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THE DUTCH DISABILITY INSURANCE ACT (WAO) AND THE ROLE OF RESEARCH IN POLICY CHANGE

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This paper has primarily been composed in behalf of a project under the auspices of the UNESCO-MOST Programme on knowledge utilization of social policy research in various countries. We presented the first results at the conference 'One Hundred Years of Social Security in the Netherlands' in The Hague in June 2001 (De Gier & Vijgen, in: Berghman et al. 2003: 139-156).

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Abstract:

In the Dutch welfare state social policy research always has been an essential tool in policy development. Much public money has been spent on explanatory research and research that has to be supportive to policy design, policy improvement and the evaluation of social policies. A significant field in this respect is social security and more in particular the Dutch disability problem. Since the onset of the at the time fundamentally changed public disability insurance legislation in the second half of the sixties of the last century, disability has become one of the biggest problems of the Dutch working population. The number of disabled workers increased rapidly after the introduction of the Disability Insurance Act (WAO) in 1967 from about 200.000 to almost one million in the nineties (about 10% of the whole Dutch working population) and remained at this unusual high level until today. To be able to tackle this problem Government and the administrative organizations carried out and funded several hundreds of research projects since the seventies.

In this paper we investigate the impact of this research on policy-making. The main question to be answered is to what extent the results of research have been used in policy-making regarding the WAO. On the basis of three more specific case studies we conclude that this impact has been very modest. More in particular, by means of detailed document studies and complementary interviews with the relevant stakeholders we investigated three important and far-reaching corrective legal reforms in the nineties and the role policy research played in this respect.

Various aspects explain the under-utilization of research, but one of the most important ones is the complicated political context in the Netherlands. Many institutional actors, that are interdependent and locked into permanent negotiation over such a sensitive societal issue, are involved. Therefore, consensus on the basis of particular research results or recommendations is difficult to envision.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Dutch post-WWII social security system is one of the best developed in the industrialised western world. It is a mixture of Beveridgean social insurance and Bismarckian workers insurance and it covers the ‘risks’ of old age, surviving one’s breadwinner, having children, poor health, poverty, unemployment, sickness and disability. The disability risk was the first for which a provision was created. In 1901 the first workers Accidents Act (OW) was introduced, followed in 1919 by an overhaul of the OW in combination with the introduction of a general invalidity scheme (IW) for the whole population. With minor adjustments these two laws endured until 1967, when a completely new disability act was introduced: the Disability Insurance Act (WAO). The cause of the disability was no longer of importance for eligibility¹. Formally, the so-called ‘*professional risk*’ was combined with the ‘*social risk*’ in one statute. The peculiar implementation infrastructure of the WAO invited the (mis)use of the disability status for labour market reasons. This made the WAO very attractive as an early exit road for older workers. The more so as the level and the duration of its benefit compared favourably to the benefits of unemployment insurance and social assistance. The number of eligible people increased from about 200.000 by the end of the sixties to a staggering one million by the end of the eighties up to the present (about 10 percent of the total working population). The WAO operated *and still operates* as a hidden unemployment scheme, covering a lot more beneficiaries than the less-attractive regular unemployment insurance. This is widely regarded as one of the major socio-economic problems of the Netherlands. From the eighties onwards (a period of high unemployment for the country), debate about possible reforms was a regular feature on the political stage. The Disability Insurance Act underwent several adjustments, but, seen from the perspective of absolute numbers, without much success. One important explanatory factor is that the Dutch consultation economy requires sustainable compromises between government and the ‘social partners’ (employers organisations and trade unions) to make fundamental statutory changes feasible. Without such support, only limited statutory reforms are possible.

From the mid-seventies onwards, the government and other institutional actors involved with the WAO started commissioning research. Research really took off in the first half of the eighties with a major longitudinal project looking into the causes or ‘determinants’ of disability of WAO beneficiaries. By now, hundreds of (mostly commissioned) studies have

¹ The Netherlands are the only country in which this is the case.

been produced, varying in disciplinary perspective, methodological approach, and general purpose, but covering a broad range of quantitative and qualitative descriptive research, explanatory research and prospective studies, formative and summative evaluations and international comparisons. Box 1 summarises a recent literature review conducted on behalf of the responsible Ministry

Box 1: WAO research 1976-2000²

During 1976-2000 more than 250 Dutch studies were published that were directly focused on the WAO and its implementation, and/or on long-term sickness absenteeism (the early stage of becoming legally ‘disabled’)³. If one includes studies that address these issues indirectly, the figure increases to a manifold of 250. The number of directly related studies that are published in a particular year increases from 5 in the late 70s to 20 in the late 90s. Most studies were executed by commercial research consultants (32%) and public research institutes (30%). The implementation agencies (14%), the national government (8%), advisory and supervisory bodies (14%) and client organisations (2%) took care of the rest. The great majority of the research was commissioned by one of the institutional stakeholders.

Over the course of this period, some topics showed a gradual increase in research attention (integration), some only appeared during its second half (implementation practice, financial incentives) or had peaks of interest (women). A few have been popular from the start and remain so to this day: the disability (entry) criterion, stress and stress resistance.

The question that we will try to answer in this contribution is what the added value of all this research output has been for improving disability policy and its implementation. Did research contribute to the containment of the WAO problem or was its impact on policy and practice neglectable? Our starting hypothesis is that, despite big investments in WAO-research during the last three decades, its impact on policy making and implementation has been fairly limited. We base this expectation on the substantial (political and administrative) impediments to policy changes of disability regulation and the institutional constraints of the interaction between research and policy in this issue arena.

² In 1999 the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment commissioned a review of 25 years of WAO trends, policy and research. The results were published in 2002 (Aarts et al.). The content of this box is largely based on this review (p.79 & p.331-335).

³ The actual number of studies is bigger because the review was only trying for good enough, rather than complete coverage.

The flow of our argument starts with an account of the methodological choices we have made: why Disability Insurance, why multiple cases and why policy changes as a starting point?

This is followed by a description of the general context of Dutch socio-economic performance, policy-making and institutional organisation, within which the WAO debacle unfolded⁴.

The next section more specifically describes the relevant aspects of the Dutch social security system and the WAO-policy arena, including its institutional setting and the role of research within this arena. Against this background the following section presents three ‘cases’ of the role played by research in important legal interferences and/or adjustments of the implementation procedures of the WAO. The first case is about the connection between the so-called ‘determinants of disability’ research project and the first important fundamental reform of social security in the Netherlands in 1987. The second case focuses on the implementation of TBA (law on the reduction of disability claimants) in 1993, a law that adapted the entry criteria for potential WAO beneficiaries. The third case deals with the aftermath of the implementation of TBA that triggered massive opposition from claimants and interest groups.

This study formed part of a wider international comparative study commissioned by UNESCO (MOST Programme) into knowledge utilization in social policy. The project is coordinated by Harvard’s Professor Carol Weiss. Important input for the various country specific case studies is an evaluation framework developed by Carol Weiss (see ANNEX). We conclude with relating our findings to the Weis’ framework, used in our study, and reflecting on the role of research in the unfolding story of Dutch disability legislation and its implementation⁵.

2. WHY DISABILITY INSURANCE, WHY MULTIPLE CASES, WHY POLICY CHANGES AS A STARTING POINT?

Ideally, a case-study design for the conceptual framework that Carol Weiss proposed for investigating the “...factors that advance the utilization of research results and the obstacles that thwart the use of research results in the policy arena” (see annex) consists of a substantial

⁴ This and the following section (sections 3 and 4) offer the necessary background for understanding properly the outcome of our project, that is the significance of the Dutch Polder Model (section 3) and the context of the Dutch Social Security System (section 4) respectively. Well-informed Dutch readers might therefore skip reading these two parts and move directly to section 5: Case Studies.

⁵ At the moment it remains uncertain if UNESCO will publish the embracing comparative study.

(evaluation) research project or interconnected set of projects - henceforth called a 'case' - and its influence on one particular policy programme or policy issue⁶. Unfortunately, for the Dutch context this approach makes not much sense, at least not for programmes or issues that really matter in terms of their social costs and benefits or their budgets.

As far as programme evaluation is concerned, although the Netherlands are part of the so-called 'second wave' of countries that have institutionalised evaluative capacity⁷, larger intervention programmes are normally not accompanied by the kind of thorough longitudinal evaluations based on proper base-lines (let alone randomised controlled social experiments⁸) that are familiar and often budgetary 'build-in' elements of comparable US and Canadian programmes. In other words, the prototypical knowledge utilisation problem is not characteristic for the Dutch setting. Another important reason for the misfit of the case-study design is the general institutional architecture of the Dutch state. For this methodological rationale, the relevant aspects are the close or even symbiotic relationship between research and policy and the number of institutional parties involved. Most policy issues that score high on public visibility are accompanied by an impressive amount of research. And policy actors fund most of it, especially during the initial phases of problem awareness and policy formulation. Academic interest in the issue follows rather than precedes policy-funding opportunities. And with respect to the latter, Dutch policy-arena is characterised by a very diverse category of potential institutional 'users', all of who have a legally sanctioned role to play in policy-making and for all of whom commissioning and/or invoking research is part of the way this role is played. This implies three things:

- To understand characteristically Dutch dynamics of research-policy interaction one has to look at an issue that is heavily studied with strong policy actor involvement;
- To understand these dynamics one has to study the particular institutional set-up of the policy arena framing this issue within the context of the general institutional architecture of the Dutch (welfare) state;

⁶ Evaluation is the prototype of policy and practice relevant research because its legitimation rests solely on its usefulness to practitioners and decision-makers. Similarly, the non-use of evaluation is the prototype knowledge utilisation (KU) problem. This is illustrated both by the fact that the KU debate has raged most intensely, and most productively for that matter, in evaluation circles, and by the related fact that most conceptual and practical contributions to the KU field have come from evaluation researchers, Carol Weiss being a prime example.

⁷ The 'first wave', involved in evaluation from the 1960s, includes the United States, Canada, Sweden, and Germany; the 'second wave' grew throughout the late 1970s and into the 1980s and includes Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, Great Britain, Finland and France. See: Boyle et al, 1999.

⁸ For an interesting example see: A Canadian social experiment on strategies to make work pay, in: Henke, 2000.

- To understand these dynamics it makes no sense to try to identify one *single* research project or programme as the focal case, one has to look at a *set* of cases.

Stating that the historical and institutional context is important for understanding the use of research knowledge is hardly breaking new ground. Also Carol Weiss is quite explicit about this, e.g. during a recent interview: “I haven’t been struck by cultural differences in the resistance to using research in policy making. I think there are historical differences, largely around the degree of development of the social sciences.... For research to be used, it is important where the social sciences are located institutionally and how they are linked to governments. History matters and the institutions matter”⁹. And their importance has come up in our own work¹⁰ too. When signing up to this internationally comparative case-studies project, the specific Dutch institutional setting turned out to have unexpected consequences for the applicability of the conceptual framework. However, the necessary adjustments we had to make have obvious merits.

