The role of immigrant organisations in the transforming welfare state: Revealing blind spots in the Netherlands

Critical Social Policy (accepted for review)

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Abstract

This paper juxtaposes the framework of research on the role of voluntary work in the welfare state with discussion about the societal role of immigrant organisations, focusing on the Netherlands case. We identify limitations in local research and policy evaluations of immigrant organisation contributions, and argue that Dutch social policy defines organisations by one specific view, called ‘social unity’. This view, rooted in Dutch policy history, is one-dimensionally focused on the risks of social fragmentation and inequality and the need to link immigrants with Dutch institutions. A second view, called ‘local empowerment’, may better fit recent policy developments and the ideals of immigrant organisations themselves, as exemplified by reference to an empirical study of parenting support in Amsterdam. As many countries’ social policy increasingly relies on volunteer organisations, future policy and research should combine these views to better plan and evaluate immigrant organisations’ role.
Introduction

Many western countries are restructuring their welfare and social policies. A common trend in the last two decades is the prominence of the role of civil society and voluntary work (Milligan, 2007; Milligan and Conradson, 2006). With broad-spectrum catchwords like 'civil society', 'bottom-up associations' or 'informal networks', governments celebrate a future in which society is better morally and materially sustained by an increasingly robust web of ‘active citizens’. The kinds of actors called to promote active citizenship vary across contexts. Even within the same policy context, civil society’s specific role and its relation with the state and state services is often unclear.

This paper focuses on a particular kind of grass-roots voluntary organisations, namely immigrant organisations providing (informal) support services to members of ethnic communities who are distanced from statutory services. Studies show that immigrants often use formal (public) services less than others do and experience a series of barriers (Hernandez-Plaza et al., 2006; Kahanec et al., 2013). Immigrant organisations operating informally within ethnic communities are sometimes an alternative and more easily trusted source of support. They can be partners for governments that aim to remove barriers to service use. However, this raises questions about the relation between informal social support and formal professional services. We aim to contribute to the understanding of immigrant organisations’ role in changing welfare systems by focusing on the Dutch case.

Much research concerning immigrant associations, especially from migration and ethnic studies, focuses on their origin, typology and contribution to the integration and wellbeing of immigrant communities (e.g., Griffiths et al., 2005; Moya, 2005; Schrover and Vermeulen, 2005). Though some also focus on the institutional position of immigrant organisations as regulated by integration policies (Scholten, 2011; Vermeulen, 2005; Zetter and Pearl, 2000), they rarely consider the broader context in which integration policies are situated. Active citizenship and decentralisation processes, for instance, are issues that transcend national immigration and integration policies, but they nonetheless influence immigrant organisations’ social role and societal position (Uitermark and Van Steenbergen, 2006).

Beyond the specific study of immigrant organisations, a broad research field has evolved around the voluntary sector’s role in welfare systems, especially in social geography (Milligan, 2007). Changes in western welfare systems in the last two decades have raised many questions regarding the relation between bottom-up, voluntary initiatives and the state (Trudeau, 2012). However, studies of immigrant organisations show surprisingly few links with this broader discussion. Similarly, research on civil society’s changing role in welfare states has given little attention to the specific case of immigrant organisations.

By looking at the role of immigrant organisations from the perspective of broader debates on voluntary work, instead of from the framework of immigration and integration debates, blind spots emerge in how social policy conceives of their function. Merging the two perspectives allows focusing on implicit tensions in policy changes and the role of voluntary efforts from within immigrant communities.

We first examine the scholarly discussion about voluntary organisations’ role in the welfare state and distinguish two dimensions for evaluating their contribution. We then turn to the position of
immigrant organisations in the Dutch context, through a short reflection on the history of Dutch integration policy. This historical analysis will show that one dimension has always been dominant in Dutch authorities’ attitude towards immigrant organisations, resulting in continued blind spots concerning their possible contributions. To illustrate how these blind spots work in practice, we lastly focus on a case of parenting support programs in youth policy. We will show how those aspects of immigrant organisation potential most relevant for current policy ambitions are not seen, due to limits of the system of meaning used to assess their role.

