

The pros and cons of 'Quid pro quo'.

Client impact of obligatory participation in voluntary work as variety of conditional welfare

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Paul van der Aa, University of Applied Sciences Rotterdam, p.h.j.van.der.aa@hr.nl

Chris de Vries, Research Department Municipality of Rotterdam, The Netherlands, c.devries@rotterdam.nl

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Abstract

This paper advances the case for a contextualized perspective on client impact of obligatory participation in welfare to work as a form of conditional welfare. We argue that at least three types of potentially variable characteristics of programmes as they are actually implemented matter for understanding client outcomes: the nature of obligations, the room for individual choice and sanctioning policies. We illustrate this argument with a casestudy on client impact of the Dutch 'Tegenprestatie' programme, which obliges social assistance recipients to engage in voluntary work without labour market perspective. This programme combines a range of possibilities to fulfil the behavioural condition, ample room for individual choice and a soft sanctioning regime in practice. We find positive client impact on indicators related to wellbeing and social participation. Whether this leads to a justifiable example of conditional welfare is discussed.

Introduction

Increased behavioural conditionality has been well-documented as a major trend in the development of welfare state arrangements in western states during the last decades (Fletcher & Flint, 2018; Gilbert, 2002; van Berkel & Borghi, 2008). Nowadays eligibility for many welfare state provisions ranging from income support to housing and care requires more than proof of material need. Usually, they also require certain behavioural conditions to be met in order to become and to remain eligible and to avoid financial sanctions or cuts in provisions.

In the field of social security for the unemployed, a widespread type of behavioural conditionality has become obligatory participation in welfare to work programmes. These programmes intend to stimulate labour market participation through various types of

'activation' of the unemployed. Examples include job-search training, personal guidance and various forms of vocational training . Usually, these programmes go together with sanctioning policies: demonstrating insufficient effort to participate in these programmes and services may lead to financial cuts of benefits or to termination of the entire benefit (Bonoli, 2010; Dingeldey, 2007; Whitworth & Griggs, 2013; Wright, 2016).

A relevant question with respect to this type of conditionality, concerns what actual impact it has on welfare recipients. Understanding this impact is relevant for ethical debates on the justification of conditional welfare, whilst acknowledging that regardless of client impact, this justification may also be related to other considerations such as general public support for conditional welfare arrangements (Geiger, 2017a). A negative impact on clients may reduce the perceived legitimacy of conditional welfare, whereas a positive impact may increase its legitimacy.

In general, available studies tend to be critical about client impact and therefore about obligations to participate in welfare to work programmes. This criticism is mostly grounded in two insights. First of all, various authors maintain that enforcing harsh sanctions for non-compliance with behavioural conditions negatively affects both income security as well as wellbeing of welfare recipients (Griggs & Evans, 2010; Handler, 2003; Loopstra, Fledderjohann, Reeves, & Stuckler, 2018; Molander & Torsvik, 2015; White, 2004). Secondly, several studies have shown that on average the added-value of welfare to work for chances of finding (decent) work are very modest or even negative (Caliendo & Schmidl, 2016; Card, Kluge, & Weber, 2015; Raffass, 2017). Based on such studies, the justification of obligatory welfare to work is rather shaky, in so far as client impact is considered to be a relevant aspect of justification.

In this paper we would like to argue however that such general conclusions may have to be nuanced, because they do not always sufficiently acknowledge the substantial variety of welfare to work programmes, sanctioning policies and their diverse implementation across and within countries. Numerous studies have shown how welfare to work programmes not only vary in terms of programmatic content (Bonoli, 2010; Dingeldey, 2007), but also in terms of the nature of conditionality (Geiger, 2017a; Kameråde & Bennett, 2017; Nybom, 2011; Whitworth & Griggs, 2013) and in terms of the ways in which programmes are implemented and conditions are being enforced (Griggs & Evans, 2010; Soss, Fording, & Schram, 2011; van Berkel, Caswell, Kupka, & Larsen, 2017; Van der Aa & Van Berkel, 2015). The consequences of this diversity on client impact has not yet been studied systematically, but it stands to reason that client impact of conditional welfare may vary across diverse contexts as well. To be able to unveil this potentially variable impact, more localized and contextualized studies on client impact of specific programmes and their implementation are necessary.

