A Struggle for Framing and Interpretation: The Impact of the ‘Basic Income Experiments’ on Social Policy Reform in the Netherlands

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Abstract
In the period from 1st October 2017 to 31st December 2019, the Dutch government allowed several municipalities to carry out so-called ‘basic income experiments’, ‘trust’ experiments, or ‘experiments low in regulation’. These experiments focused on giving exemptions on obligations attached to social benefits, allowing people to keep extra earnings on top of their social assistance benefits, and providing more guidance in finding work. In this paper, I critically evaluate the extent to which these experiments have had an effect on social policy in the Netherlands in both the short and long run. For municipalities, the main goal of these experiments was to examine whether an approach focused on trust and intrinsic motivation would lead to increased labour market participation and higher wellbeing. The national government approved the experiments; but in its evaluation, it focused solely on the outflow to work in line with the existing workfare approach. In the short run, the effects of the experiments appeared disappointing for those with the ambition of fundamentally reforming the social security system. However, in the struggle for framing and interpretation, advocates of a different social policy approach obtained success in the long run. Although the Participation Act was not initially amended, the recent coalition agreement of the new Government does propose a change related to the outcomes of the experiment; and in recent party manifestos, there are more far-reaching proposals to change social policy in the direction of a universal basic income.

Keywords
Basic income experiments, framing, social assistance, social policy, universal basic income, workfare

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**Introduction**

Over the past decades, the Netherlands has developed a tradition of debating the idea of introducing a universal basic income (UBI), which is a (monthly) income to cover essential living costs that is paid to all (adult) individuals regardless of income or work status and without work or participation requirements attached (Van Parijs and Vanderborght, 2017; Widerquist et al., 2013). Dutch policy and opinion-makers are familiar with the UBI debate (Groot and Van Der Veen, 2000), although these public discussions have never developed into a serious policy proposal in Parliament. The Dutch basic income debate is described as a ‘peat fire’, fuelled when unemployment rises and extinguishing when economic progress takes place (Groot et al., 2019). However, the latest revival of the debate, starting in 2013 with an op-ed article (Bregman, 2013), has never fully receded. Groot et al. (2019) argue that the Dutch ‘basic income experiments’ have contributed to keeping the UBI debate alive. In combination with (growing) dissatisfaction about the current social assistance law, the outcomes of the experiments added fuel to the fire. This has led to new chapters in developing policy proposals inspired by UBI.

Although the Dutch experiments were inspired by the UBI debate,¹ local policymakers strategically distanced themselves from the idea that these experiments are anything like UBI² in trying to convince the national Government to approve them. The framing of the experiments was linked to the enhancement of the ‘Participation Act’ (Participatiewet), which replaced the previous social assistance law in 2015. The national Government accepted the experiments but insisted they should be aimed at getting people off social assistance faster, thereby aligning with the dominant workfare frame, rather than offering more trust and security. However, municipalities, in association with municipal researchers, formulated the aims and conditions of the experiment far closer to the original UBI proposal, drawing on a theoretically substantiated ‘trust approach’. In a struggle for framing and interpretation, local policymakers tried to make the experiments a success.

Recent publications (Edzes et al., 2021; Muffels, 2021; Muffels and Gielens, 2019; Sanders et al., 2020) have evaluated the outcomes of the experiments in terms of reintegration in to work, job search behaviour, participation, health, wellbeing, and self-management. Others have analysed the discourse in which the experiments were proposed (Groot et al., 2019). Yet, we have no insights into the impact of the experiments on social policymaking in the Netherlands. In this article, I aim to disentangle how national and local policymakers frame the aims, scope, and conditions of the experiment and interpret their results. I define the concept of framing here as ‘a process by which people develop a particular conceptualisation of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue’ (Chong and Druckman, 2007: 104). This holds the premise that the ‘issue can be viewed from a variety of perspectives and be construed as having implications for multiple values or considerations’ (Chong and Druckman, 2007: 104). In the case of the Dutch ‘basic income experiments’, an active process of framing of social assistance policy approaches took place in which national and local policymakers were the main actors.

After looking at the process of designing and evaluating the experiments, I analyse the short-term and long-term impacts of the experiments on actual policies and policy proposals as

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¹. There has been a thorough discussion about whether the Dutch social assistance experiments were related at all (Van Der Veen, 2019). In terms of design, the experiments only tested UBI-related mechanisms to a limited extent.

². https://www.divosa.nl/onderwerpen/experimenten-participatiewet.
expressed in party manifestos and the recent coalition agreement of the Dutch Government. In this way, I hope to unravel how the Dutch ‘basic income experiments’ were, on the surface, a battleground for municipalities and the national government to change regulations, practical implementation, and the aims of the current Participation Act, while at a deeper level, they kept the dream of a far more radical proposal of UBI alive. The central research question is: to what extent have the ‘basic income experiments’ affected social policy and social policy debates in the Netherlands?

At first instance, the effects were limited; the small and insignificant effects of the experimental interventions led the national Government to clearly reject any change to social policies. However, in the long run, the experiments seemed to have affected the recent coalition agreement of the governing parties, as an explicit proposal to allow social assistance beneficiaries to keep more earnings from (part-time) work was included in the agreement. The long-term success of the ‘basic experiments’ can be assigned to the persistent struggle for an alternative framing and interpretation of the experiments’ results by local policymakers with executive power, a successful combination of ‘official’ and ‘independent’ experiments operating within and outside the control of the national Government, and a fruitful context in which the current social assistance law is disputed and arguments related to UBI are increasingly supported. It shows that ‘political will’ from policymaking ‘insiders’ is crucial if the UBI-related experiments are to succeed, even though these policymakers need or want to strategically distance themselves from the idea. Supporters of UBI might find hope in the fact that more radical proposals for UBI have now been fully embraced by progressive parties in their manifestos. The fire has not yet receded.

