

SOCIRES – Society & Responsibility

The Responsible Society

What makes for a vital society?

The viability and the strength of a society and of its components - companies, cities, institutions, all kinds of organizations - largely depends on the sense of responsibility of its members, the people. Are they willing and able to assume and carry responsibility for themselves, for their fellows and for the public good? Where, then, do this willingness and these abilities come from? In fact: how do people acquire the dispositions and the capacities to assume and carry responsibility – and thus constitute resilient and vital organizations, and a resilient and vital society?

For too long now, we have fostered the illusion that a resilient and vital society is just the outcome of the combined working of the macro-institutions of the society, that is: the state, democracy (politics) and the market. But every day it becomes clearer that each of them can have as easily have negative effects on the sense of responsibility of the people involved. *The market mechanism*, for example, can stimulate dispositions such as creativity and reliability in people, but it might as well generate selfishness, greed and irresponsible behavior.

Democracy is meant to make possible the peaceful living together of people that are strangers to each other; but democratic procedures can as easily be instrumentalised to divide, to generate hatred as political capital and to exclude.

The state is to provide law and order in order to secure the peace and prosperity of free and responsible people; but it can as easily turn into a force that controls and represses them, or alternately into a benevolent Leviathan (omnipresent state) that deprives them of the freedom and the motives to assume responsibility themselves.

And the combined working of democracy, state and market may lead to perverse arrangements that act contrarily to social responsibility; such as crony capitalism, state capture and the omnipresent welfare & preventive state.

So, instead of securing the reproduction of socially responsible dispositions in people, *the macro-institutions of society themselves need responsible persons in order to function properly*. Without responsible persons, these institutions will degenerate and will produce perverting effects on society and its individual members.

Of course, a good education, both in the family, the neighborhood and the (religious) community as well as in school and university, may provide important contributions to instill those dispositions in youngsters. But educating, training and insisting on the importance of values and virtues – an appeal for a moral revival - is of little avail if persons equipped with high values when entering society meet with cynicism and quickly adapt to the system-driven games of force, power and money (state, politics and the market) that prevail in the public domain.

- When there is no solution *from outside* (such as education, training or an appeal for moral revival), we are left with no choice but to look for ways to operate businesses, cities, organizations, institutions and society in such a way that *in and through its functioning* the people involved develop and harness their creative, social and moral talents, including a sense of responsibility and the implied ethical and prosocial dispositions, such as overcoming selfishness, empathy, loyalty, trust, commitment, perseverance and creativity.

The thesis forwarded here is threefold:

1. persons may acquire and develop a sense of responsibility and related prosocial dispositions when they meet, deal and cooperate with other human beings, sharing a common purpose and enjoying a certain degree of freedom and self-direction in its pursuit. When doing so, *on the road*, it is possible though not guaranteed that they will develop these dispositions and attitudes. They *might*, eventually, develop them - on the road, of their own free will, and as an unintended byproduct (or side-effect) of purposeful human interaction.
 2. the prevalent logic of operation in the public domain is that of goal-realization. This applies to the relationship between a professional, e.g. a caregiver, and his/her client; between a manager and his staff, between a producer of goods and his/her consumers, between an employer and his/her employees; between a government and the citizens - and so on
 3. this goal-realization logic of operation in itself is dehumanizing (by reducing the person to resource, target, instrument, object or operator) and it has destructive effects on the creative, social and moral capacities and dispositions of the people concerned, including their sense of responsibility and related dispositions and capacities. And in consequence, it has destructive effects on the health, vitality and performance and sustained success of organizations, institutions, companies and society as a whole.
- The challenge is to change the goal-realization logic into another logic of operation, one that helps and stimulates the people concerned to develop their creative, social and moral capabilities.

The prevalent logic of operation is goal-realization

The operator in the public domain - manager, entrepreneur, government, professional - has a goal and he has a plan with activities and resources to achieve that goal. The goal may be the solution of a problem, such as the lack of clean water supply in the neighborhood, or the revitalization of the impoverished countryside, or a goal like a 15% sales increase for the company, or the renewal of the national education system. The logic is one and the same: goal-realization. To achieve the desired goal, analysis are made, plans developed and activities undertaken by which the intended results are pursued through the efficient and effective deployment of human and other resources.