In this paper we present such a study, consisting of data on client impact of a relatively new conditional welfare programme: the 'Tegenprestatie' or 'Quid pro quo'-policy in Dutch social assistance (Bus, Vries, & Van Zeele, 2017). The 'Tegenprestatie'-policy obliges long-term social assistance recipients to engage in voluntary work or other types of unpaid activities. We have studied client outcomes of this policy as it is implemented in the city of Rotterdam. This case is especially interesting because it differs in important ways from obligatory welfare to work programmes which have been studied predominantly until now. As such it provides a 'most different case' to illustrate how programme characteristics and their implementation may indeed matter in relation to client impact of obligatory programmes.

First, contrary to many welfare to work programmes, the 'Tegenprestatie'-programme we studied does not aim to achieve labour market re-insertion of its participants. Rather, it obliges participants to engage in voluntary work or other types of social participation if their chances of finding paid work are considered to be low.

Secondly, participants have an individual choice to determine which type of activity suits their own wishes and possibilities. As such, it differs from more standardized activation programmes as well as from workfare programmes without any choice concerning the type of work participants have to accept.

Thirdly, although formally non-compliance with this obligation may be sanctioned, in practice sanctions are hardly administered. As such it differs from many studies on programmes which implement harsh sanctioning for non-compliance with behavioural conditions.

Finally and maybe surprisingly, this programme does not primarily aim for a positive impact on clients. In a way this means that this policy is less paternalist than many other programmes claiming they impose obligations for the client's 'best interests'. Rather, it is explicitly being justified in a contractualist fashion (Deacon, 2004). Participants are told they should do something in return for their benefits. Nevertheless, as will be shown, participants do report positive individual outcomes of this program, at least at the short term. Apparently, under certain conditions, conditional welfare can lead to a positive client impact.

In the remainder of this paper we will elaborate our argument as follows. In the following section we will elaborate our argument for a contextualized view on client impact of conditional welfare to work. Then we will present and discuss our findings on client impact of the 'Tegenprestatie' programme in Rotterdam, in relation to its specific characteristics. We will conclude by making the case for comparative, context-sensitive studies on the impact of conditional welfare to work.

Client impact of obligatory participation in welfare to work: the case for a contextualized perspective

The obligatory nature of welfare to work programmes has been widely discussed in the literature. Various authors (Dean, 2007; Dostal, 2007; Fletcher & Flint, 2018; Handler, 2003; Soss et al., 2011; Wright, 2016) take an ethical point of view to discuss - and often criticize – the basic idea of individual behavioural conditions attached to social security. Given that unemployment is structured by social and economic inequalities, many of them maintain that enforcing individual obligations will likely lead to disciplining or even punishing clients without offering them real opportunities.

In this paper we follow the argument made by Geiger (2017a) that such ethical discussions can benefit from better insight in the actual impact on clients who are faced with behavioural conditions. To understand this impact, we think it is important to sufficiently take into account the variety in welfare to work programmes and the nature of behavioural conditions. However, studies which take such a perspective are rather scarce.

The impact of sanctioning policies appears to be a predominant focus of available studies on the impact of obligatory welfare to work. In countries where harsh sanctioning policies apply such as the UK and US, scholars voice concerns about the impact of sanctioning, especially when sanctions are applied to the most vulnerable groups such as homeless people or work-disabled unemployed (Fletcher & Flint, 2018; Raffass, 2017; Reeve, 2017; Soss et al., 2011; Whitworth & Griggs, 2013). Although according to econometric studies (threatening with) sanctions on average may speed up benefit exit of some unemployed (Caliendo & Schmidl, 2016; Lalive, van Ours, & Zweimüller, 2005; Van den Berg, Uhlendorff, & Wolff, 2013) , scholars doubt whether sanctions actually increase chances of finding decent work and income in the long run. Moreover, regardless of impact on benefit exit and finding work, they report adverse social and material consequences when harsh sanctions are applied (Geiger, 2017a; Reeve, 2017; Whitworth & Griggs, 2013).

Therefore, even when overall ‘evidence’ on the impact of sanctions is inconclusive (Griggs & Evans, 2010), it seems safe to state that harsh sanctions as part of conditional welfare to work are very unlikely to be beneficial for vulnerable unemployed.

