

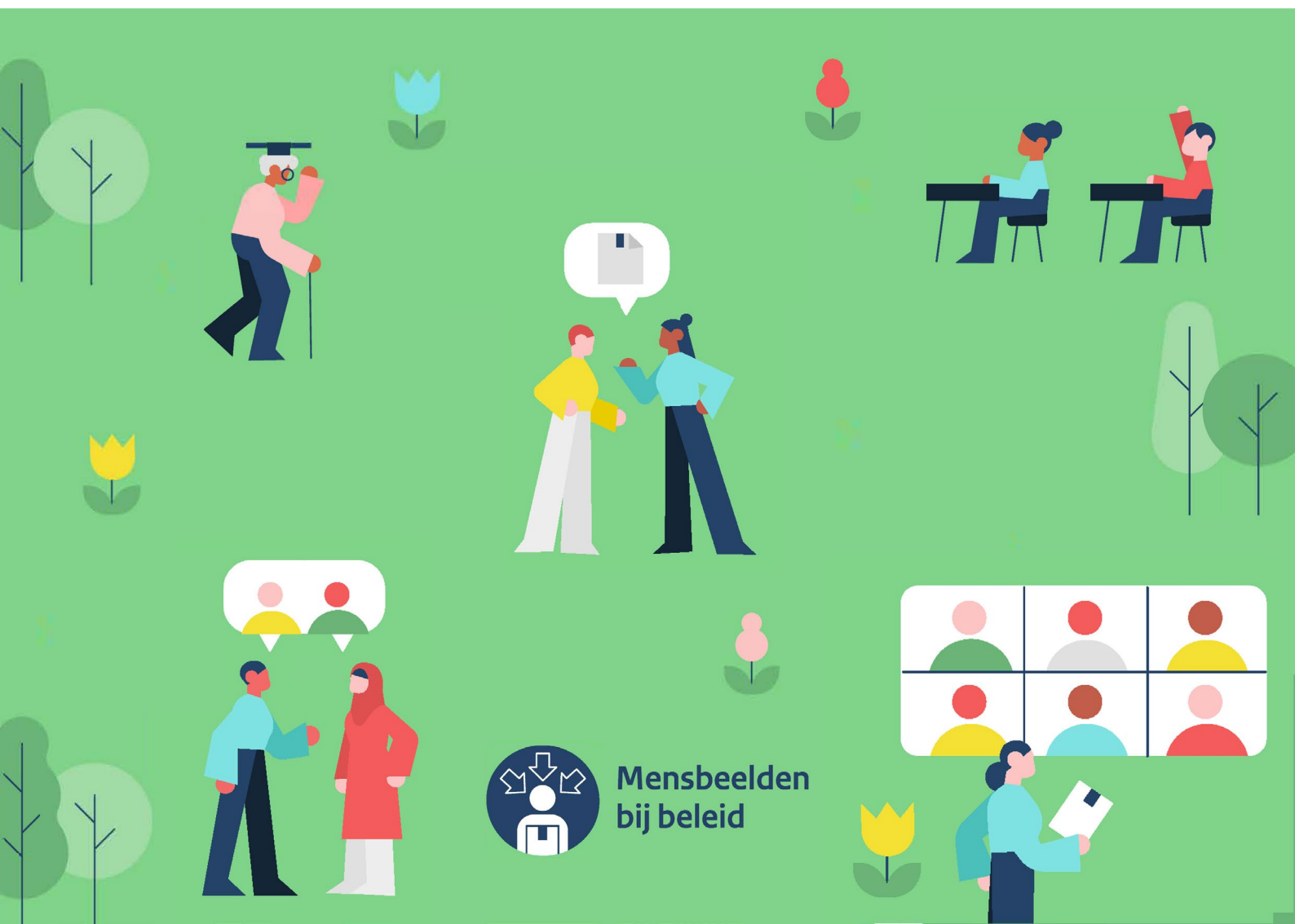


The Netherlands Institute
for Social Research

Summary

There for those who want it

Conceptions of citizens regarding
lifelong learning and development



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Conceptions of citizens regarding
lifelong learning and development

original title:

