

# STUDYING PUBLIC POLICY

Edited by Michael Hill

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University of Bristol  
6th Floor  
Howard House  
Queen's Avenue  
Clifton  
Bristol BS8 1SD  
UK  
Tel +44 (0)117 331 5020  
Fax +44 (0)117 331 5369  
e-mail [pp-info@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:pp-info@bristol.ac.uk)  
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Policy Press  
c/o The University of Chicago Press  
1427 East 60th Street  
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t: +1 773 702 7700  
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Where there are multiple implementing agencies, implementation studies have been able to quantify some of the factors outlined above. René Torenlvied, the first of the contributors to this part, is making a significant contribution to this work (see, in particular, Torenlvied and Akkerman, 2004; Oosterwaal and Torenlvied, 2012). However, he has also given considerable attention to the less measurable aspects of the implementation process, and provides here a qualitative study. This illustrates aspects of the kind of complexity that has to be handled in qualitative studies.

René Torenlvied reports here on a case study into the effect of political conflict on the course and outcomes of the policy implementation process, which is an important object of study in the field of public administration (Wilson, 1887; Weber, 1925; Hill and Hupe, 2002; Riccucci et al, 2004; May and Winter, 2009). The case study used here is the reform of sociocultural work in a Dutch city. Intuitively, it sounds quite plausible that political conflict in a legislature affects the implementation of the policy decisions adopted. Suppose, for example, that local legislators strongly disagree about the necessity of urban development programmes in their community or city. The compromise policy decisions, ultimately reached by the different political parties, must be implemented by local agencies, such as housing corporations or community organisations. Given that the local agencies have their own preferences for urban development, they may use the political controversy to advance their own most preferred alternative for urban renewal. Hence, the actual renewal efforts, made by these local agencies, could diverge from the original compromise policy decision adopted by the local legislature. Instead of taking legislative output or the process of regulatory design as an exclusive framework for the analysis of policy implementation, the case study presented here takes into account the actions and preferences of multiple agencies to explain the policy divergence of agencies during implementation.



# Agency preferences and political conflict: policy implementation in the Netherlands

René Torenvlied

## Introduction

The public administration literature does not provide strong empirical support for the prediction that political conflict among legislators affects policy divergence by implementation agencies (Evans et al, 1985; Waterman and Meier, 1998; Meier and O'Toole 2006). In a series of theoretical-empirical studies, based on the implementation of social policy reforms in three Dutch municipalities in the 1990s, I have identified the core variables and mechanisms that drive the nexus between political conflict and policy implementation (see, for example, Torenvlied, 1996, 2000). From the general patterns in characteristics of political conflict and policy implementation it is inferred that political conflict reinforces the effect of agencies' preference incongruence with the policies set for their performance (Oosterwaal and Torenvlied, 2012).

The case presented in this contribution is the story of the implementation of reforms in the sociocultural sector of the city of Groningen, one of the three municipalities in the overall study. Sociocultural work aimed to solve all kinds of social problems at various levels in the city, such as unemployment or criminality. The political-administrative context of local government in the Netherlands is, foremost, defined by the primacy of the elected *city council*. In the city of Groningen seven parties held 38 seats, with the Green Left and the Labour Party holding 17 seats. The governing coalition consisted of the Labour Party, the Democratic Party and the Christian Democratic Party. Together with the mayor, who is appointed by the Crown, 'office holders' from these three parties formed the *city government*. City administration is organised in departments, for which the Education, Sport and Wellbeing (ESW) Department was the most important for the present case. Municipal civil servants in the departments prepare council decisions, and play an active role in coordinating their implementation.