To some people, this goal-realizing logic of operation may look so obvious that it seems strange to question it.

Take the example of the relationship between a care professional and a client in neighbourhood A with problem X. Stripped from its humanizing context, this functional relation is reduced to the goal-realization scheme: the professional intervenes, applies his/her techniques and protocols, and solves the problem of/for the client.

Then consider this question: what does this goal-realization logic of operation do to the person of the client, the person of the care professional, the persons in the vicinity of the client such as the family or the neighborhood community - and particularly with their creative, social and moral dispositions and capacities?

Next, compare this goal-realization or problem solving intervention with an alternative approach.

Think of a process which finalizes not only with the problem effectively solved, but at the same time is a process in which both the care provider and the client as well as the persons in his/her social context have developed and strengthened their creative, social and moral capacities. A process, in which the problem was converted into the motive for people – the professional, the client, his/her family and surroundings – to engage together in purposeful interaction. A process which generated as byproduct an increase of the caring and problem solving capacities of all people involved,

including a growth in their sense of responsibility and related dispositions such as empathy, loyalty, trust, commitment, perseverance and creativity. And a process which strengthened the bonds between all those people.

Finally, realize what actually is happening - in these respects - when the professional assumes the ownership of and responsibility for the problem and its solution, applying a goal-realization logic of operation. The existing caring and problem solving capacities embodied in the persons of the client and the people in his/her surroundings are made obsolete and destroyed over time; the process of building up those capacities is blocked; and the opportunities contained in the problem and its solution for building up those capacities are missed and lost. In the end, the solution produced by the professional will probably be not sustainable, because the capacities of the concerned people to solve and to avoid / prevent problems and to make solutions sustainable are not addressed – but, in fact, they have been effectively reduced.

Though the previous argument may look somewhat overstretched, what is important is to recognize the mechanisms working with regard to the destructive effects on creative, moral and social dispositions and attitudes of people and the vitality of their networks and collectivities.

Then, consider the next question. Imagine what would have become of Dutch society when in the fourteenth century Korean engineers and contractors would have come to The Netherlands and would have solved our water problem, building modern dikes and other hydraulic structures. Surely, at that time everybody would have been happy (and indeed it might have saved the Dutch from a series of floods). But this intervention would have made obsolete and have blocked the ongoing developments in our country, the building up of capacities of all sorts – technical, social, organizational, political etc. Probably, all kinds of assets that make up for the strength and vitality of Dutch society today – ranging from Delft university, the large contracting companies that now build hydraulic structures elsewhere in the world, to the water boards and the Dutch habit of a subsidiary state that sustains citizens' responsibility in the provision of public services – would not have been generated.

Or think about the way that the practice of goal-oriented development assistance over a period of half a century may have had inviabilizing effects on African societies.

Or about the way the welfare state in The Netherlands has had - for a period of half a century - paralyzing effects on citizens' engagement and responsibility for public causes.

Or about the case of a manager who sets the goals, designs a detailed plan with specified targets and then instructs his staff to execute his plan: *you are my human resources to implement my plan and thus achieve the goals that I have set.*

In all these cases, the same mechanisms are working that have the effect of destroying people's dispositions and capacities to assume responsibility and constitute vital and performing collectivities.

Our thesis entails that intervening, organizing, managing or governing with a goal-realization logic of operation undermines the existing goal-realizing capacities of people and their collectivities and networks (teams, groups, associations, society) and their creative, moral and social capital and that it effectively blocks the growth of those capacities and dispositions. The goal-realization logic of operation has dehumanizing effects: instead of helping people and stimulating them to develop their creative, moral and social capabilities, it has the effect of people getting into decline and their associations becoming obsolete and defunct. At the macro-level, it has *sociocidal* effects (sociocide: a crime against society i.e. against humanity and sociality), affecting society's vitality and viability.

