



# *Confidence in Citizens*

SUMMARY OF WRR-RAPPORT 88

**WRR**

## *Confidence in Citizens*

The Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) was established on a provisional basis in 1972. It was given a formal legal basis under the Act of Establishment of June, 30 1976. The present term of office runs up to December 31 2012.

According to the Act of Establishment, it is the Council's task to supply, in behalf of government policy, scientifically sound information on developments which may affect society in the long term, and to draw timely attention to likely anomalies and obstacles, to define major policy problems and to indicate policy alternatives.

The Council draws up its own programme of work, after consultation with the Prime Minister, who also takes cognisance of the cabinet's view on the proposed programme.

Lange Vijverberg 4-5  
P.O. Box 20004  
2500 EA 's-Gravenhage  
Tel. + 31 70 356 46 00  
Fax + 31 70 356 46 85  
E-mail: [info@wrr.nl](mailto:info@wrr.nl)  
Internet: <http://www.wrr.nl>

# *Confidence in Citizens*

---

SUMMARY OF WRR-RAPPORT 88

Summary of WRR-rapport nr. 88 *Vertrouwen in burgers* (ISBN 978 90 8964 404 6), published by the Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR)/ Amsterdam University Press March 2013. The complete version (in Dutch) is available on [www.wrr.nl](http://www.wrr.nl).

Design: Studio Daniëls BV, The Hague

© WRR / Scientific Council for Government Policy. The Hague, 2013

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this book may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the written permission of both the copyright owner and author of the book.

## INHOUD

1	Introduction	7
2	The challenge	9
3	Practice	11
	Taking citizens' perspective	11
	Preconditions for success	12
	Thresholds	13
4	Inspiration	15
	Democracy of action	16
5	Building confidence	19
	Create opposition	19
	Strengthen day-to-day influence	21
	Encourage social interaction	22
	Build support pillars	23
6	Initiating change	25
7	Order information	27



# 1 INTRODUCTION

Involved citizens are crucial for a living democracy. They legitimize the representation of the people through their votes. They keep representatives of the people and government agencies on their toes and aware of being under democratic control. They also play an important part in the life of society: they provide broad-based support for policy implementation, actualize it in their day-to-day actions, and, by proposing ideas, topics, and approaches, bring about social innovation.

In order for them to be involved, citizens should trust ‘their’ democratic institutions but be able and willing to critically monitor them at the same time. They should also trust each other because they need one another to accomplish shared goals. Policymakers, in their turn, should be willing to trust citizens by providing them with scope for involvement.

Over the past few decades, policymakers have made many efforts to promote opportunities for civic involvement, but the results have been disappointing. There is a long story of many projects, little learning, and inadequate structural embedding; the links between politics and society, it seems, have been severed. And society is changing in fast and unpredictable ways. The ways in which citizens are involved are also changing. They are not only involved when policymakers invite them to do so, but increasingly on their own initiative, through more direct channels, bypassing the traditional centre.

Civic involvement has thus become a social issue in which the real and the ideal have drifted too far apart and require a policy breakthrough. The WRR report *Confidence in Citizens*, therefore, examines what policymakers can do to improve civic involvement. Owing to the complexity of our present-day society, there is no definitive answer to this question, but the report does establish a genuine basis for action. The fieldwork that preceded the making of this report yielded many rich illustrations of ways of building civic involvement in practice. The commitment, perseverance, and creativity shown by so many may help to inspire others to keep looking for better answers to the questions they have.





## 2 THE CHALLENGE

The keyword in a society that is predicated on civic involvement is confidence: policymakers' confidence in citizens and citizens' confidence in policymakers and in each other. Such confidence, however, is not blind. A good measure of confidence is essential for representative democracy and mutual involvement, and a healthy measure of distrust is required for a corrective counterbalance and for social innovation.

Though the Dutch are, on the whole, satisfied with the way democracy operates, major groups of citizens in our increasingly complex society appear to have lost touch with 'their' political world: they feel overtasked, have little confidence in their own ability to influence politics, do not believe politics will promote their interests, or think that their social goals can be accomplished much better by bypassing policymakers.

Despite the major efforts made and many experiments done, government policy progress in the matter of civic involvement has failed to arouse much enthusiasm: too many undertakings have foundered, and the tools are worn. Policies seem out of touch with developments in our society, and an entirely new approach now appears imperative.