**Political Context: From ‘Basic Income Experiments’ to ‘Trust Experiments’ or ‘Experiments Low in Regulation’**

A **Solid Point of Departure: The ‘Mature’ Dutch Basic Income Debate**

The Dutch have been quite familiar with UBI and are said to have reached ‘a mature state of the discussion’ about the proposal (Groot et al., 2019; Groot and Van Der Veen, 2000). The policy idea and related proposals have been popping up in national debates about how to improve the social security system since 1975 and prominently featured in these debates between 1985 and 1995 (Groot and Van Der Veen, 2000). In 1985, the Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) proposed a new system for social security in which a partial basic income was a central element (WRR, 1985). The political rejection of this ‘radical proposal’ was ‘massive’ (Groot and Van Der Veen, 2000: 206). However, scientific debate on the topic continued, and proponents were forced to describe in more detail the pros and cons of the different UBI proposals. It never led to a serious policy proposal. Instead, the 1994-1998 Coalition Government took a sharp turn towards workfare policies and focused on several measures to reach full employment (Groot and Van Der Veen, 2000). In the late 1990s to 2000s, the topic never fully disappeared from the agenda, but a strong focus on conditionality and workfare in those years prevented UBI from becoming very popular (Roosma and Jeene, 2017; Rossetti et al., 2020).

A recent rival of the UBI debate happened in the aftermath of the financial and economic crisis in 2013 with an op-ed article (Bregman, 2013). This article led to three documentaries on UBI by the popular television programme *Tegenlicht* between February 2014 and
April 2015 (Tegenlicht, 2014a, 2014b, 2015). This programme also actively organised discussions about the achievability of the proposal and experimenting with UBI, both offline in debate centres across the country and online on Twitter (Gielens et al., 2021). The article by Bregman and the Tegenlicht documentaries landed in a public debate that was already quite familiar with UBI as a concept. Possibly, this is why this part of the debate swiftly focused on a demand for experiments instead of a debate about the pros and cons of the idea itself (Gielens et al., 2021). The article and documentary (and its spin-off) inspired several initiatives throughout the country to propose an experiment with types of UBI. The third Tegenlicht documentary about UBI, broadcasted in April 2015 (Tegenlicht, 2015), specifically highlighted the possibilities of experimenting with UBI-like proposals. It shows how a social initiative working together with municipalities plan to execute local ‘basic income’ experiments.

‘Basic Income Experiments’ Get a Foothold in the Political Debate

With this recent revival, UBI also regained a foothold in the political debate. Following popular discussion, local politicians started to pledge for experiments with UBI in early 2015. They were asking for experiments with social assistance benefits and publicly embraced the idea of a UBI (Bommeljé, 2017). In their political proposals, local politicians actively referred to ‘basic income experiments’. In the Dutch city of Nijmegen, the political proposal issued in April 2015 referred to ‘an experiment with basic income for Nijmegenaren’. In Amsterdam, the initiative issued in March 2015 explicitly referred to UBI in arguments for the proposal.

These proposals asking for experiments with social assistance benefits were not merely a result of increased attention to the UBI debate; they also emerged from public and intergovernmental debate about the decentralisation of the Dutch social assistance law, i.e., the Participation Act, on 1st January 2015. This new Act, initiated by the national Government, emphasised the previously held workfare frame of the national Government even more strongly by reinforcing reintegration and job application obligations, while adding a new obligation to ‘do something in return’ for social assistance benefits (quid pro quo policy; Muffels and Gielens, 2019). Although municipalities would obtain some freedom of implementation with the decentralisation of the law, the stricter requirements were supposed to be imposed by all municipalities, as the law provides strict guidelines for executing the policy. The choice of the national Government to reinforce workfare policies followed from longstanding debates about the need to increase benefit conditionality and sanctions in the hope of increasing labour market participation (Raven, 2012).

However, this workfare frame was also more and more politically disputed by (local) political parties and local policymakers. Moreover, the decentralisation of the Participation Act and inclusion of extra tasks were accompanied by a budget cut, which was strongly contested by the
municipalities. In their dispute with the national Government, the municipalities argued that stricter obligations and sanctions are also increasing bureaucracy and execution costs, while flexibility in implementation was needed to meet the budgetary challenges imposed by the national Government. By introducing ‘basic income experiments’, local politicians aligned to the popular UBI debate, using it as an opportunity to show the growing support for a different approach in social security. They used the opportunity to convince the national Government that municipalities should be allowed to implement the new Act in a flexible way, possibly relaxing the strict obligations. In this unique context, strategic and political arguments aligned and turned out in favour of ‘experimenting’ with new ways of guidance in the Participation Act. UBI obtained a foothold in the political debate via these experiments.

Rephrasing ‘Basic Income Experiments’

As initiatives were taken in municipalities across the county around the same time, about a dozen municipalities - under the coordination of engaged policy entrepreneurs (Tegenlicht, 2015) - decided to join efforts in arguing for room to experiment at the Ministry of Social Affairs. They asked the State Secretary to enact Article 83 of the Participation Act with an Order in Council. This Article explicitly describes the possibility of deviating from the law in order to examine how the effectiveness of the law could be improved. Therefore, this Article could relax conditions and allow municipalities to experiment with alternative ways of guidance and exemptions, as well as extra earnings (Betkó, 2018; Bommeljé, 2017; Groot et al., 2019).

In order to achieve this, many municipalities and local policymakers explicitly distanced themselves from the term ‘basic income’ (Bommeljé, 2017). A different phrasing was needed to obtain the exemption from the State Secretary. The Government consisted of a Coalition of Liberal Conservatives and Social Democrats. Especially among the Liberal Conservatives, the idea of relaxing social assistance obligations was in direct opposition to their ideology and party programme, which claimed that obligations needed to be enforced strictly, no exemptions were possible, and extra income support from municipalities should be abolished (VVD, 2017). Although Social Democrats have been more in favour of relaxing social assistance obligations, they traditionally have not be in favour of UBI (Groot and Van Der Veen, 2000). Therefore, reference to UBI would have led to more political resistance because the proposal was still contested in the Netherlands, even if it was gaining in popularity as abovementioned (Rossetti et al., 2020). Additionally, a broader term focusing on improving the Participation Act could lead to broader support for the possible outcomes of the experiments. Therefore, the website of Divosa – the association of municipal directors and executives in the social domain – explicitly states that the experiments are ‘no basic income’ and stresses that the experiments are meant