However, we would like to argue that obligatory welfare to work is not only about harsh sanctioning. First of all, not all sanctioning policies appear to be equally harsh on paper and in practice (Geiger, 2017a; Van der Aa & Van Berkel, 2015). This may mean that client impact of conditional welfare with less stringent sanctioning regimes may be quite different compared to

harsh regimes. Secondly, obligatory welfare to work is not only about sanctioning, but also about a certain type of obligation being enforced. If this obligation varies across contexts, it is possible that client impact will vary as well. As such, when studying client impact of conditional welfare, it is important to take into account which behavioural obligations are actually being enforced and what happens when clients do not comply with these obligations.

Two decades of studies on welfare to work and activation policies have shown how they not only vary widely in terms of programme objectives and content (Dingeldey, 2007), but also in terms of the way in which these programmes are actually implemented at the local level, contingent on governance, organisational and occupational contexts (van Berkel et al., 2017).

Programmatically, programmes may be geared towards development of human capital or rather on quick re-insertion into the labour market ('work first'). Programmes may offer various types of training, individual or collective job guidance or work experience opportunities (Eichhorst & Rinne, 2014; Etherington & Ingold, 2012; Pascual & Magnusson, 2007).

Actual implementation of these programmes may vary as well, for example because implementation is decentralized and localized (Kunzel, 2012) or because frontline workers have more or less discretion to come to decisions on treatment of clients (Rice, 2017). Deciding about sanctioning may be one of the aspects of discretionary decision making, based on frontline workers' appraisal of clients' behaviour as well as on the expected impact of sanctions.

Although these studies do not always explicitly focus on clients' obligations, the diversity they find makes it very likely that the actual obligations being enforced on clients vary as well, which in turn may lead to a variable impact. This means that the actual impact of conditional welfare cannot be deduced from general policy descriptions and political rhetoric on conditions alone. It is also important to study which obligations are actually being implemented and how they have an impact on clients.

This raises the question which aspects of this diversity deserve closer scrutiny when studying the impact of obligatory welfare to work. There is only limited research available to firmly substantiate answers to this question. Based on available studies on welfare to work we do think it is possible to identify a preliminary set of relevant characteristics to at least take into account.

We propose that three types of potentially variable policy characteristics as they are actually being implemented in practice matter to understand how conditionality impacts clients: the nature of behavioural conditions actually being imposed, the room for individual choice to

adapt these conditions to individual wishes and possibilities and the degree to which sanctions for 'non-compliance' are threatened with and are actually being imposed.

First, we suggest that the nature of behavioural conditions actually being imposed matters. For example, participation in diverse types of programmes and services may be enforced. These programmes and services are usually meant to support the client in achieving activation goals, such as finding work or improving skills. It stands to reason that the nature and quality of these services as being implemented 'mediate' between the abstract obligation as such and its impact (Dwyer, Jones, McNeill, Scullion, & Stewart, 2016; Geiger, 2017a; Sage, 2013). The obligation to participate in a high quality programme as perceived by a client may have a more positive impact on clients than a low quality programme. Another type of variable obligation may consist of expected individual effort to achieve certain goals, for example the obligation to apply for a certain number of jobs regularly or to accept and keep any kind of job.

Secondly, various studies have shown how activation policies often strive for individualization (Beck, 2017; Lødemel & Trickey, 2001; Rice, 2017; Van Berkel & Valkenburg, 2007), which in practice may include individualization of behavioural conditions. Individualized obligations may have a variable impact on clients. As some studies suggest (Beck, 2017; Berthet & Bourgeois, 2014; Geiger, 2017b; Sage, 2013) this impact is likely to depend on the extent to which individualized obligations are defined in accordance with individual wishes and possibilities of clients concerning labour market participation. Therefore, to understand impact it is relevant to take into account whether or not participants have a choice in defining how their obligation can be fulfilled in relation to their individual wishes and possibilities.

Finally, as was mentioned, the literature on sanctioning policies makes clear that sanctioning policies to punish non-compliance with obligations do have an impact on clients. Various studies also show that sanctioning policies may not only vary in content, but also in terms of how they are actually being implemented at the frontline of welfare to work delivery (Etherington & Ingold, 2012; Geiger, 2017a; Loopstra et al., 2018; van Berkel et al., 2017). To understand the impact of obligatory welfare to work, it is therefore important to take into account both the content of sanctioning policies as well as their actual implementation.