Debates on the role of voluntary organisations in social care

In many national contexts similar discourses on the importance of voluntary work have accompanied policy changes in the past twenty years. Active citizenship and voluntary organisations are increasingly celebrated as a panacea for multiple problems currently facing liberal democracies (Fyfe and Milligan, 2003a, b). Voluntary organisations are called upon to become ‘partners’ of governmental bodies to achieve social policy goals. This partnership can take several forms. In Anglo-Saxon countries their involvement in service provision has resulted in actual devolution of service provision tasks. In the United States a long devolution process has shifted responsibility for delivery of social services from public agencies to local-level non-profit community agencies (Austin, 2003). Many of these operate as small community-based organisations that began as voluntary agencies but became engaged in a professionalisation process due to service contracts (Trudeau, 2008b). Similar shifts have taken place in Canada (Hanlon et al., 2007) and the UK, where first Tony Blair’s ‘Third Way’ and later the conservative government’s ‘Big Society’ relaunched the importance of active, committed citizens and local associations as society’s moral and material support (Giddens, 1998; Jordan, 2011). These localisation and voluntarisation trends have triggered both celebration and scepticism.

In continental Europe government withdrawal has resulted primarily in emphasising the responsibility of citizens – and voluntary organisations, as the most direct expression of citizen’s commitment – without necessarily investing organisations with the formal task of service delivery. But there are also state reductions in welfare and social support, coupled with policy discourses centred on pluralism and citizen responsibility, and a celebration of the synergy between state, private sector and voluntary resources (Bonoli et al., 2000; Skinner and Fleuret, 2011). These neoliberal policy trends have triggered much literature evaluating the risks and advantages of a more prominent role for voluntary work in the social support system. Along with the financial urgency to change current systems, the intrinsic advantages of voluntary community organisations have been advocated in policy discourses, sometimes with research support. A long tradition, from Tocqueville to Putnam (2000), exalts their pivotal role in generating civic virtues and social cohesion. For what concerns social support, the voluntary sector is valued for pursuing more pluralised forms of welfare and responsiveness to diverse local needs, for offering more personalised support on a smaller scale and for the ability to operate from a position of equality (Brown, 1997; Mitchell, 2001). Finally, grass-roots organisations are usually located near recipients and can fill local gaps in service; they have the ability to empower local communities by engaging in community building and group expression (Trudeau, 2008b), ‘giving “voice” to groups perceived as overlooked, ignored or marginalised by state and market’ (Hanlon et al., 2007: 344).
However, without questioning the intrinsic qualities of voluntary organisations, some researchers have criticised the stronger appeal to voluntary work made by many contemporary governments. The prevalent arguments against voluntarism in welfare policies can be divided in two main fronts: concerns about possible corruption of the specific values connected with voluntary work and concerns regarding the effects on society if social support is left to voluntary organisations.

The first type of concern focuses on the risks of compromising the autonomy of voluntary organisations as governments become increasingly reliant on them to achieve policy goals and meet statutory objectives, especially when that reliance is paired with stronger control of organisation functioning, goals and direction. Criticisms of US devolution processes have culminated in the idea of a ‘shadow state’: a situation in which non-profits operate as an arm of the state apparatus (Wolch, 1990). Similar worries have been expressed in European literature (Peeters and Drosterij, 2011; Trommel, 2009). Hanlon et al. (2007) analysed the impacts of service and financial retrenchment by the government of British Columbia (Canada), concluding that voluntary organisations invested with service provision face growing pressure to centralise into bigger organisations, with more emphasis on bureaucratic accountability and potential erosion of flexibility and personalised care. In short, the intrinsic advantages of voluntary effort might be lost when voluntary work becomes the tool of welfare support. In contrast to the image of the shadow state is that of voluntary associations as ‘spaces of resistance’ (Fyfe, 2005; Wolch, 1999), autonomous from both state and market (Clarke, 2000) and representing advocacy of otherwise unheard groups (Salamon, 2002). Spaces of resistance should supply ‘radical openness to alternative standpoints, and active incorporation of different, marginalised voices from the periphery into a sector traditionally dominated by society’s mainstream groups’ (Wolch, 1999: 29).

