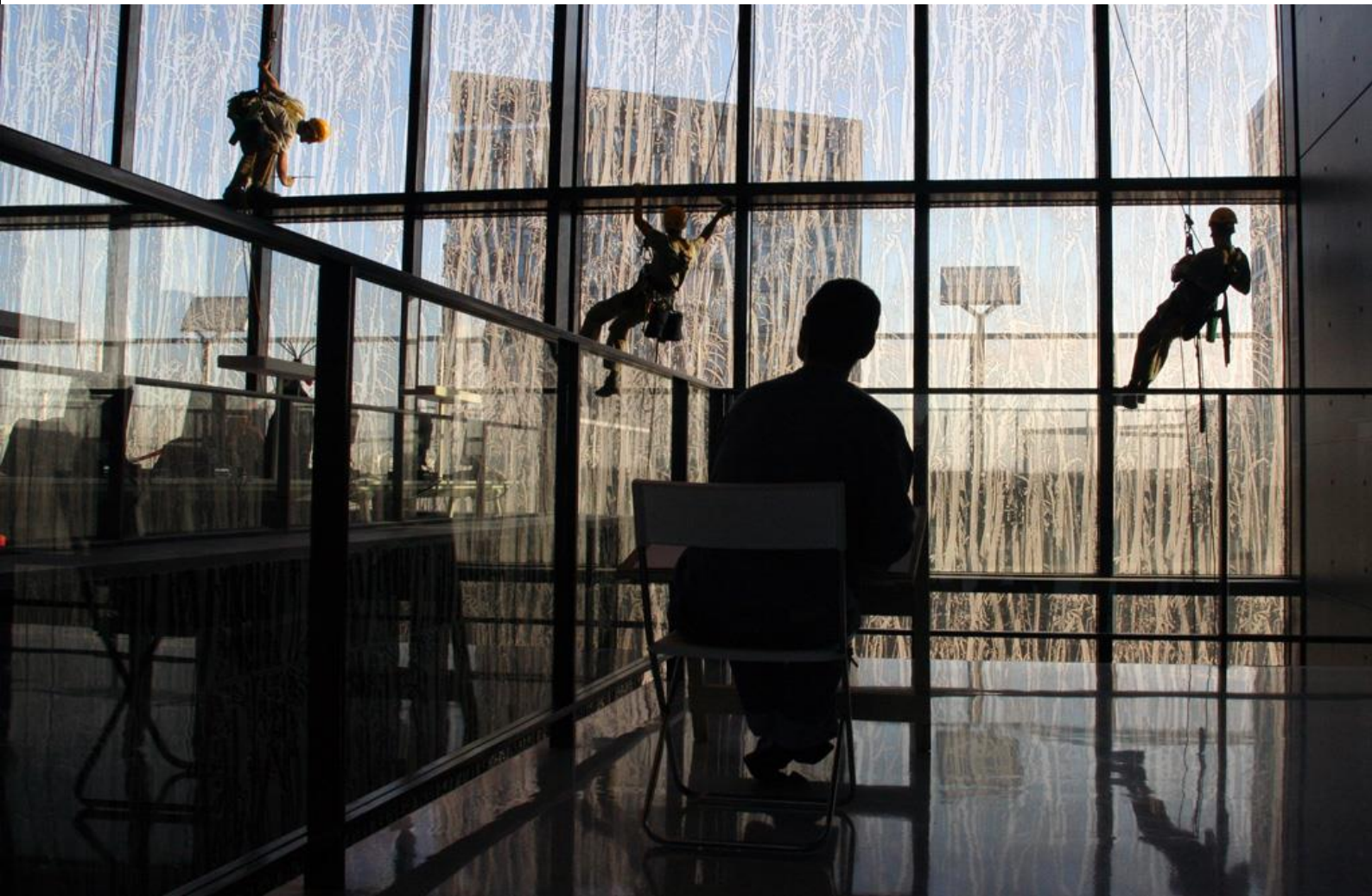


Decentralisation and Local Democracy in the Netherlands

Cooperation between local stakeholders in the development of
the Social Domain Monitor in three middle-large municipalities



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Ruben Keijser, August 2016, Utrecht

Decentralisation and Local Democracy in the Netherlands

Cooperation between local stakeholders in the development of the social domain monitor

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Abstract

The decentralisations in the social domain are a major change in the Dutch welfare state. Because of the nexus of welfare state retrenchment and relatively weak local institutions, concerns about the quality of democratic control have recently surfaced. To enable the overview on their increased responsibilities, many municipalities are currently developing a Social Domain Monitor. This is a periodically updated document that should give stakeholders a comprehensive view of relevant developments in the social domain. The present study analyses how these monitors have been developed in three middle-large municipalities. The object is to gain insight into the goals of the different stakeholders involved in the social domain. Interviews have been held with local politicians, policy makers and members of interest groups. The analysis reveals that in these specific municipalities, the monitor potentially counters some of the concerns associated with local democratic control. Besides that, several challenges are discerned that possibly undermine this value. In conclusion, this article seeks to add nuance to the relation between decentralisation and democracy.

Key terms: decentralisation, local democracy, multiple case study, Social Domain Monitor.

Introduction

One and a half year ago, the decentralisation of long-term care, work and income and youth care from the national to the local government signalled a major change in the Dutch welfare state (see respectively Participation Act: Stb. 2014, 270; Social Support Act: Stb. 2014, 280; Youth Services: Stb. 2014, 105). The three decentralisations within the social domain¹ are intended to lead to the transformation from a welfare state to a “participation society” with increased emphasis on individual responsibility and informal initiatives in the organisation of care and well-being (Dutch national government, 2013). This has to result in more local and individually tailored care; a 20 percent decrease in welfare expenditure by 2017 and a stronger civil society (Cooperation Agency of the Netherlands Municipalities [VNG], 2013; Court of Audit, 2014; Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis [CPB], 2013;).

