

In the Black Box

Drs Theo Koning and Dr Louis Polstra,
Competence Centre for Labour Studies
Hanze University of Applied Sciences.
Groningen, the Netherlands

1. Introduction

The gap between policy and day-to-day practice is one of the big issues in the fight against unemployment. Local conditions influence the implementation of national activation programs, sometimes negatively. To tackle this problem, municipalities are made more and more responsible for the development of local activation policies. Programs are developed and introduced that fit the local conditions. Still, the problem of implementation is not completely solved. This is caused by difficulties in the translation of policy in action guidelines for case managers. Activation policy gives, or sometimes even creates, dilemmas for case managers. The aim of our study is to gain insight in the discrepancy between the local activation policy and the daily practices of case managers.

The research is a multi-centre study on the social services in seven cities: three in the Netherlands, two in Germany and two in Belgium. This design made it possible to take local and national conditions into account. For a good understanding of the results it is important to have some knowledge about this local and national context.

This article was written for the International Conference of the IAB (Institut für Arbeitsmarkt- und Berufsforschung/ Institute for Employment Research) in Nuremberg on May 15 and 16 2008. At first we will describe the policy context in the seven cities regarding activation and reintegration and the function of case managers. We also discuss dilemmas and difficulties case managers are facing when they implement activation and reintegration programs. We gathered this information by using SWOT-analysis. Then we explain the methodology in this research. After the results and conclusions we suggest main issues to discuss regarding activation programs.

2. Local context

We started with a SWOT analysis of the activation policies of seven cities in the Netherlands, Germany and Belgium. Therefore we analysed documents and interviewed about forty stakeholders of the institutions (managers, project managers, staff members, client representatives and case managers). In this chapter we describe the results.

Since the millennium Dutch national government started reforming social welfare legislation. One of the major operations was the introduction of the Work and Welfare Act in 2004. This law emphasises the responsibility of each citizen to gain an income. Citizens depending on social benefits because of unemployment are stimulated to find a job as soon as possible. The municipality or local government had to develop programmes on activating and supporting unemployed citizens. Many Dutch social services started *work first projects*. Every social service of the Dutch cities that participate in this study did: Groningen, Emmen and Meppel.

In Germany the social welfare policy is carried out by ARGE's: *Arbeitsgemeinschaften von Sozialämtern* and *Agenturen für Arbeit* (Labour Communities for Social Services and Public Employment Service)

that pay *Arbeitslosengeld II* (unemployment benefit II). The participating German cities in this study were Bremen and Cologne.

In Belgium OCMW's: *Openbare Centra voor Maatschappelijk Welzijn* (the Public Centres for Social Welfare) are responsible for paying social assistance ("*Leefloon*") in cooperation with VDAB: *Vlaamse Dienst voor de Arbeidsbemiddeling en Beroepsopleiding* (the Flemish Public Employment Service and Training Centre). The cities Mechelen and Leuven participated.

As far as the case management functions are concerned the function of the case manager appears in three ways in the Netherlands: *client manager* (responsible for both benefit and reintegration process) the *social assistance counsellor* (for benefits only) and the *work counsellor* (for activation and reintegration only). In the Netherlands there is a strong emphasis on supporting the unemployed ("*fördern*" in German), nevertheless within a clear work-first framework.

Mechelen and Leuven have no compulsory work-first projects. The function of case manager is very strongly differentiated, depending on the target group he or she works for: young people, labour handicapped, foreigners, elderly, long-term unemployed etc. Emphasis is put on reintegration jobs as an activation tool.

In Bremen and Cologne the Int(egrations)-Jobs and the One Euro Jobs are frequently used instruments. The participant works for the benefit of the local community. The function of case manager has two shapes: the general function of the PAP, *Persönlicher Ansprech Partner* (Personal Contact Partner) and the more specific function of *Fallmanager*, the case manager in a narrowed sense.

In this study the term case manager refers to all these different functions.