The second type of concern focuses on societal risks, such as welfare inequality and social fragmentation. Research in social geography shows that voluntary resources are not necessarily funnelled to those most in need (Staeheli et al., 1997). The unequal distribution of voluntary resources may lead to a situation in which ‘voluntarism may reinforce rather than alleviate social and spatial welfare inequalities’ (Fyfe and Milligan, 2003a: 400; see also Jordan, 2011). The high fragmentation of the voluntary sector is a concern because of the consequent inability to guarantee equal accessibility to services. Diversification can be positive (responding to local needs) but also negative, strengthening differences in society – especially for services relating to education and parenting. Salamon (1987) introduced the concept of ‘voluntary failure’, identifying four risks of social support through voluntarism: Philanthropic amateurism, the low professional quality of voluntary work; insufficiency, the limited resources of voluntary organisations; particularism, the tendency to focus on specific subgroups as ‘deserving’ at the cost of other groups; and paternalism, the dependency relationship between those providing support and those receiving support, which may inhibit social change if the preferences of the former are dominant in defining the needs of the latter.

Thus the critiques of voluntarism (the strong appeal on voluntary work in welfare policy) fall into two main themes that go in somewhat opposite directions. The first theme, concerning autonomy and intrinsic values of voluntary activity, points to the negative effect of voluntarism on the voluntary sector and its intrinsic merits. The second theme, concerning fragmentation and
inequality, points to the negative effects the intrinsic features of voluntary work may have on the broader society, as the importance of voluntarism as a resource for social support increases.

**Two axes for evaluating the contribution of immigrant voluntary organisations**

From the discussion above, two dimensions emerge in which evaluation of the social contribution of voluntary organisations responds to different parameters. Figure 1 represents these dimensions as two continuous lines, with the extremes showing the ideals and the bugbears of each evaluative dimension. These are the projected social advantages and risks of developing organisations’ societal roles in a specific direction. We speak of these lines as axes because they represent different dimensions that can be combined in a Cartesian coordinate system to form a two-dimensional scheme, which we will do in our final argument.

The first axis concerns the issue of autonomy versus incorporation of voluntary organisations. Since empowerment from marginal perspectives is a central value by which voluntary organisation contributions are assessed, we call this the axis of local empowerment. At one extreme is the ideal of grass-roots organisations operating from local perspectives and values, delivering context-specific forms of support and enabling empowerment. At the other extreme is the worrying image of a civil society increasingly hijacked by government appeals to become partners to achieve statutory objectives. In the case of immigrant organisations, this constitutes a threat to the freedom of ethnic minorities. Indeed, immigrant organisations often give space to ethnic minorities’ values and perspectives that may contrast with the host society’s values (Jenkins, 1988), in which case the tensions between their original empowering mission and governmental expectations become particularly evident (Trudeau, 2008a). From this perspective immigrant organisations should not provide services as part of the mainstream system, nor function as an arm of that system that can reach the margins of society. Instead, they should aim at creating alternative sites for aggregation and consciousness, community building and expression of local perspectives. When immigrant organisations provide forms of social support, their ability to respond to specific needs is of crucial importance. This includes helping people articulate their needs in a way that resists pressures to conform to the ‘image of the mainstream’ and embodies advocacy for another way of life (Amin et al., 2002: 125). Here, the bonding (Putnam, 2000) function of immigrant organisations has a positive connotation because it contributes to the creation of safe spaces (Collins, 1991).

The second axis expresses the tension between fragmenting and binding forces. We call this the axis of social unity. If immigrant organisations are deliverers of services to marginalised groups, their role should be in binding their services as much as possible with professional, statutory provisions. The risk of inequality here refers not just to the amount of service available but also to the expertise and professional quality available in specific sectors but precluded from immigrants shielded by closed, sheltering organisations that create alternative facilities staffed by unqualified volunteers. Organisations that combine offering social support services with a strong focus on bonding are located low on this axis since they are closer to the bugbear: organisations constituting bastions that shade people from society. The ideal is instead represented by organisations focused on extending the bridging social capital of their members (Putnam, 2000), especially the specific sort of
bridging called *linking* (Szreter and Woolcock, 2004), providing vertical connections between individuals and societal institutions or services.\(^8\)

![Diagram](image)

*Figure 2: Two dimensions for evaluating the social contribution of voluntary organisations.*

**Immigrant organisations in the Dutch context**

In the Netherlands, as elsewhere, policy discourses stressing the importance of voluntary work and citizen responsibility are prominent. Here we will consider the position of immigrant organisations within Dutch policy from the 1980s, when immigrant integration into society first appeared on the political agenda. Based on existing historical analyses, we will show that, regardless of several policy changes, the axis of social unity, from the outset, defined the role of immigrant organisations and the way their social contribution was assessed.