The approach we took in our study was based on the following methodological choices:

- We looked at an issue that has been a *major* public, political and policy issue during the last two decades: the Disability Insurance Act (WAO)¹¹. This issue definitely concurs with our description of a symbiotic relationship between research and policy. Policy development, implementation and adjustment have been accompanied by an enormous amount of policy research;
- Within the general issue we focussed on one particular aspect that has been consistently important, both in terms of its visibility in the public debate and in it being directly accessible to policy interventions: the criterion used to establish the extent of someone’s inability to work and thus the extent of her claim to disability insurance benefits. Whenever stakeholders were queried for an aspect that had been influenced by research, this criterium was mentioned.
- Next, rather than taking research projects or programmes as the primary entry into the issue we took three important policy changes or adjustments as the starting point. This enabled a focussed search for references to particular research projects in the political and the policy discourse that accompanied them.

⁹ See Harvard, GSE, 1998.

¹⁰ Cross, et al. 2000.

- Finally, the selection of particular research cases was then guided by two premises:
 - ⇒ It makes most sense to look at cases that in terms of structurally favourable conditions (the institutional weight of their principals, an apriori linkage to a particular policy adjustment, etc.) can be expected to have had an influence;
 - ⇒ It makes most sense to look at cases that in the eyes of knowledgeable researchers and policy makers are best practice examples of the use of policy research in this area;
- In other words, to make a purposeful selection of cases most likely to have had an impact; if these turn out to have been neglected by policy, all others will have too.

The approach chosen precludes the kind of in-depth case-analysis that is actually asked for by the Weiss framework (see annex). Obviously, we stuck to the key research questions but could not include the amount of detail outlined in the conceptual framework. On the other hand, the multiple-case character of our study offers the possibility for comparisons between individual cases within the same Dutch context and the same policy arena. We believe that the added advantage of these *within-context comparisons* outweighs the disadvantage of lack of detail. Also, we believe that our multi-case treatment offers an interesting and in-depth ‘case’ for the understanding of *the relationship between institutional architecture and the research-policy interface*, more instructive than any single research case could have been.

Last but not least some information on the methodology used and the phasing of the project. The three policy adjustments resulted in the study of five core and one related research cases. The project was divided into two phases. During the first phase, on the basis of a literature scan, document analysis and interviews with key informants from both the research and the policy community the methodological choices outlined above were decided upon and the cases were selected. During the second phase additional document analysis and interviews delivered more detailed knowledge of the seven cases. Excluding pilot interviews and some (phone) enquiries for supplementary information a total of eighteen informants were interviewed in-depth. All of them have been closely involved with the WAO issue for a very long time¹², and ten of these eighteen had fulfilled different positions¹³ during their career in the field, making for a total of more than thirty different ‘roles’ or ‘perspectives’.

¹¹ Many commentators would point to structural immigrant integration and disability populations and policy as the defining touchstones for evaluating the weaknesses of the Dutch welfare regime;

¹² On average 20 years, with a range from 10 to 25 years.

3. THE GENERAL SETTING: A 'POLDER MODEL' VERSION CORPORATIST WELFARE STATE

The Dutch welfare state has been called anything from a 'disease' to a 'miracle' and is often labelled the 'polder model'. What, if anything, is so special about the way the Dutch have organised their democracy and their public decision-making? What did the Dutch do to end up as a success story in the international press? In other words, what is the general environment in terms of socio-economic performance, institutions, and policy, within which the WAO debacle unfolded?

3.1. The substantive dimension of the polder model

All of the above labels, 'disease', 'miracle', and 'polder model', highlight certain aspects and downplay others, have multiple meanings, and are often used in relation to each other. For our outline of the Dutch 'Way' we start with the term 'polder model'¹⁴, which has become common currency in both Dutch self-description and foreign analyses. The label is used for both dimensions of the Dutch model that are relevant for the story we want to tell: its institutional and its substantive aspects¹⁵. The institutional dimension, referring to the deep-rooted Dutch tradition of administrative organisation based on consensus and compromise, mutual trust and decentralisation of responsibilities, is responsible for the label 'polder model'. But it is the historically much more recent substantive aspect of the polder model's economic policies which are usually referred to when elaborating its defining characteristics¹⁶. The common storyline describes how the polder model turned a Dutch 'disease' into a Dutch 'miracle'. The early 1980s were the Dutch low point of a sustained macro-economic crisis triggered by the worldwide recession following the oil crises in 1972/1973 and 1978. The Dutch economy and its government budget were definitely 'ill'. According to a factsheet of the Dutch ministry of Economic Affairs: "the recession from 1981 to 1983 was more severe in the Netherlands than in other OECD countries. During this period, 100,000 jobs were lost every year, partly due to the sharp rise in labour costs. Furthermore, public finances had got completely out of hand."¹⁷ This Dutch 'disease'¹⁸ was

¹³ I.e. changes of position between different institutional actors or between research and policy positions.

¹⁴ This description has profited from the discussions with our colleague Louk Groot. See also Groot, 2001.

¹⁵ The distinction and part of the ensuing analysis is taken from a speech by Dutch EC member Frits Bolkestein on *The future of the social market economy*; see Bolkestein, 2000.

¹⁶ Usually, this is with some reference to an institutional infrastructure of consensus that made the policy reforms possible, but sometimes, e.g. by Frits Bolkestein (2000), they are presented as having been pushed through against strong opposition, and as leading to the erosion of social dialogue and the consensus model.

¹⁷ See: Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs, 2000.

partly caused by the “easy temptation of rapidly increasing national income due to natural gas reserves.”¹⁹ The natural gas export boom and the resulting sudden foreign currency inflow created an economic boom/bust cycle through its strengthening of Dutch currency and the ensuing inflationary pressure. As such it even achieved economic textbook status²⁰.

3.2. From disease to miracle?

The turn-around came with the so-called 1982 Wassenaar agreement on wage moderation in return for a reduction in working hours that the employers’ unions and the trade unions concluded to save their freedom of wage negotiation²¹. Tax reductions, increasing net expendable income and thus encouraging lower wage demands, smoothed the way for this agreement. The polder model ‘miracle’ took off from here with an economic reform ‘programme’²² including general budget cuts, a fixed exchange rate of the Dutch guilder relative to the German mark, the implementation of a better incentive structure for the social security system, successful efforts to introduce more flexibility into the labour market and make part-time work more attractive, and general measures to improve the functioning of markets (privatisation, deregulation, etc.). The cumulative result a decade and a half later was an economy that performed significantly better than that of most other OECD countries, and certainly than most EU countries, combining high economic growth with a significant rise in employment, without sacrificing the country’s high level of social insurance²³.

¹⁸ At this time, the Dutch also suffered from another ‘disease’, especially in US opinion. But this was a disease that most Dutch were rather proud of: the massive opposition against nuclear cruise missiles in Europe (in November 1981 an unprecedented half a million people took to the streets in Amsterdam).

¹⁹ See: Lubbers, 1999.

²⁰ This is actually the second ‘Dutch disease’ that achieved textbook status, the first being early 17th century Dutch dependence upon the price of tulips that led to the 1637 crash of its economy when the booming tulip market busted.

²¹ The government had threatened to intervene in pay levels if the stakeholders did not ‘voluntarily’ succeed in stopping the yearly increase in labour costs.

²² However, “...one has to keep in mind that at no point something like a masterplan, which was universally approved off by all relevant actors, did exist. On the contrary, the reforms were implemented in an erratic way, were quite often subject to intense political debate and can be seen as single steps dealing with one specific problem... In retrospect one can say that many adopted single measures created, with a considerable time lag, the critical mass sufficient to trigger the positive developments...” Steffen, C. 1998. For this reason some reject the term polder *model*, e.g. Visser et al. 1997, p.184.

²³ Obviously, the story of a disease cured and turned into a miracle has different versions. Some say the institutional dimension of the polder model was irrelevant, others present it as the crucial element, some say that the Wassenaar agreement and the following ‘reform programme’ ask for a specific explanation, others claim that they can be understood in terms of basic economic factors, some present the success as real and robust, others claim much of the performance to be a case of good PR and warn that whatever positive there is might be very impermanent. Some even argue that the polder model ‘myth’ became a self-fulfilling prophecy through the intermediating variable of trust in the economy (e.g. see Folia, 2002). Therefore the version presented here is not uncontested but should be interpreted as a summary of the currently dominant interpretation.

Part of the ‘miracle’ may be less successful than it seems. For example, $\frac{3}{4}$ of the jobs created since the early eighties are part-time, not highly qualified and overwhelmingly in the service sector which is largely sheltered from international competition. And cheap labour might mean a disincentive to industrial innovation²⁴. But the most questionable side of Dutch performance is the relatively low utilisation of labour potential, mostly due to the large number of people dependent on benefits - a number that hardly changed since the early eighties - and the difficulty they have finding a job even in a period of rapid employment growth²⁵. And within this conglomerate of benefit dependants the categories that internationally *really* stick out are the early retired and *especially* the occupationally disabled receiving a WAO benefit. In relative terms, the Netherlands have the highest number in the world of employees registered as disabled for work - late 2000 nearly 950,000 or about 1 out of every 6 members of the active working population - a figure substantially higher than in any other EU country²⁶. 30 Years ago the Dutch ratio of disability benefit recipients was similar to that in Sweden and Germany²⁷, during the years of the Dutch ‘disease’ the incidence of occupational disability exploded, and during the years of the ‘miracle’ it was not cured but kept rising. At present, as the titles of the sources of the above figures indicate, it is a part of Dutch performance that is still seriously ‘ill’.

3.3. The institutional dimension of the polder model

Our next section describes the history of the Dutch disability insurance act in more detail. But to understand this history and to understand why so much Dutch disease could be cured by the economic policies of the polder model while at the same time the WAO disease proved resistant to all treatment efforts, one needs to know more about the institutional dimension of the polder model.

Historians often explain the deep-rooted polder model tradition of administrative organisation based on consensus and compromise by the geography of the Netherlands. About half of the country is a delta of coastal lowland. This made for an everlasting battle against the water:

²⁴ E.g. see Steffen, 1998.

²⁵ In 1998 30% of the working population (people aged 15 to 65) held a job of less than 35 hours. 22 % are dependent on benefit (unemployment, sickness or invalidity). In 1996 only 6.4 % of the unemployed found a job each month compared with e.g. 23.3 % in Denmark (See: Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs, 2000). The OECD rate for ‘real joblessness’, including the unemployed in training schemes, early retirement or other social programs, remained at a stable 27% between 1984 and the late nineties. See: Henning, & Weber, 1998.

²⁶ See: van het Kaar, 1999.

²⁷ See: Aarts, et al. 1992.

building dykes, controlling water levels and reclaiming land (known as ‘polder’). They define the institutionalised process of consultation and compromise that guided the Water Boards²⁸ and their polder pumping installations as the roots of the current consultative administration²⁹. Others refer to the pluralist administrative tradition of the Dutch Republic, expressed in both its political governance structure (e.g. provincial regents) and in its corporate governance structure (e.g. big trading organisations like the Dutch East Indies Trading Company)³⁰.