What can policymakers do to improve civic involvement? What can they do to make sure civic involvement in society is sufficient and sufficiently diverse to keep democracy alive? So as to be able to answer this question, the WRR talked with citizens who, by trial and error, undertake to be actively involved, either with or against the policymakers. The WRR researchers also talked with policymakers who, also by trial and error, are looking for ways to engage citizens into constructive exchanges. Despite good intentions on both sides, civic involvement efforts that are considered a success by both sides are rare. Nevertheless, the fieldwork underlying the report also uncovered a wide array of examples of civic involvement success, thus revealing the factors that contribute to improvement. Citizens proved to be resourceful and capable.



### 3 PRACTICE

The WRR report *Confidence in Citizens* centres on people who take responsibility for a social good and actively devote themselves to matters that transcend their narrow self-interest. In many cases, this concerns a matter of public interest, a social good whose protection comes within the compass of the government. Citizens are involved in such matters in many and manifold ways.

On its enquiry through the Netherlands, the WRR met with a great many types of civic involvement, ranging from playful protest, staged in a flash, to many years' involvement in the building of a provincial road; from innovative examples of collaboration between unlikely partners to initiatives in people's immediate environment, such as neighbourhood watch schemes, neighbourhood conflict mediation, mutual communication, and self-organization on issues like facilities, energy-saving, and open space planning.

#### TAKING CITIZENS' PERSPECTIVE

The most valuable lesson our study has taught us is that civic involvement requires you to take *the citizens' point of view*. This may seem self-evident, but things are more complicated in practice, as citizens are involved in a variety of ways. The WRR distinguishes between policy participation, social participation, and social initiatives. In the first two of these, policymakers take the lead and citizens are 'allowed' to take part by having their say, for instance, or by acting as volunteers. In the third category, that of social initiatives, citizens themselves are increasingly showing enterprise. In practice, then, these fields overlap, and there is a lot of dynamism on the interfaces. This is certainly the case when (groups of) citizens are challenged in areas that suit their needs and qualities. Successful civic involvement policies, therefore, recognize such differences and take advantage of them.

An important question is why citizens take action. They tend to respond to challenges that face them in two ways. Their first response is to resist change and keep things the way they are. This may concern an announced change that causes unrest, such as the establishment of hostels for drug addicts, the appearance of mega-stables, or the building – or, conversely, the demolition – of a building. It may also concern a situation people are no longer prepared to put up with, such as neighbourhood nuisances. The second response is exploration: people start looking for better alternatives to the old situation. Citizens, policymakers, and frontline workers alike may be inspired by sample projects at home or abroad, wish to try out a good idea, are looking for innovation, or are willing to trust chance or just give it a go. They call this their 'dream', their 'ambition', an 'image', a 'good idea', or a 'vision', which spearheads social initiatives or

forms of social participation.

It is one thing to be willing, but quite another to be able. If we assume involved citizens feel challenged, are they properly equipped in terms of time, qualities, and tools (including legal options)? Compared to policymakers, citizens have a knowledge and information gap, both in terms of content and as regards procedures and processes. This is partially owing to the information supply by policymakers: government information is sometimes hard to find and often hard to understand. A major issue, however, is rooted in policymakers holding negative views of citizens and their abilities. Many civil servants feel that citizens are ill-informed about the tasks of public organizations and lack the ability to properly appraise public issues. They do not communicate clearly and are too much driven by self-interest.

Only recently have policymakers in certain areas decided to make a greater appeal to citizens' own responsibility. This has led to the somewhat curious observation, according to the WRR, that citizens' capacities for active involvement are both underestimated and overestimated at the same time. Citizens and frontline workers virtually always have an advantage over policymakers when it comes to experiential knowledge. This is being underused. Besides knowledge from experience, people increasingly have domain-specific knowledge or skills. Through their training, work, or extended hobby, everyone is good at 'something'. People are often prepared to make their expertise available.

### **PRECONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS**

Citizens consider their contribution a success when it helps to realize a desirable solution. They want to be taken seriously at the very least. Policymakers hope to be able to generate broad-based support or hear new ideas but are generally satisfied when turnout is high. All this being as it may, the WRR fieldwork has shown that three preconditions apply: you need to have key figures, respect for citizens, and a balance between taking control and letting go. If these preconditions have been met to a sufficient degree, many things can be achieved in the area of civic involvement.

