

## **WRR-Lecture 2016 Living on the edge: the growth of precariousness and why it matters for health**

*Commentary by Ingrid van Engelshoven*

Precariousness and how to deal with it.

In this brief reflection on Professor McKee's provocative contribution, I would like to highlight a few key points.

I appreciate Professor McKee pointing out a couple of difficulties in modern day society. I specially appreciate the attention for human aspects like mental health.

And isn't that what all public policies should be about: the wellbeing of all? Work should be more than earning a pay check. It should be about personal development, social relations and self-respect.

Professor McKee, if one of your key messages is that the political discourse should be more about people and their wellbeing, I agree.

But other than you, I say this with optimism. When we look back through history, we see that mankind has made great progress: poverty declined tremendously, life expectancy more than doubled last century. The Netherlands is one of the most competitive economies in the world and the Dutch people are the most happy people in the world. And whatever some politicians are trying us to believe, but our healthcare system is one of the best and most accessible in the world.

Income inequality has hardly risen in the Netherlands over the last decades and there is still broad consensus that we need to make sure we keep it that way.

But let us be clear: uncertainty and change are nothing new. The current degree and pace may differ, but they have always been there. The big difference is that we no longer trust that all this change will lead to improvement.

What questions does this raise for politics and government and, from my own perspective, for city administrators?

There is one thing that we certainly should not do. That is, to act as if we can go back to the past. “If we just leave the EU, no longer make trade treaties and close our borders, everything will be as it used to be.” What the populists who say this forget, is that our lives have improved tremendously and in many ways in the last decades. As a woman I can say there isn’t much reason to long back for days past.

I would like to go in to three things that could help us face this challenge:

1. As the WRR wrote in its report “The Learning Economy” (“De lerende economie”): invest in people on a permanent basis. Start at an early age and ensure that people can continue to learn throughout their lives. Make this an individual right.

Make sure education remains broad and comprehensive. Of course the cognitive subjects are important, but, we have already pursued that too far. What we really need to invest in, is people’s ability to adapt, to deal with changes, to reflect and to continue to work on their own development. But we also need to invest in people’s ability to lead healthy lives.

We need to make people more resilient.

2. Where possible, we should give people a solid footing and support. Perhaps the area in most need of reform is our labour market. Employment is one of the key solutions to precariousness. We need to offer people the prospect of a permanent contract. To make that possible, laws on contract termination also need to be changed. We need to move from job security to work security.

In your presentation, I saw an image of Drees and in your words I heard a great love for the traditional welfare state, build up after WOII.

That’s what we often hear from the conservative left: the existing welfare state should be an untouchable sanctuary. But didn’t it also make people passive? Did it help people to be more resilient? Did it give people grip on their own lives or did it keep them captured in dependence?

Shouldn't the question be: what is a modern welfare state? On which values should we build it?

3. Much of what people see as a threat to their security, comes down to institutions that feel distant to them. The EU, trade deals, the government, etc.

As an administrator in a major city, you soon learn that people's wellbeing is often largely shaped by their own living environment: the block you live in, your street, your neighbourhood. This means we need to continue to invest in the quality of that living environment: good housing, clean streets, clean air, safety in the neighbourhood.

It is precisely at neighbourhood level that we can also give people much more influence and control. Enabling them to take control for themselves. Neighbourhood budgets, a say about how public spaces are organised and a responsive local government can make a real difference, especially now.

Major progress is possible in these areas now. Every day I spend in my city, whether it's in neighbourhoods with lots of well-educated citizens or in neighbourhoods with lower levels of education, I always see a great deal of interest and enthusiasm for people to take matters into their own hands. But there is still a lot to be done in making this participation more inclusive.

Will this solve everything? Of course not, but it will certainly help.

In the short term, there are also several things that need to be done:

We cannot avoid the fact that major changes that come as a shock, can lead to problems for people and families.

In typically middle-class neighbourhoods (such as Ypenburg or Wateringse Veld), health problems increased during the financial crisis. Unemployment and debt were devastating for many families. Decentralisation in the social domain helps us to tackle issues cohesively. Health problems can often be resolved more effectively by debt support than by doctors.

We need to acknowledge that there will always be groups of people who cannot find their way on the labour market unaided: those unfit for work, people with few or no qualifications, those who are socially less able. We need to be prepared to provide them with short or long-term support in finding a place in society.

These are major challenges that we face. The current polarisation will not help us withstand them. There are no simple solutions. Pretending that there are, with our heads buried in the sand, has rarely solved anything.