



The Netherlands Institute
for Social Research

Summary

Seeing, listening and providing support

What municipalities can do to improve outreach in the social domain



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original title

Zien, luisteren en helpen

Wat gemeenten kunnen doen voor een beter bereik in het sociaal domein

Inger Plaisier

Mark Reijnders

Anne Louise Schotel

with the cooperation of

Peggy Schyns

The Netherlands Institute for Social Research

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Key findings and summary

Key findings

At present, there is a sizeable group of people in the Netherlands who need assistance or support and who are not being reached. This risks making their situation more problematic and risks further exacerbating existing inequalities between groups, as well as increasing distrust in the government as a whole. This is why the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, SCP) carried out a study to examine why municipalities and support organisations are not reaching all residents eligible for assistance in the social domain and what municipalities can do to improve that. This qualitative study was carried out in three municipalities (which remain anonymous in this study).

Why municipalities are not reaching everyone eligible for assistance...

The three municipalities in this study attempt to reach people in need of support in different ways. However, they are only partially successful in doing so. Residents who cannot be reached often include people with complex or compound problems. As this study illustrates, the causes of lack of reach in the social domain are diverse and are situated at different levels, ranging from the societal level, to the level of governance and policy and the level of support provision. Policies in the social domain are based partly on unrealistic assumptions, perceptions of and attitudes toward people, such as the assumption that people who need help will always ask for it themselves. As a result, support services are often provided through a help desk, where people may seek help for specific issues and make use of certain services that are being offered there. Although municipalities make efforts to set up these desks in a way that they are easily accessible and in close proximity to residents, this type of service provision remains passive in nature. Consequently, municipalities fail to reach people who do not consult the services for assistance on their own. At the same time, social workers themselves often do not have enough time and flexibility to actively approach residents who have become bogged down in their problems and to collaborate with network partners in the social domain. In terms of their ability to collaborate and provide assistance, they are also hampered by rigid and complicated rules. Staff shortages and a drive on the part of municipalities to cut costs are likewise not conducive to the work of support providers.

...and what municipalities can do about it

Municipalities should regard people who do not receive assistance that they nevertheless need primarily as residents who they have not reached, instead of regarding them as non-users of services that they offer. Reflecting on it as a matter of outreach, encourages policymakers and social workers to more actively seek out people who do not seek out or are unfamiliar with the pathways to assistance. By taking outreach as a starting point for reflection and action, it becomes more important to listen to people's personal needs and tailoring assistance and support accordingly. As a result, merely offering services through a service desk is not enough. It also requires room and capacity to actively approach people who need help (outreach). A well-devised vision at the local level on which residents should be reached would provide direction in terms of decisions that are being made about social service delivery. The prerequisites are that this vision is based on realistic conceptions of people, is widely recognised and supported by social workers and service providers, and that it can be clearly explained to residents. The social domain is constantly evolving due to all sorts of societal developments and changing political notions with regards to social service provision. This dynamic context calls for a continuous learning system in which both the experiences of social workers and service providers in practice and those of people who needed assistance are taken into account when changes are (or have to be) made to services in light of political or budgetary considerations.

Summary

Why this study on improving outreach? (Chapter 1)

Municipal authorities are not always successful in reaching all people who are in need of and qualify for assistance with the appropriate support. When people do not get the support they require, their problems can get worse, as a result of which they need more expensive and more complex assistance in the long run. Moreover, not receiving help can damage their trust in the government. Such issues also became apparent in the first sub-study into the 'lived experience' of residents: *Gezien, gehoord en geholpen willen worden* (Plaisier et al. 2023).¹ This study was based on experiential accounts of people who had not been reached in time in terms of assistance. This second sub-study deals with the so-called systemic environment, meaning the policies and the system of service delivery. The main research question is:

*Why are municipalities and service providers not reaching all residents eligible for assistance in the social domain and what can they do to improve the outreach of their assistance?*²

The purpose of these two sub-studies combined is to give policymakers and service providers a better understanding of the knock-on effect of social policies, the impact of their actions in implementation on the people who are in need of help, and how people perceive this. This offers them a useful starting point to improve policies and services, allowing them to reach people more effectively.

Research method

This qualitative study took place in three (anonymous) municipalities that differ in terms of their size and location within the Netherlands. These municipalities provide an insight into the wide range of challenges that municipal authorities face and the choices that are being made as to how the social domain is organised and set up. Interviews with policymakers and professionals in the social domain took place in these municipalities regarding their efforts and experiences in terms of reaching residents. In addition, working visits were carried out, policy documents were examined and external experts were consulted.

What is non-reach? (Chapter 2)

In many municipalities and in existing studies on assistance, the main focus is the (lack of) use or the underutilisation of facilities and assistance that are available. This is different to a focus on reaching people who are in need of assistance. A focus on use or lack thereof centres around the existing range of services that are being offered by municipalities and support providers. A focus on reach, by contrast, places the emphasis on connecting assistance and support to the genuine needs of residents and requires a more demand-driven approach. A supply-driven approach is a major cause of unsuitable or absent assistance, whereas a demand-driven approach improves the likelihood of people getting appropriate and timely support.