In contrast to these expected advantages, the decentralisations have led to several concerns about increasing social and economic inequality. Firstly because the changes are pervasive but their

¹ In the Netherlands, the “social domain” consists of “all the organisations, services and arrangements that together support citizens, and increase their wellbeing and social participation.” (CMO Stamm, 2013).

consequences are unknown (CPB, 2015). Secondly because decentralisations almost by definition result in differences between local governments. This is a potential strength if services are tailored to local circumstances, but can also be a weakness because the quality of these services can differ depending on the municipality a citizen lives in (Karré & Paardekooper, 2014). Thirdly, the decentralisations give individual citizens more responsibility and are coupled with budget cuts. Consequently, groups such as the unemployed and the elderly are expected to be disadvantaged (Engbersen, Snel & 't Hart, 2015). Because vulnerable citizens use a relatively high number of public services and generally have a weaker informal care network, any decrease in the level of public support affects these vulnerable groups disproportionately (Grootegoed, 2013; Komter & Knijn, 2004).

The three concerns about rising social and economic inequality have received most attention in the wake of the decentralisations. As such, they have been thoroughly held up to scrutiny elsewhere (e.g. Kampen, Verhoeven, & Verplanke 2013). Besides a major change in the welfare state, the decentralisations are the most important change in local governance since 1945 (Elzinga, 2014). The impact of the decentralisations on the democratic process has only recently begun to attract attention (Schram, Van der Steen, Van Twist, & Van Yperen, 2016). The guiding thread of the concerns is that politicians and civil servants, but also the media, citizens and interest groups lack information and a clear framework to fulfil their new responsibilities. They might not be able to proficiently evaluate the decentralisation process and its outcomes (Van de Bovenkamp & Vollaard, 2015).

Therefore, the focus of the present research will be the consequences the decentralisations have for control of local democracy.

The Social Domain Monitor

There is a growing body of literature that maps the effects of democracy, but empirical research is scarce. Especially any solutions for weak democratic control have received little scholarly attention. This research focuses on one of these solutions. To track the consequences of the decentralisations, many municipalities are currently developing a Social Domain Monitor (hereafter: “monitor”). This is a periodically (often quarterly) updated and often online available document that gathers information about the local social domain.

A monitor contains information such as the number of youth care arrangements, client satisfaction scores and interviews with welfare recipients in one municipality. The VNG has issued a general guideline for ten basic indicators to be included in the monitor (VNG, 2015). Apart from these indicators, municipalities add information on based on the preferences of policy makers, political parties and interest groups. These three groups are often the main stakeholders that develop the monitor. The goal of the monitor is twofold: it is supposed to inform stakeholders about developments in the social domain, and (thereby) to facilitate the control on the democratic process. In the words of the VNG: “progress through transparency” (VNG, 2016, p.1). By showing the success or failure of current policies to lead to these

goals, the monitor potentially facilitates the realisation of the three goals of the decentralisations: organising local and integral care, decreasing welfare expenditure and strengthening civil society. Furthermore, a monitor can facilitate the comparison between municipalities and lower the information barrier for citizens and interest groups.

Research question and article outline

To analyse how the monitor is developed and how it is or can be used to control local democracy, relevant stakeholders have been interviewed. The main question of the research is: how can the monitor be used to inform social policy and democratic decision making after the decentralisations? This question will be answered on the basis of three sub-questions. One: what is or has been the process of the development of the monitor? Two: how can the monitor be used to gain insight in the possible consequences of the decentralisations? Three: how, if at all, do the stakeholders involved (politicians, policy makers, interest groups) want to use the monitor to react to these insights? After the historical background, theoretical framework will be expanded upon. Next, the research method will be detailed. Third, the results will be presented. The article concludes with a summary of the findings, relates these to the theoretical framework and ends with practical implications and the limitations of the study.

Historical background

A brief historical overview is instructive to understand the underlying motives and pitfalls of the decentralisations. Many of the potential negative side-effects of the decentralisations originate from socio-economic developments in previous decades. In the thirty-odd years after the Second World War, Western welfare states expanded into nearly all-encompassing safety nets that protected young and old from want, poverty and dependence (Pierson, 2006). Yet since their economies ground to a halt during the mid-70s, governments have tried to curb their expenses.

In reaction to growing deficits, a programme labelled new public management (NPM) has changed the character of public services significantly (Hood, 1991). Conditions for the entitlement to services have been increased and the generosity of the services themselves has been decreased (Raven, Achterberg, & Van der Veen, 2015). Furthermore, public services and bodies have been privatised and the influence of professionals has decreased in favour of top-down management (Gruening, 2001). Lastly, the centralisation that characterised the first century of welfare state development has since the 1980s been substituted by several waves of decentralisation (De Swaan, 1988; Raijmakers, 2014). The decentralisation of political and administrative power is said to encourage experimentation and innovation, eventually decreasing the costs and increasing the efficiency of governments (Alonso, Clifton & Díaz-Fuentes, 2013). Critics argue that NPM did not reach its goals but rather led to more

economic inequality (Hood, 1991). Moreover, some claim that it has severed the link between citizens and professionals and between professionals and board rooms by the installation of managers in (now privatised) public institutions (Farrell & Morris, 2003). This, in turn, has decreased the democratic accountability and legitimacy of government (Varbo & Aars, 2015).

Because of the criticism, the ideas of New Public Governance have gained popularity since 2000 (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2012). The view tries to weld a government that is more responsive to the individual needs of citizens. In doing so, the individualised citizens become co-producers of services (Wiesel & Modell, 2014). This is also the key characteristic of the “participation society”.

Decentralisation and democratic control

Higher citizen participation is said to be important to alleviate the strain on health care budgets. Equally important, however, is the goal of strengthening Dutch civil society by bringing the democratic process closer to citizens (Tonkens, 2014). In the last decades, the perceived gap between citizens and government has increased (Bannink, Bosselaar, Van der Veer, & Trommel, 2014). The greater part of the population felt a diminishing influence on the democratic process in recent years, a trend that extends to other terrains such as participation bodies and interest groups (Netherlands Institute for Social Research [SCP], 2015). This development translates into decreasing political participation like voter turnout and political party

membership. Fuelled by budgetary austerity, the result is less involved, more sceptical and increasingly disappointed citizens. Ultimately then, the withdrawal of citizens from politics erodes the legitimacy of the democratic system decreases (Mair, 2014). To reverse this development, three recommendations are commonly given: reinforcing local democracy, increasing the influence of citizens on the political process and making government more transparent and accountable (Brenninkmeijer, 2013; Putters, 2015).

