conflicts emerged if individuals felt that volunteers were exploited or misused, for instance to replace regular work – which has to be understood in relation to the perception of no personal leeway for recipients in view of obligations and potential sanctions.

#### *Obligations and sanctions*

Respondents' stories revealed three broad topics with regard to obligations. First, obligations had to be attainable and sensible from the point of view of the recipient. One example is the obligation to apply for jobs. The experience of frequent rejections led many respondents to conclude that this obligation had to be brought in line with both the individual and the labour market situation. Second, obligations and related controls could conflict with feelings of privacy and freedom. Third, some stories revealed that stress or panicking could be the result of obligations.

In general, interviewees accepted the fact that sanctions could be imposed in cases of non-compliance. Yet, participants clearly specified that sanctions had to take into account personal circumstances, thus imperatively had to have a human dimension. Finally, the manner in which sanctions were communicated was crucial, whereby a threatening tone in place of a motivational tone was perceived highly critically.

#### *Relationship with caseworkers*

Relationships with employees of the Social Services department, for instance the contact person or so-called participation coach, were frequently central for participants and represented a crucial point of reference for interactions with the Social Services. We identified three dimensions that contributed to a positive experience. First, recipients want to be perceived as individuals with a unique past, present, and future, taking into account their interests, skills, and possibly operating constraints.

The second aspect is recognition and understanding for an individual in relation to his or her social context, for instance awareness for care responsibilities that have to be fulfilled. Third, communication played a central role. Respondents valued discussions on an equal footing and transparency as well as availability of the contact person and support or advice if needed. In contrast, negative interactions with caseworkers were characterised by a lack of one or more of the above mentioned factors.

#### *Respondents' proposed changes*

A range of policy changes were suggested by our respondents. The first topic was the creation of opportunities and perspectives with regard to training, education, or other ways of keeping on learning and developing, also in the context of volunteer activities. Others wished for more support when setting up an enterprise, particularly in the initial phase. Equally important was the relationship and the approach of employees of the Social Services department. Interviewees mentioned

#### Footnotes

1. See Jahoda, Lazarsfeld, and Zeisel (1971) and Jahoda (1981) as well as for instance Kampen (2014) in the Netherlands and Underlid (2012) in Norway.
2. Kampen (2014).
3. Chase & Walker (2014).
4. Underlid (2005, 2007, 2012).
5. Marttila, Whitehead, Canvin, & Burström (2010).

communication and social skills that they felt were partly missing, such as enhanced availability, no individual blaming, judging in advance, or belittling, and emphasised the importance of empathy and respect for the value of each individual.

### *Freedom*

Freedom or rather limits of freedom is a central theme in many narratives. In principle, this refers to the freedom to be able to fully participate in society. This can

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Some people required more information by the Social Services department. This included the possibility of other or more reintegration activities. The idea of a regular newsletter was put forward in order to stay informed. Besides, not everybody was sure whether or not he or she already received all the support that was possible by different departments or authorities. A few respondents wondered to what extent the municipality was in touch with employers in the region and whether these contacts could be used more specifically in order to find or create regular employment for social assistance recipients. Another suggestion was to financially reward work within the scope of a participation placement.

### Further implications

Each story showed an individual configuration of circumstances, interactions, and motivations. Nonetheless, two broad topics emerged that we can link back to national and international research and that allow us to identify further points of departure for a better practice.

be linked to the available financial resources to maintain meaningful social activities, but also to potential societal gaps that emerge from being ‘in’ or ‘out’ of employment. Freedom pertains furthermore to the real opportunities to do the type of work that one values and enjoys. The relationship with the contact person is crucial in this respect; it is possible to create situations of trust and motivation and to discuss opportunities and perspectives together within the scope of these interactions.

The importance of freedom is also illustrated by national and international studies on the experiences of social assistance recipients. Qualitative research for instance in the United Kingdom (3), Norway (4) or Sweden (5) equally showed that social assistance receipt could lead to subjective feelings of a reduced personal scope of opportunities. In addition to reduced opportunities on the individual level, recipients reported in these and other studies on their experiences with living on social assistance in relation to others. This manifested in feelings of social exclusion and devaluation, stigma and shame (6).



The enhancement of freedoms and opportunities does not only imply the strengthening of individual capacities and skills in order to participate in society and to find a job, but, importantly, also the social context in which someone is embedded, for instance regarding family, the community, and the regional labour market.

#### *Complex circumstances and multiple problems*

A second theme in which many narratives coincided was the complexity of individual circumstances. This refers to accumulating problems concerning physical or psychological health, care responsibilities, housing, difficult financial choices, perceived processes of social isolation, etc. In recent years, international research has increasingly paid attention to the fact that living on a low income does not only imply budgetary constraints, but also impacts on decision-making processes. Having to make ends meet with a low income is understood as a demanding context where people continuously have to engage in difficult decisions whereby small mistakes can have far-reaching consequences (7). These considerable mental efforts lead to 'cognitive load', which can subsequently negatively impact on, inter alia, the ability to acquire and process information, solve problems, keep an overview, plan and prioritise, initiate tasks or regulate emotions (8). Job search is equally a highly complex task that requires cognitive resources in order to establish a goal with regard to reintegration, planning the goal pursuit, maintaining job search activities also in the face of likely setbacks, and finally monitoring and reflecting on these activities to implement adjustments if needed (9).

Hence, the daily challenges of living on social assistance and particular the potential consequences need to be understood (10). This study further confirms that a successful process towards reintegration into the labour market can only start if other problems have been solved. Moreover, one should consistently ask how the complexity of processes or information can be kept to a minimum in order to avoid the creation of additional cognitive load. The context in which decisions are made is crucial and needs to be profoundly considered beforehand.

#### Conclusion

This policy brief is the result of a scientific study that investigates the economic, psychological, and contextual factors of social assistance recipients, and how these factors influence the choice between work, participation, and social assistance within the scope of the Participation Act. The results illustrate the complex links between the financial and social situation on the individual level, the position of an individual in a participatory society and the reintegration activities of the Social Services department. Based on individual experiences and suggestions, we can start the discussion on how reintegration activities can be refined. The present study provides already some concrete suggestions, for instance in terms of the need for more information in different areas (obligations, activities or support through other authorities) or communication between individuals and employees of the Social Services.

Beyond that, the results provide the basis for a more fundamental discussion that puts the individual in the participatory society centre stage. In this study, we see the essential need of humans to be recognised as individuals

#### Footnotes

6. Chase & Walker (2012, 2014), Gubrium & Lødemel (2014), Kampen et al. (2013), Marttila et al. (2010), Underlid (2005).

7. Bertrand, Mullainathan, & Shafir (2004), Gennetian & Shafir (2015).

8. For instance Mani, Mullainathan, Shafir, & Zhao (2013), Shah, Mullainathan, & Shafir (2012), Spears (2011).

9. Van Hooft, Wanberg, & van Hove (2012).

10. Zie Hall, Galvez, & Sederbaum (2014).



with a unique past, present, and future, and the striving for having a meaning and being valued in society. Interactions with Social Services employees can be a decisive factor – both in a positive or a negative way – which emphasises the importance of professionalism, an integral approach and insights into different areas of life. We furthermore see that the concrete implementation of

income support, reintegration activities and thus societal objectives sometimes conflicts with these individual needs. This leads to the critical question of how individual and societal objectives can be reconciled, with particular attention to how these choices are made.

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INSIDE:

## Policy Brief

### *Limits of Freedom? Experiences with the Participation Act*

Analysing the economic, psychological, and contextual factors of social assistance recipients, and how these factors influence the choice between work, participation, and social assistance.

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