Similarities

We tried to get insight into the local conditions of the activation programs. The similarities in **strength** we found were clear policies and transparent legislation, emphasis on the client's own responsibility, broad training and counselling offer, and the fact that sanctions are rather secondary. As **weaknesses** the stakeholders in the three countries mentioned contacts with employers, trade and industry, huge diversity in implementation of the policy by case managers, (low) quality of labour in work-first projects and in one Euro jobs and monitoring the clients progress in finding employment. Analogue **opportunities** were increasing needs in the labour market, cooperation within the chain of institutions, contracts between case managers and clients (Germany: *Eingliederungsvereinbarung*/reintegration contract). High workload of case managers, social disintegration and social exclusion, as well as bureaucracy, uncontrolled growth in the tendering system and the liberalising of the market were mentioned as **threats**.

Differences

There are also differences between the countries and cities, especially in their orientation towards the client or the labour market (supply or demand orientation). In the Netherlands the cities try to involve their local and regional employers actively in reducing the unemployment rate. Employers' organisations and temporary agencies participate in the Employers Services Agency in Meppel together with the Centre for Work and Income and the office for Social and Economic affairs of the municipality. Groningen has built up a network of employers, Centres for Work and Income and city departments. Nevertheless the stakeholders in Groninger stated that more support for a demand orientation is needed. More anticipation on labour market developments and contact with employers of middle size and smaller companies in Emmen is needed according to the stakeholders.

In the Belgium cities much emphasis was put on training without an analysis of the demands from the labour market. Nowadays training forms become more and more demand oriented. Some stakeholders are even afraid that future developments of the labour market are neglected because only today's demands rule. Moreover little attention is paid to the interests and preferences of the unemployed. In the short run this approach seems successful, though in the long run there is a risk that labour competencies of the unemployed are not used.

According to the interviews also the ARGE-case managers in Bremen are (considered to be) not strongly enough market oriented and the organisation has too little knowledge about the labour market developments. The city now develops new policies in this area. In Cologne the contacts with employers are almost restricted to Job Seminars and the Employers Service Desk, besides tendering and privatisation with help of *Freie Träger*, private institutions on social work, activation and integration.

Dilemmas and difficulties

In the interviews many dilemmas and difficulties in the implementation of activation and reintegration policies were mentioned. We already discussed the heavy workload of the case managers that makes it difficult to put the activation policy into practice.

One of the dilemmas concerns generally accepted labour versus sustainable placement. The emphasis on decreasing the number of citizens that depends on a social benefit stimulates case managers to push their clients to accept any kind of labour. Stakeholders mentioned the risk of mismatch. High educated people have to accept low demanding jobs and repulse lower educated people. Also the risk is high of losing the job. Qualifications by training or education give clients a greater chance for a sustainable job than a work first approach. But most policies give case managers little space for taking the clients ethics (military work, sustainability, ideal work) into account. Besides that, they sometimes face the dilemma to go for a quick win. For some groups, like the elderly, a paid work is not often a realistic perspective. Still case managers use to have the duty to oblige the client to apply for a job. Would not active voluntary work be a better option?

In their approach towards their clients case managers have to choose between supporting and demanding (in German: *fordern* and *fördern*). It seems that it depends on the client which action is chosen. Is the client able but not motivated to find work or is he motivated but not able to search for a job? But also the personal preferences, norms and convictions of the case manager strongly influence the decision.

Not everybody is capable to find a job, because of a lack of education, mental problems, addiction, etc. These clients are not the most important aim group for the activation and reintegration programs. Therefore they stay marginalized with all societal problems that this brings along, like social exclusion and disintegration of neighbourhoods.

3. Methodology

The central research question of this study is: *"How is activation and reintegration of new unemployed with entitlement for social assistance designed and implemented in the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany?"*

The SWOT-analysis gave a lot of information about the local activation policy and programs. Those programs are so to say tailor made to fit the local conditions. Still, there is often a discrepancy between the programs and the daily practice of the case managers. The programs give them heuristic clues how to act in a client situation. However these clues do not cover all situations. Stakeholders pointed out that many dilemmas exist for case managers dealing with reintegration issues. A vignette study was conducted to gather information about how casemanagers actually deal with these dilemmas.

Vignette study is also known as stated preferences methods. The term vignette study is more common in social studies and medical research. In economics and marketing, for example a study of a potential real-estate project, it is common to speak of state preferences methods. In a vignette study respondents are asked to react on a fictional but realistic situation. In this case the situation is a case management dilemma.