In the domain of sociocultural work, *organisations for sociocultural work* are the most important policy implementers. In the city of Groningen, the social services organisation *Delta* was the largest (with 60 employees, 30 of whom were professionals working in the different neighbourhoods in the city of Groningen). *Delta* provided services to approximately 50 organisations in the field, receiving annually 20 million guilders from city government. *Delta* provided support services, and was formally the employer of professional social workers in 23 neighbourhood centres – key implementers of sociocultural work. Other

implementers were: the Elderly People Wellbeing Organisation and the Bureau of Residents' Experts (BRE), which carried out technical tasks at the request of the residents and housing corporations. The Playground Centre provided support to the many playground associations in the city. In the field of sociocultural work we also observe various *societal implementers*. Social-cultural work was partly implemented by the target groups of social-cultural policy themselves: as many as 54 neighbourhood centres, residents' commissions, organisations for older people or minority ethnic groups, or volunteer associations (such as playground organisations) were active at the time of the case study.

The data collection was very intensive, and a full account is provided in Torenvlied (2000). Key informants, participative observation and document analysis were the main sources. References are made to a number of documents but these have not been cited in the bibliography since they are working papers in Dutch which readers are unlikely to want to follow up. Several stakeholders informally checked the case description. Many years have passed by since this implementation process took place, and much has changed since then in the city, as policy formation and implementation are inherently dynamic. Nevertheless, the case study is still valuable and suitable for discussion here. In the first place, it fits the current trend from 'government' to 'governance'. The more hierarchical government approach, which emphasises the primacy of elected officials and the loyalty of administration, is gradually being complemented by governance approaches that involve officials, professionals and citizens together in solving complex social problems (see, for example, Edelenbos and Klijn, 2006; Dekker et al, 2010; Mosley and Grogan, 2013). In the second place, the chain of events that occurs as the case unfolds is still revealing for scholars and practitioners. The fundamental dynamics of the implementation process are clearly visible: (1) the transposition of ideas into policy; (2) the adoption of decisions; (3) the introduction of the policy in administration and the public sector; and (4) its full implementation. In the third place, the story forms part of the critical underpinning (thick description) of the core variables used in large *n* studies that test various models of policy implementation. Without in-depth case descriptions, such models remain relatively empty structures. Although these models explain the scientific regularities we are interested in, they lack the proper description of how these regularities materialise in the real world we observe.

## Changing perceptions about how to solve social problems

In 1984, the city government of Groningen, a medium-sized city in the north of the Netherlands, published a policy document entitled *Neighbourhood and club house work*. This laid the basis for social-cultural work activities in the future. Population groups, *systematically* deprived of the opportunity to participate in society (employment, income, housing and education) were identified among older people, minority ethnic groups, women, young people and the long-term unemployed. A broad range of social-cultural activities was offered for these groups:

club house activities; tenants' support; social work; activities for older people, women, minority ethnic groups and the long-term unemployed; childcare facilities; facilities for school children after school hours; playground work; and child and youth work. Such activities were viewed as instruments to fight unemployment and criminality.

The 1984 policy document assigned responsibility for social-cultural work to one central social services organisation, Delta. Emphasis was placed on the role of professionals – social workers who provided support to volunteers in order to reach a broader target group. Delta focused on *executive work* in neighbourhoods, working with contracts for social workers who provided activities for children, young people and minority ethnic groups. Delta also provided various forms of *support* to other organisations in the field of sociocultural work, for example, *management support* (formulating policy plans, applications for subsidies and personnel management), *financial-administrative support*, and the formal employment of all the city's social workers.

Policy perceptions about the role of social-cultural work changed over time. The new National Wellbeing Law, passed in 1987, delegated more power to the local governments and made large cut-backs in the budgets of national social services. A new policy perception on the role of social-cultural work developed at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. This perception focused on the prevention, rather than the solution, of social problems. The personal responsibility and involvement of citizens was more prominent. Conflicting opinions exist about the tasks of social-cultural work in modern societies. Some support the capability and obligation of citizens to take responsibility for their own future. Others emphasise the limited means that must be yielded to success. The Groningen approach to social-cultural work was *neighbourhood-oriented*. When government interventions take place closer to the citizen, societal problems can be prevented and solved more effectively. Social-cultural activities were redefined as those that stimulated: 'group formation and meetings of people with similar interests, problems, or sub-cultural values; the acquisition and exercise of certain capabilities directed toward expanding knowledge, the development of insights, and views or attitudes, and the development of skills; awareness of personal housing, employment or life situation, and the development of an active and critical involvement in the influencing this situation' (ESW Department, 1991a, p 11).