All three recommendations highlight the importance of more or better democratic control. In line with Pettit (2008), democratic control is defined as the way individual preferences translate through different modes into the political process. Several authors make a convincing case for strong and diverse control. Bovens, Schillemans and Hart (2008) argue that one of the most important reasons for control is a proficient information provision to citizens. This prevents abuse of power and ensures that policies are supported by the public. In reference to the seminal work of Ashby (1956) and more recently Jessop (2011) on cybernetics (the study of regulatory systems), Denters (2015) argues that the democratic process is best controlled through a variety of channels. An argument along similar lines is made by Buhlmann, Merkel and Wessels (2007), who maintain that democratic control requires effective political opposition, independent research and interest groups, media and interest groups strengthen local democracy. These give citizens political influence and lead to a more transparent and accountable government. It is exactly the variety in control mechanisms that under increasing pressure on the local level.

From different perspectives, the effectiveness and legitimacy of democratic control has been criticised (Heinelt, 2010). The severity of the problems differs between municipalities, especially between small and large ones, but the general issues are the following. Political participation has strongly decreased, trust in municipal councils is declining, citizens rarely identify with the political programmes of local parties and many minority groups do not feel represented by politicians (Gilsing, Boutellier, Nederland, Noordhuizen, & Van Waesberghe, 2015). Local politicians themselves have limited time and staff to do their work, not in the least because of dwindling party membership (Castenmiller, Van Dam, & Peters, 2013). The information provision to municipal councils is mostly inadequate and many local audit offices lack the expertise and resources they need (Castenmiller & Peters, 2014). In a similar vein, local governments mostly eschew the evaluation of local policies (Dutch Association of Audit Offices, 2013). At the same time, one strong incentive for strict control has lost its leverage. Because local newspapers and radio and television stations have experienced a strong decline in their audience and resources, investigative journalism is absent in all but the largest municipalities (Dutch Media Authority, 2013).

Viewed in the round, it is uncertain whether control of the local democratic process is strong enough to handle the new responsibilities because a comprehensive system of checks and balances is lacking (Cohen, 2015; Tonkens, 2016). So although the decentralisations are supposed to strengthen civil society, an enduring question is whether the conditions to do so are met. A strong civil society needs to enable

citizens in their participation and as a counterweight to a strong government.

Connecting these concerns with the historical developments briefly discussed earlier, it is clear how the previous decades have set the stage for these issues. Declining resources of local governments and other control bodies dovetail with attenuating citizen involvement in the democratic process, and have thus weakened control on local democracy. There is a strong case for more and better ways to support the existing channels of democratic control. An example of such a way might be the monitor, provided that it discloses information about social policy and the democratic process to a wide range of people and organisations. That way, it can increase the transparency and accountability of government, and include more citizens directly or indirectly in the democratic process.

Theoretical framework

Because the decentralisations have recently been implemented, there is no established body of theory to test or to rely on. Hence, the present study draws on one long-standing debate and one recent theory to clarify the development of the monitor in the given context.

Size and democracy

The starting point is the debate within public administration about the influence of representative democratic institutions. Following the operationalisation of Myerson (1995), these institutions are defined as “the offices that politicians may seek, the constitutional powers associated with these offices, and the procedures by which candidates are elected to these offices” (p.77). There is a vast body of literature that studies whether and how these institutions matter in the democratic process (see Aarts & Thomassen, 2008; Anderson & Guillory, 1997; March & Olsen, 2006 among others). Although the consensus strongly leans to an affirmative answer on the question “do institutions matter?”, the debate about the extent to which they do matter is anything but settled (Rodríguez-Pose, 2013).

The discussion most relevant for this research is the classic debate in the political sciences about the preferable size of democratic institutions. The book *Size and Democracy* of Dahl and Tufte (1973) marked the start of the modern debate. Since then, the discussion has broadly followed two lines (Denters, Goldsmith, Ladner, Mouritzen, & Rose, 2014). One argues that small is preferable by emphasising the importance of communities, social cohesion and high political participation. Local governments are more responsive to the specific demands of citizens and are more accountable.

The opposing perspective argues that bigger democratic units are better. As size increases, the efficiency of governments does, too. The government will be able to involve more perspectives of minority groups in the decision making process (Hansen, 2015). Therefore, a stronger system of checks and balances is needed to include the

perspective of minority groups. Another argument brought to the fore by the opponents of decentralisation focuses on the consequences for health care. Too much power in the hands of local politicians potentially makes them vulnerable to individual demands. This, in turn, can cause arbitrary decisions and the politicisation of individual or minor decisions (Boogers, 2014), distracting politicians and others from focusing on other or broader policies (Shafritz, Russell & Borick, 2015).

Empirical research on the consequences of the Dutch decentralisations is still scarce, mainly because of the novelty of the events (Tonkens, 2016). Earlier studies on the consequences of the municipality mergers suggests size increase leads to less political involvement (Denters et al., 2014). Results from studies on decentralisation in several other countries point to a similar direction (Alonso et al., 2013; Hansen, 2012).

In sum, the overview of and empirical studies suggest that the decentralisations have a potentially positive effect on local democracy because of increasing political trust and participation. On the other hand, the Dutch context seems to validate at least some concerns about the extent to which citizens currently participate, and about the ways the local democratic process is controlled. If the monitor could offset the downsides, the advantages might outweigh the disadvantages. Consequently, the present research studies if and how stakeholders use the monitor as a solution to restraints related to time, budgets and expertise that lead to weak democratic control.