7. https://vng.nl/sites/default/files/publicaties/2014/20140107-pos-paper-pwet.pdf
8. https://vng.nl/sites/default/files/brieven/2014/vng-position_paper_taalies_in_de_participatiewet_-_stem_taalies_af_op_op_- arbeidsmarktperspectief_0.pdf
9. https://vng.nl/sites/default/files/brieven/2014/vng-position_paper_taalies_in_de_participatiewet_-_stem_taalies_af_op_op_- arbeidsmarktperspectief_0.pdf
10. In Amsterdam, politicians explicitly refer to the societal discussion and argue that this shows support for a new approach in social security: ‘The social discussion about basic income shows that people are hungry towards a simplified form of social security in which the relationship between income and ’profitable’ labour loosens up, or is even let go’ (see footnote 7). In Nijmegen, politicians framed the proposal as a ‘local variant of basic income’ (see footnote 6).
to test the effectiveness of the Participation Act.\textsuperscript{11} Municipalities rephrased the experiments as ‘trust experiments’, ‘experiments low in regulation’, or more neutral ‘social assistance experiments’.\textsuperscript{12} The relation with UBI was carefully avoided.

## The Experiments: The Struggle for Framing and Scope

### Different Experimental Aims; Municipalities Challenge the National Workfare Frame

By choosing the term ‘trust experiment’ or ‘experiments low in regulation’, the municipalities clearly challenged the dominant workfare frame that was reinforced by the national Government in the Participation Act. This was the first step of a longer struggle for the framing and interpretation of the experiments. Table 1 gives an overview of the aspects on which the municipalities and national Government differ in their approaches to the experiment.

While the Participation Act focused on strict obligations and conditionality (Muffels, 2021; Muffels and Gielens, 2019), the municipalities wanted to put forward a different approach based on a competing ideology related to arguments in favour of UBI. To obtain permission to experiment, municipalities needed to provide an underlying ‘policy theory’ of the experiments (Muffels and Gielens, 2019). By doing so, municipal researchers formulated not only a theoretical foundation for the Dutch experiments, but also the core arguments for an opposite approach to social assistance that deviated from the dominant workfare frame (Muffels, 2021). The main claim of this approach was that intentions of social assistance recipients should no longer be doubted but trusted, and the Government should believe in the intrinsic motivations of social assistance recipients. By providing trust in capacities for self-management, people would be ‘activated’; and by providing autonomy and freedom of choice, people would be better capacitated and able to make better choices (Muffels, 2021).

Arguments for this approach were firstly related to the work of Mullainathan and Shafir (2013). These scholars had argued that financial scarcity and related obligations cause stress and reduce cognitive capacity. By providing financial security and removing threats of sanctions, people would be able to make better decisions. Second, insights from behavioural economics were used to argue that people are more motivated to reciprocate and cooperate if they receive favours instead of negative incentives (Bohnet et al., 2001; Muffels and Gielens, 2019). Third, psychological motivation theories were utilised (Muffels and Gielens, 2019) to claim that trust in people generates feelings of ‘self-efficacy’ (Ryan et al., 1997) and intrinsically motivates people to be more engaged in their activities. As a result, intrinsically motivated people show more behavioural effectiveness and higher levels of well-being (Deci and Ryan, 1985; Ryan et al., 1997). Fourth, reference was made to Sen’s capability theory to argue that capacitating approaches work best if people are offered opportunities that fit their motivation and support their personal autonomy (Muffels and Gielens, 2019; Sen, 2004).

The link with arguments in favour of UBI is clear (Muffels and Gielens, 2019). Providing everyone with a guaranteed minimum (basic) income would not only be a more efficient

\textsuperscript{11} https://www.divosa.nl/onderwerpen/experimenten-participatiewet.

\textsuperscript{12} Different kinds of connotations were used in public and political debates by policymakers, researchers, and politicians. The actual implemented experiments were mostly referred to as ‘trust experiments’ or ‘experiments low in regulation’, but also referred to as ‘tailor-made social assistance’ or ‘what works?’ experiments. Some were simply referred to as ‘social assistance experiments’.

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Roosma 197
| **Table 1. Different approaches to the experiment.** | municipalities and municipal researchers | National Government |
|---|---|---|
| **Name of the experiment** | Mostly referred to as ‘trust experiments’ or ‘experiments low in regulation’. Also referred to as ‘tailor-made social assistance’ or ‘what works?’ experiments. And also simply ‘social assistance’ experiments. | Participation Act experiments. |
| **Aim of the experiment** | Examine several outcomes of interventions on outflow to work, wellbeing, health, participation, self-management, and quality of service. | Examine the effectiveness of the Participation Act with regard to the successful outflow to work. |
| **Scope of the experiment** | Requested; more time, relax more conditions. | Provided; strict time frame, limited relaxing of conditions. |
| **Formulation of conditions** | 1). Self-management: recipients being released from the labour and reintegration obligations; 2). Extra guidance: recipients receiving more guidance; 3). Work pays off: recipients are given additional release from income from part-time work during the assistance. | 1). Exemption from employment and reintegration obligations; 2). Intensification of work and reintegration obligations; 3). Broadening the possibility to release income from employment. |
| **Interpretation of the results** | Main conclusion: main results might be insignificant, but there are positive trends and signals with regard to providing positive attention that contributes to seeking and finding work and socially useful activities, strengthening self-reliance and social trust, and a positive relationship with civil servants. | Main conclusion: effects of the interventions on the outflow to work are minor and insignificant. |
| **Short-term political follow-up** | Requested; more budget to provide more (positive) attention and guidance. Make a combination of part-time work and social assistance pay off with a simple and unambiguous arrangement to release income from extra earnings. Keep experimenting. Amsterdam introduces the extra earning premium for all people on social benefits working part-time. Several municipalities implement more | Provided; no major changes in the law. Custom-made approaches are allowed as long as the overall goal is to optimise the outflow to work. A combination of part-time work and social assistance is not supported. A research proposal to ‘enrich the data from the experiments’. |