### Transposition of neighbourhood approach: the 1991 council decision

On 13 June 1991, the city council Commission on Wellbeing ordered the city ESW Department to conduct research into the possibilities of a far-reaching reorganisation of social-cultural work. The aim was to abolish the Delta organisation and to save 750,000 guilders. Delta's abolition was thought to be possible by merging it with other social services organisations. A condition of

the merger and cut-backs was that the quality of the executive work and support would be maintained.

The merger and financial cut-backs were motivated by three arguments. First, a central social services organisation such as Delta was thought to be incongruent with a neighbourhood-oriented approach. In bureaucratic language: 'The sectoral organization of professional support for residents (social work) and residents' experts (housing) does not accord with the present integral method of operation in the neighbourhoods' (Discussion document, RSNS, p 8). Second, many were not satisfied with the functioning of the central social services organisation, Delta. A number of problems that had been noted by the local council earlier had never been tackled. The problems listed in a previous evaluation were: too little resources to allow residents to participate; a suboptimal distribution of resources across the neighbourhoods; too little consultation of neighbourhood organisations and institutions concerning projects in their neighbourhoods; and a fragmentation in subsidies. Third, financial cut-backs were planned in relation to sociocultural work. A total of 2.2 million guilders of cut-backs were planned for the sport, wellbeing and recreation sector. The policy document *Perspective* stated that the budgets should not be cut incrementally, but that specific budgets should be identified – and cut. The ESW Department dutifully followed up on this assignment.

At the same time, the ESW Department wrote a discussion document, together with the Planning and Economic Affairs Department, on support for residents, which is part of social-cultural work. This document was published in September 1991, and was entitled *Residents support new style* (RSNS). It presented a structure for neighbourhood-oriented work by residents' organisations, proposing that neighbourhood organisations be established, and subsidised separately. Subsidies would first be bundled, and then allocated to the neighbourhood organisations. The Urban Residents' Platform (URP), representing residents' organisations, would become an umbrella organisation providing support to social-cultural work.

The residents' organisations themselves had proved to be a 'difficult' discussion partner for the city government: internally divided, opinionated, and with diverse levels of organisation and composition. The first reactions were, indeed, strongly divided: 'this document, like many others before it, [...] shows little understanding of local problems; the chosen design has an open end character; the residents' organizations believe that it is intended to solve the problems of ESW, rather than those of the residents' organizations'. The introduction of new neighbourhood organisations, and the allocation of resources and powers to these organisations, met with great resistance from the existing residents' organisations, which were often keen to operate independently. The city government was not sensitive to their criticisms. The main proposals in the RSNS document remained unchanged. However, in November 1991, the city government (mayor and office holders) proposed to the council that the new organisation structure be introduced one year later than originally intended.

The mayor and office holders were also prepared to give residents' organisations more involvement in the further development of a neighbourhood-oriented organisation structure. The governing body proposed to the council to 'give the city government the task of elaborating a new organization structure for professional support and the distribution of the neighbourhood budgets for professional support for residents in consultation with the residents' organizations, the Delta organization, and the Bureau Residents' Experts (BRE)'. The elaboration of this new organisational structure would be connected with the city council's plans for restructuring social-cultural work as a whole.

Meanwhile, a more broadly oriented policy document concerned with sociocultural work appeared that was commissioned by the council from the ESW Department. This document, entitled *Time for the neighbourhood*, provided a basis for the planned restructuring: (1) the abolition of Delta, coupled with the cut-backs and the merger of social services organisations: the Elderly People Wellbeing Organisation, the Playground Centre and the BRE; and (2) the introduction of neighbourhood platforms for the support of residents (as in the policy document RSNS). This introduced the third important issue involved in the restructuring of social-cultural work: *the establishment of neighbourhood platforms*. A sum of 200,000 guilders was reserved to implement the council's proposal. The council approved the policy document *Time for the neighbourhood* on 18 December, but specified, in an amendment, that *all* organisations should be involved in the implementation of the council's decision. This initiated large-scale political-administrative and societal conflict.