The representative claim

The second perspective that guides the research is the Foucauldian concept of “the representative claim” (Saward, 2010). The political sciences have recently turned their attention to the influence of non-elective bodies. Neighbourhood meetings, public consultation evenings and citizen councils have gained much more influence in recent years (Scientific Council for Government Policy, 2012). As the influence of traditional (i.e. parliamentary) democratic involvement falls, other forms of participation emerge. Especially on the local level, this development is visible. The representative claim holds that the democratic process is much broader than electoral representation. Power is also held by institutions such as client councils, advisory boards and through informal ways such as daily contact. In relation to this development, it is important to understand how these local developments influence the democratic process. Because the monitor has been developed in cooperation with interest groups. Therefore, not only the direct parliamentary process but also indirect influences will be analysed by focusing on other groups (indirectly) involved in the development of the monitor.

Methodology

Between mid-April and mid-June 2016 21 semi-structured face to face interviews have been held with twenty-two participants from three municipalities. These are local politicians (n=6), policy makers (civil servants from the statistics department (n=5) and the social domain department (n=4)) and members of civil interest groups (n=7, these are consultation bodies that represent the collective interests of citizens in the policy process and informal meetings such as neighbourhood centres and public consultation evenings). Two civil servants from the statistics department have been interviewed together, the other interviews were held one-to-one. Each interview lasted between 45 and 65 minutes. Apart from that, eight published monitors from three municipalities and one policy document per municipality have been studied.

Research design

The aim of the present research is to acquire in-depth knowledge of the development of the monitor as well as of its outcomes: the actual use of the monitor and what this means for the democratic process. The strength of qualitative research for studying policy processes is that it can help to understand “what is going on in the field” (Boeije, 2010, p. 5). Interviews are particularly useful because they give detailed for gaining an understanding of a new yet complex process and to understand the “how” and “why” of a specific subject (Magnusson & Marecek, 2015). To understand the mechanisms in the development of the monitor and the potential goals from different perspectives,

multiple interviews in several municipalities are conducted. This means that a multiple-case study design is chosen to answer the research questions (Yin, 2009). This method generates both breadth and depth because the design contains comparability between cases as well as multiple perspectives within cases.

Case selection

Comparing cases is only viable if they resemble each other on relevant characteristics (Yin, 2009). Accordingly, three municipalities have been selected based on the following four criteria:

- A. Only middle-large cities (100.000 to 200.000 inhabitants) have been selected. Different issues typically play a role in the social domain and on the political and governmental structure and dynamics that depend on the size of the population (Van Kempen, 2000).
- B. Municipalities that have published a monitor at least two times have been selected. This has given participants time to reflect on the process and to redevelop the monitor.
- C. The municipal council should have been elected in before April 2014. This way, politicians have been involved in the development of the monitor and the implementation of the decentralisations.
- D. The political colour of the municipal executive is important. One municipality should be right-wing, one left-wing, and one centre. This enables comparison between monitors throughout the political spectrum.

After selecting three municipalities on the basis of an online

exploration, first the statistics departments were contacted by telephone. After expressing the will to cooperate, an email was sent to explain the design and goal of the research in detail. Then, more participants within the municipalities were selected and contacted through the snowball sampling method (Harbour, 2013), by searching online for relevant organisations and by contacting the Registry of the municipal council. To ensure equal and comparable information across the municipalities led to seven interviews in Dieperdrecht and Loevendaal, and eight in Middenhaag.²

Participant selection

Three groups of stakeholders have played an important role in the development of the monitor: policy makers, local politicians and members of interest groups. Therefore, at least two members of every group are interviewed in every municipality. In these cases, at least one policy maker from the statistics department and one from the social domain department has been selected. Furthermore, in every case at least one member of the opposition and one member of the municipal executive have been interviewed. Thirdly, members of interest groups have been interviewed.

Data collection and analysis

² The names of the municipalities have been changed to ensure anonymity of the participants.

The interviews with the participants are semi-structured. This way, the interviews will discuss the same topics, resulting in specific and comparable information but leaving interviewees the opportunity to add for their own input (Richards, 2009). A questionnaire was developed based on the theoretical framework and a document study of the monitors. The main topics of the interviews were the role of the participant in the development of the monitor, the goals of the participant with the monitor, and the (actual or intended) use of the monitor. For the interviews with civil servants and politicians a second element was included, the Q methodology technique (for the questionnaire and the statements, see Appendix A). This method is designed to give insight into human subjectivity defined as “a person’s communication of his or her point of view” by forcing participants to choose between statements (McKeown & Thomas, 1988, p. 12). These have to be sorted on a scale ranging from 2 (“I Agree”) to -2 (“I do not agree”). Because the number of statements equals the number of squares of the scale, priorities have to be given to statements the participant (dis)agrees most with (Watts & Stenner, 2005). This methodology is used because it helps to compare the three municipalities and three groups of participants and because the element of play can lead to a more open conversation with the participants (Coogan & Herrington, 2011).

For the purpose of analysis, all interviews have been recorded on a digital audio recorder and transcribed. The transcripts have been coded in NVivo as developed by QSR (Appendix B lists the codes). The Qsort statements are used in the analysis in addition to the answers

from the open questions. This adds structure to the qualitative analysis. The development of the code tree is based on the research questions and literature. After major themes have been discerned, further refinement of codes has been based on the interviews themselves.

Results

The main question of this research is how the monitor can be used to inform social policy and democratic decision making after the decentralisations. In order to answer this broad question the results focus on three sub-questions first. The sub-questions will be answered for each case separately, arranged according to the amount of difficulties in the process. Combining the answers from these three municipalities, the main research question will be answered.

Dieperdrecht

The municipal council and municipal executive in Dieperdrecht are centre-right. Apart from lower budgets after the decentralisations, there have been serious budget cuts in the social domain (Dieperdrecht, 2014) . Because of the decentralisations, the organisation of interest groups has been reorganised, merging the large number of groups to be merged into two bodies that have had teething troubles in the cooperation with each other and with policy makers and

politicians. Initially, the monitor contained both quantitative and qualitative data. Because of controversy in the council (described below), the qualitative part has been adapted and reduced.

1. What is or has been the process of the development of the monitor?

The development of the monitor has led to several problems. To determine the content of the monitor, multiple information sessions and debates were held with the municipal council and interest groups. These meetings have often not generated the intended results. To create more support among the participating bodies, and to improve the quality and coherence of the monitor, several new sessions were organised. The most important reason is that the municipal executive and municipal council did not agree with the statistics department on the content of the monitor. Especially the qualitative part, which contained interviews about the satisfaction of citizens and professionals, proved to be a stumbling block. The municipal executive successfully pushed for the exclusion of the interviews in newer versions of the monitor, much to the discontent of the statistics department. The document analysis shows that the monitor has been continuously adapted (Dieperdrecht, 2015a; 2015b; 2016).