Wie wil moet het kunnen

Mensbeelden van burgers bij leren en ontwikkelen

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Summary

Background and research question

There has been a growing focus on conceptions of citizens in policymaking in recent years. These conceptions are assumptions about how people are, or how they ought to be. Recent studies and reports show that these assumptions in policy affect the people concerned (Nationale Ombudsman 2015, 2021; Putters 2021, 2022; RVS 2021; Tiemeijer 2021; WRR 2017). A previous study by the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (*Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, SCP*) found an underlying conception of citizens in Lifelong Learning and Development (LLD) policy as rational, acting autonomously, and well-meaning (sympathetic to the policy goals). Additionally, this analysis revealed a conception as vulnerable, requiring support (Blijleven et al. 2023). This report builds on this earlier work and examines conceptions regarding LLD from the perspective of citizens. Are the conceptions that citizens have of themselves and others on this subject similar to the conceptions policymakers have of citizens, or are they significantly different? Through interviews with citizens, we answer the following question: *To what extent do the conceptions of citizens in LLD policy align with the conceptions citizens have about themselves and others in relation to LLD?* To answer this, we analysed the interviews based on what citizens believe people must, want to, are able to, and should be allowed to do when it comes to LLD.

The focus on LLD is partly driven by urgent societal challenges emerging in the labour market. The labour market faces issues such as an ageing population, a dejuvenation of the workforce and associated staff shortages in critical sectors. These challenges become most apparent when addressing major transitions, such as the climate and energy transitions. These developments and challenges demand people who continue to develop themselves. LLD offers numerous benefits for individuals, society, and the economy, such as better career opportunities, a well-educated workforce and increased labour productivity and innovation. The government therefore emphasises the importance of LLD, using various measures to encourage lifelong learning and development throughout one's career. As such, LLD is a relevant policy area that addresses key societal challenges of our time. With this research, we aim to contribute to a better understanding of how conceptions of citizens in policy function. We also seek to provide recommendations that are particularly useful for LLD policy.

Research findings

Citizens believe the decision to engage in LLD should lie with individuals themselves

In our study, the interviewed citizens indicated that they consider LLD important, both for individuals and for society. The importance of LLD is therefore clear to the interviewees. Participation in LLD activities is seen by the interviewees primarily as a matter of personal desire. Those who want to engage in LLD should be given the opportunity. Those who do not wish to participate should be free to make that choice. The ability to make personal decisions based on individual considerations is highly valued. Without necessarily using the common policy terms of 'self-regulation' or 'personal responsibility', the interviewees describe the importance of being in control of one's own LLD. Not only is the decision to participate in LLD up to the individual, but the way they engage in LLD is also seen as a personal choice. As such, despite the societal importance of LLD, the interviewees consider the decision to engage in it to be an individual matter. In this sense, our citizen interviewees broadly support the ideal of a rational, autonomous individual who makes personal choices and is eager to learn. Personal choice is closely tied to intrinsic motivation for the interviewed citizens. As a result, they believe mandatory learning would be ineffective, except for employer-required courses essential for employees' daily functioning.

Those who are unable to participate in LLD should receive support

The interviewees also recognise the image of the vulnerable person, acknowledging that not everyone is in a position to participate in LLD. They believe that these individuals should receive additional support, such as accessible information, guidance and financial assistance. Moreover, both the interviewed citizens and policymakers (see Blijleven et al. 2023) acknowledge a spectrum ranging from relatively less self-sufficient individuals, who need more support, to self-sufficient individuals, who require little or no support.