**Integration policies in the 1980s: organisations as allies**

The policy developed in the 1980s was mainly concerned with specific ethnic groups, called ‘minorities’, perceived to be at risk of socio-economic arrears and cultural segregation (De Graaf et al., 1988; Duyvendak and Scholten, 2011). The rationale of the minorities policy is partly connected with the Dutch history of pillarisation, although the precise nature of this connection is debated. ‘Pillarisation’ refers to the compartmentalisation of Dutch society into ‘pillars’ with specific confessional or ideological orientations, which organised most aspects of social and public life from the 1920s to the 1960s, including the system of social support and welfare. Some scholars claim that this institutionalisation of ‘sovereignty within one’s own sphere’ (Lijphart, 1968) was reflected in the Dutch approach to immigrants, broadening the cleavage between immigrants and the rest of society (Koopmans, 2003). However, the creation of new pillars was never an objective of the minorities policy, which appeared when Dutch society was already largely depillarised.

\(^8\) Whether the risks of bonding social capital outweigh the advantages, as in our social unity dimension, is a controversial issue (see Nannestad et al., 2008; Tillie and Sliper, 2007).
What did last from pillarisation, according to various scholars, was the thinking in terms of cultural contrasts, which resulted in framing ethnic and cultural differences in terms of fixed categories (Ghorashi, 2006; Vink, 2007). According to Ghorashi, the conceptualisation of immigrants as minorities reflects this ‘categorical thinking’.

The picture that emerges from literature analysing the first period of Dutch integration policy is that of an ambiguous vision. The policy explicitly stressed minorities’ rights to maintain their own cultures, languages and religions, thereby justifying state support of ethnic organisations (Pennix and Schrover, 2001). However, sociocultural emancipation was supported mainly as a means to combat socio-economic deprivation and segregation, which was the main aim of the policy (Duyvendak and Scholten, 2011; Scholten, 2011). The focus on socio-economic arrears can be related to the rise of the welfare state. The latter started to replace the pillarised system of service delivery in the late 1960s and implied increased government involvement with equality issues and the welfare of its citizens (see Duyvendak et al., 2009; Ghorashi, 2006; Rath, 1991). Minorities were targeted by support programs aimed at overcoming deficiencies, especially low levels of education, low socio-economic status and insufficient familiarity with Dutch language and society (De Zwart 2012).

As De Zwart and Poppelaars (2007) stated, borrowing Taylor’s terminology, the minorities policy was founded on the intertwined principles of recognition of cultural identities and redistribution of resources and opportunities. However, the redistribution principle was dominant and was held more consistently than the recognition principle. Analyses of policy motives and practical implementations over the years show that only in the early 1980’s were these coupled with multicultural views that valued ethnic and cultural identity maintenance9 (Duyvendak et al., 2009). Even then, the minorities policy emphasised improving the position of individual immigrants (De Zwart 2012), whereas collective emancipation through immigrant institutions was only very limitedly and symbolically encouraged (Scholten, 2011). Hence, political rhetoric emphasising recognition of collective identities primarily resulted in a categorical conception of problems rather than a search for pluralistic solutions. The concrete measures implemented were not based on a pluralistic view of social development in which group emancipation and empowerment from marginal positions is seen as a response to inequality.

This becomes clear when looking at the position of immigrant organisations. One primary motive to support them was the need for community representative participation in local and national advisory boards so as to fit immigrant groups in the distinctive Dutch consensus-based policy model (Lucassen and Lucassen, 2011). Also, from the advent of the 1980s minorities policy, ethnic organisations were increasingly expected to reinforce governmental efforts to overcome social arrears of immigrants (De Graaf et al., 1988), specifically by serving as a link between immigrant communities and public services to improve accessibility (Scholten, 2011: 73).

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9 The right to maintain cultural identity was endorsed, mainly in relation to language, but this was seen as a temporary remedy for the identity clash in which second-generation immigrants appeared to find themselves, so as to avoid social tension (Fermin 1997).
The professed multiculturalism of the early Dutch immigrant policy has accordingly been described as a powerful public image (Duyvendak and Scholten, 2011, Scholten et al. 2015), created in tacit accord with politicians and intellectuals, on the basis of a shared belief in rational societal steering (Scholten, 2011). Nevertheless, the policy was received, at home and abroad, as a truly audacious multicultural experiment (Lucassen and Lucassen, 2011).