The second major difficulty the politicians also had to do with the content of the monitor. The municipal council wanted to include very detailed information while the statistics department tried to limit the amount of data. After much debate, the department complied with the

political demands. But when the monitor was presented to the council, most politicians were not satisfied:

“when this version was presented to the council after the first quarter of 2015, the council exploded with fury. They demanded even more information! And the things that they saw, they wanted differently.” (Civil Servant)

The most likely cause for the problems is, as a politician suggest, that the decentralisations have been “one long educational trajectory for the council”. None of the stakeholders was familiar with such a comprehensive process and that local politicians are not used to having to negotiate with others than other politicians. This implies an inherent link exist between the decentralisations and a problematic process of developing the monitor. As the other two municipalities will show, however, not all processes have been troublesome. Therefore, the unicity of the decentralisation process can be part of the explanation at best. What will turn out to be a recurring theme, however, is the call for the inclusion of ever more data in the monitor.

2. How can the monitor be used to gain insight in the possible consequences of the decentralisations?

The vast majority (80 percent) of the respondents argues that fully understanding how the social domain develops is very difficult. As one member of an interest group says: “The process is very dynamic, and there are so many factors involved that it is difficult to get a

straightforward idea of what is actually happening.” To that end, the most important goal of the monitor is providing information to the municipal council and civil servants, health care organisations and consultation groups. The monitor bundles and discloses new and existing information from organisations and bodies such as the social domain department and neighbourhood teams.³

Apart from disclosing information, the greatest worth of the monitor lies in the continued updates on the selected indicators. This ideally reveals developments and trends that are taking place. Participants say that especially the structured and comprehensive character of the information is valuable. With other sources of information, especially direct contact with citizens, it is hard to determine whether the issue at hand is a structural or an individual problem.

3. *How, if at all, do the parties involved (politicians, policy makers, interest groups) use or want to use the monitor to react to these insights?*

The information from the monitor broadly serves two purposes. First, several policies have been influenced by data from the monitor. Interest groups, for example, discuss outcomes of the monitor with citizens. Based on these meetings, they issue reports that are based on

³ In the wake of the Dutch decentralisations, these teams have become the cornerstone in the access to and coordination of care.

the information from the monitor. One of the most clear examples of the use of the monitor is that it revealed that the consistency and cooperation between work and income (the Participation law) and the neighbourhood teams was still lacking. Because of this finding, a policy was implemented that obliged the organisation to cooperate and communicate more with the neighbourhood teams. Furthermore, the three groups of stakeholders use the monitor in their meetings about the social domain. This means the information is discussed between policy makers, politicians and interest groups, but also with citizens and professionals.

In line with the first goal, the second is to facilitate the transformation of the social domain. This is the change to a health care system and society geared to individual needs and responsibility. In short, the “participation society”. Although most participants are sceptical about the extent to which the monitor currently contains the information necessary to do so, it is potentially a valuable instrument.

Comparing municipalities is clearly not one of the ways the information will be used. According to the Qsort statements all but one participant argue that it is not helpful to compare local policies and outcomes with others because the context differs too much. Elaborating on this position in the context of the monitor, one member of an interest groups argues that any causal relation is laid between two or more municipalities might obscure more than it reveals because it is “just a paper reality”. This does not *a priori* exclude any comparison, he and others stress as well. Through visits and work groups, information about policies and best practices is incidentally shared.

This last point is emblematic for a broader finding within all three municipalities. In all three municipalities, the participants use multiple sources of information to gain insight into developments.

Middenhaag

The municipal council and municipal executive in Middenhaag is almost equally divided between the political left and right. Mainly due to lower budgets because of the decentralisations, the municipality has implemented cutbacks in public services (Middenhaag, 2016) . The main local interest groups have only been reorganised after the monitor was developed. The monitor contains quantitative data, other than the other municipalities also elaborate financial information about the expenditure of specific services (Middenhaag, 2015a; 2015b). Debates about the monitor have been relatively mild and positive.

1. What is or has been the process of the development of the monitor?

Middenhaag has known less troubled development of the monitor. The municipal council has been involved a lot at the start of the process, but stepped back after that. Similar explanations are given by several participants:

“At the start, we have been very involved in what we want. So we got less discussions, motions of distrust and the like. Just

because we have said, all political parties together: we try to limit the political games in these areas as much as possible.”
(politician)

Once the information need of of both municipal council, policy makers and interest groups was clear, the amount of data selected to be included in the monitor was very large. Yet unlike in Dieperdrecht, a solution was found before the publication of the first monitor. Part of the large number of statistics was still included, but not part of the main monitor:

“Then we [the Statistics department] said: ‘let us develop a concept version, let us include the indicators that have your priority. Then we created a top monitor, and two other parts, from very important to less important.’” (Civil servant)

After the publication, the attention focused on the “main monitor”, while specific, individual demands were consigned to the lower parts. The first part consists of key performance indicators. These are, for example, the total number of clients with a custom made care arrangement. This helps stakeholders to discern the most important facts and trends, leading to more shorter debates and efficient use of the monitor.

2. How can the monitor be used to gain insight in the possible consequences of the decentralisations?

The most important goal mentioned by the participants is similar to that of Dieperdrecht: gathering and disclosing structured and comprehensive information about the social domain. Except for both respondents from the statistics department, all participants agree that the social domain is vast and complex. Because of a lack of time, assistance from parliamentary aides and information sources, knowing and understanding what the developments are is difficult. The monitor partly alleviates this problem. The difference with Dieperdrecht is that the monitor in Middenhaag contains the same indicators over time, making it possible to see developments and trends. This stability has actually been a priority from the start, as one politician remarks: “we wanted to repeat this same process of monitoring, [because] the improvements will come on the long run.”