3.3.1. Politics

Whatever its origins, under the influence of 19th century modernisation trends, including the staged introduction of general suffrage, this tradition evolved into a specific form of consociational democracy³¹. From 1917 to about 1970 a stable civic equilibrium was achieved through governmental powersharing of the elites of the four³² so-called pillars of Dutch society, the Catholics, the Protestants, the Socialists and the Liberals. The ‘elite accommodation’³³ of these “...subsystem[s] in society that link...political power, social organisation and individual behaviour and...[that are] aimed to promote, in competition as well as in co-operation with other social and political groups, goals inspired by a common ideology shared by...[their] members for whom the pillar and its ideology is the main locus of social identification”³⁴ was guided by a ‘role culture’ or ‘style’. The ‘rules of the game’ of this style consisted of “a mixture of procedural rules and general orientations towards politics and do not have much substantive content”³⁵. They included regarding politics as a rational enterprise, pragmatic tolerance, proportionality, and depoliticisation of issues and power of minority vote. The process of depillarisation that became evident in the early 70s drastically changed the political landscape and did away with the peculiar ‘social apartheid’³⁶ of the pillars, but the open and near proportional Dutch electoral system still harbours many political parties, none of which has ever had anything approaching a majority in Parliament, and continues to make coalition-building a political inevitability, and Parliament a place for unspectacular deliberation rather than fierce debate. Although the elite ‘style’ has had to adjust itself to the changed social realities of a politically emancipated electorate and much

²⁸ The country’s oldest tiers of government: the first ones were established in the early 14th century.

²⁹ See: Kranenburg, 1999.

³⁰ See: Van der Ploeg, 1998.

³¹ The label is Arend Lijphart’s (see his 1968 classic). For this section we have profited from the expertise of our colleague Thom Duyvené de Wit. See also his unpublished paper, 1996.

³² However others define three or five pillars, see van der Hoek, 2000. p. 389.

³³ The term used by Arend Lijphart who fathered the international fame of the Dutch pillarised society.

³⁴ Bax, 1988. p.104.

³⁵ See Lijphart, 1968. p.123.

³⁶ Van der Hoek, 2000. p.389.

more aggressive and influential mass media, it remains consensualist at heart. This underlying ethos is reflected in countless advisory and consultative bodies: “Each issue where there is a remote danger of disagreement has its own forum in which all interested parties are represented, whether it be traffic issues, defence matters or education affairs”³⁷.

To give but one example of the institutional resilience of the pillarised model of society and the profound effects it still has: at the same time that the Dutch pillars socially evaporated minority incorporation was politically being redefined as ‘integration while preserving own culture’³⁸. Although more recently, individualist educational attainment and labour market participation policies became more popular they did not do away with the earlier socio-cultural identity perspective and the associated opportunity structures³⁹. The institutional legacy of pillarised society continues to financially support the founding of Muslim, Hindu and Chinese schools and denominational broadcasting organisations. And, the Dutch government keeps “...financ[ing] a range of minority organisations and has incorporated their leaders in advisory bodies and procedures. Additionally, the implementation of minority policies is often left to...such organisations or to special migrant welfare organisations”⁴⁰. One predictable result was the creation and co-optation of an immigrant elite, more than happy to stick to the consensualist rules of the game. In comparison with Germany this policy of cultural accommodation and facilitation has contributed to minority claims making that is much less polarising, less radical, and less country-of-origin oriented⁴¹.

3.3.2. Corporatism

The deep-rooted polder model tradition is also reflected in the specific form of corporatism that evolved in the Netherlands, which is characterised by a prominent role for the state and the same culture of consensualism that structures the political interactions. As the next section provides short descriptions of the main institutions of Dutch corporatism⁴², we will limit ourselves here to what seems to make it effective. Uwe Becker summarises the conditions of

³⁷ Kranenburg, 1999.

³⁸ Early 80s, see Fermin, 1997.

³⁹ Fermin, 1997.

⁴⁰ Duyvené de Wit, & Koopmans, 2001.

⁴¹ Duyvené de Wit, & Koopmans, 2001. However, one should not make the mistake of equating political harmony with successful performance. In other comparisons, e.g. on an arguably more important structural indicator like labour market participation, be it with Germany or other European states, this Dutch approach of elite accommodation clearly underachieves (See Thränhardt, 2000). The point here is to demonstrate the resilience of the institutional infrastructure and the power of the underlying ethos to co-opt newcomers into the system.

⁴² For a short historical outline, see: van Empel, 1997.

effective corporatism as “...relatively unified and centralised organisations of capital and labour..., a limited ideological distance between them, and a socially strong notion of the common or public interest...”⁴³. These conditions have better chances of gestating in smaller countries with open economies⁴⁴, a non-absolutist past and a long-term dominance of Christian social philosophy over etatist and individualist worldviews⁴⁵, a pattern that perfectly fits the Netherlands. Dutch corporatism is the connotation of the ‘polder model’ that is most popular in the ‘miracle’ discourse. It is usually described as a ‘consultation’ or ‘concertation’ economy, involving employers’ associations and trade unions – the so-called ‘social partners’ - and the government. In this version, the polder model distinguishes itself by its particular consultation institutions, of which the Social and Economic Council and the Labour Foundation that are described in the next section are the most prominent, and strong consensualism. A telling indicator of this aspect of the ‘model’ is a very low incidence of strike in the Netherlands⁴⁶.

3.3.3. Consensualism

As the descriptions above indicate a culture of consensualism underlies the institutional arrangements and is essential to their effective operation. Obviously cultural ‘traits’ are bound to pervade more than just particular institutional arrangements. A lot of more general Dutch fame or shame⁴⁷ is infused by this ‘national need to compromise at all costs’ as it was recently described by the Economist: “One quality that suffuses Dutch political and social mores is the notion of *gedogen*, a nigh-untranslatable term that means looking the other way when you must. It seems to feed a national need to compromise at all costs. It is often translated as ‘tolerance’ but could also come to mean something pretty close to sogginess, fudge or even hypocrisy”⁴⁸. A powerful indicator of this need is the fact that the Netherlands is the country that has been reigned by ‘meetings’ longer – more than 400 years – than any other, and is the birthplace of the first meeting ‘class’ with its own code of ‘meeting class manners’⁴⁹. Dutch is the only language that has a specific verb for holding a meeting (*vergaderen*) and the white-

⁴³ Becker, 2001. p. 15.

⁴⁴ E.g. van Empel, 1997.

⁴⁵ See: Becker, 2001. p. 15.

⁴⁶ “The average days per 1,000 workers annually lost through industrial action amounts to only a fraction of that in most other developed countries. Many Dutch people with a job reach their retirement without having been on strike one single day” See: Boerman & Nederstigt.

⁴⁷ Also ‘tolerance’ regarding the legalisation of drugs and prostitution, the decriminalisation of euthanasia, marriage rights to homosexuals, etc. is discussed in terms very similar to the politico-economic discourse on the polder model. E.g. see Allen, 2001.

⁴⁸ October 12, 1996.

⁴⁹ It is telling that this history was first described by a Dutch sociologist, see van Vree, 2000.

collar class is very aware of working within a ‘vergadercultuur’. Participating in meetings is a distinguishing status symbol since 17th century Regents’ rule and the 1960s democratisation of society did not taint the symbol but made it accessible to the masses who not only adopted its ritualised forms but also the underlying consensual habitus. So now, as historian Han van der Horst, author of a well-researched guide for ‘understanding the Dutch’⁵⁰ observes, not only elite but also average everyday life, including its evenings and weekends, is controlled by appointments that are hard to change once they have ended up in the diary⁵¹. And the ideology of pragmatic equality that had buttressed elite accommodation in pre-1970s pillarised society was taken over by the masses and resulted in a peculiar form of ‘blunt informality’⁵², also across obvious barriers of hierarchy⁵³, that astonishes foreigners who are used to more decorum. In internationally comparative terms, the speed and extent⁵⁴ of this cultural democratisation was as conspicuous as the pillarised deference toward authority had been in the decades preceding it⁵⁵. However paradoxical it may seem, this Dutch informality can be interpreted as an indicator of the ‘habitual’ nature of consensualism in the Netherlands. As Stephen Mennell summarises this figurational⁵⁶ argument “...it has been observed that the more informally people behave in their dealings with each other in meetings or in other contexts the greater, rather than the less, the necessary degree of habitual self-restraint. The less rigid the social rules, the greater the demands imposed on emotion management”⁵⁷.

3.4. The connection between the substantive and institutional dimensions

In the general story of the polder model turning a disease into a miracle it is also this underlying ethos of consensus and compromise that connects the substantive and institutional dimensions. Intellectual opinions about the nature of this consensus differ. The most influential analysis, Jelle Visser and Anton Hemerijck’s ‘A Dutch Miracle’, argues for a perspective in which the 1982 Wassenaar agreement indicates the outcome of a successful policy learning process that enticed the social partners, in particular the trade unions, to adopt an ‘other regarding’ policy stance. They are very clear about what they consider to be the

⁵⁰ Van der Horst, 1996.

⁵¹ See: Van der Horst, 1998.

⁵² See: Van der Horst, 1998.

⁵³ E.g. courses for expat managers devote explicit attention to the fact that the dictatorial style in dealing with secretaries as practised in countries such as France and Germany is not appreciated in the Netherlands, because ‘whether boss or secretary, both are also just people’. See: Vossestein, 1998.

⁵⁴ E.g. no people secularised as fast as the Dutch. See: Daalder, 1995.

⁵⁵ See: Daalder, 1974.

⁵⁶ Figurational studies or sociology indicate a research tradition strongly influenced by the work of Norbert Elias.

⁵⁷ Mennell, 2000. Foreword. In: VanVree, 2000.

crucial precondition for successful reform: societal consensus. “In all welfare states there are many veto options and actors with the power to obstruct. A politics of imposition is likely to provoke conflicts which may retard or even reverse the process”⁵⁸. And they argue that the need for consensus only increased with the conditions prevalent in the 1980s: “...the scope of supply-side corporatism is narrower and more predicated on generalised trust and consensus, deep within firms, networks and interest organisations which make up the economy, than the Keynesian strategies of wage moderation, demand management and redistributive social policy”⁵⁹. In other words, the success of the Dutch polder model is conditional upon an *extraordinarily strong* ethos of consensus and compromise.

A more recent analysis⁶⁰ by Uwe Becker warns against reading *too much* consensus into the acquiescence of the trade unions to the extraordinary wage restraint in the 1980s. He argues for “...an a-symmetrical or hegemonic consensus, where the weaker party adjusts, at least in deeds, to the dominant interpretation of the common interest”⁶¹. In this view, the consensus of the Wassenaar agreement is mythical⁶² and a real ‘reign of harmony’ regarding the strategy of wage restraint only took shape in the 1990s. According to Becker the weaker party submits to the dominant view by a mechanism of consensualism which he describes as a mode of conflict regulation, normatively ingrained in everyday life, that “...demands consensual behaviour of the participants who have to avoid conflict, to look for the common good and to pose ‘reasonable’ demands....Deviations...result in excommunication....Most suitable to adjust to these conditions and to be ‘reasonable’ is to conform to the dominant opinion, i.e. the opinion which in a careful process of trial and error meets least opposition and that is most supported from outside..., particularly from science or from government agencies relying on scientific experts. As a reward to consensual behaviour every participant will be presented as a winner: ‘win-win’ even if only acquiescence has taken place”⁶³. But whatever the best interpretation of the *underlying* mechanism may be, it seems clear that the long-established ethos of decision-making in the Netherlands is strongly consensualist and sticks out in internationally comparative terms.