*(continued)*
way of spending collective means, but would lead to autonomous, entrepreneurial individuals (Van Parijs and Vanderborght, 2017; Widerquist et al., 2013). By choosing the term ‘trust experiments’ or ‘experiments low in regulation’, the municipalities provoked the workfare discourse of the national Government. This dispute with the national Government was reflected in differences in formulating the aims of the experiments. The national Government explicitly stated and evaluated one specific aim: the aim of examining how the Participation Act can let people move from benefits to work as effectively as possible by measuring the outflow in (preferably full-time) employment (De Boer et al., 2020). With this aim, the national Government chose effectiveness as the main frame and argument to allow the municipalities to experiment. Municipalities instead framed the experiments in a much broader perspective. They were also interested in the impact of the treatment on different social outcomes in line with the theoretical arguments of the trust approach (Edzes et al., 2021; Sanders et al., 2020). They decided to also evaluate the impact of the treatment on health, wellbeing, participation, and self-management, and were interested in the quality of the government service as well (Edzes et al., 2021; Sanders et al., 2020).

### Different Experimental Scopes
The national Government and the municipalities also struggled in formulating the scope and conditions of the experiment. Municipalities hoped to be able to experiment with exemptions from all obligations, a high amount of extra earnings (release of income), and a rearranging of social assistance benefits and poverty allowances to give higher social assistance benefits (Bommeljé, 2017). In the concept proposal to regulate the experiments under the exemption of Article 83, the national Government offered very little room: participants would not be fully exempted from controls, which was in line with the dominant workfare approach (Muffels, 2021); the release of income

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13. Later, they became interested in other outcomes as well (Verlaat and Zulkarnain, 2022).
and the scope of the experiment were limited; and participants would need to fulfil many requirements. Scientists warned that strict conditions would lead to ambiguous results (Bommeljé, 2017).

Several municipalities opted out of the official experiments and chose to operate independently (Bommeljé, 2017). Divosa, the association of municipal directors and executives in the social domain, and the VNG, the Association of Netherlands Municipalities, explicitly lobbied for more room for experimental conditions. This lobby partly succeeded, as the final regulations of the experiment conditions were less strict and the scope and requirements were relaxed to the satisfaction of the municipalities who still wanted to participate in the experiment.

The Experiments

In the end, six municipalities decided to continue the experiments using the exemptions provided by the State Secretary (referred to here as the ‘official experiments’). Five other municipalities decided to formulate similar experiments, including scientific guidance and evaluation using the possibilities within the conditions of the existing law (referred to here as ‘independent experiments’). See Table 2 for an overview. The official experiments had a fixed time and duration of 24 months (De Boer et al., 2020). Conversely, the independent experiments did not, and municipalities could extend the duration of the experiment, although only Amsterdam decided to have a longer experimental scope of 36 months. The independent experiments were not allowed to let participants keep more extra earnings from employment than specified in the law (reduced benefit withdrawal), while the official experiments could use the obtained exemption to let participants keep (more) extra earnings (Muffels, 2021). Other conditions were not very different between the official and independent experiments. All experiments worked with three main interventions, which were combined in different ways by different municipalities. Because the different municipalities chose different interventions for the experimental groups and combined different interventions in various ways, evaluation of the experiments was hampered (De Boer et al., 2020).

Again, we see some differences in the formulated conditions and the language of these conditions between the national Government and the municipalities (Table 1). The national Government chose to refer strictly to the conditions formulated in the law (De Boer et al., 2020), talking about exemptions and intensifications. The municipalities instead referred clearly to their overall aim of providing trust in line with the policy theory, using such terms as ‘self-management’, ‘extra guidance’, and ‘work pays off’ (Edzes et al., 2021; Sanders et al., 2020). It is important to note that the experimental conditions were still in accordance with the law and fell in the space provided by the national Government; however, in executing the treatments, the municipalities also tried to stay close to their original aims (Betkó, 2018).

14. https://vng.nl/sites/default/files/brieven/2016/20160804_brief-kabinet_verzoek_bestuurlijke_reactie_besluit_experimenten_participatiewet.pdf
15. https://www.divosa.nl/sites/default/files/onderwerp_bestanden/20161025-brief-divosa-cieszw-ao-participatiewet.pdf
16. https://vng.nl/sites/default/files/brieven/2016/20160804_brief-kabinet_verzoek_bestuurlijke_reactie_besluit_experimenten_participatiewet.pdf
17. https://vng.nl/sites/default/files/brieven/2016/20160928_brief-kabinet_reactie_op_besluit_experimenten_participatiewet.pdf
The Results: Insignificance or Great Success?

Results from the Overall Evaluation: Minor and Insignificant Effects

The official experiments were evaluated in three different layers. Local evaluations of the experiments in the six municipalities were executed by municipal researchers affiliated to different universities and were brought together in one overview publication. In addition to the outflow to work, they examined the impact of the intervention on secondary outcomes, such as wellbeing, health, participation, and self-management (Edzes et al., 2021; Sanders et al., 2020; see next section). Two national institutes – assigned to their task by the Ministry of Social Affairs - added the two extra layers: a ‘process evaluation’ (De Graaf and Van Gastel, 2020) and an overall evaluation of the experiments focused on the outflow to work (De Boer et al., 2020). The overall

Table 2. Comparing the official and independent experiments.

| Participating municipalities | Official experiments | Independent experiments |
|-----------------------------|---------------------|------------------------|
| Relation to the law         | Deventer, Groningen, Nijmegen, Tilburg, Utrecht, Wageningen. | Amsterdam, Apeldoorn, Epe, Geldrop-Mierlo, Oss. |
| Term                        | Exemption (obtained from the State Secretary) to deviate from the Participation Act in certain aspects. | Operate under the full conditions of the Participation Act. |
| Experimental design         | Fixed two-year term: 1st October 2017 until 31st December 2019 (duration of experiments differed between 16 and 24 months). | Randomised Controlled Trial (all other municipalities except Amsterdam) and/or matching participants with non-participants based on individual characteristics. |
| Experimental conditions     | Randomised Controlled Trial. | Combinations of: 1). Exemption from employment and reintegration obligations; 2). Intensification of work and reintegration obligations; 3). Broadening the possibility to release income from employment. |
|                             | Combinations of: 1). Exemption from employment and reintegration obligations; 2). Intensification of work and reintegration obligations. | No possibility to allow participants to keep more income from employment than prescribed in the law. Amsterdam experiment: participants received an extra earnings premium of, on average, €1,439 if they started working part time. |

18. Saxon Hogeschool, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, Radboud Universiteit, Tilburg University and Universiteit Utrecht.
evaluation was the main source for the State Secretary to draw conclusions about the experiment; also, in this evaluation, the scope of the experiment was limited to improving the effectiveness of the outflow to work.