A member of an interest group implicitly gives an explanation for the stability by arguing that there has been trust between the stakeholders from the very start. Interestingly, trust between the parties has also been emphasised by two participants from Dieperdrecht. Yet when push comes to shove, the trust necessary to hand over the responsibility for the monitor seems only to have been present in Middenhaag.

3. *How, if at all, do the parties involved (politicians, policy makers, interest groups) use or want to use the monitor to react to these insights?*

The information from the monitor broadly serves two goals. The governing parties, as one politician from the opposition adds, traditionally have more access to information than those in the opposition. This advantage has a dampening effect on the debate because the ruling majority can discuss the outcome of a debate beforehand. This neutralises the opposition. Such asymmetry is even larger in local parliaments, because the political parties have less staff and hardly any press as leverage. The monitor partly counters this disadvantage because it makes it easier to find relevant information.

Comparing their municipality with peers is the second goal of the information from the monitor. Mirroring the answers of their colleagues in Dieperdrecht, the Qsort statements of all but one participant show that they think comparing municipalities can be fruitful. But just like in Dieperdrecht, this is currently only done on an intermittent basis.

Loevendaal

The municipal council and municipal executive in Loevendaal are centre-left. The budget cuts induced by the decentralisations have been relatively minor because the municipality has set aside additional resources (Loevendaal, 2016b). The local interest groups have been reorganised ahead of the decentralisations. The monitor contains only quantitative data, including some financial statistics (Loevendaal 2015a; 2015b; 2016a). Debates about the monitor have been quite positive.

1. *What is or has been the process of the development of the monitor?*

Similar to Middenhaag, the involvement of the Loevendaal municipal council and the interest groups has only been relatively intensive at the start. The process has been less troublesome than in Dieperdrecht. To agree on the information all parties involved wanted to have in the monitor, the statistics department organised several information sessions for council members to:

“update them on the kind of information that we are collecting. ‘What is still lacking, according to you? What else would you like to know?’ Those were relatively intensive sessions. And at a certain point, we found that the number of visitors started to decline. [...] We had the impression that was because the trust of the council started to increase that we do monitor things, but that we also cannot monitor everything.” (Civil servant)

This process has been satisfactorily to all groups. Trust between the stakeholders might be the most important explanation indeed. Sessions with the relevant parties have also increased their knowledge about the chances and complications of creating a monitor, building the understanding between them and the statistics department.

2. *How can the monitor be used to gain insight in the possible consequences of the decentralisations?*

In Loevendaal, the Qsort statements indicate, the respondents do not share the scepticism of Dieperdrecht and or even Middenhaag about their capability to oversee the social domain. Nevertheless, all value that the monitor collects information on a higher aggregation level than other sources of information do. Thereby, it also discloses information to larger groups of people. The information in the monitor is, according to participants, trustworthy because it is “independent” or “objective” (member of an interest group and a politician). In addition, the monitor counteracts the plurality of information from multiple sources. Apart from information received through direct contact with citizens, politicians indicate that they receive “fragmented” and often “contradictory” facts and information (politician).

3. *How, if at all, do the parties involved (politicians, policy makers, interest groups) use or want to use the monitor to react to these insights?*

According to the participants, the information provided by the monitor can be used for several goals. First, it facilitates the political debate. Because of the “objective” information that the interest groups, policy makers and politicians receive, gaining insight into the consequences of the decentralisations has become easier. The downside of this, is that the monitor has sometimes been used by the municipal council as “a candy shop” (politician) that contains something to the taste of everyone. Politicians and interest groups can be tempted to select the

information in the monitor that fit their agenda best.

However, the monitor has also been used to counter an unfavourable study by an interest group about the consequences of the decentralisations. A policy maker (social domain department) recalls that they managed to retort bad publicity by pointing to the (diverging) outcome from the monitor. From one perspective, this is an instance in which the monitor facilitates an well informed debate. According to the policy maker, the study of the interest group was not very well conducted. Yet from another perspective, the monitor increases the risk of stifling the debate. For better or for worse, if it contains a large number of data the governing bodies can always evidence to contradict disagreeable information.

Secondly, the respondents in Loevendaal are moderately positive about the comparison with other municipalities. According to one member of an interest group who has a lot of contact with other municipalities:

“Some aspects are more relevant in one municipality than others because there have been different budget cuts. (...) So the comparison is not only made with the monitor, but the information necessary to do so provides the basis.”

This means that interest groups still have to interpret the data, but the monitor gives them better access to information. Thus the monitor partly solves the problem of the lack of information. It only supplements other, traditional, sources of information. This can either mean less arbitrary information because the other sources are mostly

from individual or incidental sources, or it is another possibility to use data that underwrite the point of view one wants it to.

Main question: how can the monitor be used to inform social policy and democratic decision making after the decentralisations?

Comparing the three cases, the main question can be answered. It is clear that the monitor is or can be very useful to policy makers, politicians and interest groups, but also to others such as health care organisations and neighbourhood teams. Due to limited resources and the complexity of the social domain, it is hard to gather structured and aggregate data about it. In this respect, the monitor mainly has a signal function for trends in the social domain. Once such a trend is discovered, the underlying reason can be analysed. The monitor maps these trends in a structured manner, instead of the “fragmented image” and “anecdotal evidence when you’re speaking with citizens” (politician). Additionally, the monitor can bring the position of minority groups to the limelight simply because their opinion is included in the monitor. This cannot be done without gradual development but also stability in the content of the monitor. Otherwise it is impossible to differentiate between developments. In brief, the monitor:

- A. Provides information about developments in the social domain that is used in the debate and has already influenced specific

policies. More data is open to inspection to politicians, health care professionals, interest groups, media and others.

B. Counterbalances some of the most important concerns related to democratic control. It does so mainly because it enhances the information provision about services and expenditure within the social domain and facilitates the democratic control through the information of various stakeholders.

Once the understanding of the social domain has increased, multiple monitors can also facilitate the comparison between municipalities them. At this moment, comparison mainly happens through work visits and informal meetings between, for example, policy makers. Making a structured and clear comparison between multiple municipalities is therefore difficult, as several respondents explained. An improved understanding of what are successful social policies can partly compensate the lack of proficient local audit office and evaluations, especially if the monitor contains financial information. As such, it can increase the transparency as well as the accountability of local government.