### Political-administrative turmoil in the 'adjustment year' 1992

Optimistically, the city government of Groningen named 1992 as the 'adjustment year'. The social services organisations wrote proposals on the form of the restructuring, and all sorts of 'cooperation models' were proposed. In the document *Time for Delta*, Delta proposed a flexible form of cooperation in each neighbourhood. This proposal deviated considerably from that of the city government, which proposed Delta's abolition. Delta wanted to maintain full control, and expected that the other social services organisations would support that proposal.

The social services organisations did not want to reveal their preferences immediately. The Playground Centre was, broadly speaking, supportive of Delta's proposal, and wanted to cooperate voluntarily in a merger. The Elderly People Wellbeing Organisation did not go any further than a declaration of its intention to participate in a merger. The neighbourhood centres, which received professional support from Delta and were represented by the management consultation neighbourhood centres, could not reach a consensus with their own members. Three neighbourhood centres refused to cooperate: they supported a fully neighbourhood-oriented organisation, in which there would be no role for Delta.

The BRE, which performed all sorts of activities for the housing corporations and residents, was the final merger partner. The discussions with this organisation were very difficult. It had appealed for cooperation in the past, but had been turned down by Delta. The services provided by the BRE could also be offered in the free market. This made its continuation uncertain after a merger. The BRE requested that the restructuring be postponed. According to its proposal, its specialist knowledge would be protected within an urban 'federation', after which the BRE would change itself gradually into a more market-oriented organisation.

The neighbourhood-oriented reorganisation of the residents' organisations, represented by URP, was another point of discussion. URP feared a disintegration of its activities. It wanted to continue performing the function of a strong interest group (according to its own members) in the areas of planning and housing, particularly in relation to the housing corporations. The performance of this function was, according to URP, facilitated by having its own city-wide organisation. Together with the BRE, which was involved in the proposed merger, URP commissioned an independent research project. In a move that was characteristic of the 'adjustment year' 1992, Delta and the Elderly People Wellbeing Organisation refused to cooperate with this research. Nine residents' organisations brought out a separate policy document, *What residents want*, which was in broad agreement with URP's proposals. However, they were a small, unrepresentative group. The city government reacted fiercely: 'The URP still functions as an umbrella organization/discussion partner for the city government and the corporations, and it is highly questionable whether the residents' organizations support their interests. All things considered, we doubt whether the URP has been able to demonstrate that it is able to meet a need which justifies its existence during the past three years' (p 43). The tone of this reaction implies one option only: abolish that organisation!

A new organisation structure was proposed in which a single *new* social services organisation would be created, in which all organisations (including Delta) would be merged. This new organisation would be the employer of social workers, who would provide support to new neighbourhood platforms. The neighbourhood platforms would then receive the authority to commission contracts: they could determine the desired activities in the social-cultural area themselves. The city council did make two procedural concessions to the organisations and interest groups involved: (1) the start of the new social services organisation was postponed for one year; and (2) a management group was established 'to arrive at a more detailed plan for the implementation of the new model'. An additional sum of 150,000 guilders was reserved for this management group as a 'premium for cooperation'. It was almost the end of the 'adjustment year' 1992.

The council decision could then be implemented, but the 1991 decision turned out to be a political powder keg. The city government concluded dryly: 'The analysis of the proposals and the differences between them reveals that the main points of the council decision were apparently not clear or not (fully) supported'. Therefore, the ESW Department began to work on yet another council decision

– as a follow-up of the decision from 1991 – entitled *Time for the neighbourhood: Sequel*. The local council took a new decision on 2 December 1992. The council stood its ground – the earlier council decision (from December 1991) remained *substantively unchanged*.

### Implementation of the council decision

At the end of January 1993, the city council Commission on Wellbeing, Assistance and Media Policy met in two sessions to discuss the further development of the 1992 policy document, *Time for the neighbourhood: Sequel*. It was decided to set up a broad management group that would be divided into two project groups: 'Organisation' and 'Neighbourhood Platforms'. A heated discussion took place regarding the participation of different organisations in these two project groups. The responsible office holder did not want to delay the process any longer and, although he favoured small project groups, he did not manage to obtain these.