A sustainable logic of operation: The Responsible Society

For the sustained viability and success of our companies, organizations and society as a whole, we need another paradigm, another logic of operation. A logic of operation that is able to recognize and

process the fact that people only develop virtues and dispositions such as creativity, commitment, passion, loyalty, selflessness and trust *in freedom*, of their free will, on the road and as by-product or side-effect of their purposeful interaction.

Stated in practical terms:

- The most sustainable, efficient and effective logic of operation to achieve goals and to solve problems is
 - to convert the goal into a purpose, i.e. convert it into a motive for people to engage and commit themselves personally;
 - to convert the goal-realization or problem solving process into a process that vehiculizes the strengthening of the creative, moral and social dispositions and capacities of the people involved, including their goal-realizing and problem-solving capacities, as well as the corresponding collectivities and networks;
 - which implies that the people involved are given a large degree of freedom and self-direction in achieving the goal i.e. realizing the purpose.

This idea of converting a goal into a purpose might best be illustrated by the following quote, ascribed to Antoine de Saint-Exupéry:

“ If you want to build a ship,
don't drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work, and give orders.
Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea.”

In this same vein, the carpenter may be hitting a nail into the board, he may be building the ultimate boat or he may be cherishing his yearning for the endless sea – and in all three cases actually DO the same.

In other words, for the creative, social and moral development of people, the process of setting and pursuing goals constitutes the means, motive and vehicle. A goal is not something to be achieved by appropriate action of the government, the professional or the manager, and a problem is not something to be solved by his/her intervention. Instead, the problem to be solved or the goal to be achieved must be seen and used as a reason to address and a motive to engage people for purposeful interaction, and the goal achievement process must be seen and be arranged as a vehicle for the process of creative, social and moral development of the people and their networks and collectivities, who are given freedom and ownership and who assume responsibility for the process and its outcome.

Further illustrations

- *An organization (company, city, society) conceived as a system in which people are used as human resources to achieve the goals set by the operator organizes its own destruction, as it destroys the creative, moral and social dispositions of people, which it depends on for its success and survival. Conversely, the organization is to be conceived as a vehicle for the creative, moral and social development of people, inside and outside the organization. That is the only possible strategy for sustainable success.*
- *The production and distribution of goods and services is no longer driven by the systemic logic of the market, i.e. profit, stock exchanges and shareholders, but socialized and equipped as a social function. This makes the economy strong, resilient and innovative. Companies provide goods and services that help people move forward and to develop their talents. It goes without saying that such producers are paid a reasonable fee for their services.*
- *Social functions such as health care and education are no longer the domain of government (the political-bureaucratic system) but they are destatized and given*

back to people and their own networks and collectivities - making those services more effective, and society stronger.

Operating The Responsible Society

Flourishing persons, vital networks and communities, performing companies, and institutions that do what they were made for. That's the point of The Responsible Society.

The Responsible Society can only be brought about if and when all the operators that intervene in the public domain - the professional, the manager, the director, the entrepreneur, the politician or public officer - recognize the need, utility and benefits of reversing the end-means logic between goal and the human person. People are no means to achieve their goals, but the setting and pursuing of goals should provide motives and vehicles for the creative, social and moral development of people. That must be the aim of governing, managing, directing and acting.

Employers who find that the continuity of their business is important, realize that they need responsible and well trained professionals, who take pride in their work and who are eager to improve. Employees are enabled to develop their capacities, they are given the freedom to assume and carry more responsibility, and increasingly so, parallel to their increasing capacities and competence, to which end they constitute solid teams on a human scale that are in pathways to co- and self-management.

Employees realize that, in order to secure their income and future, they have to create and exploit opportunities to grow and to increase their contribution to the purpose, the profitability and the future of the company.

Employers and employees work together, with a shared purpose, commitment and responsibility for a healthy company that provides a meaningful contribution to society. Only in this way are the various interests on a line: sustainable profit, sustainable employability of workers, adding sustainable value to society.

The **manager of a company** is in charge of the healthy development of the company, both in terms of external positioning and with regard to its goal-realizing capacity. With his team, he periodically reviews:

1. the purpose of the company – what is our mission, what do we as a company aim to contribute to society and people's creative, social and moral development?
2. the operationalization of this purpose into concrete goals for the coming period
3. the development of the company in the coming period, and the way in which operational processes are designed so that they contribute optimally to increasing the goal-realizing capacity of the company. This implies that the responsibility for operational business processes (achieving the goals) is delegated more and more to the professional teams at the work floor.