To sum up, a number of potentially variable programme and implementation characteristics are likely to matter in relation to the impact of obligatory welfare to work. To advance the discussion on conditional welfare we therefore think it is important to study more closely how specific obligatory welfare programmes are designed and implemented locally and how this impacts clients on welfare. In our view, this calls for contextualised studies on conditional welfare to work, the nature of actual obligations being imposed in relation to client impact. In

the remainder of this paper we will present such a study, on the 'Tegenprestatie'-programme in the city of Rotterdam, the second-largest city in the Netherlands.

Implementation of the "Tegenprestatie" policy in the Dutch city of Rotterdam

The 'Tegenprestatie'-policy is part of the Dutch social assistance scheme. In the Netherlands, social assistance is the national, means-tested public income support system for citizens with insufficient means for subsistence. They cannot apply for unemployment benefits ('WW') which are only accessible temporarily for unemployed after losing their job. In 2015 social assistance was renamed into the 'Participation Law', as part of a long-term reform since the nineties to make social assistance more 'activating'. Apart from providing income support, the Participation Law explicitly aims to stimulate labour market (re-)entry of its claimants.

The Participation Law consists of a general, national legal framework which is further regulated and implemented at the local, municipal level. At the national level the 'benefit' part of social assistance is mostly regulated (such as eligibility criteria and benefit level), as is the general framework for sanctioning policies. Activation policies related to social assistance are mostly defined at the municipal level.

The Participation Law at the national level stipulates various behavioural conditions. General conditions related to activation consist of the obligation to accept any kind of available job, to actively look for jobs and to cooperate with activation services. Sanctioning policies for non-compliance stipulate harsh maximum sanctions for repeated non-compliance with conditions. The actual content of activation services is determined locally. Various studies have demonstrated moreover that Dutch frontline workers have a lot of discretion which influences how national and local policies translate into actual 'activation'-treatment of social assistance recipients (Rice, 2017; Van Berkel, Van der Aa, & Van Gestel, 2010; Van der Aa & Van Berkel, 2015). Therefore, it is important to look at how policies are actually implemented to be able to understand their impact.

The Participation Law contains a new behavioural condition called the 'Tegenprestatie' or quid pro quo clause. This condition stipulates that social assistance recipients can be obliged by municipalities 'to engage in unpaid, socially useful activities in return for receiving social assistance'. These activities should not displace paid jobs. Municipalities have to develop local regulations on what kind of activities may count as being a 'Tegenprestatie'. These can be obligatory participation in available welfare to work programs (which already was an obligation in former versions of social assistance law), or participation in unpaid activities regardless of their relevance for labour market re-insertion. Failure to comply with such obligations may lead to sanctioning.

Municipalities have developed various types of local 'Tegenprestatie' policies (Inspectie SZW, 2016). Some local governments oppose to the principle of the 'Tegenprestatie' and have formulated policies with modest obligations and little enforcement. Consecutive municipal governments of various political signatures in the city of Rotterdam however have been strong proponents of this type of contractualist conditionality and experimented with already in 2012, years before it became national law. The Rotterdam experience heavily influenced that 'Tegenprestatie' paragraph in the 2015 Participation Law.

In this paper we look at the 'Tegenprestatie' policy in Rotterdam which targets recipients with allegedly very poor chances of finding work, for example because of high age, long-term dependence on benefits, poor health, limited education or personal problems. In the beginning of 2018 this group consisted of approximately 21,000 recipients, more than 50% of all 37.000 social assistance recipients in this city.

This type of 'Tegenprestatie' as it is implemented in practice can be characterized in terms of the characteristics proposed earlier in this paper as follows.

The *nature of the behavioural condition* to be met is defined broadly. Social assistance recipients in this category are obliged to 'do something in return' for their benefits, on average for 20 hours weekly, to the extent that individual capacities permit. 'Doing something' ranges from engaging in voluntary work, informal care for relatives or neighbours or in activities to 'improve one's personal situation', such as engaging in language training. In practice, around most participants engage in voluntary work. As was mentioned in the introduction contrary to other welfare to work policies, labour market re-entry is not considered to be the goal of these activities. The policy is purely justified on contractualist grounds, regardless of expected benefits for participants themselves.