⁵⁸ Visser et al. 1997, p.182.

⁵⁹ Visser et al. 1997, p.64.

⁶⁰ See: Becker, 2001. p. 15.

⁶¹ Becker, 2001. p.14.

⁶² He also disputes the substantive importance accorded to wage restraint, but that is beside the point here.

⁶³ Becker, 2001. p.18-19.

It is equally evident that the limited degree of ideological polarisation which is a necessary condition for the ‘political integration of potentially subversive classes and forces’⁶⁴ through the described ‘friendly’ form of hegemonic consensus is also a characteristic feature of the Dutch scene. We already mentioned the dominance of Christian elitism, such that even Socialists and Liberals were ‘christianised’⁶⁵ and subscribed to basic principles of Christian social philosophy like the primacy of social responsibility over the promotion of sectional interest. Although some of the pillarised ‘rules of the game’ did not survive the cultural changes of 1960s the core remained firmly in place. E.g. Arend Lijphart identified a technocratic, ‘non-ideological’ perspective on the role of politics as *the sine qua non* for successful consociation. Its most recent master symbol is the ‘purple’ coalition of social democrats and liberals that came to power in 1994 and ruled for eight years⁶⁶. Another example is provided by Jan Willem Duyvendak’s fascinating post WW II history of the rhetoric and realities of the socio-political debate on social engineering in the Netherlands⁶⁷. During these decades, whatever their rhetoric, the actual policy stances of the parties on the left and right poles of the political spectrum on the pragmatic possibilities for and the normative desirability of the social engineering of individual well-being coincided in a remarkable way. And when one looks for ideological polarisation at the level of concrete policy issues, be it socio-economic policy⁶⁸, migrant integration⁶⁹, educational policy⁷⁰ or environmental policy⁷¹, the picture is one of mutual accommodation rather than polarisation of positions.

3.5. The role of experts and research

The last but crucial issue to be addressed in this section is the *role of ‘experts’ and research* in Dutch consensualism. The above quote from Becker describing the mechanism of consensualism explicitly refers to ‘science’ and ‘government agencies rely on scientific experts’ as playing an important role in determining and/or legitimising the politically

⁶⁴ Becker, 2001. p.18.

⁶⁵ Becker, 2001. p.17.

⁶⁶ Until 1994 the Christian democrats had been a necessary the bridge between these opposites, ruling with one or the other in all post WW I governments (with the exception of ‘40-’45). The 2002 elections toppled the ‘purple coalition’ and reinstated the tradition of coalitions including Christian democrats.

⁶⁷ See: Duyvendak, J.W. 1999.

⁶⁸ E.g. see: Becker, 2001.

⁶⁹ E.g. Fermin, 1997.

⁷⁰ E.g. Peschar, & Wesselingh, 1995 and Sturm et.al. 1998.

⁷¹ E.g. Leroy, & Nelissen, 1999.

dominant opinion. Becker signals a ‘remarkable’⁷² respect for scientific expertise, as indicated by the influence of the figures of the Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis (CPB). E.g. the CPB is asked by political parties *across the ideological spectrum* to “...scrutinise the feasibility of their policy intentions or election programs”⁷³. A recent essay⁷⁴ by Ben Crum and Jeroen Bos describes policy research as the lubricant that enables a smooth operation of the concertation institutions. It helps to create shared problem definitions and a common consultation frame, what Becker called the ‘common interest’, i.e. it facilitates depoliticisation of ideological positions. This role of research is engrained in the Dutch way of running the government. All kinds of circumstantial evidence testify to the importance of research knowledge for policy.

- A long and strong tradition of producing detailed and accurate administrative data;
- An internationally acclaimed system of government funded social reporting;
- The government commissions a lot of contract research and contract research often paves the way for the emergence of academic fields of interest⁷⁵;
- The reverse also applies: when there is not enough policy interest, including contracts, for a particular topic, academic interest is often negligible⁷⁶;
- The Dutch socio-economic research community is very policy oriented⁷⁷;
- The Dutch being part of the ‘second wave’ of countries institutionalising evaluative capacity, i.e. the countries that adopted evaluation when its role shifted from improving the effectiveness of policy programmes to a tool of public accountability via the budgetary process and as a means to influence activities at the political level of government⁷⁸, in other words a tool for creating ‘common interest’.

That Lijphart already identified the strategy of using figures - in combination with the use of legal and constitutional principles - to depoliticise conflicting ideas as one of the rules of the

⁷² Becker, 2001, p. 17. I.e. ‘remarkable’ even in comparison with other corporatist states that all share respect for experts (Katzenstein, 1985, p.88).

⁷³ Becker, 2001, p. 17.

⁷⁴ Crum & Bos, 2001.

⁷⁵ Take any major policy field and available reviews will point towards a major role for contract research in the emergence of an associated academic field: environmental issues (E.g. Leroy & Nelissen, 1999), primary production (agriculture, animal husbandry, fisheries, etc. e.g. Leroy & Nelissen, 1999), building (e.g. Spekkink, 1997), education (e.g. Peschar & Wesselingh, 1995), migration and minority integration (e.g. Van Niekerk, 1993), labour market and labour relations (e.g. Evers et al. 1998), ageing (e.g. Nitsche, 1995), or the WAO for that matter.

⁷⁶ E.g. a policy issue like (early) retirement and pensions (e.g. Van den Heuvel et al. 2001) or an economic ‘sector’ like philanthropy (see the website of the only – recently established – research group: <http://filantropie.scw.vu.nl/gin/english.htm>)

⁷⁷ E.g. in comparison with the German research community. See: Van Waarden, 1996.

consociational ‘game’ indicates the deep-rootedness of (scientific) expertise as the lubricant for consensualism.

As such, socio-political respect for economic, demographic and statistical figures is not specifically Dutch⁷⁹. However, the close and often *institutionalised* relations between science and policy in The Netherlands are also to a substantial part country specific. The existing institutions do matter because they are resilient: “...disappointment [in their performance] is translated into different preferences for kinds of research (for example, more evaluation, less causal analysis), as well as disciplines (more economics, less sociology), and changing ways of linking with research (more explicit short-term contracts and less block grant finance) rather than abandoning the commissioning and the use of research”⁸⁰. The Dutch infrastructure of publicly funded knowledge institutes and expert advisory bodies is quite elaborate. If in its general design it can be called exceptional is hard to say because international comparisons are lacking. However, our description - in the next section - of the institutionalised knowledge infrastructure that is part of the WAO policy arena suggests that the extent to which the research function is an integral part of the policy-making process can be seen as a characteristic of the polder model. So we would guess that the close and institutionalised relations between science and policy are as exceptional as Dutch consensualism.

4. THE SPECIFIC SETTING: THE DUTCH SOCIAL SECURITY SYSTEM AND THE WAO

In this section we describe the one hundred year history of the Dutch social security system. To really understand the story as told below, it is imperative to know something about the institutional setting within which it unfolded. The last section sketched this setting in its general outline; this section will zoom in on the institutional actors directly involved in the WAO-debacle. To prevent any confusion between what is substantive history and what is institutional setting, the actors are described in boxes that are set aside from the text.

4.1. A slow start followed by a big bang⁸¹

⁷⁸ See: Boyle et al, 1999.

⁷⁹ E.g. Cross et al. p.60.

⁸⁰ Cross et al. p. 56.

⁸¹ The sources used for this historical overview were: De Gier, 1987, WRR, 1994, De Jong & Vos, 1994, Aarts et al. 1998, SCP, 1998.

The history of social security provision by the Dutch state can be divided into three phases, a long and slow starting phase, a shorter but spectacular extension phase and a the post-oilcrises retrenchment or restructuring phase.

Social security provision started with the Occupational Insurance Act (OW) of 1901. Until that time, only the labourers employed by certain enlightened industrialists were fortunate enough to be insured⁸². Coverage was limited at first, until 1921 only for dangerous factories and only for accidents at work ('risque professionnel'). The implementation of this Act – who should investigate the accident, determine the damage and decide on the height of the benefit – was contested but became a state monopoly. In exchange, the employers were allowed a free hand in financing the risk. Twelve years later the first additions were proposed resulting in an Invalidity Act (IW) in 1919 (covering disability caused outside the industrial sphere) and the Sickness Act (ZW) in 1930. Again discussion about responsibilities delayed the policy process considerably. This time the social partners got their way and implementation was handed over to statutory industrial insurance boards, governed by the trade unions and employers organisations that controlled the respective branch of industry.

In 1919 the Supreme Labour Council ('Hooge Raad van de Arbeid') was installed by Royal Decree. This tripartite consultative body provided a platform for trade unions and employers organisations to influence legislation and its implementation. It was the birthplace of important pieces of labour relations legislation like the Collective Agreements Act of 1927 (CAO) and the law enacted ten years later that governed its universal applicability (AVV). It was also the place to seek consensus about social insurance issues, apprenticeship systems etc.⁸³ but although support for further elaboration of social security provisions grew during the 1930ies, nothing much happened. All in all, a slow start, mainly because of protracted discussions about the architecture of the system and the distribution of responsibilities between the state and the 'social partners'.

The widespread support for the elaboration of the system into a population-wide safety net only resulted in action after WWII when renewed fierce debate about implementation responsibilities was finally settled with the enactment of the Social Security Organisation Act of 1952. The Labour Foundation's hand, a bipartite trade unions and employers organisations

⁸² E.g. by company specific arrangements for sickness and unemployment.

⁸³ E.g. Van Empel, F. 1997, p.7.

platform established in 1945⁸⁴, was clearly visible in the design of the system: implementation of the Sickness Act and the Unemployment Act (1952 additions to the system) was handled by the industrial insurance boards; supervision of their lawfulness, effectiveness and efficiency was assigned to a new quango, the Social Security Council (SVR), that had no direct links with government. The SVR was also assigned the task of co-ordinating the implementation, managing the funds of the insurance contributions, and advise the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment on social security policy. This amalgam of tasks without clear ownership of either the state or the social partners turned the SVR into an ineffective watchdog and left the field to the social partners who controlled the implementation. The system was subsequently expanded with provisions for old age (AOW, 1957), survivors (AWW, 1959), child benefits (AKW, 1963), and finally, to ensure a social minimum for all citizens, the Universal Social Security Act (ABW, 1965). Implementation of these universal insurances was in the hands of the tripartite Social Insurance Bank (SVB), and supervised by the SVR⁸⁵

4.2. Disability legislation as the pinnacle

Occupational disability legislation, having been the first to emerge, was the last to be reformed. The 1967 Disability Act (WAO) combined the risks covered by the Accident Act ('risque professionnel') and the Invalidity Act ('risque social'), and guaranteed a benefit of 80% of one's previous wages⁸⁶ for a period of unlimited duration. The severity of disability was related to the earning capacity of healthy others who matched the recipient's educational profile and experience, expressed on a seven-point scale ranging from mildly disabled (15-25%) to fully disabled (80-100%). To deal with the all but unambiguous entry criteria, a problem that was aggravated by the elaborate classification system, the industrial insurance boards founded a Common Medical Agency (GMD) for the assessment of 'claims', and for the reintegration of the remaining earning capacity.