Recent stress on assimilation: organisations as risk to integration

The minorities policy of the 1980s was abandoned in the 1990s and came under heavy attack at the end of that decade. The main criticism was that the alleged multiculturalist stance had distracted attention from the real problems of an immigrant underclass and of their cultural separatism and segregation, which was intensified by the essentialist (reifying cultural groups) multiculturalist rhetoric. The explicit categorical policy was replaced in the 1990s with a more universalistic policy centred on citizenship and ‘civic integration’ (Joppke, 2004). After the turn of the millennium, the critique of multiculturalism evolved into an increasingly assimilative line in Dutch policy (Entzinger 2014, Hurrekamp 2012, Joppke and Morawska, 2003). However, as argued by various scholars, the new assimilative trend has maintained a strong categorical nature, seeing immigrants as an essentially different and problematic category (Ghorashi 2006). The assimilative turn went hand in hand with a new political climate of ‘new realism’ in which having the guts to call problems by their name was exalted (Prins, 2004). Thinking in cultural contrasts remained dominant, as did the joint focus on sociocultural difference and socio-economic arrears.

In this context, the political position of immigrant organisations has been weakened by growing scepticism concerning their contribution to integration (Brink et al., 2003; Rijkschroeff and Duyvendak, 2004), and by discussions of whether their function is actually that of bastion rather than bridge (Pennix and Schrover, 2001). Moreover, the support and valorisation of ethnic organisations ill fits the universalistic principles advocated by the government since the 1990s. The national government has officially abandoned social policies targeting ethnic groups. Yet De Zwart and Poppelaars (2007) claim that local-level targeting of ethnic groups persists, and municipalities employ immigrant organisations mostly to access those groups that are hard to reach (see also Uitermark, 2003). They explain the different logic used at the national and local levels by stating that the universalistic approach inescapably faces the ‘dilemma of recognition’. As they describe, the recognition principle of the categorical policy has been abandoned, but not the redistribution principle. Socio-economic differences of ethnic groups continue to exist and are considered an urgent problem. However, when policymakers design targeted redistribution to address this inequality, it inevitably accentuates group boundaries and reaffirms the recognition policy that was to be abandoned (De Zwart and Poppelaars, 2007: 391). This dilemma is resolved at the national level by translating ethnic categories into broad, vague categories (like ‘high-risk groups’); however, these are retranslated into ethnic categories at the local level (De Zwart and Poppelaars, 2007: 391).

While the context in which immigrant organisations have operated has always been dominated by a focus on integration and overcoming social arrears (rather than pluralistic views), the multiculturalist language from the 1980s has contributed to strong contemporary scepticism about supporting minorities’ ethnocultural ties, which are seen as inextricably bound to risks of sociocultural isolation and segregation. The early Dutch policy has resulted in widespread resistance against pluralist views of the social function of immigrant organisations. The goal of articulating
and responding to local needs, identified in the literature on voluntary work as a positive feature of voluntary organisations, becomes more contentious within this perspective, as this ‘local need’ might be a manifestation of the distance that certain groups feel from Dutch institutions.

Thus, immigrant organisations are evaluated primarily on whether they ‘foster integration of their members or on the contrary aim to distinguish them from the host society’ (Schrover and Vermeulen, 2005: 824-5) rather than on their potential for empowering marginalised groups. The social unity axis described above has been clearly dominant in the assessment of their social contributions, while the local empowerment axis has appeared only sporadically in Dutch policy history and largely as superficial rhetoric.

**New challenges in Dutch youth policy**

In the following we discuss the case of parenting support as an elucidatory example. Drawing on previous research, we will detail the tensions that emerge between the two evaluative axes in this context.