The *room for individual choice* about how to fulfil the obligation in this programme is considerable. The only choice which cannot be made is not to participate, participation is obligatory. Frontline workers arrange group meetings at the neighbourhood level to explain the policies and obligations. After that social assistance recipients have individual meetings with workers in which they can discuss and propose how they want to fulfil this obligation. People who are already active in voluntary work or informal caregiving for sufficient hours per week can have this work acknowledged as a 'Tegenprestatie'. Clients who have no idea what to do are referred to local welfare organisations who can advise them about possible activities to engage in within their own neighbourhood. The individual 'Tegenprestatie' is written down in a kind of 'contract' comparable to activation plans known from other welfare to work programs.

Finally, non-compliance with this obligation can be sanctioned financially. Refusing any kind of 'Tegenprestatie' leads to sanctions. In practice however, sanctions are administered scarcely by frontline workers in Rotterdam. Municipal administrative data reveals that in 2016 out of 17,000 registered participants, 86 persons received a 'one month' sanction for not complying with conditions related to the Tegenprestatie. As such, a 'threat effect' of this policy is likely, but actual client impact related to sanctioning is quite limited. Put differently, the sanctioning regime in practice is rather 'soft'.

Research design to study client impact

In 2017 the municipal research department of Rotterdam was asked to assess the individual and societal 'costs and benefits' of the 'Tegenprestatie' programme. Since the goal of the programme is not to reduce social assistance caseloads or to promote labour market re-integration, the researchers were asked to study possible outcomes related to wellbeing, to be used in a cost/benefit analysis. The study focussed on a number of health and wellbeing related outcomes on both the individual as well as the societal level, which were chosen based on an earlier literature review on outcomes of various types of social participation, including voluntary work.

For this paper we use the data from this study on the following self-reported individual outcomes of participation in the Tegenprestatie: social contacts, self-esteem, quality of life, self confidence, chances to find work, health, contribution to society, engaging in useful activities, appreciation by others and learning new things. This allows to study a broad range of possible impacts at the individual level which may occur regardless of finding work.

Data was collected through a telephonic survey in 2017, directed at a sample of participants in the Tegenprestatie. This sample was selected as follows.

The programme had been extending its range gradually and geographically since 2013, by periodically engaging with all social assistance recipients within the target group in neighbourhoods within the city. This study focussed on a sample of participants in the neighbourhoods which initiated the programme already in 2013-2014, which allowed for respondents with a significant period of participation. Furthermore, only participants who engaged in voluntary work, informal care or training activities were included. People 'working on their problems' were excluded, which means the impact on this subgroup is unknown. Social assistance recipients older than 60 years were excluded as well, since in practice they are not pushed to engage in the programme.

The research population based on these criteria consisted of 2335 individuals. Out of this group a random sample of 900 persons was drawn and asked to be surveyed (voluntarily). Participants were offered a compensation of twenty euros for participation in the study. 413 persons completed the survey. This amounts to a response rate of 46% which is quite high given the fact that its target group is 'hard to survey'. The response and non-response group did not statistically differ on the following indicators: age, ethnic background, deprivation index of the neighbourhood, type of 'Tegenprestatie' and sex. As such our sample constitutes a representative sample of the research population.

For this paper we focus on a smaller subset of these respondents, namely those who engaged in either voluntary work or in informal care, which are the most frequent types of 'Tegenprestatie' to be found. This means that in this paper we report on the impact on a group of 359 respondents, of which 296 participated in voluntary work and 93 in informal care activities. 30 respondents engaged in voluntary work as well as in informal care.

To measure client impact, the survey consisted of statements concerning the various types of outcomes according to the participants. For example, respondents were asked to what extent they thought engaging in the 'Tegenprestatie' had influenced the various aspects of wellbeing and health, in either a positive or a negative way. Measuring self-perceived impact in this way of course has its limitations: people have to look back in time and may over- or underestimate changes. Nevertheless, we think the data collected in this way allows for a relevant assessment of how the target group of this kind of conditional welfare experiences its impact.