Based on the experiential accounts documented by the first sub-study, non-reach can be defined as a situation in which municipalities and service providers fail to provide people who are unable to get by with appropriate assistance for a humane existence in a timely and comprehensive manner. The non-reach phenomenon consists of several elements:

- An element of *invisibility*: people who could benefit from assistance are not (sufficiently) visible to municipalities and service providers.
- An element of *lack of availability* of assistance: there are no services for specific assistance needs, there is a shortage of support (e.g. due to waiting lists) or service providers mistakenly assume that people are not eligible for assistance.
- An element of *time/timing*: assistance is provided at too late a stage or not at all.

¹ Plaisier, I., P. Schyns, K. Kadrouch-Outmany, A. Schotel and M. de Klerk (2023). *Gezien, gehoord en geholpen willen worden. Ervaringsverhalen uit het sociaal domein over gemiste ondersteuning*. Den Haag: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau.

² Service providers refer to both people who work for the municipality and allocate facilities to residents, such as client managers or counsellors, and social workers who (also) provide assistance to residents themselves, such as employees of a district social work team (*sociaal wijkteam*).

- An element of *appropriate* assistance: assistance is not (sufficiently) tailored to people's specific needs, there are insufficient tailor-made solutions available.
- An element of *incompleteness*: when people have needs in different areas of life, but municipalities and service providers are unable to reach them on all the various fronts.

If people are not reached either in a timely or appropriate manner, this can exacerbate their existing problems and may also lead to other problems. Furthermore, the personal stories in the first sub-study also show that people who are not given assistance in a timely manner feel that they are not seen or heard by the government.

Non-reach causes a major dilemma for a large number of municipalities. On the one hand, they want to provide support for the people who need it, yet, on the other hand, limited funding and personnel capacity can lead to these authorities wanting to avoid excessive use of facilities and support services. In addition, it is difficult for municipalities to gain insight into the extent of non-reach. The statistics that municipalities use for this purpose do not accurately portray the support needs of their residents and those for follow-up assistance. In the case of income assistance, data appears to be more readily available than, for example, in the case of health problems or loneliness, for which accurate data is often lacking.

Non-reach in a broader social and policy context (Chapter 3)

Developments in society, such as (the aftermath of) the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing lack of trust in the government, the energy crisis and rising volunteer and personnel shortages have an impact on how people are reached in the social domain. Generally speaking, these developments negatively impact the ability and efforts to reach people in need of help. However, occasionally they do produce positive types of impact. For example, during the pandemic and the energy crisis, groups that had previously been difficult for municipalities to reach, such as the self-employed, became more visible as a result of temporary income support schemes.

In addition to developments in society, municipalities also have to deal with policy assumptions and frameworks at the national level on the basis of which they shape their policy and which appear to partially account for non-reach. National laws, regulations and policies (such as the General Data Protection Regulation, GDPR) have the potential to restrict the ability of municipalities and support providers to share relevant data in order to improve their outreach. In that regard, more flexible legal options may improve municipalities' ability to detect people with problems at an early stage. Early detection for debt counselling and the Proactive Service Bill (*wetsvoorstel proactieve dienstverlening*) are examples that point in this direction.

Unrealistic conceptions of people and policy assumptions at the national level, such as people's willingness to seek out assistance, decreases the likelihood of reaching people who are most in need of assistance. For example, the policy assumption that people will ask for assistance themselves has in practice proven problematic. The same applies for what in policy terms is referred to as people's self-reliance and co-reliance. For example, the point of departure of the Social Support Act (*Wet maatschappelijke ondersteuning, Wmo*) and the Youth Act (*Jeugdwet*) is that people can become self-reliant again following temporary support or that they are able to get sufficient support from their own social network. However, this is not feasible for every single person. Some people have permanent or increasing disabilities and will need long-term assistance. Furthermore, their own networks are not always strong enough to provide (long-term, intensive) support.

The notion underpinning the decentralisation of the social domain centred around municipalities being closer to their residents than governmental bodies, as a result of which they would be more aware of what is going on. In practice, however, it has been shown that the gap between policymakers and residents in districts and people's immediate environment can be equally significant at the local level.

Policies in the three municipalities (Chapter 4)

The three municipalities that were studied vary in terms of their vision and policies when it comes to reaching residents with support needs. Political preferences and the local context of the municipality play

key roles in the policy choices that are being made. The policy decisions have an impact on the organisation of access to their services, which differs in the three municipalities examined. In the policy documents regarding the social domain that were studied, the terms 'non-reach' and 'reach' of residents in fact hardly appear at all. However, they do pay attention to issues such as the availability and accessibility of services.

One of the three municipalities relies heavily on the assumption that their residents form a tight-knit local community and that they look out for one another a great deal. This municipality makes a strong appeal to its residents (on paper, in any case) to participate and to be self-reliant. The initiative in respect of requesting assistance is primarily placed with residents themselves. In doing so, the municipality has made the pathway to support (which is digital as much as possible) as clear and accessible as possible. However, support providers in this municipality observe that specific groups fall outside the local community and are therefore not reached effectively.