The process evaluation concludes that, among other things, the experiments had sufficient scientific foundation to be able to make meaningful statements about the effects of the interventions. However, the choice of the municipalities to use different combinations of interventions impedes an evaluation of which mechanisms in these combination interventions influenced the outcomes, as the sample size of each separate intervention was too small to infer anything meaningful. Moreover, municipalities differed in their ways of describing the control condition, as the normal practice of executing the Participation Act differed across municipalities in terms of the nature, number, and frequency of contacts with the social assistance recipient. Therefore, it is complicated to compare the different outcomes. The report also concludes that the follow-up period to the experiments was too short to be able to draw conclusions about the sustainability of the outflow into paid work and self-employment (De Graaf and Van Gastel, 2020), as was feared by municipalities and scientists.

The overall evaluation reports generally found insignificant results for the interventions on the outflow to work, with only two exceptions. In one municipality, Utrecht, a statistically significant effect on the variable ‘partial or full outflow to work (>12 h)’ was found for the intensification intervention. In one municipality – again, Utrecht – a significant effect of the release of income intervention on the variable ‘partial outflow or full outflow to work (>12 h)’ was also found. The report mentions that the effects that were found were difficult to interpret, as they were small and insignificant (De Boer et al., 2020).

Results from the Municipal Evaluations: Positive Attention Works

The municipal evaluations executed by the municipal researchers concluded that the results for the outcome ‘outflow to work’ are generally ‘minor’ or ‘modest’ (Sanders et al., 2020: 2). The interpretation of the (mainly) insignificant results for outflow to work are more positive, however. The municipal researchers concluded that the absence of significant effects is an important conclusion in itself: ‘It also means that the current approach, with many obligations that are enforced with (the threat of) punishment, does not lead to clearly better results than an approach based on attention, trust, customisation and self-reliance of the participants.’ (Sanders et al., 2020: 2).

In addition to the outflow to work, the municipalities evaluated the effects of interventions on health, wellbeing, participation, and self-management. The effects on these secondary outcome measures were also modest and largely insignificant. The effects point in different directions and are significant in only a few cases. For instance, in Groningen, a negative effect of the ‘exemption’ intervention on wellbeing is found; in other municipalities, though, positive but insignificant effects are found. In Groningen, negative effects on ‘looking for work’ are also found for both the ‘exemption’ intervention and ‘intensification’ intervention (Sanders et al., 2020). The overview report concludes that with regard to the ‘hard results’, ‘we are appropriately modest’ (Sanders et al., 2020: 16), and points at the diverse interventions applied and the short duration of the experiments. At the same time, the report sees merit in the trust approach: municipal researchers mention that qualitative indicators show positive results for the positive attention and trust that were provided in the experiments. According to the report, civil servants see positive changes and are themselves more satisfied with their jobs (Sanders et al., 2020).
In addition to the overview evaluation, the municipal policymaker added a memorandum in which they interpreted the results of the municipal researchers. With regard to the ‘exemption’ intervention – referred to as ‘self-management’ by the municipalities – the municipalities acknowledged that there were no significant positive effects on the outflow to work or wellbeing, and that there were even some negative effects on these outcomes. However, they also mentioned and concluded that in some of the experiments, the ‘self-management’ intervention, in combination with continuing to facilitate people by supporting them, had shown positive results. ‘Here, the emphasis is not placed on letting go, but on ‘taking the wheel yourself’ for people on welfare… Reinforcing self-management in combination with appropriate guidance therefore shows positive effects, both on outflow as on other factors.’¹⁹ This interpretation is clearly in line with the approach of trusting welfare recipients, which the municipalities support. Additionally, with regard to the ‘intensification’ intervention – or ‘extra guidance’, as the municipalities phrase it – the municipalities related the outcomes to the trust approach: ‘The effects of positive attention also show how important it is to talk to people regularly and not to start from distrust and rules’.²⁰ With regard to the ‘release of income’ intervention – also called ‘work pays off’ – they stressed that welfare recipients are reluctant to work part time because of the complex rules and regulations that can impose risks with regard to other income allowances. Therefore, they interpreted the small positive findings in Utrecht as an important result showing that if rules and regulations were improved, more people could work part time.²¹ The municipal policymakers also argued the experiments showed that, ‘positive attention helps to better assist people on welfare… It takes people on welfare seriously and strongly improves the relationship with civil servants. People often gain more self-confidence, which contributes to seeking and finding work and socially useful activities and strengthens self-reliance and social trust’.²² The municipal policymakers mentioned that although many effects were insignificant, they pointed in the expected direction. They also stressed that, ‘a different positive approach is certainly no worse for achieving outflow and work acceptance’.²³ Finally, they argued that in the interpretation of the outcomes, attention should be given not only to the ‘hard, indisputable evidence’, but also to the positive trends and signals.²⁴

Results from the Independent Experiment in Amsterdam: More Attention and Premium Work

Amsterdam has conducted an ‘independent experiment’ with a longer duration (36 months) compared to all the other experiments (max. 24 months). The (preliminary) results indicate that more guidance contributes to a greater chance of work (De Beer et al., 2021). Participants of the extra-guidance group found work more often than participants in the self-management and control groups, and also work more hours all while being on social assistance. However, no differences