Client impact of the 'Tegenprestatie' in a Dutch city

Table 1: Perceived development on 6 indicators after participating in the 'Tegenprestatie'				
Type of 'Tegenprestatie' ->	Voluntary work (n = 296)		Informal care (n = 93)	
indicator	Improved	Deteriorated	Improved	Deteriorated
social contacts	65%	2%	12%	9%
self esteem	56%	2%	55%	4%
quality of life	50%	5%	26%	14%
self confidence	45%	4%	30%	3%
chances to find work	21%	0%	15%	0%
health	20%	9%	0%	16%
None of the above	18%	84%	35%	76%

Table 2: Perceived advantages of participating in the 'Tegenprestatie'				
Type of 'Tegenprestatie' ->	Voluntary work (n=296)		Informal care (n=93)	
Indicator	agree	disagree	agree	disagree
contribution to society	92%	3%	85%	7%
useful activities	90%	6%	86%	4%
appreciation by others	78%	12%	77%	14%
learning new things	71%	29%	31%	69%

Tables 1 and 2 show the survey results on client impact. Table 1 contains answers to statements formulated as 'Do you think participating in the 'Tegenprestatie' has influenced your social contacts', with 'improved', 'not changed' and 'deteriorated' as answering categories. Table 2 shows results for answers to statements on questions like '*In the 'Tegenprestatie' I can develop useful activities*'. Outcomes in both tables have been ranked from 'high' to 'low' in terms of the percentage of respondents who perceived positive impact of voluntary work, so that the most important 'positive' impact is mentioned first.

A number of insights concerning the impact of this specific example of conditional welfare can be inferred from these data.

First, table 1 shows that up to 65% of the respondents who engaged in voluntary work perceive a positive individual impact of (obligatory) participating in this program. 65% report an increase in social contacts through voluntary work, 56% improved self-esteem and 50% an increase in their quality of life. Other possible positive impacts are mentioned much less, notably contributions to chances for finding work and self-rated health. At the same time, the percentage of respondents reporting negative impacts is (well) below 10%. Even though not all participants report an equally positive impact, the share of respondents being negatively impacted through the programme therefore is relatively low.

These results resonate with studies concerning advantages of engaging in voluntary work (Kamerāde & Paine, 2014). Apparently, up to a certain extent a similar impact of voluntary work can be achieved in a situation where engaging in voluntary work itself is not a voluntary choice. The room to choose which voluntary work to engage in is likely to matter for understanding this impact.

Second, table 1 also demonstrates quite a large difference in impact between voluntary work and informal care, which with exception of self-esteem only shows positive impacts for small groups of participants and larger negative assessments on some indicators such as quality of life. Somewhat cynically this illustrates the point made earlier that the nature of the obligation matters for understanding impact. Informal care is mostly carried out based on a sense of obligation towards relatives or friends and tends to burden the care givers significantly. In this case, participants are not pushed to engage in informal care, but are 'allowed' to have informal care count as a 'Tegenprestatie'. Since this informal care would probably be given anyway, the 'added-value' of acknowledging informal care as fulfilment of behavioural conditions of course is contestable. At the same time, through the programme social assistance recipients' engagement in care does become more visible, which may contribute to a sense of recognition.

Thirdly, table 1 shows that 9% of volunteers and 16% of informal carers report a negative impact on perceived health, because of the additional burden caused by voluntary work or care work. Apparently, although the programme leaves room to choose activities which fit personal circumstances and possibilities, in practice in a number of cases participants do engage in activities that do not align well with their health condition. To avoid such outcomes, careful matching of people with activities is required, which apparently is not always the case. This illustrates how actual implementation matters to understand outcomes of general behavioural conditions.

In the fourth place, table 2 shows high percentages of participants who acknowledge advantages of becoming active as a result of the 'Tegenprestatie'-obligation. Taken together,

these numbers can be interpreted to indicate the importance social assistance recipients attribute to being recognized and valued as contributing to society. The impact of learning shows the importance of offering possibilities for learning.

These outcomes may question the validity of assumptions underlying conditional programmes. Behavioural conditions are put in place because policy makers think that without them unemployed would not voluntarily contribute to social goals or engage in learning. However, the fact that most of these respondents once they have become active, value that they can contribute and participate, suggests that maybe when they would just have been invited to participate, they would have been willing to do the same regardless of behavioural conditions. This is more or less confirmed by the fact that around 75% of the respondents when asked agreed with the contractualist notion that social assistance recipients should do something in return to the extent of their abilities, whereas 15% disagreed with this statement (not in the tables).

Finally, the apparent modest impact of this programme to chances for labour market re-insertion is noticeable. Although this concurs with the official policy goal of this program, this raises questions about the long-term impact of this kind of conditional welfare. It may lead to exclusion from support to finding paid work again and in economic terms to 'lock-in' in a situation without perspective for further improvement, for example in terms of income. A Dutch qualitative study on participants in a more or less comparable programme in another city in fact points to this risk and finds that some participants become frustrated after some years because of lack of improvement and opportunities (Kampen, 2014).

