DO-OCRACY

A brief review of the Dutch Cabinet’s policy document on facilitating a vibrant society

People’s Wood, Friesland. A wood made for and by the people. The locals buy, plant, maintain and enjoy the trees in their own surroundings. Photo: Greenish

Background
The Dutch Cabinet wants to create space and generate trust for community initiatives and to contribute actively to the transition to a more hands on democracy, coined ‘do-ocracy’ (a form of co-decisionmaking that citizens engage in when they tackle societal problems themselves). The Cabinet has developed this standpoint as a direct response to recommendations from the Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR), the Council for Public Administration (ROB), the Council for Social Development (RMO), the Chairs of nine advisory bodies and the Voortman Motion.

Aside from these recommendations, certain trends in society have prompted the Cabinet to develop a standpoint:

a. More people are taking control of their own affairs.
b. Less government involvement in society.
c. There is a growing need for social cohesion. The transition to a do-ocracy is moreover administratively and politically relevant as a response to economies of scale, decentralization, public spending cuts and other trends.

Do-ocracy
The Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) and the Council for Public Administration (ROB) have noted a trend in which people and organizations are no longer waiting for political decisions and are solving problems themselves, such as the maintenance of playgrounds and greenery or the provision of local services for the elderly. Such attempts to take direct control of the living environment are signifying a new kind of democracy that is unfolding alongside the traditional representative democracy of the polling booth and majority rule. The actions people take in their own circle to solve societal problems do not need to be sanctioned through the circuitous route of political decision-making. We have dubbed this new trend ‘do-ocracy’. Essentially, it is a form of participative decision-making that works through ‘doing’ – by tackling issues in the public domain, alone as a citizen or a business, or in conjunction with public bodies.

This will not happen entirely of its own accord. Some people are sceptical: citizens may not want to or may not be able to participate. Or it could be undesirable on the basis of democratic principles. The government with its traditional powers – which lead to
standardization, centralization and the institutionalization of services – will not be able to adjust. But, despite the resistance and criticism, things are moving in that direction!

The Cabinet wants to highlight and support this trend. It will be a quest for new relationships and working formats that we try out without knowing where they will lead. In other words, ‘learning by doing’.

The Cabinet has carried out a field survey of practices and system interventions that local authorities and public organizations can implement to support citizen empowerment and suppress bureaucratic resistance. Based on these findings, the Cabinet has formulated a range of practical interventions as a source of inspiration for local authorities and public organizations. These interventions will target:

A. The community: actively provide citizens with support and assistance in the form of funding, knowledge, customization etc.; invitations to non-active citizens; and a good volunteer policy.

B. The market for providers of public services: transfer of control, user involvement, access to social tenders for social entrepreneurs.

C. Local government: systematically welcome social initiatives and seriously involve citizens in policymaking and services.

Kracht in Nederland

Kracht in NL (Power in the Netherlands) is a network of partners made up of the Ministries of the Interior and Social Affairs & Employment, municipalities, institutions, social entrepreneurs and private citizens. Kracht in NL is making socio-economic renewal visible and speeding up the transition to hands-on democracy by uniting all the partners in active cooperation in a new configuration. The ‘Top Sector’ of civic initiative and entrepreneurship is about coming together and is deriving inspiration and learning via the new infrastructure offered by Kracht in NL: www.krachtinNL.nl

It is essential for government at all levels to contribute actively to the transition to do-ocracy by focusing on facilitating rather than providing. It is not always easy to change things in practice – forces become entrenched and resistance may be strong. To promote, support and speed up the transition the Cabinet is presenting a collaborative acceleration agenda.
Acceleration agenda

To promote, support and speed up the transition to a do-ocracy the Cabinet is working on a collaborative acceleration agenda which brings together initiatives and incentives from the Cabinet itself and a diverse group of social partners. Seven Dutch ministries (Interior, Education, Culture & Science, Economic Affairs, Social Affairs & Employment, Health, Welfare & Sport, Infrastructure & the Environment, and Foreign Affairs) are working together in a broad network approach and with a whole array of social partners including Kracht in NL, the Association of Dutch Municipalities, Platform 31, and the NOV Association of Voluntary Organizations.

The Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations is the collection point for activities, a hub in a network, where everyone develops and shares their speciality. The ministry is trying to maintain an overall view, taking the initiative when necessary and removing generic obstacles.

The acceleration agenda is moving things on two fronts by:

1. getting people into position.
2. improving the ability of government to connect to society.

1. Getting people into position by:
   - paying extra attention to citizenship and social entrepreneurship in education.
   - supporting volunteers and initiators through Kracht in NL, Greenwish, De Nieuwe BV, NOV, etc.
   - transferring control and ownership to citizens, including discussions on instruments such as personal care budgets.
   - changing regulations, exploring and adopting new funding models, neighbourhood rights, local enterprise and social tendering.

2. Improving the ability of government to connect to society, by amongst others:
   - enhancing the learning ability via knowledge exchange and peer review in groups of local and national government officials sharing their best practices and dilemmas, but also investing in experiments, case support and a nationwide helpdesk.
   - introducing policy assessment for the vibrant society, starting with ex-ante situations.
• increasing responsiveness through input and process management, risk acceptance, pleasant contact and open government.
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The Municipal Council of the Future
Do-ocracy will change the role of the Municipal Council. The members will need new skills in order to connect with what is happening at local level and to understand how it relates to the political playing field. In the 'Municipal Council of the Future' project, new, contemporary working formats are being sought by a partnership of local officials, advisors and initiators.

Budget monitoring in Amsterdam’s Indonesian district
Budget monitoring made its debut in Amsterdam’s Indonesian district in 2011 with support from the municipality. The aim of budget monitoring is to give citizens, associations and organizations access to financial information and insight into what happens to public money. The applicants are trained to read budgets and annual accounts and to identify the expenditure on residents’ initiatives. That way, public spending can be checked and individual citizens, organizations and local government can engage in dialogue to find the best way to tackle problems.

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