



The Netherlands Institute  
for Social Research

## Summary

# Conceptions of citizens in policy

Lessons learnt on the role of conceptions of citizens in lifelong learning and development policy and the COVID-19 vaccination strategy



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## *Summary*

# Conceptions of citizens in policy

Lessons learnt on the role of conceptions of citizens in lifelong learning and development policy and the COVID-19 vaccination strategy

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## **Awareness of conceptions of citizens in policy**

We have observed that, in recent years, there has been an increasing awareness of the key role that conceptions of citizens play in policies. These conceptions of what characterises (or should characterise) citizens and citizen behaviour influence how the government approaches them, what policy goals it considers feasible and desirable, and what policy instruments it deploys to get them to do certain things (Schneider and Ingram 1990, 1993; Ingram et al. 2007; Brown 2011, 2014). Recent studies and advisory reports have shown that conceptions of citizens in policies are sometimes simplistic, overly optimistic or, conversely, too pessimistic and that this can have serious consequences for the people concerned (National Ombudsman 2015, 2021a; Scientific Council for Government Policy 2017; Putters 2021, 2022; Council of State 2021; Tiemeijer 2021). The best known example of this is the Dutch childcare benefits scandal, in which the conception of citizens as ‘fraudsters’ had disastrous consequences for the parents affected and their children.

The conceptions of citizens that underlie policies often stay implicit and are rarely scrutinised. Despite the growing awareness of this issue, little is known at present about the conceptions of citizens underlying policies. Therefore, in this report, we examine conceptions of citizens in two policy areas that differ greatly from each other – the lifelong learning and development policy (*Leven Lang Ontwikkelen*, LLO) and the COVID-19 vaccination strategy – to draw lessons on the role of conceptions of citizens in policies. Based on an analysis of policy documents, government communications and interviews with policy-makers, we will answer the following question: *What implicit and explicit conceptions of citizens underlie the ‘lifelong learning and development’ and ‘COVID-19 vaccination strategy’ policy areas?*

In the following sections, we will summarise the findings of our research into this question.

## **Humans as rational beings who are of good will and responsible**

Although there are substantial differences between the two policy areas in terms of policy issues, a similar conception of citizens emerges from both. In both policy areas, what emerges is an idealised view of citizens as autonomous beings who make choices that are in their best interest and who, in doing so, are able to look towards the future, act responsibly and are sympathetic to the policy goals. This idealised view in large part sets policymakers’ expectations of what citizens are actually like and how they will respond to the policies.

In both policy areas, the policies are based on the assumption that, when you offer citizens the means (such as financial or other support) and inform them of the urgency and importance of the policy goal, they will generally choose to make an effort to accomplish it, by taking up training and investing in their development, or by getting a vaccination. This is based on the government’s belief that the policy goal is in citizens’ own best interest. Moreover, what is in the individual’s best interest is by extension assumed to be in society’s best interest: protecting each other and avoiding another lockdown in the case of the COVID-19 vaccination strategy and ensuring a properly functioning labour market in the case of the lifelong learning and development policy. In both policies, the importance of autonomy and free will is valued, but at the same time, citizens are expected to exercise this free will rationally and responsibly.

The policies are based on the assumption not only that citizens will behave rationally and responsibly, but also that they will therefore take specific actions: getting vaccinated or, if they have the option, taking training relevant to the labour market. When people are unwilling to do so, the policies mainly ascribe this to hurdles that can be removed through policy or to a lacking sense of urgency. More fundamental reasons for such unwillingness, such as people having other priorities or beliefs, are not addressed or, as in the case of the COVID-19 vaccination strategy, are only addressed at a later stage of the policy process.

At the same time, it is recognised in the policies that the average citizen is only human and does not always live up to the ideal. In our study, we have observed that this idealised view is being nuanced; this was particularly evident in our interviews with policymakers. In nuancing this idealised view, the main focus is on the variation that exists in terms of what people *are able to do*. These policymakers do not assume that people are entirely rational and self-reliant, but rather that they are rational beings to a limited extent and therefore do not make detailed cost-benefit calculations to reach the ideal decision.

These qualifications of the idealised view of citizens also end up being reflected in the policy interventions; this is partly driven by feedback from those charged with implementing the policies, responses from the outside world and the public debate. In both cases, this has resulted in the provision of extra support to people who need it and a greater focus on the accessibility of facilities, such as subsidy schemes and vaccination sites.

### **Humans as vulnerable beings**

Alongside the conception of citizens as rational beings who are of good will and responsible, we also encountered another conception of citizens in both cases: that of citizens as vulnerable beings who, due to circumstances related to their characteristics, experiences or environment, are unable to independently make responsible and rational decisions. In the policies, this manifestation of humans as vulnerable beings is, as it were, the exception to the rational, autonomous and responsible version of citizens. These people want to do what is asked of them, but they are not or not yet able to. According to the policies, these people deserve support, encouragement and protection, which means there is a role for government. In the lifelong learning and development policy, this concerns various forms and degrees of inability. Vulnerable humans and rational, autonomous humans form a sort of continuum of citizens who to a greater or lesser extent need support. The assumption in the lifelong learning and development policy is that, when the hurdles to engaging in training and development are removed, everyone will ultimately be able to proactively work on advancing their career prospects.