In the second municipality, inclusiveness in respect of all its residents is a paramount principle. In order to increase inclusiveness, the municipality has elected to operate brick-and-mortar service desks in the various districts, in locations where people also come to meet each other and relax. According to respondents in this study, one disadvantage of this strategy is that people are highly visible to people in their neighbourhood if they turn to the service with their support needs. Furthermore, the municipality offers a great deal of freedom for the initiatives and creative solutions of policymakers and social workers aimed at supporting people. Respondents consider this to be a positive aspect, however equally see it leading to a multitude of rather short-term and ever-changing projects, making it challenging to stay well informed about current service offerings.

The third municipality has a strong commitment to the uniformity, findability and easy accessibility of the district teams to whom residents can turn with any support needs. Out of the three municipalities, it was this municipal authority that wanted to reach out to its residents and reach people at an early stage the most by having a visible presence in districts in many different places. A lot of initiative is expected (on paper) from the implementing parties in the social domain. In practice, it is difficult to sustain this way of working due to the large numbers of people with support needs and the limited time available to help everybody.

In the practical implementation of the three municipalities, the similarities in attitudes and behaviour of support providers appear larger than the differences between them in the policies on paper would suggest. As people become more distant from (municipal) policymakers and more involved in the practice of services delivery, they become more critical. This criticism focuses on the assumptions underpinning the policies in particular. Support providers, for example, state that policymakers occasionally have little knowledge of the experiential environment of their residents and having overly high expectations of the capabilities and methods of social district teams and other professionals in the social domain.

Organising outreach within local services (Chapter 5)

The success of municipalities in reaching residents on time as well as comprehensively, and offering suitable assistance where necessary, ultimately depends on the performance of social service providers. Based on the interviews in the three municipalities, three aspects can be identified that may advance or impede outreach. These are: 1) the organisation and methods of local service provision, 2) the interplay of organisations within the local network, and 3) the facilitation of individual professionals in the social domain.

1) Organisation and methods of local service

When designing their services, policymakers and service providers often believe that services should be organised to be low-threshold – meaning easily accessible, safe and well staffed – have a brick-and-mortar service desk or multiple service desks of this type in close proximity to people. In addition, the language and tone of the communication regarding the services of municipalities and the resources play a role: on paper, digitally (website or app), posters or by word-of-mouth. The choice of these resources and channels must align with the groups you want to reach. It is possible that the service desk notion (the idea that people should be able to ask for help at fixed points in the municipality) is not always conducive

to outreach. Certain parties feel that there ought to be more variety in ways to reach people and provide them with support. They feel a service desk is too 'wait-and-see' in terms of attitude and is supply oriented. Professionals should adopt a more active approach and – if necessary – get behind people's front doors. Outreach work and early detection are not a matter of course from the position of a service desk, whereas these are methods aimed at reaching people.

2) The interplay of organisations within the local network

A properly functioning network of a broad range of organisations broadens perspectives on people and their support needs and therefore contributes to outreach. At the same time, manpower and expertise are needed to establish and maintain it. According to participants to this study, it pays to invest in structural network connections between various parties involved. In this regard, they also explicitly refer to organisations from adjacent fields such as education, medical care, safety and public housing. Improved relationships and cooperation between relevant parties can contribute to solutions to more complex issues in the social domain, such as failure to reach people in the most vulnerable positions. The three municipalities examined demonstrate several relevant positive examples, including through decompartmentalisation within and between organisations, establishing connections between GPs and district teams, and case study teams in which various organisations come together to discuss how to help people with complex problems. Although interviewees do cite the fact that there are difficulties, including limitations in respect of data sharing and an unclear division of tasks and responsibilities between organisations.

Furthermore, effective local political-administrative cooperation between various domains is crucial, such as between the work and income domain and the healthcare domain, in order to avoid compartmentalisation between departments and forms of services. Close cooperation at policy level encourages consistency in taking up requests for assistance from people with problems in different areas of life. This is certainly the case if this happens in a system in which stakeholders from different (executive, experiential and administrative) levels share knowledge with each other in different policy areas and continue to learn from one another. It is therefore crucial to set aside time for policy officer and support providers to be able to establish and maintain structural relationships.

3) Facilitating support providers in doing the right thing

Outreach to a large extent depends on the attitude, experience, knowledge and organisational capabilities of support providers who operate in the social domain. The interviews show that the way in which they are supported and facilitated by their organisations has an impact on outreach. This includes the time and flexibility they are given to do their outreach work, the extent to which organisations manage to invest in support and guidance of professionals and volunteers and the level of visibility they have in the district where they have targeted their support services. Budget cuts, personnel shortage, a high caseload and rigid rules and procedures hinder social workers from doing what is necessary. These issues hamper them in the development and application of methods such as outreach work and get in the way of learning from one another. Although it is unlikely that all barriers can be removed, it would be beneficial to foster a more explicit focus on the effective facilitation of social workers. As this study shows, it is vital to draw on the valuable experience and knowledge from professionals in the social domain in this regard.



This is a publication of:

The Netherlands Institute for Social Research
P.O. Box 16164
2500 BD Den Haag
www.scp.nl
info@scp.nl

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