

# Trusting and letting go

Summary

Rob



# Trusting and letting go

## Summary

Now that belief in the market as the place where complex problems can best be solved within an interplay of supply and demand is being eroded, and confidence is lacking that government can take back many of those functions once more, there is considerable enthusiasm for the argument that citizens should shoulder greater responsibility for public affairs. There are a number of possible explanations for this shift. There is little room for manoeuvre in the public finances, resulting in a major reduction in the financial capacity of government. There is also growing awareness that many of the issues facing society are too complex for government to be able to solve them. This has led to the increasingly vocal argument that politicians and administrators should enable people and their organisations to take matters into their own hands, because they are often better able than government to solve societal problems.

Given its aim of creating compact government, the first Cabinet led by Mark Rutte (2010-2012) joined in with the call for a shift in tasks and responsibilities towards society as a whole. It was in that context that the Minister of the Interior, Liesbeth Spies, requested the Council for Public Administration to provide advice regarding the societisation of government functions. In the view of the Council, societisation takes place when the authorities leave public tasks and the associated responsibilities and powers to citizens, civil-society organisations, and businesses.

Many of the tasks that we now describe as being government tasks in fact originated as initiatives by individuals. In the course of the twentieth century, they were increasingly taken over by government, which performed them together with civil-society organisations that were divided along social and political lines. Since the 1980s, execution of these tasks has increasingly shifted to the market. In recent years, however, that market emphasis has been partly abandoned and replaced by a greater focus on society as a whole, on individual citizens, and on their organisations.

Countless civil-society organisations in the area of healthcare, education, and housing are the result of the historically close involvement of people with one another. But as with public tasks, these organisations have shifted in the course of time from society via government to the domain of the market. They have therefore become uprooted; they belong neither to government nor to the market, and society has been lost track of. These organisations – often referred to as “societal businesses” – have become too detached from the people for whom they carry out their public tasks. That connection needs to be restored. Countless civil-society organisations are therefore realising once again that they are primarily “owned” by – for example – pupils (and pupils’ parents), patients, or tenants.

Pleas for citizens to take over more of tasks of government are often based on the implicit underlying judgment that citizens are currently insufficiently involved or do not shoulder sufficient responsibility. An abundance of studies has shown, however, that the citizens of the Netherlands are in fact extremely active and involved. There has, however, been a shift in the way that they express

their involvement. Small-scale, separate, and informal groups are gaining in importance at the expense of formalised organisations. There has also been a change in people's motives for being active. Nevertheless, the Netherlands still has more voluntary workers than the international average and they perform an exceptionally large amount of work. Dutch society therefore in fact consists of ideal citizens: people who wish to be active for their neighbourhood, district, or association. They appear to be ready, under certain circumstances, to undertake more public functions.

The reasons for government to transfer public tasks to citizens and their organisations are crucial in that respect. Currently, those reasons one-sidedly involve economising and the creation of "compact government". The main reason for societisation ought, however, to be recognition of the fact that politicians and administrators are dependent on input from society as a whole for knowledge and experience and that ultimately government cannot do everything by itself. It is also advisable for politicians and administrators to dispel concern that societisation leads to "passing the buck" as regards responsibilities. Government must continue to act as the safety net for vulnerable members of society and must be alert to the risk of making demands that are too high. The Council finally wishes to note that citizens and their civil-society organisations must also be given greater responsibility and control. Societising public functions is a recipe for disappointment if residents and their organisations are reduced merely to implementing agencies that are required to carry out orders received from the town hall.

A vital society – i.e. one in which people are active on behalf of their fellow citizens, neighbourhood, association, municipality, nature conservation, or other ideals without receiving any actual reward – does in fact exist in the Netherlands. It is that vital society that may offer options for making government in the Netherlands more compact – in that order and not vice versa. In this connection, government must above all become more compact as regards its pretensions and ambitions, and leave room for initiatives from within society. Ultimately, the main point is to call upon the vitality and resilience of society as a whole. That demands a different kind of government, with a different concept of its role: government that creates the preconditions for orderly social interaction, with society itself shaping the outlines and implementation of people's own and shared interests.

Such an enabling state can only be a success if the domains of the market and society function properly and if they are in balance with one another. The three different domains must be deployed where their logic and features can generate benefits. Moreover, the change implies a different way of working on the part of civil servants. They will need to become facilitators who work with stakeholders and interested parties – including political administrators – towards a clearly defined goal and the associated necessary interventions. In doing so, they must attempt to avoid the three common errors of government where initiatives from within society are concerned: asking too much of volunteers, taking over the initiative, or swamping the initiative in procedures and rules. Another requirement for the switch to an enabling state is perhaps the most important, namely that politicians actually leave room for private initiative rather than clinging too much to formal power and political primacy. Politicians and administrators must learn to let go and must not be afraid of saying that government cannot always be involved in everything. They cannot solve every problem or exclude every risk.

This change in the role of government involves nothing less than a paradigm shift. It begins by accepting that what is necessary develops first and foremost within society as a whole and within the communities that make it up. Society may then subsequently express a need for government support. It is the private initiative that is decisive, and the role that government consequently needs or wishes to play must be made explicit. In order to help select the appropriate role, the Council is taking this opportunity to introduce a government “participation ladder” consisting of five rungs: letting go, facilitating, encouraging, directing, regulating. There is not just a single ideal or optimum role for government. For each particular situation and topic, politicians and administrators will need to determine and make explicit the role that they envisage for government. At the same time, however, the shift we are referring to does mean that they will more frequently adopt only a modest role. Leaving room for the vitality of society is more likely to be successful if government stays down towards the bottom of the participation ladder.