From the beginning the WAO stipulated that the severity-of-disability assessment should take into account that partly disabled jobseekers are not very attractive to potential employers (the 'discountability article'). This far-reaching element of the statute was a result of extensive

⁸⁴ This platform is not a successor of the pre-war *tripartite* Supreme Labour Council, but of a bipartite platform established in 1938 (see Van Empel, 1997, p.7, and box 3).

⁸⁵ With the exception of the ABW that was implemented by local authorities under the supervision of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment.

⁸⁶ I.e. unrelated to the recipients employment history.

deliberations of the social partners in the Social and Economic Council (SER). It is obligatory for the government to consult this advisory council in almost every important socio-economic matter. If the social partners reach an agreement on something within this platform, it is politically very difficult for the government to ignore its opinion. A 1973 circular by the federation of industrial insurance boards⁸⁷ operationalised this stipulation as meaning that unemployment of partly disabled was to be regarded as caused by their disability. This ‘discountability’ principle resulted in most *partly* disabled receiving a *full* disability benefit and built a certain extent of hidden unemployment into the WAO-figures.

When, in 1969, a legal minimum wage was introduced, coupled with the development of CAO wages, and used as a benchmark for the universal as well as the employee insurances, the Dutch welfare state had reached its pinnacle. It was a mix of the Beveridgean ‘universalist’ system, based on national solidarity, and the Bismarckian ‘continental’ system, aimed at the reproduction of the existing social order. Its benefits were comparatively very generous and wage-related. And amongst all its benefits, the occupational disability benefit stood out in particular in its lumping together of *risque professionnel* and *risque social*, the absence of a relation with employment history, its easy entry criteria and its discountability principle.

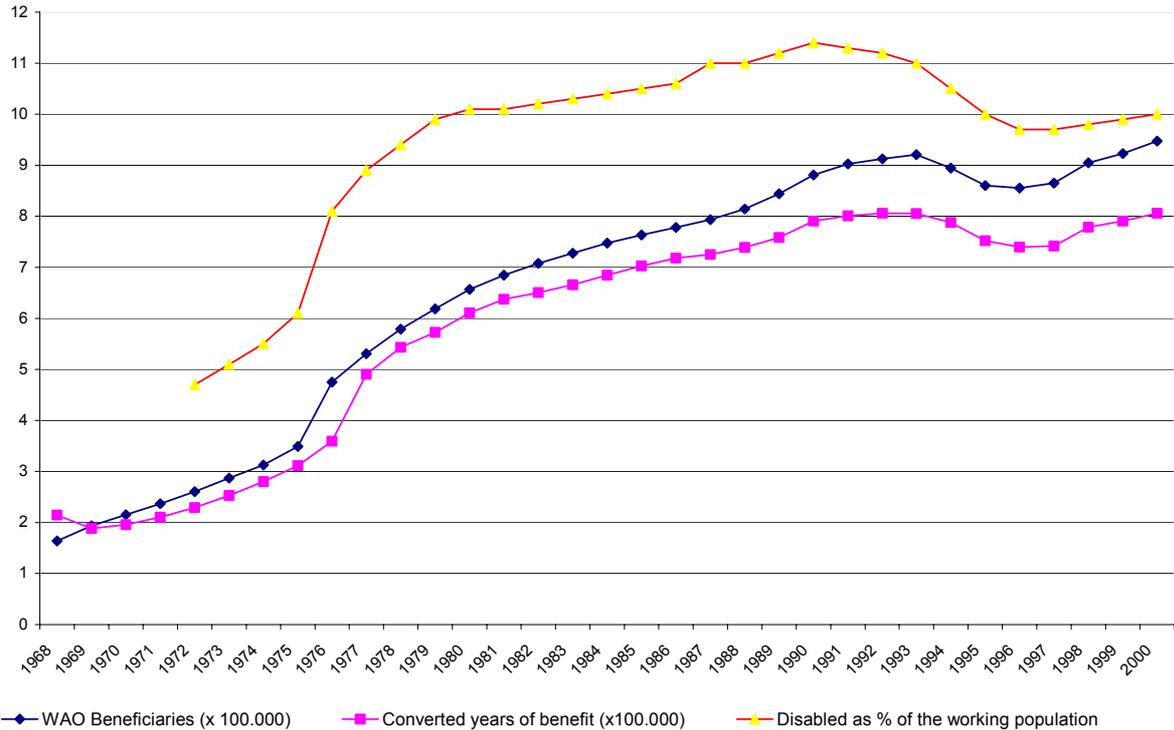
4.3. Crises and revisions

The social security system was all but flawless, and this was realised soon after it had reached its most elaborate incarnation. In terms of regulations and implementation it had become quite complex and even uncontrollable. It had been build on the traditional principle of a male breadwinner, which was not in line with either the fast changing Dutch household realities, nor with EC-directives on equal opportunities. The design of the universal old age provision (AOW) and the implementation infrastructure of the WAO made it sensitive to the ageing of society. All in all, the system was (too) generous, strongly focused on guaranteeing income (as opposed to work), easy to enter, but difficult to exit. Any system with near universal coverage, high benefits, easy access and limited reintegration instruments, that is not strictly implemented is bound for trouble when the number of beneficiaries starts increasing substantially. This is what happened during the first half of the 70s. The oil crises made the ‘full employment’ doctrine of the then ruling coalition untenable, the number of recipients of unemployment benefits started rising. But the number of WAO claimants started rising even

⁸⁷ After consultation with the SVR and the GMD.

more, as its generous benefits⁸⁸ made it the preferred redundancy scheme (preferred that is by employers and workers) for less productive and older personnel. Figure 1 illustrates this spectacular rise. Since then, the Netherlands have a WAO ‘volume’ crisis that remains unsolved to this day: agreement on WAO restructuring was *the* main issue of contention during the coalition negotiations between the political parties that won the 2002 national elections.

Figure 1: The 'volume' problem of the WAO (data-source: LISV)



4.3.1. The restructuring process: price and volume

The period of continuing crisis and revision of WAO legislation and its implementation and supervision infrastructure covers a period of three decades and 9 different cabinets. The next section (5. Case studies) will describe three important policy changes and the role that research played in their genesis, the shape they took and the effects they had. The particular context for each of these changes will be described in that section too. Therefore, this section will conclude with a general outline of the restructuring process and its outcomes.

At first, until the mid-70s, the cabinet followed the Keynesian recipe of countering a recession by increasing government spending. The first warnings about hidden unemployment, failing

⁸⁸ the height of which was easily maximised because of the discountability clause.

implementation and prohibitive costs⁸⁹ were ignored. The next cabinets, forced by the increasingly ‘diseased’ socio-economic realities focused on regaining control over the spiralling ‘volume’ of benefit dependants. However, the WAO was still not perceived as a problem but rather used as a ‘solution’ to slow down the rising official unemployment figures. The discountability principle’s financial repercussions were recognised but not yet deemed reason for intervention.

The continuing economic decline (the second oil crisis of 1979 and the recession of 1982-83) brought a centre-right coalition to the fore that agreed on a neo-liberal agenda of policy restructuring: revision of public expenditures, strengthening of the market sector, and fighting unemployment. The government successfully pressurised the social partners into agreeing (Wassenaar, 1982; see 3.2) on wage restraint in exchange for more jobs. An agreement that the trade unions hoped would prevent further retrenchment of social security provisions. This hope proved idle. The new neo-liberal policy did indeed create new jobs⁹⁰, but could not stop the reorganisations in the industrial sector, including the associated redundancy schemes increasing the ‘volume’ of unemployment and disability benefit recipients. Thus the government had to intervene in social security arrangements by progressively decreasing the generosity of benefits (‘price policy’), however without making entry more difficult or paying attention to reintegration. The WAO was still not singled out as an especially worrying aspect of the social security system. The result was that purchasing power of WAO claimants declined by 25% (sic) from 1980 to 1985, but numbers kept rising.

The situation became so untenable that real restructuring couldn’t be stalled anymore. After years of bipartite and tripartite consultation and advice, the first so-called ‘system alteration’ (as opposed to ‘adjustment’) finally took shape in 1987. For the first time the WAO received explicit attention, not by way of a ‘price policy’ but by way of ‘volume policy’ intervention: the discountability principle was deleted in the hope that this would ‘legalise’ the estimated 50% hidden unemployment in the WAO⁹¹ and in due time reduce costs and total volume of benefit recipients. It took a near cabinet crisis to get these changes through Parliament but their effects were hardly convincing. Although the volume of full benefits did decrease (albeit much less than expected) this was more than compensated by an increase of new entrants.

⁸⁹ from the political opposition, social scientists and the Ministry of Finance.

⁹⁰ but mostly part-time in the service sector for newcomers.

4.3.2. The restructuring process: sidelining the social partners

Slowly the macro-economic perspective of WAO stakeholders as innocent victims of economic circumstances was replaced by a micro-economic perspective of choice for and interested action of all stakeholders. The degrees of freedom of the social partners in implementing the WAO legislation was seen as making practice virtually resistant against policy changes. This reframing resulted in a shift away from policies using ‘price’ or ‘volume’ as their handle to policies seeking to influence the position and responsibilities of the social partners. After much political struggle this resulted in a law (TAV, early 1992) on decreasing disability volume by reintegration measures and financial (dis)incentives for employers, followed in August 1993 by an even further reaching law (TBA) that restricted height and duration of the benefit and made the entry criterion more strict. TBA was the first act to have noticeable effects and WAO volume indeed decreased (see figure 1)⁹².

However, it became increasingly clear that legal changes alone would be insufficient as long as implementation practice was not restructured. After a Parliamentary Enquiry (see box 2 below) had redefined the ‘WAO-problem’ as an ‘implementation-problem’ and lifted the taboo on debating misuse of the legislation, government became serious about distancing the social partners from WAO implementation and its supervision. In two consecutive changes (1995 and 97):

- The SVR was replaced by the Supervisory Board Social Security (CTSV), a quango without participation of the social partners. However, the CTSV was less independent from the responsible Ministry than recommended by the Enquiry committee, and lacked the competence to command compliance from the implementation agencies;
- All the tasks of the bipartite industrial insurance boards, formerly in charge of the implementation agencies, were taken over by the tripartite National Institute Social Security (LISV);
- The Common Medical Agency (GMD) was dissolved and its tasks taken over by the separate implementation agencies;
- The advisory role of the Social and Economic Council remained unchanged.

⁹¹ By shifting them to the less generous unemployment benefit scheme.

⁹² It also had unintended negative effects: see 5.3.

The then ruling ‘purple’ coalition left it at that, even when the volume started rising again after 1997⁹³. Political debate concentrated on (inconsistent) privatisation proposals and prevention and reintegration measures. Although from 1994 onwards various preventive and reintegration measures were adopted, the privatisation debate took a U-turn in 1999 and resulted in the introduction of a new system of social security (SUWI, operational since January 2002) that makes all implementation of unemployment and disability legislation a public task. Meanwhile, the volume keeps rising and the WAO remains the open nerve of Dutch politics⁹⁴.