This vision of the enterprise also implies a new role for **workers' organizations**. Its primary aim is to secure the sustainable employability, resilience and agility of employees. Upgrading the quality of their work is a function not only of training, but (and mainly) brought about by constantly moving the positive spiral between more freedom for the workers to assume more responsibility, increase of their capacities and competences, and increase of their willingness to assume more responsibility. Workers' and employers' organizations discuss and implement such schemes not only at company level but also at the sectoral level, by industry, at regional level, and at national level. In tripartite conversations with the **government** they come to agree on such issues as work opportunities for young, elderly or disabled persons, or on social security and activation schemes. Workers, employers and government share the responsibility for a healthy and performing companies, a resilient economy and a vibrant society.

For the **government** as a public service provider this paradigm implies that public services are socialized, which means that they are destatized and depoliticized. Instead of conceiving them as public services to be delivered by the state, it should be recognized that involved are social functions - education, care, maintenance of public space, etc. - which ideally provide both motives for people to take responsibility together as well as vehicles for their creative, social and moral development and for strengthening their bonds, networks and collectivities.

And socialization of public services also implies that the huge state-controlled public service delivery systems be "dismantled" in units at a human scale and the transferred to the people concerned, both professionals and citizens, at the local level. The ownership of service providing institutions must return to the society. Those institutions should be designed, organized and managed in such a way that people's engagement, individually and in groups, makes the difference.

The Responsible Society

The Practices of Sociostruction and Sociocide

1. Address the operators, that is: the people that are that are in charge of, govern, direct, manage, conduct, administer, in short: operate - a company, a country, a municipality, a public service delivery institution, *any* organization acting in the public domain.

2. Make it clear to them that by doing what they do, they *always* have effects on the strength, resilience and vitality of the people and their networks that they serve, steer, reach, employ, affect in any way, either directly or indirectly. And make it clear that these effects can be either positive (= sociostruction) or negative (=sociocide). (*Note that the discussion whether society is makeable or not is pointless; with every act the operator is making - or breaking - society.*)

3. The two concepts are mirror-images.

Sociostruction cannot be produced, it is not the outcome of an intentional and planned effort. It can only be facilitated and stimulated with an oblique approach, while the outcome is never guaranteed.

Sociocide is widely committed – though always unintentionally.

4. *Example 1.* A government can either solve the problems of/for its citizens – in which case its intervention will have sociocidal effects. Or it can facilitate the strengthening of the problem solving capacities of its citizens and their own networks – and thus generate sociostructutive effects.

5. *Example 2.* A manager can either deploy his workers as human resources to follow his instructions and achieve the targets set – depleting their capacities and thus commit sociocide. Or he can manage the health of the company by organizing the goal-realization process in such a way that the goal-realizing capacities of his team are strengthened – and thus generate sociostructutive effects.

6. Sociocide is committed (i.e. sociocidal effects are being generated) when the operator intervenes in such a way that he dispossesses and expropriates people from the subject matter, motives and vehicles to mobilize and develop their creative, moral and social capabilities and dispositions. By solving their problems, by satisfying their needs or by steering them as instruments to achieve pre-set goals (in short: with a goal-realization logic of operating), the operator triggers and feeds a downward spiral: people that have less and less reason, less space, less willingness and less capacities to assume and carry responsibility; with the consequent need to solve more of their problems and to intensify the steering of their behavior, and so on. By reducing people's freedom, willingness and capacities, this operator generates destructive effects on the viability, resilience and vitality of groups/networks of people.

Not only does he destroy the existing creative, moral and social capital embodied in the people and their groups and networks. By his intervention the operator also prevents the development of (new) skills, capacities, capabilities and dispositions. The problem (to be solved), the need (to be satisfied) or the goal (to be achieved) contains opportunities to constitute subject matter, motives and vehicles for people to mobilize and develop their creative, moral and social capabilities and dispositions; and by his intervention, these opportunities are lost. This is the missed-opportunities cost of a goal-realization intervention; missed opportunities for the viabilization and vitalization of groups/networks of people.