The definition of ‘vulnerable people’ is largely determined by the political debate, the debate among policymakers and the public debate and is shaped by the specific definition of the policy issue or policy goal. For the lifelong learning and development policy, these are the people who relatively rarely take part in training and development and whose jobs are most likely to change or disappear. For COVID-19, these – at least initially – were the people with the greatest health risks in the event of an infection with the virus.

### **Developments in conceptions of citizens: diversification, shifting and hardening**

During the period covered by our study, there appears to have been a trend towards policies more specifically aimed at target groups and towards more diversified policies in both policy areas, and the conception of which people are vulnerable appears to have shifted over time. In terms of conceptions of citizens, we see an increasing focus in both policy areas on differences between people and groups of people, along with a stronger emphasis on the view that people are in a vulnerable position. For example, in the COVID-19 vaccination strategy, vulnerable groups were initially identified on the basis of their health, in particular their physical health. Prompted by warnings from civil society organisations and government advisers, this definition of who was vulnerable was broadened to also include those who experienced serious social consequences due to the pandemic, such as adolescents. In the case of the lifelong learning and development policy, there has in recent years been a similar shift, with policymakers focusing more on the conception of citizens as vulnerable beings and on exerting more control through policy. This is partly in response to the increasing urgency to implement lifelong learning and development, due to staff shortages, and a shift in public sentiment due to the unfolding of the childcare benefits scandal that first came to light in 2017.

The shifts in the conceptions of citizens in these two policy areas show that conceptions of citizens change and are dynamic. This means conceptions of citizens are not entirely static, but change through a process of interaction with the policy and social contexts. Depending on those contexts, this change takes place gradually over a long period or instead suddenly and rapidly. The case of the COVID-19 vaccination strategy also shows that, in addition to the dominant conception of citizens becoming more nuanced and a shift taking place in this respect, a hardening of the conception of citizens can occur in a particular policy area, leading to an alternative, more extreme conception of citizens. This can serve as a counterpart to the dominant conception of citizens. For example, alongside the conception of citizens as rational beings who are willing to get vaccinated, an alternative, negative portrayal of humans emerged, that of obstinate anti-vaxxers, which was a main feature of the communications in the government’s COVID-19 press conferences.

### **Main takeaway: explicitly express conceptions of citizens and make potential mechanisms of exclusion visible**

To summarise, research into conceptions of citizens in policies reveals the – sometimes implicit – expectations the government has of its citizens. A government may obviously base its policies on normative views, as the role of politicians is to set goals and make choices. Indeed, a government that has no ideals may well be undesirable. But this becomes problematic when governments assume that *all citizens* share those ideals and, furthermore, will base their actions on those ideals. After all, conceptions of citizens are a simplification of reality and never provide an accurate characterisation of *all* citizens. Consequently, dominant conceptions of citizens give rise to mechanisms of exclusion. Previous studies have shown, for example, that for some groups of citizens, many policies are not aligned to what they are able to do (Oomkens et al. 2022; Tiemeijer 2021).

Our study shows a number of other potential mechanisms of exclusion that remained under the radar in previous studies looking into the impact of conceptions of citizens. These mechanisms are associated with the dominant conceptions of citizens we have identified in the different policy areas, but also with the specific application of these conceptions in light of the policy goals in the specific policy area.

First, we have found that there is a risk that policies disregard people who are ‘unwilling’ or that policies even put this ‘unwillingness’ in a negative light. In both policy areas, the policies in principle assume that citizens are of good will. When people are unwilling to do what is asked of them, the policies mainly ascribe this to hurdles that can be removed through policy or to a lacking sense of urgency. More fundamental reasons for such unwillingness, such as people having other priorities or beliefs, are not always addressed or are only addressed at a later stage, and in some cases, they cannot be influenced through the available policy instruments. As a consequence, people who are not sympathetic to the policy goal are implicitly labelled obstinate, irrational and irresponsible. This was reflected in the portrayal of the obstinate anti-vaxxers that emerged from the government’s COVID-19 press conferences. With policies aimed at supporting and encouraging people, where the urgency and direct consequences are less immediately visible or felt, exclusion can also be an unintended real-life consequence. The lifelong learning and development policy mainly caters to people who are intrinsically motivated to take up training and to work on their development. This also implicitly means that people who, despite the removal of hurdles and receiving the right information, are unwilling to take up training and to work on their development remain out of reach of this policy.