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¹⁹. https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/rapporten/2020/05/28/memo-wethouders-over-bijstandsexperimenten-participatiewet - page 3
²⁰. Ibid.
²¹. Ibid.
²². https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/rapporten/2020/05/28/memo-wethouders-over-bijstandsexperimenten-participatiewet - page 4
²³. Ibid
²⁴. https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/rapporten/2020/05/28/memo-wethouders-over-bijstandsexperimenten-participatiewet - page 5
were found in the outflow to work. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, which interfered with the experiment, fewer people on social assistance found (part-time) work and the outflow from benefits to work dropped. Nevertheless, the participants in the extra-guidance group performed better in terms of keeping or finding work than the participants in the other two groups. Results also show that offering more attention and guidance is better valued by the participants and creates more trust in guidance; there is more room for customisation in the cooperation between welfare beneficiaries and civil servants (De Beer et al., 2021). Participants in the Amsterdam experiment could receive an extra earnings premium if they started working part time (in providing this premium, Amsterdam operated on the edge of the law). The extra earning premium of €1,491 on average, which is paid twice per year, motivated participants in the experiment to work (extra) part time compared with a group of social assistance claimants with similar characteristics who did not participate in the experiment. The participants spent this premium mainly on repaying debts, arrears, and fixed charges, such as rent, insurances, and subscriptions (Van Kempen et al., 2021).

**The Political Follow-up: An Initiative that Seems Dead, But Rises Again**

On the one hand, the results of the experiments can be seen as a disappointment for those who had hoped for significant policy reform following the ‘basic income experiments’. On the other hand, the municipal policymakers expressed contentment with the outcomes, and the results from the Amsterdam experiment forecast positive results of the interventions as well (De Beer et al., 2021). But, what does this mean for the actual impact of the experiments on social policies?

**Short-Term Political Follow-up: An Initiative that Seems Dead**

The municipal policymakers explicitly asked the national government to reform social policies, although they put emphasis on asking for a different policy approach. In their abovementioned memorandum, they asked the State Secretary to actively speak out in favour of a positive approach to people on welfare, where ‘extra attention does not consist of more control and more obligations (certainly not for the substantial part of people that are not available for work).’25 They asked for more budget to provide more attention and guidance. When it came to changing policy, the municipal policymakers asked to make an effort to remove unnecessary obstacles that people on social assistance experience when working part time and, more substantially, to make part-time work pay off with a simple and unambiguous arrangement to release income from extra earnings. Finally, the municipalities proposed to keep experimenting.26

The results of the official experiments were sent to Parliament by the State Secretary at the end of May 2020. In an accompanied letter, she reacted to the results and mentioned the following actions. First, because no significant effects were found for the ‘exemption’ intervention, the State Secretary explicitly stated that, ‘the results therefore give me no reason to amend the

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25. https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/rapporten/2020/05/28/memo-wethouders-over-bijstandsexperimenten-participatiewet - page 5
26. https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/rapporten/2020/05/28/memo-wethouders-over-bijstandsexperimenten-participatiewet
Participation Act.' As one significant effect of the ‘intensification’ intervention was found, she wanted to discuss with municipalities and stakeholders: ‘how we can use the experiences gained during these experiments to better shape the services to people entitled to social assistance.’ However, because one significant effect of the ‘release of income’ intervention was found, she argued that she: ‘cannot conclude that a broader release within the Participation Act promotes outflow to work.’ In response to the more positive assessment made by the municipalities and the related requests to speak out actively in favour of an approach based on trust and guidance, the State Secretary mentioned that a customised approach could best help to realise more outflow to work. At the same time, she stressed the overarching goal must remain to let people become self-sufficient in their income generation - that is, independent of benefits. All instruments should be used by municipalities to achieve this goal, and the insights of the experiments can contribute to this. Hereby, she implicitly rejected the proposed positive approach of the municipalities. All in all, the national Government does not seem to be prepared to implement major changes in the law. Municipalities can make policy adjustments based on the experiments, as long as the overall goal is to optimise the outflow to work. A combination of part-time work and social assistance seems to not be supported by the national Government, and no concrete policy measures have been taken to make part-time work pay off more, despite the municipal policymakers’ suggestions.

At the end of 2021, the national Government mentioned that: ‘CPB is currently working on a research proposal to enrich the data from the Participation Act experiments’ in order to ‘investigate the broad benefits of access to work and to determine the effectiveness of the investment in reintegration.’ This study was published in early 2022 (Verlaat and Zulkarnain, 2022). Here, the Centraal Planbureau (CPB) researchers reported (significant and insignificant) findings for other outcome measures, but their conclusion remains that results are ‘modest’.

At the local level, some changes – within the scope of the law – were made. Most explicitly, in Amsterdam, the municipality decided in November 2021 to introduce the extra earning premium as an instrument for all Amsterdam residents entitled to social assistance benefits and who work part time. This measure will be in effect until 31st December 2022, when the final report about the experiments will be published and discussed. As this was formally a temporary adjustment, the Ministry allowed it. In Utrecht and Tilburg, for example, policymakers implemented less far-reaching policy changes based on the insights obtained from the experiments. They proposed

27. https://open.overheid.nl/repository/ronl-1ab98d58-386b-4dcf-ae72-5429f4617db9/1/pdf/tkbrief-reactie-op-uitkomsten-experimenten-participatiewet.pdf - page 5
28. Ibid
29. Ibid
30. https://open.overheid.nl/repository/ronl-1ab98d58-386b-4dcf-ae72-5429f4617db9/1/pdf/tkbrief-reactie-op-uitkomsten-experimenten-participatiewet.pdf - page 5
31. https://www.tweedekamer.nl/downloads/document?id=3a2b612f-b4ca-4c2b-a789-5fac28126f51&title=Memorie%20van%20toelichting.pdf – page 261
32. https://amsterdam.raadsinformatie.nl/document/10832497/1/09012f9780449b35
33. Raadsbrief Eindrapportage Weten wat Werkt (2020) https://utrecht.bestuurlijkeinformatie.nl/Agenda/Document/99220ec3-553f-43f9-a9d6-c72b3d1f8506?documentId=7890e650-34f6-47b6-aade-70ce41464acf&agendaItemid=4c73b805-ac88-493d-82ec-4268319d30f
34. Tilburg Investeert in Perspectief (2020); https://tilburg.notubiz.nl/document/7754994/1/191169-02%20Kadernota%20%27Tilburg%20investeert%20in%20perspectief%27%20definitief
changes in re-integration policies, but the execution of these policies became less strict, more tailor-made, and more personal.