Such are the mechanics of sociocide.

7. The mechanics of sociostruction are the mirror image of those of sociocide. The operator intervenes in such a way that he leaves people – or provides people with - the subject matter that may constitute motives and vehicles to mobilize and develop their creative, moral and social capabilities and dispositions, in groups, teams, networks. The operator thus triggers and feeds a upward spiral: people that have more and more reason, more space, more willingness and more capacities to assume and carry more responsibility together, to solve their problems (and avoid new ones!), to satisfy their needs, to achieve their goals. In this way, positive effects on the viability, resilience and vitality of groups/networks of people are generated.

8. Which creative, social and moral talents and dispositions of people are involved here?

o creative dispositions: creativity, industriousness, innovativeness

o moral dispositions: overcoming selfishness, engagement and commitment, perseverance

o social dispositions: empathy, loyalty, generosity.

9. People may develop these dispositions when interacting with others, of their free will but not necessarily in any conscious way, provided that in this interaction they are experiencing:

- o a sense of belonging, a sense of connectedness; feeling recognized and appreciated as a person, as a professional and as a member of the group / team*
- o a sense of self-direction, experiencing the freedom (discretionary space; trust) to assume and carry as a group / team the responsibility for the outcome*
- o a sense of meaning, a sense of purpose; the feeling of contributing to something greater than self*
- o mastery / drive for professional excellence.*

10. Thus, sociostruction may happen when the operator is able to have a group of people experience together a sense of connectedness, a sense of ownership/self-directiveness, a sense of purpose/meaning and a drive for excellence. Because only then those people may feel triggered to mobilize and develop their creative, moral and social dispositions. And only then, they may be prone and susceptible to get immersed in an upward spiral of ever more responsibility, more capacity, more willingness, more competence, more freedom.

11. In blunt and practical terms, this means that

- a. the operator assumes the specific responsibility to further the strength and resilience (performing capacities etc) of the people/group/team for which he is in charge
- b. the operator is able to instill in this group/team a shared sense of purpose; by converting goals, needs or problems in purposes which can address, engage and motivate people for action and to assume collective responsibility
- c. which necessarily implies that he leaves the responsibility for the operational process - deriving goals from the purpose, set targets and achieve them as results – as much as possible and in ever increasing ways to those people in collective action
- d. and that he accompanies the process by getting and adjusting the right fit between strengths and challenges, in order to constantly feed the upward spiral.

The Responsible Society

The Dutch case

A peculiar society

The Dutch societal model is a peculiar combination of three features:

1. A developed welfare state, with government provision of social insurance and social services with universal coverage of the population; both cash welfare benefits (such as old-age pensions or unemployment benefits) and in-kind welfare services (such as education, health or childcare services).
2. With large scale involvement of private non-commercial organizations – in water boards (managing water and dykes) since early twelfth century, and since a century also in sectors such as education and care. Citizens' associations have the freedom and assume the responsibility to organize and perform public functions, with the state in a subsidiary role (funding and controlling).
3. The polder model, characterized by the tri-partite cooperation between employers' organizations, labour unions such as FNV and CNV, and the government; embodied in the Social Economic Council (SER) as the central forum to discuss labour and economic issues. The polder model is a problem solving as well as a (neocorporatist) policy-making institution concerning labour and social welfare policies, in which the organizations of employers and of employees together have a relative freedom and assume the responsibility to negotiate, formulate and propose policies regarding labour-, employment and socio-economic issues that may be declared legally binding by the government.

Community and citizen-led public services

The Netherlands has an age old tradition of citizens organized involvement in public policies. The first water boards, in which people from all layers of society in a given area cooperate as equals, were established in early 11th century. They established a novel practice of public-private (non-commercial) partnership that is characteristic for Dutch society; a habit of active involvement of citizens in public affairs, secured by the corresponding mandate and resources. This arrangement was not restricted in its use to water and dykes. About a century ago, it was applied to education and care. By far most schools and care centers in The Netherlands were established by parents associations and local church communities and congregations. And starting with education in 1917, these private institutions gradually succeeded in obtaining the same amounts of public funding as their state equivalents. Even today, protestant and catholic schools account for three quarters of primary education in The Netherlands.