*Parenting support in the Netherlands*

The Netherlands system of youth care comprises programs and activities meant to support children, adolescents and parents with problems related to parenting and growing up. The preventive services, offering support for minor problems, are centred around Youth and Family Centres. These municipal centres detect problems at an early stage, offer parenting courses and 'light counselling', and refer families to specialised services – from specialised pedagogic support to ‘heavy’, compulsory interventions, including residential care and foster care. The current system has come under fire lately and policymakers have recognised a number of weaknesses, such as a high fragmentation of services, statutory bases and responsible funding authorities. Because of this complex arrangement, innovation is difficult to implement, services are insufficiently integrated with each other, and families needing support get lost in a jungle of different options. ¹⁰ The system also struggles with too strong a bias towards heavy interventions, leading, for example, to unsustainable costs. Demand for specialised care increases every year, but this rise cannot be explained by an increase in developmental problems in children (Hermanns, 2009). The focus on problematic development at the cost of normal development also translates into funding patterns; much more is invested in heavy forms of specialised help than in preventive, light services that must be broadly available.¹¹

One category of concern is immigrant families. In the last decade immigrant youth have been the focus of policy discussions. Some groups are underrepresented in preventive support programs, but overrepresented in compulsory aid and detention centres (Gilsing et al. 2015). Immigrant parents appear to face more and different parenting difficulties and insecurities than native parents do (van Bergen et al. 2008; Pels et al., 2009; Adriaanse 2014). They are also less keen to use statutory services, but do turn to smaller and more informal support settings (Van den Broek et al.; 2010,


¹¹ NJI website.
Boon et al. 2012). In 2007 the former Ministry of Youth and Families developed the Diversity in Youth Policy program, which aimed to provide more families with light, preventive parenting support programs and offer specialised services that better responded to their specific needs.

The program directive did not mention a role for immigrant organisations, apart from referencing the need to ‘employ easily accessible frontline initiatives’. The more elaborated research and development plan coupled with Diversity in Youth Policy, however, provided a clear-cut role for immigrant organisations, which were described as ‘reinforcement of youth services’. It stated that developing more culturally sensitive and informed services would only pay off if ‘immigrant groups themselves’ played their part in breaking down barriers. Immigrant organisations were recognised as potential partners who could play a crucial role, since they were doing ‘much good work’ with families. However, they were insufficiently ‘building a bridge’ to statutory services. One program aim was thus to engage immigrant organisations in the development of ‘effective recruitment strategies’. It is clear that the role of immigrant organisations in this recent policy was understood from the perspective that has always been dominant in Dutch policy attitudes towards immigrant organisations. The emphasis was on linking with Dutch institutions and combating social arrears, in line with our axis of social unity.

At the same time however, the youth policy is facing new developments, which follow the aforementioned broader trend of voluntarisation and valorisation of local and less formalised forms of support.12 Criticisms of the youth care system have led to a transformation which involves both a structural-organisational aspect (shifting all services to municipal control for better streamlining) and a directional aspect, involving a new perspective on the underlying aims and values, captured by the catchwords ‘de-caring and normalising’ (RMO, 2012). Thus, the focus is shifting from treatment of problematic development to improvement of normal development conditions. The new system aims to take the natural environment in which children grow up as a point of departure and offer support that empowers parents and reinforces the inherent potential of the family’s ‘informal networks’ in overcoming difficulties instead of substituting them with professional interventions.

An important aspect of the transformation is ‘tailor-made care’: professional interventions, including more specialised forms of help, will strive to be better geared towards the actual demand of families and towards local and individual situations. These changes are directed at counterbalancing the dominance of a professional perspective, which is deemed to be increasing dependence on professional help and impairing professionals’ ability to work with – and capitalise on – the natural improvement resources already present in the family and its social network13.

Voluntary immigrant organisations and parenting support

The transformation described above emphasises the importance of the voluntary, informal efforts forming the daily environment of families. Since one problem is that the growing demand for professional support is making the system unsustainable, encouraging voluntary work also has a financial facet. But rebalancing the system by emphasising voluntary support seems to

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12 The following exposition of changes in the youth policy is based on information from the NJI website.

13 See also Janssens 2015
simultaneously articulate a shift in scientific and policy paradigms from a developmental psychological frame to a sociopedagogic frame (Daly, 2012). However, in relevant policy documents, voluntary support mostly means family members, neighbours, friends and acquaintances. The role of voluntary organisations in the policy changes is not yet clear, and immigrant organisations are hardly mentioned. Expectations concerning their role still seem to be defined by the 2007 program. In fact, while this transformation is afoot, many local governments are substantially reducing financial support to immigrant organisations in their jurisdiction. Next to the (persistent) evidence-based paradigm that questions the role of voluntary organisations on the whole, the constant push for immigrant organisations, specifically, to link with Dutch institutions and combat arrears is all the more likely to overshadow potentially fruitful ways to see their contribution.