Civic involvement, therefore, starts with people, with *key figures* who can make a difference. Social initiatives in particular cannot do without 'initiators': people who take the lead. In all areas of civic involvement, however, the ones who play a leading role are the 'connectors': people who can connect different groups and networks and who can liaise between people and key contacts. Connectors can also bridge the gap between groups of citizens on the one hand and policymakers or officials on the other. Rarely does a connector operate on his or her own: in virtually all practical cases, both formal and informal net-

works appear to be crucial. A network may grow naturally with people meeting in the context of a neighbourhood theme or event; but it can also be purposely developed, by providing people with different backgrounds or in different organizations with a joint task.

Without showing respect for citizens, the WRR concludes, their genuine involvement cannot be expected either. Policymakers can encourage civic support by taking citizens seriously, by providing a continuous information exchange process, and by keeping a sharp focus on the possible and the impossible. Criticism voiced by citizens in the course of our fieldwork often targeted the formal policy participation procedures: policymakers do not listen, they do not respond, and they make people feel that decisions are being made without them being informed or involved. People generally understand very well that they cannot have it all their way, if only their arguments have been encompassed in the decision-making process. If policymakers take citizens seriously, investments made in civic involvement do produce genuine returns.

The art of civic involvement, finally, lies in offering a helping hand in the right way: *letting go if possible* and *taking control when necessary*. Citizens are looking for greater scope to take action, but classic policy participation has a bad name in this respect: the local council comes up with a plan, arranges a perfunctory opportunity for the public to have their say, but the policy had already been all but finalized, and everyone goes home feeling unhappy about the proceedings. Nor is it uncommon for policymakers to make sure a bill is all fixed up before it is presented to the outside world or for them to entrench themselves in a position once taken. In social participation too, policymakers who master the art of letting go are few and far between. Policymakers and officials should venture to do so, and citizens and frontline workers should be able and willing to do so. It is crucial to offer scope, backing, and ownership for civic involvement, but many initiatives also require a measure of ‘shelter’: a helping hand during and after kick-off.

### **THRESHOLDS**

Even if all these preconditions for success have been met, it often proves troublesome to get an initiative off the ground. There are many impediments to change. Citizens and policymakers often speak a different language, act on the basis of different perspectives, and hold different expectations about a project’s nature and goal. The mindset of citizens – they way they think, speak, and act – differs from the mindset of policymakers and officials. Citizens and policymakers have *clashing mindsets* as the citizens’ life world confronts the policymakers’ system world. It does not always fit into the policymakers’ world view that citizens can also be experts. In their contacts with citizens, policymakers also

tend to centre on their own processes and stick to formal procedures, policy plans, and organizational configurations, allowing themselves neither time nor flexibility to seek partnerships with other parties.

Governments and social institutions, moreover, are complex organizations, often causing citizens to get lost in labyrinthine structures and systems: bureaucracy. On the other hand, exchanges with increasingly better educated, better informed, and more elusive citizens are not getting any easier either: their informal structures and systems – often a mismatch with formal frameworks – may act as inhibitors to policymakers who need to justify their actions publicly. Such thresholds to change that are due to *inhibiting structures and systems* are mainly to be found within governments and institutions, but policymakers and officials also have grounds for complaint. Policymakers are often regarded as an elite, but initiators may also create their own elite edifice and keep its gates firmly closed to newcomers.

In addition, both citizens and policymakers prove to be prone to short-term orientations: when the one is in a rush, the other often is not. This is a reciprocal reproach: ‘you’re too slow’. Both policymakers and citizens may be in a rush when it suits them to get their initiative on the road. Or, conversely, they may be sticklers for detail and slow down fast action. Civic involvement needs the long term, and this proves to be an awkward issue. The short-term orientation of policymakers who are in a hurry – or, indeed, citizens who are in a hurry – raises the thresholds for civic involvement.

One of the greatest impediments to change is uncertainty amongst the key figures: the initiators and connectors. Each process of change is entirely dependent on the commitment of these people. Their position in its turn is conditional upon the support they get from other people, from co-initiators or superiors. If co-initiators or superiors fail to sketch a vision of the future they want to usher in, key figures do not know how much room for manoeuvre they will be allowed. If they do not back up their key figures unconditionally, then the risk of reputation or career damage might be too great and cause many to back off.