All in all, the unsuccessful restructuring of Dutch disability policy took several decades. The politico-economic situation – especially a political or economic crisis – and the institutional logic of the distribution of implementation and supervision responsibilities between actors with diverse interests seem to be the main determinants of policy changes. The history of the Dutch social security system can be described as a continuous battle between the institutional actors involved, which are so interdependent that their relationship sometimes impresses one as a mutual hold. The question to be answered is what role, if any, socio-economic research plays in this story. As most research is initiated and commissioned by institutional actors, box 2 describes the research involvement of the most important ones. The next section will examine the role of research in light of three empirical cases of policy change.

5. CASE STUDIES

In this section we will describe three separate empirical cases of the influence of research on policy changes. All deal with adjustments (restrictions) of the disability or entry criterion of the WAO that determines the eligibility of claimants. In one-way or another this criterion has been at the heart of the debate about the WAO reform. Whatever the dominant interpretation of *why* things went out of hand, for the *how* the disability criterion was always given centre stage and seen as the prime locus of intervention. Also our informants were unanimous about

⁹³ The Labour party (PvdA), one of the coalition parties of ‘purple’, had lost about a third (sic) of its seats in the Parliamentary elections of 1994 as a result of being responsible for the enactment of the tough TBA legislation. Its then time coalition partner, the Christian Democrats (CDA) had also lost a third and, for the first time since WWI, were relegated to the opposition benches. This heavy political beating made *all* parties wary of further retrenchment of the WAO.

⁹⁴ It has to be stressed that figures kept rising in *absolute* terms, but not in *relative* ones, i.e. as a percentage of the working population (that grew spectacularly during ‘purple’); and costs came down as TBA lowered the ratio of full versus partial benefits. But the compulsion of the ‘number comes close to one million’ slogan, around since 1982 when the then time prime minister, Ruud Lubbers, made his political survival dependant upon preventing this from happening, is as strong as ever.

Box 2 Institutional actors: their research involvement

In the Netherlands the relationship between social science and policy making in the field of social security is highly institutionalised, but highly fragmented at the same time. Policy actors like government departments, administrative bodies and local authorities all have their own research budget. Inter-actor co-ordination is usually non-existent or badly organised. With respect to the disability problem, the majority of research projects are instigated and financed by three organisations: the politically responsible department (the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment), the body in charge of supervising the implementing agencies (until the 90s the SVR, then the CTSV and now the IWI), and the more recently established National Institute for Social Insurance (LISV, now UWV).

Both the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment and the SVR/CTSV/IWI have their own research department. The research branch of the Ministry usually contracts out to research consultancies or academics. The research department of the supervising body does almost all its research in-house. As both institutional actors had their own, and until 2002 partly opposite policy agenda, research results of one were seldom fully in accordance with the objectives or priorities of the other. As a consequence, much of the research of these two organisations, and thus of the bulk of WAO research, can be characterised as politically controversial. The UWV mainly produces descriptive monitor-type output.

Although the bulk is (in)directly produced by the above actors, the research activities of the other institutional stakeholders is all but insignificant. Box 3 describes the importance of the Parliamentary Buurmeijer Enquiry. And the WAO related production of the advisory bodies may not be very extensive but was certainly influential, even if only because government is required to react officially and cannot totally ignore their reports. In summary, all players of the dense network of institutional actors make use of research in playing their consultative game.

the centrality of this issue. All these adjustments were aimed at substantially reducing the number of new WAO beneficiaries⁹⁵. The first case focuses on the first big research project with respect to the WAO, the so-called WAO-Determinants Project. This long-term project, initiated in 1976 and completed in the early 80s, influenced several important policy adjustments between 1980 and 1990. The second and the third case deal with policy and research with respect to further changes of the disability criterion in the period 1990-2000.

⁹⁵ The criterion doesn't influence the level of the benefit as such. This depends first and foremost of the remaining earning capacity of the claimant. Disability is assessed by a medical practitioner, whereas a labour

5.1. The first case: the WAO-Determinants Project

This project was born at a time when research in the field of social security was still very scarce in the Netherlands. And most of the research efforts were directed at (reducing) sickness absenteeism of workers. The main initiator of the project was not an institutional actor, but a group of individuals⁹⁶, mainly academic researchers. The project was financed by and embedded in the administrative office of the Social Security Council (SVR) and started in 1976. At the time, insight into the real determinants of the rapidly increasing WAO problem was very limited⁹⁷. Three years after its implementation, in 1979, about 215.000 persons were eligible for a WAO-benefit. Hardly six years later the amount had more than doubled to 475.000 persons. That these figures pointed to the fact that both employers and employees ‘played the system’ had already been voiced by some. But how exactly the process worked in practice, the kind of knowledge that is essential to formulate effective policy measures, was very much in the dark. But that the ‘discountability’ article and its 1973 operationalisation had to be part of any explanation seemed obvious.

5.1.1. The research project

The main question to be answered in this project was what the real reasons (determinants) are underlying occupational disability. Which factors cause long-term disability and which factors determine the formal acceptance of someone as a legally disabled person? The core of this multi-tiered project consisted of client-oriented research and more in particular a longitudinal study of 3000 persons on long-term sick leave, conducted in 1980. The first measurement took place after five months of sickness absenteeism and the second after twelve months of absenteeism⁹⁸. The study also included a control group of 2000 healthy WAO insured workers. The researchers not only interviewed the workers and their employers and inspected their work environment but also talked with the medical doctors and labour experts involved.

5.1.2. Results

The whole project took quite a long time, also because the implementation agencies obstructed data collection. The first results were published in 1981 and still phrased in very

expert assesses the remaining earning capacity. Both experts are employed by the (same) sectoral insurance organisation.

⁹⁶ Actually the first initiative came from a SVR staff member, but it was an individual, not an institutional initiative.

⁹⁷ The only systematic information available were descriptive statistics.

⁹⁸ At the time, during the first twelve months of sickness absenteeism workers were eligible for Sickness Insurance. After one year they could apply for the WAO. Therefore, this so-called 12 months demarcation line

‘non-committal’ terms. In 1982, the concept of ‘hidden unemployment’ was taken on board as the fitting label for what was wrong with the WAO. The final results weren’t published until 1987. In between the researchers had published various papers, articles and some ten monographs. The main conclusion was that many entered the WAO not only for medical, but also for socio-economic reasons. The bulk of the new entrants could be described by the following set of characteristics: older male, low educational level, a weak labour market position, and a relatively bad health condition, job with physically strenuous working conditions, held over a long period, with bad career opportunities. Cumulation of these unfavourable socio-economic and physical factors came out as a highway into legally disability. Apart from the professional assessment of the medical practitioner and the job expert, the client’s self-perception about his or her remaining working capacity also played an important role in the process. Older workers in particular were pessimistic about their remaining working capacity. Employers who wanted to get rid of their older workers often supported this attitude. The importance of the non-physical determinants expressed the (unintended) options that the WAO offered to both workers and employers. The researchers estimated that about 29 to 49 percent of the new entrants were in fact able to carry out work befitting their educational level and work experience. This implied that a substantial part of the total WAO problem was not about disability but about hidden unemployment. They suggested four policy instruments or incentives to reduce the number of WAO entrants in the future:

- Decreasing the current generous benefit level;
- Improving the employment situation;
- Applying more severe entrance or eligibility criteria;
- Improving working conditions on the shop floor.

5.1.3. *Reception of results*

As could be expected, the conclusion with respect to the hidden unemployment part was politically sensitive and even contested, especially by the trade unions. But not only the trade unions refuted the results of the project. Also the organisations responsible for implementation of the WAO, the supervising Social Security Council (SVR) and the advisory Social and Economic Council (SER) reacted negatively. Only the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment was positive, especially after the cabinet change in 1982, and ‘translated’

became an important psychological watershed in the process of becoming ‘disabled’ or remaining oriented towards a return on the labour market.

the research estimate into a 50% hidden unemployment supposition. And the Ministry didn't have much choice here given the continued increase in the number of legally disabled persons to more than 700.000 by the end of 1982. It succeeded in putting the WAO problem and more in particular the question of hidden unemployment high on the political agenda, and prepared policy measures to change the WAO. As a consequence, the Parliament decided to reduce the benefit level from 80 to 70 percent of the last earned income (1985). In 1987 the 'discountability' article was abolished and a stricter definition of the statutory disability criterion introduced. At the same time the Government conceded to a program of ex-post evaluation research of the effectiveness of the new measures, the so-called PES-project⁹⁹. The Determinants project was regularly invoked to buttress the political legitimacy of all of these changes. The use made of the results is selective, the policy measures reflect only some of the project's recommendations, and the setting makes it impossible to determine if we should conceptualise this as political use (legitimation) or instrumental use. But, with hindsight, the WAO-Determinants Project has been very significant. Not only did it trigger many new policy research efforts, also, and more importantly, the project induced a political discussion about the WAO that is still ongoing and can thus be said to have had considerable conceptual impact.

5.2. The second case: a further reduction of WAO entry by TBA

Soon after the reforms of 1987 it became obvious that the number of new entries in the WAO didn't decrease. On the contrary, the absolute number increased. However, the background of the new entrants showed some important changes: more women, younger workers and also more people with psychological complaints (stress, burnout). These changes mirrored the ongoing structural changes of the nature of employment in the Netherlands (less manufacturing and more services industries). They deflected political attention away from hidden unemployment as the explaining growth factor of the WAO, and shifted it towards the unrestrained degrees of freedom of the implementing infrastructure in deciding who is or is not disabled. By the end of 1989 the number of legally disabled people had reached the unprecedented level of 844.000. Simultaneously, also the official unemployment figures peaked. This unfavourable socio-economic situation and the sense of urgency that it created made the Government introduce a package of financial stimuli directed at employers to improve their preventive policies. When this so-called Bonus-Malus Regulation of 1991

⁹⁹ Partly to smoothen the political acceptance of these adjustments.

proved insufficiently effective a new law (complementary to the existing WAO) was implemented in 1994. This so-called TBA consisted of further reaching changes of:

- The legal disability criterion in the WAO: recognition of loss of earnings capacity only on the basis of objective medical conditions;
- The legal definition of alternative acceptable work: claimants had to accept a much broader range of (alternative) jobs, even if this meant jobs below their educational profile and work experience, and with lower pay;
- Use of the computer programme Function Information System (FIS) by the labour expert was made compulsory and the FIS assessment of the remaining earning capacity was now to be based on only three instead of five occupations, representing a total of 30 jobs;
- All claimants (also existing ones) are to undergo a regimen of periodic re-assessments (after one year, then every five years) on the basis of the new disability criterion;
- The level of the WAO benefit and the benefit period: both are restricted (only applicable to new entrants) and made age-dependant (the younger, the shorter and the lower).

These measures caused a certain reduction of the WAO numbers: between 1993 and 1996 the number of WAO beneficiaries decreased from 921.000 to 855.000. At the same time the level of unemployment increased significantly.