**Long-Term Political Follow-up: New Government and Coalition Agreement**

In March 2021, national elections were held. It might therefore be unsurprising that no major policy reforms were proposed by the State Secretary within a year before the elections. All eyes and efforts were directed at the parties’ election manifestos.

Remarkably, some of these 2021 manifestos contained quite radical proposals to reform the Participation Act and tax system. Of the ten major parties elected with five or more seats in Parliament, two even proposed a (form of) basic income. D66 (Social-Liberals, 24 out of 150 seats in the 2021 elections) said that in the long run, they ‘aim to replace social assistance with a tax credit that can be cashed in, which guarantees the social minimum’ (D66, 2021). GroenLinks (Green Left Party, 8 seats) wanted to gradually introduce ‘a basic income for everyone within eight years’ (GroenLinks, 2021). In their 2017 party manifestos, D66 and GroenLinks had already expressed support for ‘basic income experiments’ and mentioned supporting the municipalities that were in the process of getting permission (D66, 2017; GroenLinks, 2017). Two other parties mentioned (forms of) basic income experiments in 2021. The Partij voor de Dieren (Party for the Animals, 6 seats) wanted ‘a major pilot towards basic income’, (Partij voor de Dieren, 2021) and the Partij Van De Arbeid (PvdA, Social Democratic Party, 9 seats) wanted municipalities to experiment with ‘forms of basic income’ (Partij van de Arbeid, 2021). Both these parties were also expressing support for a ‘basic income experiment’ in their 2017 party manifestos (Partij voor de Dieren, 2017; Partij van de Arbeid, 2017).

While in 2017, parties expressed a general wish to learn from ‘basic income experiments’, in 2021, parties proposed very concrete changes with regard to the Participation Act. Five out of ten parties had proposals that are in line with the aims of the experiments. D66 wanted to amend the Act so that: ‘municipalities are given the opportunity to offer tailor-made services when counselling people in a benefit situation’. With regard to the release of income, D66 proposed to extend: ‘the possibility for every person entitled to social assistance to temporarily earn up to the minimum wage in addition to the benefit, to take the step to a regular job through part-time work’ (D66, 2021). GroenLinks proposed a so-called ‘foot income’ (partial benefit) for working people, people on benefits, and retirees in order to tackle poverty and make sure that ‘people with a lower income can also work part-time’ (GroenLinks, 2021). The PvdA wanted: ‘people who partly start working on benefits to benefit financially. They are entitled to good guidance, including financial coaching.’ Finally, they also wanted to give municipalities more freedom in providing guidance and provide them the possibility to ‘exempt people from the job application obligation and reintegration obligations’ (Partij van de Arbeid, 2021). The SP (Socialist Party, 9 seats) only mentioned that they want to abolish the *quid pro quo* policy. Most remarkably, the right-wing (Liberal Conservative) party, VVD (34 seats – biggest party both in 2017 and 2021), mentioned a proposal related to the experiments that would ‘make it attractive to start working part time with social assistance benefits by means of wider additional income limits’ (VVD, 2021). This is in sharp contrast to their position in their 2017 party manifesto, in which the VVD argued that ‘work must pay’ and additional income support for people on social assistance must be avoided as it will keep them ‘unnecessarily stuck on social assistance benefits’ (VVD, 2017).

After the elections, it took about ten months to form a new coalition with a new coalition agreement. Four parties formed the Coalition – VVD, D66, CDA, and CU – which were the same parties
that formed the previous coalition (2017-2021). They presented their Coalition agreement on 15\textsuperscript{th} December 2021. With regard to the Participation Act, the following paragraph was included:

\textit{We are expanding the additional income limits in the Participation Act and, together with municipalities, we ensure that people who have been on social assistance for a long time are actively approached and supported and encouraged to find work. We also ask that those entitled to benefits play an active role. In addition, we have an eye for everyone’s talents and limitations; we work from trust and there is room for customisation.} \textsuperscript{35}

The first half of the first sentence includes a specific proposal to change the law. By allowing social assistance recipients to keep a higher amount of extra earnings on top of their benefit, this proposal is clearly related to the third intervention of the experiments. This might not have been a surprise, as the idea features in the manifestos of the two biggest parties in the new Coalition (VVD and D66). It is a quite progressive (proposed) change to the law. The second half of the first sentence and the second sentence seem to express a political compromise. On the one hand, it is stressed that people should be actively encouraged to find work and asks them to play an active role. On the other hand, it is explicitly stated that not only is there room for customisation - as was also stressed by the State Secretary in her response to the experiments - but that ‘we work from trust’, which was an explicit wish from the municipalities but not approved by the State Secretary. In only four words, it seems to acknowledge the competing approach put forward by those advocating for the experiments. Of course, it remains to be seen what this means for policy practice.

\textbf{Additional Circumstances Affecting the Long-Term Follow-up}

It is hard to provide evidence for whether these effects on the proposal in the Coalition agreement can be solely and causally ascribed to the experiments, as it is hard to pinpoint from where an idea derives and trace back the lines of influence. The fact is that many political parties on the progressive or left side are triggered by the UBI proposal and the (what they still call) ‘basic income’ experiments, as reflected in their party manifestos. At the same time, as described above, there is growing dissatisfaction with the Participation Act, which is likely to have a direct influence on proposed policy changes within the Act as well. It is important to mention two additional circumstances – which drew a lot of media attention - that might have contributed to the long-term political effects, too.

First, in December 2020, the Parliamentary Interrogation Committee Childcare Allowance published their report, \textit{Unprecedented Injustice} (Tweede Kamer der Staten Generaal, 2020). This investigated how unjust and unjustified fraud policies within the scheme of childcare allowances, with harsh and strict chargeback regulations, had victimised 26,000 adults and 70,000 children, who ended up with severe social problems, such as debts, health problems, unemployment, homelessness, and the out-of-home placement of children. The awareness of this social policy scandal grew during the period of the experiments. This might have added to a societal context in which strict sanction policies are increasingly criticised by politicians and the public.