## 4 INTERPRETATION

Why is it that some people swing into action whereas others – in seemingly similar circumstances – turn away down-heartedly, indignantly, or indifferently? How do citizens make common cause, and how do they swing into action as a group? And what does this mean for policymakers?

The fieldwork that was carried out in the framework of the report *Confidence in Citizens* leaves no doubt whatsoever that people are willing and able to be involved if the challenge matches their needs and if they believe they are properly equipped to find suitable answers. People act because they want to change something, because they want to counteract what they consider an ‘undesirable’ development, or, conversely, because they want to promote a desirable development. There are those who have a dream or a vision of what could be achieved: sustainable energy supply, the preservation of urban industrial heritage, a meeting place for people and the arts, or a day-care centre for the elderly in their own hometown. People also swing into action because they disagree with decision-making procedures.

If the challenge matches their needs, many citizens are willing to commit themselves to a public cause. But are they able to do so? The challenge also needs to match their ability. Commitment can move mountains, but reluctance achieves nothing. Some citizens will chiefly consider themselves able to make a contribution to traditional kinds of involvement, such as a neighbourhood meeting in a venue; others will rather being involved through the new media at times that are convenient to them. People’s social environment also plays an important role, as many citizens’ efforts depend on the participation of their friends, family, acquaintances, and colleagues. The expected result is also important: if people feel overtasked, they will drop out. That is why the availability of time, expertise, interest, and even finances is an important factor.

The scope granted to citizens and felt by them to express their involvement is subsequently demarcated by their interaction with policymakers: what suits their mutual needs and qualities? On the basis of such interaction, citizens have developed various ways of acting (collectively) to promote their interests. The current civic involvement opportunities appear to be offering a proper balance between challenges and required equipment to a limited number of citizens only.

Individual citizens swing into action for different causes, in different ways, and for different reasons. Citizens, however, rarely act all by themselves. *Groups* of involved citizens arise in different ways and, just like individual citizens, they have different possibilities for translating their interest into active involvement.



A group's ability to swing into action depends on various factors, and the way in which it does so is largely decided by the group's dominant culture.

Two processes – condensation and acceleration – are feeding society's increasing complexity. This growing complexity makes it imperative for a group's survival to keep adapting to changing circumstances. Network cultures are better able to do so than other cultures because they do not crumble immediately when some of its connections are severed. Due to their open character, moreover, new connections can easily be made, which is why network cultures have a greater learning ability and resilience than other cultures. A network culture, however, is also more unpredictable and ungovernable, which does not make the policymaker's life any easier. Where outsiders can quite easily understand how a hierarchy, a market, or a community works, this is much more difficult in the case of a network: it is unclear who is in charge, who is responsible for what, or how and when decisions are made. The boundary of a network can barely be made out.

#### **DEMOCRACY OF ACTION**

Society's increasing complexity is also changing the ways in which citizens are involved in society. The effectiveness of the traditional civil society channels for civic involvement, such as social institutions and NGOs, has come under pressure. Citizens are no longer only invited by policymakers to be involved but increasingly do so on their own initiative through more direct channels for involvement, via captains of industry, for example, or a multitude of movements. Information flows are also becoming less and less governable. Civic involvement in a complex society, therefore, particularly requires a belief in the resilience of the network society and the scope it offers for citizens to unite in more and more effective forms of collaboration. It is precisely the multitude of such initiatives and channels for involvement and their overlap that gives us an unprecedented quickness of response, learning ability, and creativity in a society of assertive citizens.

Such radical changes require democracy to be malleable. Calls for more direct kinds of democracy and matching forms of civic involvement, to supplement representative democracy, are increasingly heard. Policymakers have widely experimented with different kinds of more direct democracy, and 'democracy of action' in particular is offering opportunities to take better advantage of social initiatives.