5.2.1. Research

With respect to the TBA package, the role of research wasn't very outspoken. Some results from the WAO-Determinants project were used (for instance to legitimise the restriction of the decision-making freedom of the medical practitioners and the work assessors of the implementing agencies). But no new research (only financial scenarios) was initiated to prepare for TBA. Given the nature of the policy changes one might have expected at least some formative evaluations to get an estimate of the possible effects of measures like restricting the benefit duration. The shape of TBA was thus primarily the outcome of political negotiations within a setting that was infused by a broadly felt urgency to counter-attack a further increase of eligible people. However, an evaluative parliamentary enquiry into the role and function of the implementing social security organisations was quite important conceptually, as it underwrote the mood swing in the public debate from hidden unemployment to the deficiencies of the implementing infrastructure as the main cause of the derailment of the WAO. One might question if this instrument should be labelled research. Parliamentary enquiries are only used when existing evaluation procedures or research fails because of political complexities. Their fact finding, although supported by a budget to hire

Box 3: The ‘Buurmeijer’ Parliamentary enquiry

In March 1992 the National Audit Office (Nationale Rekenkamer) published a critical report on the Social Security Council’s (SVR) supervision of the implementation agencies¹⁰⁰. The Rekenkamer is a very respected institution, feared by many but praised by all for its critical independence. Two committees of the Lower House (Social Affairs and Employment and Treasury) decided that it was up to them to take action because neither the Ministry nor the SVR was expected to do so. First a joint working party was installed but soon proved too light an instrument to uncover what exactly went wrong with the implementation of social security laws. Therefore, a temporary (sub-)committee of the Lower House with the specific objective of investigating social security implementation, including its supervision, and the effects of the current procedures on the unemployment, disability etc. figures, was set up. This form of Parliamentary investigation relies on in-house Parliament staff and public hearings with experts. But even this was soon thought insufficient and the heaviest instrument, a Parliamentary Enquiry (a nine member of Parliament committee, chaired Buurmeijer who had also chaired the temporary committee) was established by the Lower House. Enquiries dispose of a research budget and examine informants on oath. Two external research consultancies conducted a total of 430 interviews; the Parliamentary committee examined a total of 79 stakeholders behind closed doors. The committee’s report was presented to the Lower House early September 1993. Its main conclusion was that all parties involved – implementation, supervision and policy – had failed in their duties. The ‘social partners’ controlling both implementation and supervision were not really interested in making policy changes (like the abolition of the discountability clause) a success, the responsible Ministry remained aloof and the cabinet, eager for co-operation of the social in making other objectives come true, did not intervene. As such, these conclusions were old news but the political clout of the Buurmeijer Enquiry lifted the existing taboo on discussing misuse. Therefore, its influence on the political debate was considerable, although none of its detailed recommendations were taken over. The Parliamentary debate about the report concluded with adopting three intentions for restructuring the system:

- Supervision was to become independent;
- Implementation was to be organised regionally instead of sectorally;
- Claims assessment was to be taken out of the hands of the social partners.

The next (‘purple coalition’) cabinet reformed the existing Organisation of Social Security Act in two tranches more or less along the lines of these intentions, although supervision was made much more dependant upon the responsible Ministry than recommended by the Enquiry Committee.

¹⁰⁰ That the Rekenkamer had aimed its arrows at the SVR was purely coincidental. It had just been awarded the legal right to audit quango’s. Because a (recently hired) staff member was well acquainted with the social security arena it had chosen the SVR as a pilot.

(research) consultants for specific information gathering and analyses, is firmly in the hands of the members of Parliament who are part of the Enquiry committee. However, within the context of the peculiar relationship between research and policy in the Netherlands it is one more interesting example of how a policy actor, Parliament in this case, has institutionalised the production and use of ‘research’ knowledge. On top of that, this ‘mini’ case illustrates the (research) role of another important institutional actor: the Auditor General. Therefore we have opted to include a box describing this ‘Buurmeijer’ Enquiry in more detail.

5.3 The third case: softening the impact

The aftermath of the implementation of TBA saw many emotional reactions, in particular amongst claimants. They feared a loss of rights in comparison with the pre-TBA period. Client organisations increased political pressure upon the government, and to a certain extent and after some time, government was willing to listen. An important reason for this receptivity was that the number of disabled people decreased from 921.000 (end 1993) to 855.000 in 1996s as a consequence of the legislative reform, and the ratio of full versus partial benefits also decreased. Another was the co-incidental implementation of TBA and the execution of Buurmeijer parliamentary enquiry.

5.3.1. Research

As soon as the reformed legislation was implemented it induced social research, partly financed by the National Union of Regional Client Platforms of disabled people and partly by the controlling institution CTSV. We will focus on the three most important research projects in a chronological order.

The *first study* (Rietbergen 1994/a) was published in February 1994 and dealt with complaints of WAO-clients. The number of complaints registered with the (regional) platforms had raised almost immediately after the introduction of the TBA policy package. The majority of the complaints referred to the following three problems:

- (Fear for) loss of the full benefit;
- Stricter medical assessments, that is lower percentages of legal disability and therefore lower disability benefits;
- Abolishment of the regulation allowing WAO beneficiaries some additional earnings to supplement their benefit.

The research project confirmed these complaints, and, on top of that, identified a number of unintended impediments of the TBA policy package to the re-integration of handicapped workers. The report contained a number of very specific policy recommendations. These ranged from financial compensation for older disabled workers, postponement of the stipulated re-assessments under certain circumstances, increasing the number of alternative jobs that are used for determining a claimant's remaining earning capacity, to providing the claimants with more information about the FIS. None of these had direct impact on policy making.

The *second study* (Rietbergen 1994/b) released in November 1994, is a follow-up of the first. Again the National Union of Regional Platforms of disabled people was the initiator and contractor. The complaints that this study investigated were very specific: in a number of cases claimants were unjustifiably declared fit to work on the basis of very atypical and/or non-existent jobs included in the FIS-programme (e.g. springroll maker and bonsai tree grower). FIS also contained jobs that couldn't possibly be fulfilled by disabled in light of their physical limitations. Obviously, something was wrong with this computer program and its use. The purpose of the research project was to understand what exactly happened during the assessment procedure of the labour experts using the FIS. Therefore, the researcher ran some simulations with the FIS and compared their results with the official FIS-outcomes. The study managed to identify the elements of the programme that were responsible for the 'freak' results and made specific recommendations for improving the system. The implementation of these changes would have increased the degrees of freedom in the assessment process for the labour experts and reduced their possibilities of hiding behind the FIS as a more or less objective decision-making system.

As an immediate result of this research project some members of Parliament raised questions to the responsible minister and State secretary. However, the minister of Social Affairs and Employment first commissioned two other studies in order to verify the conclusions of Rietbergen (Knegt et al. 1995). These new projects fully confirmed the earlier outcomes, but not until a third research project hit the market did the Government finally move.

This last project (Koehler et al. 1995) was conducted by the supervising CTSV. It was an evaluation of the adjusted legal disability (entry) criterion. The project confirmed the successful impact of the TBA policy package on the total number of WAO claimants, but was

very critical about the quality of the administrative process. It confirmed the earlier studies in identifying arbitrariness and unfairness in disability case management. Pragmatic flexibility in the assessment procedures was found to have almost disappeared. The critical results almost instantly caught media attention and became a public issue. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment couldn't ignore the implementation failures anymore: already before the official publication of the CTSV results, the State secretary sent a letter to parliament, listing a total of seventeen specific adjustments 'that can mitigate suffering..'. Some examples of the proposed softening of the TBA policy package were:

- A change of the formal 'assessment regulation' (February 1996): From then on assessments of labour experts needed to be based on the availability of three separate occupations with *each* thirty or more jobs;
- Abolishment of some unrealistic jobs in the FIS;
- Exemption of older workers (45 years plus) for re-assessments;
- A further standardisation of assessment procedures of insurance doctors.

5.3.2. *Policy impact*

Arguing that the CTSV-research project induced the changes of the TBA policy package would be simplifying reality. A more realistic assessment is that the existence of several studies - all verifying a core of critical conclusions – in combination with a public opinion supporting the recommended adjustments paved the way for the changes. Some of these were directly related to the outcome of the different evaluation research projects. Thus, research played both a conceptual and an instrumental role. And the context was favourable: the significant decrease of the number of WAO-claimants made it easier for the government to accept some changes (the strictness adhered to had done the job), especially because the significance of the changes remained modest. And given the political thrashing that the main coalition partner PvdA had received in the 1994 elections, disarming the issue was right up the street of 'purple'. Most were more cosmetic than real. But they removed the political pressure and removed the need for more evaluation studies.

6. CONCLUSIONS

We'll summarise our conclusions at two levels: first of all conclusions with respect to the various case studies (6.1.) and then subsequently conclusions referring to the Weiss framework and to the relationship between institutional architecture and the research-policy interface (6.2).

6.1. The case studies

The puzzle that we tried to solve in this contribution is what, if any, the added value of the sizeable research efforts on the WAO issue has been for improving disability policy and its implementation. Did research contribute to the containment of the WAO problem or was its impact on policy and practice neglectable? Let's recap the methodological choices made in our selection of research topics and cases:

- We looked at an issue that has been a *major* public, political and policy issue during the last two decades, and that has been accompanied by an enormous amount of policy research;
- Within this general issue we focussed on one particular aspect that has been consistently important, the disability (entry) criterion. Whenever stakeholders were queried for an aspect that had been influenced by research, this criterion was mentioned.
- The selection of particular research cases was then guided by two premises:
 - ⇒ It makes most sense to look at cases that in terms of structurally favourable conditions (the institutional weight of their principals, an apriori linkage to a particular policy adjustment, etc.) can be expected to have had an influence;
 - ⇒ It makes most sense to look at cases that in the eyes of knowledgeable researchers and policy makers are best practice examples of the use of policy research in this area;

All of these choices were aimed *maximising the chance that we would detect influence of research on social policy*. And what did we actually detect?

All of the above is more or less in line with what we formulated as our starting hypothesis: despite big investments in WAO-research during the last three decades, its impact on policy making and implementation has been fairly limited. Limited for sure in as far as direct use is concerned, less so in terms of its conceptual influence. Research was not the main conceptual influence, it was usually not the first or only source to signal the need for change, but it was certainly instrumental in anchoring shifting perspectives on the 'problem'. Interestingly, a review of 25 years of WAO trends, research and policy that was published when the fieldwork for our study had already been completed comes to a very similar conclusion¹⁰¹. Box 4 describes their evaluation of the influence of research on policy.

¹⁰¹ See also box 1.

Box 4: the significance of 25 years of WAO research for policy¹⁰²

....”The normative character of social science knowledge limits its instrumental use. Policy problems are not only caused by the lack of knowledge but also by clashing interests.... But, the existence of opposing interests does not imply that knowledge has no role to play, e.g. in mediating between opponents by way of an empirical evidence base. For example, the increasing popularity of rational choice reasoning, expressed in important policy changes in the 90s, is partly due to WAO research.... However, this contribution [of research] cannot be interpreted in terms of instrumental use. The growing dominance of a new way of looking at the issue is strongly influenced by the changing volume of claimants. New knowledge has not been the determining factor; but it did support the shift in perspective.... More direct, instrumental use is evident on a less abstract level. Especially the adjustments of the disability criterion and the introduction of various...incentives can be related to research input. But also in the case of more ‘direct’ use, the actual transfer from research effort to policy instrument is ‘indirect’.... Research has supported the [political] mood that adjustment of the WAO was necessary; it did not determine the direction of the actual changes.... Thus, also in case of ‘instrumental’ use, the translation to policy practice implies big steps that cannot be reduced to the research results.... Especially the research efforts of – bodies with political clout like – the National Audit Office and the Parliamentary Enquiry Committee have resulted in changes of the implementation infrastructure. Even here, the gap between research and policy was considerable....