The vignette study started with the construction of nine cases. Dutch case managers helped to make the cases as realistic as possible. The Belgian case managers were able to read and understand

Dutch. For the German case managers the vignettes we have to translated them. The vignettes are adapted to the national and local situation. Colleagues and students of partner universities of applied sciences and local fieldworkers helped to make this possible.

Why nine cases? We used two criteria to build the cases: age and education. Age was divided in three categories, and the same was done for education. The result was a matrix with nine cells and therefore nine cases. Each case was given a fictional client's name.

	Only low education but no start qualification	Start qualification	High education
23-25 years	1. Henk-Jan/Heinz	4. Frea/Freia	7. Ron/Ronny
About 40	2. Lianne/Lian	5. Martijn/Martin	8. Roland
Between 50-55	3. John/Johann	6. Martine/Martine	9. Arash

In each municipality three case managers were asked to write down their answers to the following four questions for each of the nine vignettes:

1. What would be for you, in your own words, *the core of this case* in one sentence?
2. What *questions* (please mention at least two) would you like to ask this client?
3. What do you think the *reaction of the case manager should be* in this case?
4. What *dilemma* might play a role here in your opinion?

4. Results

We now describe the results from the vignette study. The results have been summarized per country.

(01) Mister Henk-Jan Fleksenburg is 25 and applies for a social assistance benefit at the local social services. In the last years Henk has had several different jobs, but every time too short for entitlement of an unemployment benefit: three months as a bricklayer's assistant, six month social welfare, four months conveyer belt in dairy industry, six months unemployed. He just finished a job for a cleaning agency, but there is no work left for him anymore. Henk-Jan says: "I am prepared to accept any kind of work". Till he was 22 years of age Henk-Jan regularly had problems with the law and with the police and he was arrested and detained a few times. "That regularly leads to rejections of my applications", he tells: "I was kicked out of a number of schools and I looked for a job when I was 16 and succeeded at the time. "

All case managers emphasised sustainable labour. In Germany and Belgium the necessity of training is stressed but all case managers give priority to work-first options, so that Henk-Jan becomes active in any job whatsoever.

(02) Mrs. Lianne Dik has just become 40 and is single parent of Roef (4) and Erna (2). Lianne tells that in the long run she would like to take up her job again, which she stopped eight years ago: office work. She says she does not have diplomas for it but she always liked the work very much. During the interview it becomes clear that Lianne and her partner live separately and from the first day of the coming month she will be divorced. That is why she would like the Social Services to raise the divorce and maintenance allowance to the social assistance level. Moreover, she would like to get a discharge (dispensation) of the labour

duty because of her care for Roef and Erna. Now she stands alone facing the task of educating the children, she tells. She has great emotional and psychological problems with this situation, she says. And this, of course, has an impact on the children.

Very striking in the international comparison is the fact that in Germany discharge for the labour duty is given, so work placement is out of the question. The emphasis is on getting to rest and on social and legal support. In the Netherlands there is a legal labour duty of at least 20 hours, though we see case managers deal with this duty in a rather libertarian way. In Belgium the accent is on support/fördern: a psycho-social approach of the problems and in the long run: work in combination with child care.

(03) Mister John van der Meij is 54 and worked for decades as a warehouse manager at the local Sugar Factory, without having the diplomas for it. A few years ago he was dismissed for business management reasons. He now is no longer entitled to the unemployment benefit and that is why he applies for social assistance at the Social Services. He has not been successful in finding a job until now. At least three days a week he is active for the church that he belongs to. Every week he organises jumble sales/fancy fairs for children's homes in Rumania: "my ruling passion". He is so enthusiastic about it that he would like to make his job out of it. But only if it is *for the good cause*, John emphasises. As a case manager you have strong indications from a straight tip that John earns from each sale about € 100 net from the allowance for expenses.

In the Netherlands and Belgium, different from Germany, there is a strong hesitation among case managers to report undisclosed income of clients. Mostly they restrict themselves to pointing out to the client that he/she has to stick to the rules and has to report the income. But much more important than reporting the income fraud, from the activation and reintegration point of view, of course the German suggestion to form an own company with help of the clients jumble sale activities (Ich-AG), whereas in Belgium the suggestion of the charity (with help of the church or charitable association) was given.