This is an attractive proposition and a daunting task for policymakers at the same time. As their environment is becoming more and more complex, policymakers are aware that, within the frameworks of representative democracy,

they have been entrusted with permanent responsibilities as the formal architects and guardians of its rules and as its ultimate arbiters. 'What citizens consider important', moreover, is a not unambiguous and, in some cases, even conflicting proposition, even more so in a network society. Political decision-making processes, founded as they are in different value systems and social philosophies, must lead policymakers to balance interests, protect the most vulnerable, and encourage or contain certain social developments. It is a formidable challenge to regulate the tensions, conflicts, and oppositions this generates in such a way that it will curb violent and destructive forces. To accomplish such a reorientation, we need a new generation of 'democracy of action' that can renew the ties with and among citizens.

In a democracy that continuously means to adapt itself to technological and social developments, policies are never entirely tailor-made. Millions of people have to keep making millions of minor adjustments as they interpret and challenge formal policies. The art of public administration is to a large degree about creating the proper scope for citizens: to know when you are needed and to stay away when you are not. To achieve this, a change of culture in public administration is essential, and policymakers need to take bigger steps than they have done so far. It is not enough to offer more scope to civil servants and to introduce new tools for civic participation. Present-day society requires one to control the uncontrollable. For policymakers, this signifies a major challenge that takes a lot of stamina.



## 5 BUILDING CONFIDENCE

Taking all this into consideration, what can policymakers do? In its *Confidence in Citizens* report, the WRR acknowledges it cannot pretend to be able to offer *the* solution, but it means to offer an impetus, a source of inspiration for further reflection and action. There are two starting-points that apply: take the citizens' point of view and open up the frameworks.

If you want to involve citizens, you need to take their perspective. Citizens have a miscellany of needs and qualities, which must be taken into account in a network society. Failure to do so will cause many to drop out. Under certain conditions, *all* groups of citizens can be reached and activated. This, however, does require a differentiated scope that accommodates their needs and qualities.

If you want to involve citizens, moreover, you should distinguish between different areas of involvement. Policy participation still tends to take a unilateral focus on the policy planning stage and mainly tends to take the policymakers' perspective, 'allowing' citizens to have their say on government plans. If we *open up* policy participation to other policy stages, this means we can seize opportunities for civic involvement in agenda setting, policy implementation, and crisis management. *Renewal* of social participation means we should reinforce public space and strengthen ties between policymakers and vulnerable groups of citizens. The main challenge here would be to *welcome social initiatives*, even if these do not fit smoothly into policymakers' perspectives. Especially if these initiatives are taken in the fields of policy participation and social participation, they may be both highly dislocating and offer great added value to policymakers, as they can loosen up rigid habits of thought.

These starting-points call for open-minded policymakers who are prepared to build confidence and lay the foundations for a new generation of 'democracy of action': one step at a time, experimenting, learning, and, if necessary, amending things afterwards. The WRR has outlined four different ways of accomplishing this in more concrete terms: creating sufficient and adequate opposition, strengthening day-to-day influence, encouraging social interaction, and building solid support pillars.

### CREATE OPPOSITION

Good policymakers value opposition. They not only allow scope for opposition, but also actively welcome it. Good information is essential here. Citizens need to have good information in order to be able to launch initiatives and advocate their interests; and policymakers need to be informed about citizens so

as to be able to involve them. In both of these areas, considerable improvements are needed, according to the WRR.

Groups of citizens often get together in an information exchange process, ranging from ‘buzz’ at the school gate or in the local newspaper to neighbourhood websites and social media, real and virtual meeting grounds for like-minded people. Proper opposition requires such buzzing to be based on correct information. Policymakers have a special responsibility here because they possess a lot of data that could be valuable for citizens. When such data are publicly available and published in line with a standard, citizens themselves will come up with applications that may be useful for other citizens and that aim to keep policymakers on their toes.

Access to information is most valuable if policymakers decide to transfer certain responsibilities to citizens, for there is no possibility for citizens to fall back on the government to promote their interests in this case. Policymakers have traditionally made requirements upon information supplies to citizens by third parties – as in labels, instructions, and quality marks – to support citizens in making informed choices, but when the underlying data are made public, other parties can also take care of the information supply. Greater openness and accessibility of data can have a stimulating effect on citizens, for instance, to devise applications that could not have been thought of in advance. There are now apps, for example, to support people in making responsible food choices in supermarkets. One might think of similar initiatives for information supplies aiming to assist people in making better informed choices on institutions such as schools, hospitals, or housing corporations.