An important caveat to these finding is that media are not using the monitor as a source of information. Even if the monitor lowers the barrier to access information, it cannot be an antidote to the complete absence of local parliamentary and investigative journalism.

Differences and similarities between municipalities

The most striking differences between the municipalities are the variation in content of the monitor and in the process of its development. In this case, the most important issue has been the debate about which and how much data to include in the monitor. Wedding the findings of the cases together, two related explanations can be given. Firstly, the experienced degree of control and insight into the social domain differs between the interviewed stakeholders. Answers on the Qsort statement “It is easy to gain a full understanding of the social domain” diverge clearly between Dieperdrecht (80%), Middenhaag (60%) and Loevendaal (20%). It might be the case that the combination of trust and (confidence about the existing) knowledge about monitoring and the social domain have led to a more open and accepting position of stakeholders.

Secondly, the political contexts differ between municipalities. While right-wing parties hold around a quarter more seats in Dieperdrecht than in Middenhaag, in Loevendaal the left is the largest political force. The left traditionally has a stronger focus on health care and welfare arrangements than the right, as is visible in the differences in budget cuts between the municipalities. Add to this the relatively better financial position of Loevendaal, and it is clear why the three municipalities have set different priorities when it comes to the social domain in general and the monitor in particular. A politician from Loevendaal formulates it like this: “We [the council] have said from the very start: ‘we do not want people to get into trouble, period.’”

Key in both the control and the political context explanation is to be the level of efficacy (or lack thereof) experienced by policy makers,

politicians and interest groups. If their sense of control was high, they were only involved at the start. Once they gained confidence about the end result, their attention decreased. In a municipality with low efficacy among participants, the municipality council and interest groups maintained a high level of involvement, and hence a tense debate ensued. In Dieperdrecht, with the most problems, the Qsort statement “The municipal council has been very closely involved in the development of the monitor” is (strongly) agreed to by all participants. Parallel to their shorter and far less problematic development processes, in Middenhaag and Loevendaal this have been respectively two and one participant.

Further evidence for this mechanism is provided by the role of the interest groups. In Dieperdrecht, they have not been very cooperative while their position has been more constructive in the other municipalities. Part of the explanation for this finding can be found in the recent (top-down) reorganisation of interest groups in Dieperdrecht. One of the two local bodies was unsatisfied with its new role in the political field. Again, trust between stakeholders seems to be central in the development of a widely supported monitor that contains information all find valuable. Although this contributes to a monitor that gives stakeholders a comprehensive and proficient understanding of the social domain, one downside should not be ignored. The statistics department is not a democratic body. This means that, paradoxically, the democratic accountability of the development (not its actual goals or use) of the monitor is arguably the highest in Dieperdrecht.

Differences and similarities between stakeholders

One interesting difference and one similarity between politicians, policy makers and interest groups should be noted. The difference first. Many participants explicitly express at least slight concerns about their ability to get the overall picture of the social domain. The structural exception are (apart from the aforementioned participants in Loevendaal), members of the statistics department. Statisticians have more knowledge and time as well as means at their disposal to comprehend these developments—after all, it is their profession. Yet it is also their task to report these findings to a large group of relative outsiders, including other policy makers, politicians and interest groups. What this probably means is that the problem is not so much the intrinsic impossibility to grasp the social domain, but the lack of time, knowledge and other resources of the other participants. As the sessions in Loevendaal show, involving other relevant parties from the start by explaining the goal and dilemmas clearly can be an effective way to facilitate cooperation.

Then the most striking similarity between the three groups of stakeholders. Notwithstanding fierce debates and some degree of frustration, all participants stress that the cooperation with the other stakeholders has been mostly constructive. From a broader perspective, the close cooperation is part of a wider trend in which policy makers, politicians and interest groups are working together on an increasing number of issues. Mainly because these issues have

become more complex and because they have to be solved with less (public) means.

Risks and disadvantages

Finally, the analysis of the interviews shows that there are a couple of serious downsides connected to the development and use of the monitor. The first risk is explicitly mentioned by many participants: the drive for the inclusion of ever more data in the monitor contravenes its effectiveness. The overabundance of data is problematic because it becomes harder to focus on the data that do matter (i.e. that are related to policy fields under the influence of stakeholders). In addition, each new indicator increases the leeway for stakeholders to use only favourable information. The risk of only focusing on favourable information has been demonstrated in all three municipalities. A second major risk is that the monitor is treated as a goal in itself. It is not a substitute of but an addition to other sources of information, such as direct contact with citizens and health care organisations. This notion should also make it easier to focus on a limited set of information.

Conclusion

The starting point of this research was the broadly shared concern about the consequences of the decentralisations of the social domain for the democratic process. The key point of this research is that the monitor partly mitigates the lack of democratic control in the three municipalities that have been studied. It increases the information available to stakeholders, hereby offsetting part of the lack of overview and the fragmentation and bias that other sources of information can be subject to. The monitor enhances the democratic process by giving stakeholders more and better information to design these policies and by broadening the number of citizens that inform the stakeholders in this process. This increases the transparency and accountability of local government. In addition, once fully developed monitors have become more common throughout Dutch municipalities it will become easier to compare policy outcomes. This will facilitate comparison between municipalities, in turn contributing to the accountability and transparency of municipalities. This way, the decentralisations will live up to their potential as the most effective policies can be known and adapted to other contexts.

Relation theory and findings

The existing literature on the effects of size for democracy does not show a dominant line, but several recent studies have emphasised the relative weakness and pitfalls of local democratic control (Cohen, 2015; Gilsing et al., 2015; Tonkens, 2016). Based on Ashby (1956), Denters (2015) argues that a varied control on the democratic system is

essential. The image that emerges from the present study is that, indeed, these concerns are warranted. Local politicians, civil servants and members of consulting bodies all attest to some degree to the complexity of the social domain and the difficulty of their new responsibilities after the decentralisations. By and large absent, local media do not cover and research the social domain.