We illustrate this point using a recent Amsterdam study conducted by the first author (Ponzoni, 2015a, 2015b –chapter 3 and 4 in this dissertation), concerning the aims and strategies of immigrant organisations focusing on parenting issues and the way these relate to the expectations of policy and professional institutes. The methods and results are extensively described elsewhere, and are here referred to only as an exemplification of our argument. The study showed that the way volunteers conceive their role in parenting and family support clearly transcends that of connecting people to professional counselling and courses. One shared aim that emerged was bringing parenting dilemmas to the fore. Although volunteers acknowledged the value of professional parenting support and often agreed that professional expertise would help parents, they saw tangible barriers to direct appeals to available services. These barriers included persistent fear, distrust and prejudice against child protection agencies and, by extension, the youth care system in general. However, volunteers concomitantly pointed to more substantial problems, namely that parents did not share the premises and assumptions underlying parenting programs offered by statutory services.

An important goal of these organisations was creating a community in which parenting questions become articulate, starting from the specific views of parents and the social dynamics of their daily lives. Volunteers maintained that the way to achieve this was to work within the natural interactions that take place between mothers or fathers during informal activities. Reflection on parenting issues can then be stimulated, departing from parents’ own narratives and experiences. This requires extensive observation and a level of affinity and familiarity not easily attained by outsiders.

Another issue volunteers noted was the vulnerability that many immigrant parents experience in raising their children in a host society that increasingly sees cultural difference as problematic. Besides eliciting questions that mainstream parenting programs do not directly address, this vulnerability formed the basis, in the volunteers’ view, of a defensive and unreceptive attitude towards aid and advice in parenting matters. Overcoming this vulnerability is possible in a community setting where people feel safe and share a feeling of belonging.

14 The 2010–2012 study involved frame analysis of interviews and focus groups with core members of twelve immigrant organisations in Amsterdam and with professionals and policymakers active in the formal system of parenting support (31 respondents total). It included document analysis and results from two in-depth study cases conducted with a participatory methodology (reported in chapter 3 and 4).
The position of trust that volunteers have in the community was in their view intrinsically linked with the informal support (advice or practical help) they offered to parents experiencing difficulties. By ‘going the extra mile’, they created ground for the belief that parenting conditions could improve. Essential components of volunteers’ strategies were the informal character of their involvement; the personal connection with parents, made from a position of equality; and the time allowed for the organic articulation of local perspectives and demands, in a setting in which parents feel safe.

Thus, volunteers perceived the setting in which they worked as crucial, and their work as providing a different rationale than that of professional programs. A connection with professional experts was mostly described as something that could be desirable, provided that professionals would see and be able to capitalise on the empowerment work done within the organisation. Their views concerning a potential cooperation with professional parenting support have been described as the frame of shared spaces. This frame differs greatly from the frame of access employed by respondents from professional organisations (Ponzoni, 2015b –chapter 3 in this dissertation).

This and other studies (De Gruijter et al., 2009) suggest that appraising the work of immigrant organisations exclusively from the perspective of the axis of social unity (i.e., creating bridges to statutory services) can stand in the way of appreciating their potential, especially in light of new youth policy challenges. When taking their aims and strategies into account, a linking role centred on conveying information about available services and referrals to professional counselling appears fundamentally insufficient.

However, a strong focus on the linking role of immigrant organisations still appears to be dominant in the attitudes of professionals and government actors (specifically local government). They expect that volunteers, respecting the line between professional and volunteer expertise, should direct families to statutory support programs instead of developing alternative forms of support. Professionals and local policymakers define the desired role for immigrant organisations as ‘channelling’ and interpret volunteers’ low enthusiasm to embrace this role as a sign of uncooperative distrust and closure (see chapter 3).