In a network society, information flows do not exclusively proceed in top-down ways but also in horizontal ones, both within organisations and in their exchanges with the outside world. If policymakers succeed in accessing the most relevant networks proactively, they can gain broad-based support for their policies. What they need, though, is creative and appropriate tools. *Crowd-sourcing* is such a tool, allowing hundreds of thousands of citizens to be asked a question at the same time on Twitter, for instance. *Web monitoring* allows one to spot particular patterns and ideas at a much earlier stage than used to be the case. The continuous digital monitoring of the Internet allows the early detection of an impending hazard before it spreads, at a point when it can still be dealt with constructively. *Serious gaming* is offering great opportunities for policymakers to involve people in finding solutions to complex challenges in fresh and creative ways. Many people enjoy the challenges of so-called *strategy games*. If you can present challenges as attractive games, you can count on the voluntary contribution of gamers.

A notable deficiency in this respect is that, in the survey-rich domain of public administration, frontline workers – local police officers, teachers, healthcare professionals, and social workers – are rarely invited to give us the benefit of their experience or opinion. Being closer to citizens, they are in a better position than policymakers to share bottom-up ideas. Besides, they are the experts in the matter of assessing the effectiveness and efficiency of policy implementation.

The WRR recommends, finally, that all major dossiers for which policymakers ask citizens to be (co-)responsible should be subjected to *public testing*. This process may be straightforward: a new project or a policy proposal is submitted including a civic involvement plan. The initiators then request a second opinion on the proposal and, if necessary, make recommendations for its adjustment. Policymakers may decide to depart from it but need to motivate their decision and may find their position weakened later on if their motivation was not well-founded. Upon completion of the process, moreover, the quality of the process implementation may also be subject to assessment.

#### **STRENGTHEN DAY-TO-DAY INFLUENCE**

People's day-to-day living environment is a major launch pad for civic involvement, according to the WRR. Traditionally, forms of involvement have strongly tended to focus on 'the neighbourhood', but such a partial focus would bypass many other opportunities, for people's day-to-day living environment also comprises their education, work, and leisure activities. Also at regional and national levels, citizens increasingly make their voices heard in order to influence the quality of their day-to-day lives. Many people, moreover, now increasingly act in a new, global neighbourhood on the Internet where they help complete strangers to find solutions for a wide range of everyday issues.

Ideally, citizens feel a sense of ownership for the social facilities around them: the houses they live in, the schools their children attend, the healthcare institutions they turn to in case of emergency, the police who are in charge of safety in their neighbourhoods and on their roads, and the green areas and sports facilities where they recreate. This almost inescapably leads us to the idea of *partnerships*, in which involved citizens and officials of social institutions join hands. What citizens bring into the partnership is what they know and who they know: not their policy expertise but their experiential expertise. Ideally, officials and citizens in a partnership conceive of 'their' institution as a shared property. This would require large, vertical institutions to be broken up into smaller clusters that are close to citizens and frontline workers: to split up comprehensive schools and housing corporations, as it were, into small-scale units, each with its own partnership board.

Sometimes citizens may need the support of policymakers in order to build a collective. Unorthodox incentives may help them on their way in such cases. Community work, for instance, can be stimulated by offering citizens greater decision-making scope, using a community rights programme, for example. Policymakers could even take this further by charging lower property tax rates in communities running active neighbourhood watch schemes, to reward citizens for taking over policing duties. There are yet other incentives for policymakers to boost voluntary work: unemployed volunteers with a proven track record in a volunteer's pool, for example, could be given priority in job application procedures.

Occasionally, according to the WRR, measures may need to be more rigorous. Citizens may not be well-equipped to engage reluctant individuals in a type of self-organization. This may prevent social initiatives, aiming to improve the design or the safety of people's day-to-day living environment or to save energy, from ever taking off. It is recommended that policymakers initiate these types of partnerships or enforce them by way of public law, while taking on board carefulness requirements.

#### **ENCOURAGE SOCIAL INTERACTION**

Social participation is all about the participation of citizens in the life of society. Policymakers have an encouraging role to play here, which, however, is largely underexposed. Favourable policies may help citizens who share nothing but the space they happen to be in to treat each other respectfully. Shopping precincts, town squares, schools, and libraries may be designed in a way that fosters chance meetings. Shared spaces should attract people and offer diversion (a stage for youngsters to do their own thing, for example) while providing a sense of security to the elderly.