(04) Mrs Frea Cuperus is 23 and she has just finished her Community College vocational training in Social and Legal Services, but unfortunately without a diploma. She missed only one point for this. But she has no interest anyhow to go back to *that sh....school* again to get the diploma. That is what she is fed up with. She is sick and tired of it. She wants to work and also get rid of her debts (more than € 5500). These come between her and her sleep. But to go and find a job is hard. There is simply no work available.

In the Netherlands work first is stressed: immediately back to work in a call centre or for a temporary work agency, with or without training and help. In Belgium and Germany case managers emphasize the need of analysis and training and afterwards a reintegration job or a job on the side.

(4) Mr Martijn Magermans (44) had a serious accident at work eight years ago, but with the help of a good rehabilitation he got out of the industrial disability benefit and with the support of an unemployment benefit he succeeded in finishing the part time education in social and cultural welfare studies at a community college. For this he got a diploma in December 2005 and since then he has actively been looking for a job, but in vain. He would like to start the Bachelor Course in Social Work, a part time course of three years. But to be accepted for the Course he has to have a student placement at an Social Work Agency. (Could he start such a placement without losing the social assistance benefits?)

In Belgium case managers choose for supporting the course combined with a reintegration job as a student placement or internship. In Germany and in the Netherlands the legal status of students (and so for student on work placements, too) is more strictly regulated and that is why a BA-course is only possible on clients' own expense.

(05) During the last years Martine Weerd (52) has had a reintegration job in a primary school. Fifteen years ago she finished the course for geriatric assistant and she always liked to work with people. But the reintegration job has now come to an end and so have the benefits that she received because of the job. That's why she now applies for social assistance benefit. She has been referred by the Public Employment Service CWI (Centre for Work and Income). She is very disappointed that there is no reintegration job left for her. She really enjoyed it. Since then she has applied for jobs in vain. All alone at home she will become depressed, she says, but there is no work, she always concludes after her weekly city tour (Centre for Work and Income and Temporary Employment Services). She used to work as a *overblijfmoeder (a volunteer who supervises children staying on during school lunch break)*: those were the days. "Pupils, especially toddlers, are much nicer and prettier than the elderly" is Martine's conclusion.

In the Netherlands and Belgium in this situation the emphasis is on support and motivation ("fördern") and many options are possible, whereas in Germany it is especially the duty that calls: the first labour market with lack of workers in residential care calls for employees and this is generally accepted work: *zumutbare Arbeit!*

(06) Mr Ron Fabricius (24) did Finno-Ugric studies at the City University and finishes his studies this month with a cum laude graduation according to the general expectation, as he states.

Unfortunately, he looks for a job in vain and this is why he applied for a benefit. Ron, who is very active, would like to start a project to support student exchange between his home town, Finland and Hungary. He was in Helsinki and Budapest several times himself for longer periods of study. The universities are (also the university of applied sciences) seriously interested, according to Ron. But he needs money to support himself in the meantime, he says.

Belgian and Dutch case managers at first pay attention to the feasibility of the exchange plans with Helsinki and Budapest. In Germany the case manager supports the client by a broad view on vacancies for which the client might have the right competences. In the three countries the leading thought is that rather soon the generally accepted labour, usual work is the most reasonable option from which the client could look for suitable employment. Between the lines it became clear that these kinds of clients, in the view of the case managers, are not entitled for social assistance and allowances, because they have other and much better competences to make a living.

(07) Mr Roland Niekus (45) was dismissed a few months ago because of (so called) urgent reasons as a supermarket branch manager. The Centre for Work and Income/Public Employment Service referred him to the Social Services. "The Unemployment Insurance sent me a rejection in answer to my application for an unemployment allowance because of *serious culpability for the dismissal*", Roland explains. "Rubbish, but what can I do?". Roland emphasizes that he is a graduated business economist with twenty years of experience as a branch manager and he says that he wants to do his utmost to find a suitable job. Of course he knows, as he says, that he has to accept everything. "And that is just what I want most, but it must be a vacancy that suits me well, Roland says. He already registered himself at a number of headhunting agencies and he applies for management positions that he finds in the professional journals.