Concluding discussion

Based on the literature on voluntary work in the welfare state, we have drawn a distinction between two axes for the evaluation of voluntary organisations and their contribution to social policy. The axis of local empowerment values organisations that help people articulate their needs in a way that resists pressure to conform to the ‘image of the mainstream’, thereby sustaining advocacy for alternative ways of life and self-enhancement of parents from marginalised groups (Hanlon et al., 2007; Trudeau, 2008b; Wolch, 1999). The axis of social unity values instead organisations that connect their members with the broader society and its institutions and focuses on risks of social fragmentation, inequality and uneven distribution of care connected with a larger role for voluntary organisations in social care (Fyfe and Milligan, 2003a; Jordan, 2011).

As we have shown, the social unity perspective has been largely dominant in policy discourse on the social contribution of immigrant organisations in the Netherlands, while the local empowerment perspective has only superficially and temporarily coloured it. Already in the 1980s a focus on individual emancipation led to the expectation that organisations would function as links
between immigrants and those statutory services that could help them overcome social arrears. The widespread, but inaccurate, image of the early Dutch integration policy as a multiculturalist approach based on the collective emancipation of groups, nevertheless presently hinders a re-interpretation of their role that includes local empowerment, which would fit the current policy climate. Community-based approaches to social support, currently popular in the transforming welfare states, encounter a strong barrier regarding immigrant communities because of immediate connections with the recognition component of the early ‘multicultural’ policy, which has been strongly critiqued since the 1990s.

This one-dimensionality presently obscures immigrant organisations’ potential to contribute in meaningful ways to current policy challenges, as we have shown in the example of parenting support. Policymakers have enduring concerns about parenting insecurity in immigrant families and renewed interest in the potency of informal support on the one hand and in enhancing statutory service responsiveness to diverse user needs on the other. But these concerns do not lead to rethinking immigrant organisations’ potential role as grass-roots initiatives that can articulate local perspectives ‘from the margins’, despite the fact that organisations themselves strongly identify with this role.

This connects well with the observation that, in Dutch social policy, citizenship has been ‘culturalized’ (Hurencamp et al 2012), while the stress on citizen’s participation and responsibility is coupled with assimilationist assumptions, resulting in ‘repressive responsibilisation’ for immigrant citizens considered ‘at risk’ versus ‘facilitative responsibilisation’ for natives (Schinkel and Van Houdt 2010). This climate hinders the trust relationship between immigrant parents and parenting services, which have been described as ‘civilizing offensives’ directed at the emancipation of immigrants: An emancipation that is conceived along strong assimilative lines, contributing to separate progressive native ‘us’ versus conservative immigrant ‘others’ (Van den Berg and Duyvendak 2012).

Without suggesting that the social unity perspective is irrelevant in the actual situation, we propose instead a new, two-dimensional picture for assessing how immigrant organisations supply social support to citizens, one constructed by intersecting the two axes (see Figure 2). Juxtaposing the axis of local empowerment with the axis of social unity creates a new evaluative field for (local) policy, which takes into account the risks and advantages expressed in the voluntarism literature in a more complete way. In Figure 2, the upper right quadrant comprises the ideals of both perspectives. Sites for local empowerment and the development of marginal voices must be valued, while avoiding the development of bastions. Similarly, achievements within immigrant organisations should be connected and related to the effort of institutional support services to become more inclusive. But building links between the statutory support system and immigrant organisations must not evolve into a situation in which these organisations are merely used as an arm of the state to achieve policy goals.
In this evaluation system, immigrant organisations score high when they combine the aim of creating spaces for the articulation of marginal perspectives with that of becoming a site for encounters between community and institutional perspectives. From this angle, creating safe spaces for the expression of specific local dilemmas can be seen as a precondition for connection, or exchange, between the lived experiences of immigrants and the dominant perspective in the statutory support system. This will be hard to achieve if the role of immigrant organisations is limited to that of linking or channelling, since the creation of safe spaces involves (informal) intervention and support by the voluntary organisation itself. Instead, immigrant organisation support (in its ideal form) should be conceptualised as attempts to catalyse a community’s potential for tackling shared social issues in ways that professional programs can relate to and possibly even nourish with their available expertise.

Rethinking immigrant organisations’ potential from this two-dimensional perspective might prove fruitful in the context of current social policy transformations in the Netherlands, but also elsewhere in Europe, where the promise of a vital civil society is pivotal. A development in this direction would require the synchronised effort of policy and research. Policymakers should attempt to shape material conditions for immigrant organisations so they can effectively contribute to social policy in these terms, while further research should assess their actual achievements.
References


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