Furthermore, we have identified the risk that, due to the domain-specific application of the conception of citizens, certain other priorities and roles of people and other vulnerabilities and strengths remain under the radar. The conception of the rational citizen and the vulnerable citizen is applied in light of a specific policy issue or policy goal. That is a very logical step. However, the way in which citizens are approached affects who will make use of the offered support in practice. For example, people who experience a financial hurdle are properly supported through the lifelong learning and development policy, but that does not hold true for people who do not participate in lifelong learning and development activities due to health reasons or due to their responsibilities as an informal carer. The specific policy goal determines which issues are recognised and which are not. In the COVID-19 vaccination policy, for example, physical health issues were recognised, but mental health issues among adolescents arising due to the pandemic were overlooked, at least at the start. Furthermore, we know from previous studies that putting the primary focus on a specific domain can result in overburdening citizens and in a set of government policies that ‘competes with itself for people’s scarce time’ (Verbeek-Oudijk et al. 2023: 14). An example of this is when the government expects citizens to work more, invest in their development and also provide informal or other care to loved ones.

### **Recommendations for policymakers**

An all-encompassing portrayal of human behaviour that is applicable to everyone does not exist. But there are ways to take into consideration citizens and groups of citizens who do not fit into the dominant conception of citizens. Making explicit and questioning the conceptions of citizens that underlie policies helps in thinking through the consequences of policies for different groups of citizens and helps to identify and thus avoid potential mechanisms of exclusion. In addition, this study has identified a

number of possible ways in which policymakers can achieve this. Accordingly, we set out four suggested approaches for policymakers below, focused on the development of policies, the selection of policy instruments and how to communicate about and to citizens.

#### *1 Reflect on conceptions of citizens at the outset and during the policy process*

Conceptions of citizens are often deeply entrenched in policies. This makes it difficult to make more fundamental adjustments once policies have been introduced (Council of State 2021; see also Van Echtelt et al. 2019). Moreover, the application in policy of conceptions of citizens that not everyone fits into can also have adverse consequences for people and groups of people that are difficult to remedy (Council of State 2021; Schaper and Hartman 2023). Therefore, we recommend that, early on in the policy process, policymakers explicitly reflect on both their own conceptions of citizens and the conception of citizens underlying the policy they are developing. A concrete way to do so is by making the policy theory explicit and by scrutinising the underlying assumptions of what characterises people and their behaviour by comparing these to the experiences of citizens, agencies that implement government policy, experts and other stakeholders. Performing such a thought exercise or ex-ante policy review makes it possible to situate conceptions of citizens, to make strategy choices during policy preparations and to provide systematic accountability for the policy conducted.

#### *2 Use different interventions aimed at what people are able, want to, must and are allowed to do*

In recent years, a great deal of attention has been paid to people's ability to act (Scientific Council for Government Policy 2017) and differences in what people *are able to do*. In this study, we observed in the two policy areas we researched that policymakers increasingly take this aspect into account in the development of policy. However, our study also shows that policymakers, at least initially, pay relatively little attention to what people want to do, must do and are allowed to do, despite how importance this is. One of the ways to incorporate into policies what people are able, want to, must and are allowed to do is by tailoring policy instruments to the different motivations, perspectives, concerns, needs and social environments of people and by using different intervention rationales behind policy instruments. Different types of interventions are required to bring about behavioural change with different groups of people (Scientific Council for Government Policy 2017; Sirovatka and Spies 2018; Westerveen and Kruiter 2020). We have seen good examples of this in both of the policy areas in our study.

#### *3 Look at people's roles from an integral perspective*

In order to gain an overview of the consequences of policies for different groups of citizens, the different roles people perform in their daily lives need to be considered in designing policies. This requires first of all that, in designing policies, policymakers see citizens not only, for example, in their capacity as workers (or potential workers), but also as neighbours, informal carers or volunteers (see also Van Oudenhoven-van der Zee 2023). In our study, we found a great example of that in the lifelong learning and development policy: focusing on making the training offered more flexible. Offering more flexible ways to attend training would enable people to better combine it with the other roles they perform at work and in their household. Secondly, this requires collaboration and consultation between departments and ministries. Some hurdles or opportunities are outside of the scope of a particular department or ministry but can be addressed in or in collaboration with another policy domain. This requires that the policymakers involved take an integral perspective that transcends the boundaries between domains and target groups.

#### *4 Be aware of the implicit and explicit normative messages in policy and explain policy goals and decisions*

Our study shows that conceptions of citizens in policies always contain a normative message, sometimes explicitly but more often implicitly. Portraying a negative image of people who do not fit into the dominant conception of the ideal can lead to people being excluded and can increase the distance between the government and citizens (see also Schaper and Hartman 2023). Policymakers should take into account the normative message of policies, and their side effects. They can do so first of all by looking into citizens' underlying motivations and concerns and tailoring their policy interventions accordingly (see also our second recommendation). In addition, the government can explain its policy goals and the resulting policy decisions to citizens, showing understanding for the different perspectives, interests and concerns of citizens, and explain to citizens how it has weighed these up. This would also cater to the need among citizens for a clear vision and a consistent weighing up of interests (see Van

Oudenhoven-van der Zee 2023; Elchardus 2009; Verbeek-Oudijk et al. 2023). Our study shows that the nuances and underlying deliberations by politicians and policymakers to some extent remain invisible in policies and in the communications about policies. One possible approach to address this is by making the deliberations behind policy goals and policy decisions more visible by explaining why particular policy goals have been set.

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