Dutch case managers are the most strict here: go to work immediately and examine the possibility of a sanction (= the cut in the benefits because of culpability for the dismissal). The Belgium case managers are the least strict. After three months they continue to stress suitable work instead of generally accepted work.

(09) Arash Karimi (51) comes from Iran. For about 10 years he has been in the country with his family and he and his family now have a permanent residence permit (green card). About two months ago he moved to the town to stay here. During the intake interview it became clear that in the former municipality the Social Services did not carry out anything in his situation. Mr Karimi opts for a job in the medical world. In Teheran he graduated as a medical specialist (gynaecologist). He strongly concentrates on this issue. A comparison of diplomas with help of the Ministry of Education turned out to be a dead end, also because of the fact that he finished his studies as long as twenty years ago, as he tells. Until now his applications in the medical sector have turned out to be unsuccessful.

The approach of all case managers is to convince the client that he had to let go his dream to become a doctor again. Then they offer him a work experience place, training or reintegration job in the medical sector to find out what is a realistic job for him.

5. Summary and conclusion

The central research question of this study was: *“How is activation and reintegration of new unemployed with entitlement to social assistance designed and implemented in the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany?”*

The activation policy in the three countries can be characterised by a stimulating and supporting approach with a tendency in the long run to get more demanding. The common slogan is: empowering and activating instead of pampering and alimony.

Definitions of aim groups and instruments for reintegration (reintegration jobs, intake, profiling, training and qualification etc) are roughly similar in the three countries. Generally accepted labour takes a central place in the Dutch and in the German (Zumutbarkeit) social assistance legislation, whereas in Belgium suitable work is the leading principle, which of course is especially of interest for skilled workers. In all three countries sanctions in social assistance occur but are secondary. The functions of case managers differ per country. In the Netherlands there are three different types of case management: case manager as a uniform undivided function and case manager as work counsellor or as social assistance counsellor. In Germany there are two types: Casemanager (*Fallmanager*) versus the Personal Contact Partner (*Persönlicher Ansprech Partner*) and in Belgium/Flanders there are about 12 or 13 different case management functions, depending on the target group.

The similarities in the *strengths* from the SWOT analysis are clarity of the policy, stress on the clients own responsibility, the offers of training and other options for activation and reintegration. Considered as *weaknesses* are the demand orientation, the contacts with the employers, diversity in implementation of the activation and reintegration policy (so the differences in approach between different case managers) and the quality of the work in the work first projects or one Euro jobs. Also the monitoring of the clients is considered as a *weakness*. *Opportunities* are expected from the economic situation and labour market developments, contracts between case manager and client and the cooperation of the so called *chain institutions* in the field of public and private activation and employment services. The main *threats* that were mentioned are the heavy workload of the case managers, social disintegration and the tendering system. At the same time some people consider the tendering as an opportunity with fruitful chances.

It is striking that in Germany strict rules and legislation occurs and the least discretionary authorizations among the case managers occur. Mostly this leads to a stricter but also more similar approach by the case managers. The Netherlands can be situated between the German strict approach and the more counselling approach of Belgium.

6. Discussion

We want to make three remarks about this study. The first and second are regarding the methodology, the third is about the methodology.

The main goal of activation policy is to reduce the number of citizens with a social benefit. Different instruments are used to achieve this goal. This asks for a tailor made approach of clients from case managers. The translation of policy into this approach depends on is their professionalism. Here we see one of the dilemmas rising. On the one hand there is the principle of equality of rights, on the other hand case managers base their decisions on the individual situation of clients, because then their actions are most effective. Equality versus individuality.

Another interesting point is the possible conflict between ethics of activation policy and moral standards of a case managers. For example, an activation policy subscribes every client has to be activated, even single parents with young children. A case manager agrees with this policy, but in contact with single

parents his moral standard that a parent has to be at home to take care of his children, makes him making exceptions. We think it is very important for a successful implementation of policy to be aware of the influence of moral standards of field workers in daily practice. Moral standards have to be explored. This can be done by creating a so called conversation space in the organisation where workers can discuss their moral positions openly without any repercussions. The result of this dialogue is a framework of operationalized actions within the boundaries of the policy. A vignette study can be a tool to start this process.