Discussion

The 'Tegenprestatie' programme as it is implemented in Rotterdam provides a case of conditional welfare which according to its participants results in mostly positive outcomes on various indicators related to wellbeing and participation. Long-term effects may be less positive, at least for participants with ambitions to re-enter the labour market.

Specific characteristics of this programme as it is implemented are relevant to understand these outcomes. The behavioural condition concerns a broad range of possibilities to become or to remain socially active, which resonates with what social assistance recipients in this city themselves find important. Moreover, the abstract obligation to do something in return can to a large extent be tailored to the wishes of participants, which 'softens' the obligation. Especially for participants with health problems there is a risk of a negative impact on (self-rated) health, even though the programme on paper should be able to prevent this. Finally, in this case

sanctions are hardly implemented, which means they cannot be considered a defining characteristic of this type of conditional welfare. They are a rather 'loose stick', threatening in the background to be sure, but are hardly used as a means to achieve policy outcomes.

These outcomes raise issues concerning the justification of this kind of conditional welfare.

As has been explained, the Tegenprestatie-programme is mostly justified on contractualist grounds. It does not paternalistically pretend to improve the situation of social assistance recipients or to improve their labour market position. This contractualist justification moreover is accepted by many social assistance recipients themselves, given the programme characteristics and the opportunities it offers.

A positive interpretation of these outcomes could be that in this specific context and implementation, the conditional welfare provides social assistance recipients with a stimulus and opportunities to become socially active, or to be acknowledged for what they are already doing. As such it may relieve immaterial disadvantages of being long-term dependent on social assistance and reduce some of the 'stigma' of being unemployed. As Sage (2013) argues, such outcomes related to wellbeing are relevant to consider in debates on outcomes of activation policies, regardless of labour market impact.

However, a more critical reading would wonder whether the behavioural conditions are necessary in the first place to achieve these outcomes. After all, advantages of engaging in voluntary work have been shown before (Kamerāde & Bennett, 2017; Spera, Ghertner, Nerino, & DiTommaso, 2015). Inviting and stimulating people to become active without obligation might very well achieve the same or even better results. Moreover, the material conditions of social assistance recipients do not improve which in the longer term may lead to frustration. Maybe connecting with programmes to improve chances for finding decent, paid work could alleviate this problem. Lastly, large scale introduction of this type of programmes could easily crowd out the labour market and replace paid jobs with voluntary work. In the Netherlands critics therefore fear that reductions in welfare facilities and services because of budget cuts will be addressed by putting people to work voluntarily in similar jobs.

Such critical reflections caution for being overly enthusiastic about 'soft' conditional welfare such as the 'Tegenprestatie'. We would like to suggest that policy makers may mostly learn from the positive outcomes of stimulating social participation by unemployed. Soft conditions may add to the broader legitimacy of welfare state arrangements, but may not be necessary to achieve client impact. Moreover, it will not solve structural inequalities on the labour market and may even increase them as long as such programs are not connected to development of realistic labour market perspectives for long-term unemployed.

Conclusion

In this paper we have advanced the case for a contextualized perspective at obligatory participation in welfare to work as a form of conditional welfare. We have argued that at least three kinds of characteristics of programmes as they are actually implemented matter for understanding potentially diverse outcomes: the nature of obligations, the room for individual choice and sanctioning policies.

The case study of the 'Tegenprestatie' programme combines characteristics which in this specific case contribute to various positive client impacts at the short term: a broad range of possibilities to fulfil the behavioural condition, ample room for individual choice and a soft sanctioning regime in practice. Whether this leads to a justifiable example of conditional welfare can be contested.

Our study has the obvious limitation of only examining one case. To better understand how varieties of conditional welfare to work and their implementation matter for understanding client impact, systematic, comparative research is needed. Such research could start by comparing contexts with little or ample diversity and choice concerning obligations, as well as comparing contexts with 'soft' and 'harsh' sanctioning regimes. Moreover, it would be relevant to study how frontline workers exactly mediate between conditional policies on paper and actual treatment of clients based on these policies. Such research would yield further relevant empirical grounds for normative debates on conditional welfare, in so far as such debates are grounded in empirical arguments.

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