Recommendations

Highlight where individual freedom of choice and collective goals intersect, and possibly steer more strongly towards collective goals

Based on these findings, we present several recommendations. The first is to clarify where individual freedom of choice and collective goals intersect and, if necessary, to more strongly steer towards what is needed by society. This recommendation stems from an apparent contradiction in the interviewees' attitudes. On the one hand, they recognise the importance of Lifelong Learning and Development (LLD) for society, often mentioning sectors with labour shortages. The idea is that it would benefit society if people retrained for sectors where there is an urgent need for workers. Despite acknowledging that collective goals are tied to LLD, individual freedom of choice remains the interviewees' main priority. At first glance, this creates a tension: how can collective goals be achieved if individual choices do not necessarily align with those goals? The recommendation to policymakers is to communicate more clearly about what the collective goals are and how individual choices can contribute to them. Retraining for sectors with shortages is a good example of how individual and collective goals can align. It is important to better highlight where the qualitative and quantitative labour shortages (and thus job opportunities) lie. If this does not lead to more retraining for shortage sectors, the government could choose to more actively steer collective challenges. For example, by limiting the range of training options so that individuals can only choose courses relevant to the labour market (when they are applying for government subsidies) or by proactively encouraging learning and career behaviour (in a specific direction) among workers and job seekers through intensive and/or targeted career guidance. In any case, it seems reasonable for the government to reconsider the assumption that individual 'rational' choices will always lead to collectively beneficial outcomes.

Emphasise links between LLD and major issues that affect people

A closely related recommendation is to make it much clearer that there are links between LLD and the major issues that affect people. Although LLD policy does indeed touch on major themes like equality of opportunity and broad prosperity, its *direct* impact on people's daily lives is less tangible than, for instance, challenges in healthcare or the housing market. According to our interviewees, LLD is much more seen as something someone could do rather than a key to solving urgent societal problems. If citizens view LLD as a policy area unrelated to pressing social issues, participation will remain a matter of free choice. By making it clearer how LLD is indeed linked to societal challenges, it could gain more urgency in citizens' eyes. Labour shortages in sectors crucial to society's quality of life are the most striking examples of how LLD can help address a societal issue. Another example is how LLD can reduce inequality of opportunity. People who had fewer opportunities in their initial education can catch up through later training. Policy could stress that LLD is connected to these larger issues and is more than just an individual responsibility. The government could also give LLD a less optional character by, for example, developing a separate legal framework for adult education. This possibility is described in the report *Ongekend Talent* (Unheard-Of Talent) as follows: 'The government could develop a clear view of the form and content of retraining and upskilling opportunities and the associated rights and obligations, and institutionalise this in the legal system' (Rijksoverheid 2020: 86). The challenge with this option is to ensure that citizens do not perceive policy instruments involving obligations and restrictions as coercive or paternalistic, as this would clash with their view of the autonomous, self-directed individual.

Be aware of possible blind spots due to ‘silent ideology’

Our final recommendation stems from the observed overlap between conceptions of citizens and the conceptions visible in LLD policy. This overlap can be seen as positive: citizens and policymakers share the same conceptions with regards to LLD. However, there is a potential downside, as this overlap may also indicate the existence of a ‘silent ideology’ surrounding LLD. A silent ideology is an unspoken set of assumptions so widely accepted that they are no longer questioned. The existence of a silent ideology is not necessarily problematic, but it can make it difficult to see alternative ways of shaping policy. Elements of the silent ideology surrounding LLD include a strong emphasis on self-regulation, personal responsibility and the focus on incentives and stimuli to promote LLD. The presence of a silent ideology can obscure alternative solutions that fall outside the established frameworks. Alternative viewpoints can emerge by making room for dissenting voices, which policymakers can actively encourage. We provide suggestions for this in the concluding chapter.

This research sheds light on citizens’ conceptions of themselves and others. In this study, we focus on LLD policy as a case to explore conceptions of citizens. By comparing these with the previously identified conceptions underlying policy, we gain a more complete picture of how the government and citizens view each other. The conceptions of policymakers and citizens can differ significantly. However, in this study, we found that citizens and policymakers share remarkably similar assumptions about how people are and how they should be.

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