In the past two decades, the vitality of this arrangement in the delivery of public services has been slowly decreasing. Three developments are particularly noteworthy: First, state funding has come along with ever more detailed and strict control and regulation. State control and regulation led the private institutions to adopt a bureaucratic and then business-like way of operation. Secondly, both the education and the care sector have experienced a mayor wave of mergers and up scaling.

And the third development: most private institutions have lost their nexus with their original constituencies and with the local communities. They are not anymore part of the life-world of people, but have become part of the system-world of state and market, of power and money.

These three developments taken together have blurred to a great extent the difference between private and state institutions. In fact, both became parts of huge state-led public service delivery systems, fully integrated into the welfare state.

At present, there is a growing awareness of the negative effects of those developments. Two types of analysis – and consequent policies – stand out:

One stresses the negative aspects of size and anonymity of the system driven institutions, their solipsism and immunity, the loss of human scale. So, the recent trend is towards downsizing and deconstructing both the holdings and the operational entities, towards a more human scale.

The second stresses the negative effects of centralized government and steering, which was blamed for not being able to deal with real life diversity and rapidly changing conditions and contexts. And indeed, recently a huge decentralization operation has been launched by the government, in which the almost complete welfare state arrangement (care, youth, education, social protection, work and income) is being transferred from the central to the municipal level.

It is clear, however, that *both downsizing and decentralization are merely administrative operations*. As such and taken on their own, they do not necessarily involve any change in the relationship with the citizens in terms of their engagement, commitment or ownership; of their freedom to assume responsibility. Downsizing and decentralization are important steps, but the harder and decisive part will be to transfer ownership and responsibility to people. That is, to find new owners, people that are ready, willing and able to assume responsibility and ownership for those entities. After 50 years of statization of all social functions in the context of the flourishing and proliferating welfare state, people's willingness and capacities to take over and assume those responsibilities have been severely affected. So this transfer back to the people will only be possible in an gradual way and parallel to the reconstruction of the creative, social and moral capacities of the people and their associations.

As for the boards of the remaining social organizations in care and education, their challenge will be to deconstruct their holdings, to re-establish their autonomy vis-à-vis the state, and to re-connect to their social constituencies.

To sum up, The Netherlands seem to be struggling to close a cycle spanning a century:

- from the establishment and growth of community and citizens-led public services in especially education and care sectors, in the first half of last century
- *via* the built up of the public service delivery systems of the welfare state - involving processes like bureaucratization, statization, juridification, commodification; and concomitantly, the destruction of a good part of the creative, social and moral capacities of the people and their associations, in the second half of last century
- back to community and citizens-led public services.

Note on the Dutch welfare state as *benevolent Leviathan*

The fact is that over the last 60 years of so The Netherlands has been witnessing a silent but massive statization and politicisation of societal life. First, there was the incorporation of the care and education sectors, until then largely run by private associations and social organizations. This was part of the construction and expansion of the welfare state. Then came this wave of bureaucratic regulation and uniformisation. Next to that, the 90's witnessed the proliferation of the enterprise approach to public administration, forcing public services to function with a businesslike logic. And since a few years we have this phenomenon of the preventive state. The adage *Prevention is better*

than cure has become an important guideline for the government in recent years. Prevention seems to be a logical answer in the face of contemporary social issues such as security, education and youth, welfare and public health. However, prevention also has an expansive logic and pushes the state towards an ever more detailed, comprehensive and early approach to risks. As a consequence, the emergence of the preventive state tends towards a further and silent politicisation of society and usurpation of the state-free domain.

So, in different ways and based on different policy discourses, Dutch society has been strongly stasized and politicized over the last hundred years. Is this typically Dutch? Or is it an intrinsic and almost unavoidable effect of the combined working of politicians and bureaucrats in the context of modern media-driven democracies? The way this would operate runs as follows. Politicians look for situations that arouse public outrage, mostly because the mass media make it an such an issue. They reformulate it as a political problem, address it in parliament and then make it a problem owned by the state. Subsequently, the problem falls in the hands of the bureaucracy, and their logic of action is to regulate, steer and intervene in society.