\textsuperscript{35.} Coalition Agreement between VVD, D66, CDA and ChristenUnie (2021). “Omzien naar elkaar, vooruitkijken naar de toekomst”, presented 15 december 2021 https://www.kabinetsformatie2021.nl/binaries/kabinetsformatie/documenten/publicaties/2021/12/15/coalitieakkoord-omzien-naar-elkaar-vooruitkijken-naar-de-toekomst/coalitieakkoord-2021-2025.pdf
Second, also in December 2020, there was a news report on the case of a social assistance beneficiary in a small municipality who had to repay €7,000 because she had received groceries from her mother for several months. The municipality counted this as extra income ‘earned’ on top of her social assistance benefit, which is not allowed. It led to a national and political debate on the strict and harsh conditions of the Participation Act and municipal differences in approaching social assistance beneficiaries (Kuijpers and Rotman, 2022). Although this debate took place after the publication of the party manifestos (elections were in March 2021), the debate might have had an additional influence on the specific formulation in the Coalition agreement, which was published at the end of 2021.

Conclusion

In this paper, I analysed the impact of the Dutch ‘basic income’ experiments on real social policy reform. The findings show a long-term effect of the struggle for framing and interpretation between municipalities and the national Government on proposed social policy reforms. In the stage of formulating the aims, scope, and conditions of the experiment, the national Government focused on a strict formulation and demarcation of the experiments aimed only at examining the effectiveness of interventions in the Participation Act, and not at fundamentally reforming the purpose of the law. According to the national Government, the law should be entirely focused on increasing the outflow to work, aligning with the dominant workfare frame. The municipalities, on the other hand, broadened the scope of the experiments and additionally focused on social objectives – improving well-being, participation, self-management, and the quality of service provision – to challenge the underlying objectives and approach of the current Participation Act and take an approach based on ‘trust’.

In the short run, the effects of the experiments appeared disappointing for those whose ambition was to fundamentally reform the social security system. The small, modest, and often insignificant results led to a thrifty response and a quick conclusion by the national Government that the law does not need to change, and that the aim of the Participation Act should remain in line with the workfare approach to get welfare recipients off welfare as soon as possible. However, in the struggle for framing and interpretation, advocates of a different social policy approach obtained success in the long run. In party manifestos and the recent Coalition agreement, a crucial proposed amendment to the law appeared: parties argued it should be easier to combine work and social security by allowing additional ‘extra earnings’ from (part-time) work while receiving social assistance. In addition, the Coalition agreement proposed an approach working from trust, exactly as the initiators of the experiments had argued.

Which factors led to this long-term success? I argue that five factors played a role. First, and perhaps most importantly, the (official experiment) municipalities’ persistence in reframing the purpose and design of the experiments and positive interpretation of the results, despite the mostly small and insignificant effects, facilitated the positive formation of ideas around the experiments. The struggle for interpretation was very important for changing the image of the experiment, from a technocratic one within the workfare frame, into one that showed a different approach to social assistance provision is possible. The struggle for interpretation paid off, however, only in the long run.

Second, the fact there were both ‘official’ and ‘independent’ experiments optimised fully the possibilities to work both from within the system – getting a different frame in the official documents – and from outside the strict conditions of the formal experiments. The independent experiments used more time and showed positive significant effects and, in the case of Amsterdam, operated at the edge of the law to show that extra earnings premiums for those on social assistance could work.
Third, it was crucial that the experiments were not (only) carried out by political parties and policy entrepreneurs, but by local policymakers. As these local policymakers supported the challenging frames and aims of the experiment, there was real executive power to change local policy practice. The support of local policymakers was not only crucial for the national Government’s approval to execute the (official) experiments in the first place, but also mattered in the struggle for framing and in the interpretation of the experiments.

Fourth, the recent decentralisation of the Participation Act formed the ideal context for proposing the experiments for several reasons. Firstly, the Participation Act included Article 83, which offered the opportunity for municipalities to engage with national policymakers and propose experiments. Secondly, there was strong discontent with the reinforcement of extra obligations and sanctions, as well as the budget cuts imposed on municipalities under the new Participation Act. This increased discontent with the system in place both in society and among local policymakers responsible for executing the law, from parties represented in the national Government as well as from parties in opposition in the national Parliament. Thirdly, with decentralisation, local policymakers obtained more responsibility for daily policy practice. They could rightfully claim a position to at least discuss the policy with the national Government. Finally, the budget cuts and disputed reinforcements of extra obligations and conditions also gave local policymakers the bargaining power in opposition to the national Government to ask for more local room to manoeuvre. The fact that this opposition came from politicians across the political spectrum, including governing parties, strengthened this bargaining power. The political will to struggle for interpretations came from dissatisfaction with the current system.

Fifth, the recently revived UBI debate in the Netherlands formed an ideal backdrop for proposing an alternative policy approach. Dutch policy and opinionmakers were quite familiar with the proposal and quickly turned renewed enthusiasm for the idea into a proposal to ‘experiment’. At the same time, local policymakers strategically distanced themselves from the term ‘UBI’ but kept the arguments in favour of the UBI proposal floating, reframing them as ‘trust experiments’ or ‘experiments low in regulation’.

These abovementioned factors could be informative for those initiating ‘basic income’ experiments in other countries. The role of local policymakers in particular can be crucial for strategically positioning experiments in the existing policy context, i.e., using theoretical substantiated arguments for a different policy approach but avoiding reference to the contested UBI.

In conclusion, the struggle for interpretation led to some long-term successes. Although the current proposal to allow people on social assistance to keep (more) additional earnings from work is nothing like a UBI, the policy reform seems indirectly inspired by the UBI debate (although additional circumstances might have played a role as well). The statement of the new Coalition that the Government should be working from ‘trust’ might be the biggest victory for those advocating for a new approach to social security.

Under the surface, the experiments did keep the dream of a far more radical policy reform alive, at least with some of the progressive parties in Parliament. The current second-biggest party in office, D66, proposes a detailed idea of implementing a negative income tax in its party manifesto; and the Green Party now openly argues for introducing a basic income. The revived UBI debate did not die out with the experiments; there is a bonfire burning, not a peat fire.

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