In this study we conducted a SWOT analysis of local activation programs and a vignette study. This gave us some insight in the discrepancy between policy and daily practices of case managers. In total 21 case managers gave their comment on vignettes. Because of this small number of participants we have to be modest about the outcome of the study. But the vignette study taught us that using vignettes is a good method for exploring how field workers like case managers act in a specific situation. We think it would be fruitful to enlarge the number of respondents to get a better view on the behaviour of case managers. This needs some adjustments of the used methods. The case managers gave their written comment on open questions about the vignettes. If the vignettes are used on a larger scale questions should be less open and for instance multiple choice questions would be more appropriate.

7. References: literature, policy documents and websites

Literature:

- L. Struyen, G. Steurs, A Peeters en V. Minne, Van aanbieden naar aanbesteden. Marktwerking bij arbeidsbemiddeling en –reintegratie in Australië, Nederland, Verenigd Koninkrijk en Zweden. Acco Leuven, 2002.
- E. Sol en M. Westerveld. Contractualism in Employment Services. A New Form of Welfare State governance. Kluwer Law International. Den Haag, 2005.
- Met creativiteit en politieke wil. Beleidsaanbevelingen vanuit cliëntenperspectief. Sociale Alliantie en Landelijke Cliëntenraad, maart 2004. Lokale monitor Werk en Inkomen. Onderzoek Sociaal Beleid Gemeenten 2006. FNV, februari 2006.

Beleidsnotities

- J. Vosselman, M. Beukeveld, "Hoe werk jij? Methodiekontwikkeling bij Sozawe". Bureau Onderzoek Gem Groningen, oktober 2005.
- Re-integratieverordening Gemeente Groningen.
- Nota Re-integratie Gemeente Groningen.
- Werken, meedoen, erbij horen. Re-integratiebeleid in samenhang met welzijn & zorg 2006-2008. Groningen
- Groningen@Work. De Groninger aanpak van jongeren.
- De Nieuwe Wet Werk en Bijstand. Ministerie Sozawe, 2006.
- Stand van zaken van de Sociale Zekerheid. Ministerie Sozawe, 2006.
- Werk en Activeringsmap 2006. Sozawe Groningen.
- Één jaar Groningen@Work.
- Beleidskader werk, inkomen en zorg 2003-2006. Gemeente Emmen, 2002.
- Wet Werk en Bijstand, uitgangspuntennotitie. Emmen, 2003.
- Strategienota Emmen 2020.
- Verordening Fonds Maatschappelijke Activiteiten. Meppel, z.j.
- Maatregelenverordening WWB Emmen.

- Re-integratieverordening WWB Emmen.
- Notitie Re-integratiebeleid Wet Werk en Bijstand. Meppel, z.j..
- Eerste Evaluatie Werk Nu. Meppel en Evaluatie Werk Nu 08-2005.
- Plan van Aanpak Work First in het kader van de WWB. Meppel z.j.
- Maatregelenverordening WWB, Meppel.
- Re-integratieverordening WWB, Meppel.
- Notitie werkgeversbenadering Emmen (2004).
- Brochure Werk Nu, direct aan de slag. Meppel 2004.
- Die Reform der BA. Dezember 2005
- Wachstumsaspekte der Arbeitsmarktpolitik. Bonn März 2007
- Several German and Flamish policy documents and brochures, such as Arbeitslosengeld II/Sozialgeld (Bundesagentur für Arbeit), Integrations- und Arbeitsmarktprogramm der BAglS für 2007 (BAglS Bremen, 2007), Integrationsprogramm Neuakzentuierungen 2007. (ARGE Köln 2007), Jaaractieplan 2008 LKC Mechelen, Arbeitsmarktanalyse 2006 2007 Arrondissement Mechelen. Beleid Arbeidsmarktwerking 2008 (VDAB Mechelen)

Websites

- www.minszw.nl; www.gemeenteloket.szw.nl; www.lzwijs.nl; www.emplooi.net;
www.esfbureaudrenthe.nl
- www.landelijkeclieutenraad.nl; www.groningen.nl www.meppel.nl www.emmen.nl
- www.vdab.be; www.rva.be; www.ocmw.be
- www.arbeitsagentur.de; www.arge-sqb2.de; www.soziales-koeln.de