The management group was installed by the city council on Wednesday, 17 February 1993. It consisted of an independent chair, a representative of each of the organisations that were to merge, representatives of the neighbourhood club houses and representatives of the residents' organisations from URP. It is important to note that each of the representatives had a mandate from their organisation. A city administrator was present as an observer. In addition, an independent adviser was brought in to manage the implementation. The management group received the task of working out the council decision before 1 January 1994.

Several events occurred which diverted the talks within the management group. Great unrest occurred when Delta sent its director (a member of its personnel), rather than the chair of its board, as its representative to the management group. Delta stated that it was entitled to do so, on the basis of its own responsibility and autonomy, and would not reconsider this decision. At the same time, URP announced in a letter to the mayor and office holders that some of the residents' organisations had blocked participation of URP in the management group. The two representatives of URP were therefore unable to make an agreement.

In April 1993, the external adviser was appointed and the two project groups were started. The adviser quickly got to work and drew up different models for the neighbourhood platforms and the new central organisation. The council decisions formed a firm basis for these proposals. Progress was, however, soon disturbed. Delta filed a complaint regarding the proposed financial cut-backs with the city council Commission on Appeal and Complaint. This complaint could delay the further implementation of the restructuring. Delta made an alternative proposal for restructuring. Its proposal was, however, unknown to the neighbourhood centres. BRE felt that its sheer existence was threatened by Delta's proposal. Thus, an acute crisis situation developed, and a great deal of political diplomacy was required on the part of the chair of the management group to ensure that the conflict did not escalate.

A period of reconciliation commenced. The different organisations began to cooperate with each other, which was inevitable given their common situation. They made such an extensive inventory of possibilities that they became convinced of their future success. They worked hard on a merger document, and this document contained the implementation agencies' elaboration of the council decisions from 1991 and 1992. It was agreed on in the management group on 7 February 1994. The demand for services in the sociocultural area would be formulated in neighbourhood platforms, and the supply would be provided by the new organisation. The city government gave the document its provisional approval. Only the Playground Centre remained recalcitrant. At the last minute, it claimed its own budget from the office holder, who was receptive to this influence attempt by the well-organised playground association. Despite the two council decisions, the office holder was prepared to continue to grant the Playground Centre its own separate budget. Consequently, it maintained strong independence – albeit within the new organisation.

The city council wanted to formally authorise the implementation of its council decisions. On 9 March, the ESW Department proposed that the governing body of the mayor and office holders approve the merger document. The document would then be laid before the city council. However, before this could be done, new local council elections were held, and a new office holder was appointed, this time a Labour Party member. On 15 March, he gave his approval to the ESW Department's proposal as a principle decision, but now concluded that additional consultations had to be conducted. Once again, the implementation of the two council proposals was delayed with the aim of creating broader support among the organisations and interest groups involved. Consultation evenings were held on 17 and 30 March. The organisations involved reacted to the governing body's proposals and, on the basis of the consultation report, made a proposal to the council. Their objections were concerned mainly with the specific design of the neighbourhood platforms. The council responded to these objections. The decision was approved by the council on 18 October, with the addition that the design of the neighbourhood platforms would not be dictated.

In the meantime, the new social services organisation was set up. It was called WING (Wellbeing in Groningen). The merger implied by the establishment of this new organisation was associated with much symbolism and feelings of attachment. Meetings were held for the neighbourhood platforms in January 1995, which were followed by discussions with residents' organisations in February. Those within the new WING organisation were able to cooperate with each other well. Many employees were shifted within the framework of this new organisation. Employees had to accept new roles, whereby former opponents of the new organisation were put in positions that compelled them to be supportive. It was intended that the BRE would grow into a market-oriented organisation within the new organisation, after which it could become independent. The situation was different in the neighbourhoods. The cooperation with the residents' organisations was not optimal, especially in the neighbourhoods where few professional social workers

had been active in the past. The success depended largely on the extent to which these organisations were used to cooperating. Minority ethnic organisations were more prepared to become involved in the broader social-cultural work activities. The Playground Associations remained closed groups that did not seem to care about the implementation of the restructuring.