Sports and leisure are important recreational activities that create functional meeting places. Sports centres can be developed into alternatives for community centres; community centres can be used as daycare centres for the elderly or open up to accommodate societies, the library, and primary school activities. Schools, sports clubs, and musical societies are natural meeting places for young people and, hence, offer exquisite opportunities for them to reconnect.

It is not granted to all citizens to participate fully and autonomously in society, which is why social participation undertakes to reach out to vulnerable groups in their everyday living environment. Frontline workers can play a key role here, but they can only reach the most isolated groups of citizens if all parties involved collaborate and offer their frontline workers the latitude to do so. Social institutions and local governments, in their turn, cannot offer latitude to

frontline workers and citizens if they themselves are not given scope in national legislation. The WRR, therefore, recommends that policymakers – the Cabinet first and foremost – reaches concrete agreements with the officials concerned on how they can expand their responsibilities. This is an issue that certainly merits attention in the current decentralization process of many government tasks from the national to the local level.

### **BUILD SUPPORT PILLARS**

Social institutions will need to widen their services to comprise the delivery of tailored services to people who live in isolation, in vulnerable communities, or in shrinking regions, to collaborate in areas facing population decline, and to secure the optimum delivery of services to citizens. To be able to do so, their officials should step out of their comfort zones and combat counterproductive social separation, according to the WRR.

Housing corporations, healthcare institutions, and educational institutes have not only been privatized or placed at some remove from the government, but they have also been forced to enter into competition, causing them to contend rather than collaborate. The target-driven culture in healthcare, welfare, and law enforcement is at odds with a more modest and motivational role that would be required for civic involvement.

Citizens are not in a position to tackle officials from reluctant institutions about the necessity of collaboration: their involvement is restricted to their ‘own’ institutions and local councils. This makes it hard for policymakers to exercise democratic control of social institutions, which is needed for the government to meet its ‘umbrella responsibility’.

Collaboration and solidarity can be promoted if policymakers and officials at the regional level enter into covenants to corroborate their working agreements. Should this fail, it is recommended for all involved to have recourse to an alarm device that will cause policymakers in The Hague to intervene. Citizens in their role as users should also be able to raise the alarm in a region, even outside ‘their own’ local council. This calls for the introduction of new legislation, which may partly reverse an excessive autonomy of local councils and institutions.





## 6 INITIATING CHANGE

There is a lot policymakers can do to stimulate civic involvement. Let us, however, sound a word of caution here: the thresholds to change appear to be high and require specific attention. Clashing mindsets of citizens and policymakers, inhibiting government structures and systems, a short-term orientation, and weak backup are expressions of a government culture that is unequal to the task of dealing with a complex network society. A democracy that continuously means to adapt itself to technological and social developments undertakes to control the uncontrollable. This can only be done if policymakers offer appropriate scope to citizens: to recognize when they are needed and to stay away when they are not.

To break through to another kind of civic involvement policy, we need a considerable change in government culture, a change that is based on vision, backup, and spark: vision will outline the framework for frontline workers to interact with citizens and is required to recognize opportunities offered by social initiatives; backup helps policymakers and frontline workers to have the courage to risk their necks and to act in unforeseen circumstances which inevitably occur in a network society; and the spark of inspiration will enthuse policymakers and frontline workers to animate a new generation of democracy of action.

The changes the WRR wishes to pursue can only be accomplished if all involved are seriously committed: local councils, civil society institutions, and particularly policymakers at the national level. Local councils will only be able to offer sufficient scope to frontline workers and citizens if they themselves are given scope by the state. So this is our call: involved citizens are crucial for a living democracy. National leaders in particular should help other parties on the playing field of civic involvement to make this call come true.



## 7 ORDER VERTROUWEN IN BURGERS

*Vertrouwen in burgers* (ISBN 978 90 8964 404 6) is available in bookstores and Amsterdam University Press, [www.aup.nl/](http://www.aup.nl/) [info@aup.nl](mailto:info@aup.nl). The full version of the publication is downloadable on [www.wrr.nl](http://www.wrr.nl).



*Vertrouwen in burgers*, ISBN 978 90 8964 404 6



Amsterdam University Press