The present evidence supports proponents of decentralisation because of the downsides of municipal government (e.g. Denters et al., 2014). In line with various authors, the development of the monitor has in some municipalities distracted stakeholders from other, more general issues at hand (Boogers, 2014; Shafritz, Russell & Borick, 2015). This increases the likelihood of arbitrary or micro policies.

However, the effects of the decentralisations are not just negative. Local stakeholders have various ways to receive information from citizens, directly as well as indirectly. The conclusion is that decentralisations can also have positive effects if the representation of minority groups is accommodated. This finding challenges the assumption that the decentralisations of 2015 pose an unequivocal threat to the quality of social policy and the democratic process (Tonkens, 2016).

Drawing on the work of Michael Saward (2010), this research has shown how citizens hold political power through other channels than political parties. Interest groups and neighbourhood meetings, for example, have also been important in the development of the monitor. On the other hand, representative democracy is as of yet the most important way through which the monitor is designed and decisions

are made. These findings partly validates the notion of the representative claim (Saward, 2010), which states that there are other, non-parliamentary ways in which interests are represented.

Implications for practice

The main challenge for politicians, civil servants and members of interest groups is to limit the amount of information that is included in the monitor. Because the effectiveness of the monitor as a tool for stakeholders hinges on it being concise, making substantiated choices about the content is imperative. The indicators that should be included can differ across municipalities, but it is important that they can be (directly or indirectly) influenced by policies. Besides that, stakeholders should aspire to agree on clear goals that have to be achieved. This last point also applies to the importance of comparing municipality with others and across time. All three municipalities are still developing their monitor. How to strike the right balance between innovation and stability is an essential question for all parties involved. Although the case for further improvement is strong, too much innovation restricts the possibility to discern meaningful developments. Without the ability to compare data throughout an extended period, the monitor does not live up to its potential. Awareness without consequences is meaningless. If stakeholders fail to act on the findings of the monitor, its development has not been more than an exercise in gesture politics. Lastly, the monitor is not a panacea for the shortcomings of local democracy. A clear separation of powers

and independent research on local issues is and will remain an important condition for the functioning of democratic institutions. Strengthening local democracy requires more than new and innovative tools such as the monitor.

Limitations and further research

Several limitations to these conclusions should be mentioned. First of all, the research covers relatively new terrain. This means that there has not been an established theoretical framework on which to build. Although the methodology and analysis has built on broader theories and practices, this could have decreased the validity of the study. Another important caveat is that only three of almost four hundred municipalities that are currently developing a monitor have been studied. Although stakeholders and mechanisms such as trust are probably similar in other contexts as well, this restrains the generalisability of the findings. Therefore, more research about other kinds of municipalities is important to gain a better understanding of the role and potential of the monitor other municipalities. For example in cities with more citizens and probably more means to control, or in smaller municipalities that often have less means of democratic control. This strand of research might quantitatively study any existing differences between municipalities to broaden its scope. Especially after the monitors have been in function for an extended period, the positive and negative experiences of stakeholders can be valuable to disclose to peers in other municipalities. Finally, the mechanisms of

trust and knowledge might be studied on the basis of interdisciplinary research that combines, for example, social psychology and insights from public administration or the political sciences.

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Appendix A: Questionnaire

I. General information

Name:

Position:

II. Qsort statements: 9 choices (only for policy makers and politicians)

	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	

1. It is easy to gain insight into the consequences of the decentralisations
2. The municipality council has explicitly been involved in the development of the monitor
3. The municipal council does not really need the monitor
4. The monitor is not an important instrument to gain insight in to developments in the social domain
5. It is not necessary for other parties (such as?) to be involved in the development of the monitor
6. Other parties than the municipal council can really benefit from the monitor
7. Comparing the decentralisations between municipalities is not necessary for their successful implementation
8. We have developed the monitor based on the local situation
9. Citizens have gotten more influence on policies in the social domain because of the decentralisations

III. Open questions

1. Background information

- Can you describe the most important characteristics of the social domain in [municipality]? What are the demographic and social-economic characteristics of the population, for example?
- Which positive consequences of the decentralisations do you see?
- Which negative consequences do you see?
- What do you think of the quality and organisation of the way the information provision to the municipal council and the municipal executive is organised? What are the problems, if any?
- What do you think of the control on the policy process?
 - What are the problems, if any?
- What do you think of the control on the democratic process?
 - What are the problems, if any?
- How do other parties such as local media and interest groups receive and find information about developments in the social domain?
 - To what extent are they focusing on the social domain?

2. The development of the monitor

- Why did the municipality decide to develop the monitor?
 - Who made the decision?
 - Can you take me, step by step, through the process of the development of the monitor?
 - What are the parties involved?
 - How is/was the cooperation between them organised?
 - What do you think of the way they have cooperated?
 - What will be the next steps in the development of the monitor?
 - What is/has been your role in the development of the monitor?
 - How do you think the cooperation between the parties was, during the development?
 - What kind of the information the monitor contains?
 - Qualitative or quantitative?
 - Pre-existing or newly gathered data?
3. Current use of the monitor
- How is the information of the monitor reported to stakeholders and others?
 - How (if so) are the outcomes discussed with them?
 - To whom? And why?
 - What do you think of this? How could it be improved?
- Is the monitor currently still adapted?
 - If so, how and why is this done?
- Can you give an example of a specific example of a policy that has been influenced by information from the monitor?
4. Goals monitor
- What are, according to you as (position), the most important goals of the monitor?
 - What are the advantages of the monitor?
 - Can you give an example of a moment when this has already materialised?
 - Do you also see disadvantages or risks of the use of the monitor?
 - Wat is het verschil in doelen met andere belanghebbenden?
 - What (if any) are the differences in goals and priorities of other stakeholders in the use of the monitor?
 - Are these contradictory? If so: why?
 - How, if at all, can the monitor be used to adapt policies?
 - What do you think of comparing municipalities on the basis of the monitor or through other ways?
 - Does this currently happen by you or other stakeholders?
 - Why does or doesn't this happen?
5. Conclusion: Did we miss anything?
- What haven't we talked about yet?

Appendix B: Code Tree (one per municipality)

Nodes