### **In retrospect: contested politics and compliant implementation**

A full analysis of the case is beyond the scope of this present contribution. Nevertheless, the chain of events that developed in the mid-1990s in the city of Groningen, can be analysed from the perspective of the policy issues at stake: what were the ultimate policy issues, and what compliant behaviours were supposed to bring about success?

#### *Merger of social services organisations*

The first theme in the policy decision concerned the merger of the four social services organisations: Delta, the Elderly People Wellbeing Organisation, the BRE and the Playground Centre. Although there was a great deal of resistance to the merger, the local council remained determined. The council threatened the use of personnel measures if the merger failed. With this threat looming over them, the organisations cooperated successfully.

#### *Size and allocation of cut-backs*

The second theme in the restructuring of social-cultural work concerned expenditure cuts in the city's social services sector. Decisions were taken regarding the size of the cut-backs and the allocation of these across the diverse posts of social-cultural work. It was thought that large savings could be made by bundling the organisations' administrative, overheads and supportive activities – leaving the operational costs largely unaffected. Alternatives were proposed, ranging from 100 to 750,000 guilders. The city council eventually decided to impose a budget cut of 550,000 guilders. At the end of 1995, 480,000 guilders had been cut. As a result, the organisations creatively proposed to postpone the implementation of the remaining 70,000 guilders of cut-backs by budgeting them as future 'earning effects'. The city government viewed this as a time bomb that could wreck the merger: the factions within the new WING organisation apparently did not agree on the distribution of these 'earning effects'.

#### *Introduction of neighbourhood platforms*

The third theme in the restructuring concerned the introduction of neighbourhood platforms. These were territorially defined consultation structures

that would assign contracts to the central social services organisation. They would set certain priorities regarding social-cultural work in their own areas. Concrete council decisions on the neighbourhood platforms were not taken until a later stage of the restructuring. These council decisions concerned four aspects of the functioning of the neighbourhood platforms: their structure, composition, their relationship with WING and their relationship with city government.

The *structure* of the neighbourhood platforms pertained to the level of decentralisation (number of platforms, the scope of their mission), and their level of standardisation. In some neighbourhoods, there was already cooperation between residents' organisations, social workers, volunteers and other actors. In other neighbourhoods, such cooperation did not exist. In both cases, there was little enthusiasm for a uniform 'imposed' cooperation structure. The *composition* of the neighbourhood platforms was a contested issue. Who should be allowed to participate? In October 1994, the council decided on a broad discussion platform, where residents could participate personally. There were many differences between the organisations in the field. For example, active residents were often also professionals in the field. The organisation of minority ethnic groups and older people supported the restriction in participation of professionals and volunteers. The Elderly People Wellbeing Organisation even stated that the proposed restructuring was utopian, and that the power would be held firmly by professional social workers.

The neighbourhood platforms' *relationship with WING*, the central organisation, was the subject of a number of other policy issues. They would be authorised to formulate the demand for services, and WING would have to supply these services. City government would authoritatively connect demand and supply. Neighbourhood work plans were developed, the feasibility of which would be tested by the city's social services department. The neighbourhood centres and residents' organisations fiercely attempted to contract out their demands to various organisations. In response, a controversial decision was adopted by the city council that basically forced the neighbourhood platforms to contract out exclusively to WING. Indeed, the social services organisations, merged in the central organisation WING, made forceful attempts to maintain their monopoly while at the same time displaying 'goodwill' towards the neighbourhood platforms. All the neighbourhood platforms had to accept the imposed monopoly of service provision by WING. The *relationship with city government* revolved around the flexibility in the allocation of budgets to the neighbourhood platforms. The city council decided on a small amount of flexibility. The residents' organisations, elderly people organisations and playground associations demanded much more protection regarding their future existence.

In retrospect, we conclude that the amount of political control which the city of Groningen exercised on this process was a key success factor, in the sense that despite all political conflict and the heterogeneous preferences of implementers, the reforms were seen as inevitable, and their implementation a success.