This devouring state logic has had and still has serious consequences. By assuming all problems, and by its steering and controlling mode of problem-solving intervention, the state takes away the motives for people to engage; it takes away the freedom and the need to take responsibility themselves. And by not taking up problems themselves, these actors stop generating their own problem-solving capacities. Thus, excessive state regulation, intervention and control generates a society that is deprived of its problem-solving capacities. This weakening of society in turn generates the need for more state intervention - an infernal negative spiraling movement. People are stimulated and legitimized to sit back and see. Because that is the other side of state intervention. When the state takes over, the most probable response from the people is not so much to oppose and reclaim their autonomy and freedom to act themselves. No, it is quite possible that they react saying, *okay, state, go ahead, it's yours. And I let go, sit back and see. That is much easier.* Freedom and autonomy cost effort, assuming responsibilities brings with it a lot of work. Why bother?

So, the crucially important issue is to stop this negative spiraling movement. Urgently needed is a radical change in the logic of operation of both politicians and public administrators, at all levels, national and local. A radical change, based on the awareness that the present logic of their combined operation is the sustained weakening of society, the destruction of its own problem solving capacities, embodied in their own organizations. A radical change in the conception of what is theirs to do; in the conception of the use and function of politics and of public administration.

If we think of one word to describe this paradigmatic change, it would be *subsidiarity*. The idea is that all government action, at all levels, is geared towards – not: solving the problems of society, not: providing all kind of services to the people, not: satisfying their needs – but to reinforce the problem solving capacities of the people, the people and their own associations and organizations. That is what is needed. First come the problem-solving capacities and the vitality of the people and their initiatives, of their associations and organizations. First come the vitality and resilience of society. Government action is supposed to facilitate and reinforce it.

Current developments

The Netherlands, in spite of the state's expanding omnipresence, is still sprawling with social energy. Last year Socires organized a series of workshops in various locations around the country, on the theme on civic engagement. One conclusion stands out: The Netherlands are full of social energy. Everywhere, again and again, you see people taking social initiatives of all kind, concerned people that are committed to their cause, and that work together in creative and horizontal ways. But when local government comes in their way, they mostly feel as if they bump into a rubber wall. The

system-world of government and bureaucratic control is not able to move along with the people, and this produces incomprehension or even cynicism and hostility.

In a similar vein, and based on a broad three years research program, Tilburg University professor Gabriel van den Brink is able to ascertain that by far most Dutchmen are driven by high values, spiritual motives and moral principles. The problem however is that politicians and media have a cynical view of man, making that this idealism is denied and suppressed. According to Van den Brink, the underlying reason is that we have banished higher things from public life. We no longer talk about ideals and meaning. A kind of enlightened cynicism holds sway. The accepted opinion seems to be that our society revolves around money and power. We have come to regard ordinary citizens as calculating, rational beings who are only out for their own interests.

But this is completely wrong. Human beings are strongly moral beings. People value justice, commitment, respect and modesty highly – in fact, those qualities is what our lives are about. And this is what is missed by the government operators, much to society's detriment – says Van den Brink.

At the scientific and policy front, there is definitely a growing awareness that the state–society relationship should change drastically. In the past year, all the mayor advisory councils of the government have written reports on the subject. And in a quite unique common effort, nine advisory councils, amongst them the Council for Social Development RMO, have written a letter to the government, in which they state:

Promoting citizen involvement, civic engagement and socialization requires that the government systematically examines whether it make sufficient use of the vitality of society and the knowledge and expertise of citizens. Where do citizens have a direct involvement in the promotion of public interests? Are their initiatives allowed /given sufficient space and does government try and experiment with new forms of cooperation that will facilitate that complex social problems may be addressed in more effective and efficient ways? It is now up to the new cabinet to make use of the opportunities, in two ways: do away with obstacles that hinder those social initiatives and give them an extra impetus, where useful.

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The Hague, 31st of July 2013