Research offers policy-makers hardly any tangible hold. Policy development is dependant upon political choices and the practical intuition of the policy-maker, not upon scientific understanding.

6.2. General conclusions and conclusions referring to the Weiss framework

- In the Netherlands, explanatory policy research into the disability issue is comparatively scarce. The Determinants project that started the ‘tradition’ of WAO research remained a remarkable exception. Most research is descriptive and/or evaluative and refrains from investigating possible solutions. There is permanent demand for descriptive studies, delivering preferably statistical information on the current situation. As such, this seems in line with the policy cycle thesis that states that the purposes and uses of research in the policy process differs across phases: “...when policy makers look for help in coming to grips with an intangible problem, field researchers are often given carte blanche, the purpose their input serves is often conceptual, and their work may be very influential in

¹⁰² This evaluation is taken from Aarts et al., 2002, p.195-197 [translation RH]. In comparison with our ‘policy-change’ case-approach, their review of WAO trends, research and policy took more of a helicopter view. This enabled them to identify broader trends in research topics, principals and contractors, results and relations with the policy debate.

setting the (policy) agenda. On the other hand, when established policy is to be evaluated, researchers are usually recruited on the basis of very detailed terms of reference, the assumptions underlying the policy are not expected to be questioned, and the results of the evaluation do not normally influence policy”¹⁰³. On the other, given the ‘chronic’ nature of the WAO-problem, one would have expected more explanatory studies. To give but one example still awaiting proper explanatory research efforts: the shift in the WAO population from older male, with limited education, industrial job etc. to younger, female, service sector job etc.

- The WAO-issue has had its share of evaluation research. New legislation even requires evaluation, and the Lower House is eager to remain informed on effect. However, evaluation is always summative (although the Determinants project is again an exception to the rule), often made ineffective by the changes in policy perspective and priorities that took place after the measure that is being evaluated became operational. This is a variant of the more general finding, and confirms a well-known KU maxim: the problem definition of research projects strongly determines the possible findings and thus their policy recommendations. Time works both ways: results or recommendations may be ‘picked up’ with a considerable time lag (e.g. the Determinants project), but time may also make them obsolete, a possibility that stakeholders sometimes hope for and that entices them to ‘buy time’, e.g. by commissioning research instead of taking policy action, or by frustrating ongoing research.
- The debate about and policy interventions in the WAO are strongly related to increases in the volume of claimants, especially if the socio-economic situation is troublesome in other respects too (high official unemployment). Research may play a role, either in supporting a particular change of perspective, or in suggesting concrete policy measures or correctional adjustments of existing ones. If it does seem largely dependant upon how the research results and/or policy recommendations fit into the pre-existing politico-institutional WAO arena. And the more sensitive the results, the greater the risk of intervention by the principal of the study, e.g. by downright obstructing the research process (for example by misusing his seat on the supervisory committee of the project), by influencing the presentation, by commissioning a second opinion, etc.
- This is not to say that the role of research is negligible: its conceptual value can be considerable. It is just to say that the fit between the results/recommendation and the

¹⁰³ Cross et al., 2000, p.36.

current established policy-actor interests is much more important than either the validity of the recommendations or aspects like the methodological soundness of the studies, or the financial investment that they represent. From a methodological point of view the Determinants project was very thorough, but its results were only picked up when their content fitted the changed political climate, i.c. with a considerable time lag. The results of the methodologically much weaker client-perception studies following the implementation of TBA were picked up immediately, because they could be used to deflate political tension.

- The latter example also illustrates that direct (instrumental) use is only to be expected when the research addresses very specific (technical) issues that are part of the day-to-day reality of the user.
- Publicity is an important mediating factor. Publicity is dependant upon aspects like the right to publish the results, the extent to which the publication is downplayed or highlighted by principal and/or contractor, the way the results are presented (appealing human interest stories have much easier media access than technical reports stuffed with quantitative data);
- All in all, one can conclude that of all the Weiss factors it is the *political context*, in the Weiss sense of the term (see annex) that is the prime determinant of what happens with research results. And given so many institutional actors, who are interdependent and locked into permanent negotiation over such a sensitive issue, over such a long time, consensus on the basis of *particular* research results or recommendations is difficult to envision. If anything, agreement on common perspectives, supported by the outcomes of *many* research projects *and* other resources, is what one would expect.

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Factors that Improve the Use of Research in Social Policy: Case Studies

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See: <http://www.unesco.org/most/weiss.htm>

The Definition of the Problem

The problem that the study addresses is the frequent disregard of the findings of sound research and evaluation in the making of social policy. Much social research is conducted for the avowed purpose of influencing policy decisions. Government agencies, international organisations, foundations, and professional associations sponsor research that is intended to provide guidance for wiser policies. The research is conducted in university departments, university research centers, institutes of science, not-for-profit and for-profit research organisations, and within operating service organisations. Much of the research (although by no means all) is thoughtfully done with careful attention to appropriate social science theories and valid research methods. Yet a sizeable fraction of it never influences the audiences for which it was meant.

The proposed research will examine the question of which kinds of research, under which conditions, have a better chance of making a difference in policy councils. The study, and the series of collateral studies in other nations for which it will provide a model, will help research sponsors and researchers to conceptualise, conduct, and disseminate research in ways that increase the likelihood that policy audiences will pay attention. That is the long-range objective: to help improve the use of evaluation evidence in the making of policy.

A great deal is known from more than twenty-five years of research on "knowledge utilization" (KU), which is the term by which this phenomenon is generally considered. Many studies have investigated the characteristics that are associated with greater use of research findings: characteristics of the studies, of the dissemination mechanisms, of the researchers, or of the users. Scores of studies of knowledge utilization (KU) have been published, providing a cafeteria of answers to the question of what kinds of research are most apt to be used. Unfortunately, the answers have not converged. For example, some studies find that research quality is important for use; other find that the quality of the research is unrelated to how much influence it has. Some studies find that policy actors turn to research findings when they face a crisis situation; other studies find that crisis is not an environment favourable to research use.

Much of the reason for the discrepancies in research results on KU has to do with differences in definition and in methodology. Regarding definition, researchers have taken different approaches to the meaning of "utilization." What does it mean that a particular study has been "used"? Some researchers expect that the findings of the research will determine the course of policy, i.e. it will change a decision from what it would have been in the absence of that research. Other researchers take a wider frame: they consider "use" as any serious consideration of the findings of research, whether or not they are actually followed. These latter researchers recognise that many elements go into the making of policy and that it is naïve to expect that research results will overpower all other interests, ideological commitments, and previous information in the issue-arena. If research findings are given a serious hearing, they have a chance of altering policy makers' understanding of the issues, their priorities and agendas, and even their subsequent actions further down the road. On the

other hand, if one takes a liberal definition of "use," how can the KU researcher truly know whether the research results have received serious consideration?

Regarding differences in methodology of KU studies, a variety of methods have been used. Studies on KU have been conducted through quantitative surveys, qualitative interviewing, analysis of the fate of particular research studies by the researchers who conducted them, analysis of documents, and through prospective, retrospective, and simulated time frames. The studies have dealt with such varying issue-arenas as housing, energy, mental health, and education. The research on KU has been conducted at different periods of time, much of it in the late 1970s and early 1980s, with another upsurge in the last few years. Most of it has been conducted in the U.S., although studies have also been conducted in Western Europe and occasionally other places as well. It is small wonder that the findings on KU do not cohere into a tidy package of accepted truths.

It is the aim of the proposed study to develop a better understanding of the factors that enhance wise use of research results in the making of policy.

Key Research Questions

The key questions have to do with factors that advance the utilization of research results and the obstacles that thwart the use of research results in the policy arena. Specifically, which characteristics promote research use and which block research use? We will consider such characteristics in four main categories:

- Characteristics of the research and the researchers who conduct it
- Characteristics of modes of dissemination or linkage between researchers and the policy arena
- Characteristics of potential user groups
- Characteristics of the political domain that the research enters

Let me give examples of the kinds of features in each category. Regarding research and researchers, it is possible that research undertaken by well-known and respected researchers who work in respected research institutions will be better attended to than research from novices in provincial institutions. Other hypotheses are that research of better methodological quality is more often heeded than research of lower quality, or that quantitative research receives a better hearing than qualitative research. In similar vein, it may be that results of meta-analyses or syntheses of a body of literature are more influential than single studies.

Regarding modes of dissemination, particular attention will be devoted to four strategies for making research findings known. One is the ordinary mode of academic publication. Research results are reported in professional journals and in reports to the agency that sponsors the research. A second type of dissemination is inclusion of stakeholders in the research process, so that they have a say in shaping the study from the start and remain close to findings as they emerge. This is currently one of the most widely advocated mechanisms for disseminating research results to prospective users. By engaging stakeholders in the research, it tends to make the research more relevant to users' needs and to keep them apprised of emerging findings during the research so as to avoid surprises. However, when the intent is to engage policy makers, this strategy assumes a willingness to participate in the research process and a continuity of attention that few policy makers appear willing to sustain.

A third strategy of dissemination that will be studied is networking. This is a "political" strategy, akin to lobbying, that relies on face-to-face personal contacts with influential elites. Some U.S. research groups that aim to reach members of the Congress contact staff and members of important Congressional committees to convince them of the relevance of the research results and their implications for policy. Finally, one may come across cases where research was picked up and disseminated by others (i.e. not the researcher or research organisation), such as the mass media, think tanks, a research "champion" who takes it upon him/herself to spread the word, or an "issue network" of issue activists from different institutional bases who stay in contact with each other and share information.

Characteristics of potential user groups are also likely to make a difference in what kind of hearing the research receives. For example, in Germany and France, many high officials in state bureaucracies have been educated in the law and relatively few have any background in the social sciences. There is some evidence from the U.S. and Canada that policy actors trained in law are less responsive to social research and evaluation than officials with different kinds of training. Another characteristic of policy actors that appears relevant from some KU research is how long they have worked in the issue- arena. Relative newcomers often seem to be more receptive to research findings than those who have long experience and believe themselves well informed about the issues. Other such characteristics will receive consideration.

Characteristics of the issue-arena are clearly important, and yet these are the factors that have received least attention in the KU literature. It seems important to investigate whether some policy fields (e.g., macroeconomics, criminal justice) are more amenable to research and evaluation than others. Similarly, the degree of polarisation in the politics of the issue would seem to make a difference, as would the intensity of lobbying from interested parties. The extent to which research results run counter to the politics of the arena can be expected to affect the degree of influence that research and evaluation findings will have.

Conceptual Framework

It is proposed to develop case studies of a series of research studies (or syntheses of studies). Many earlier studies have used quantitative methods, attempting to quantify the effects of different factors on the utilization of research findings. Studies based on surveys, content analyses, and other quantitative approaches have provided useful understanding. However, each quantitative study tends to define "utilization" in somewhat different terms. They also use somewhat different variables and create the variables from different questions. Therefore, they develop different models of factors affecting the use of research and different estimates of the effects of various features on the extent of research utilization.

A point has now been reached in the KU field where further findings of this sort are not likely to contribute substantially to further knowledge. We now need to take context into account and to do so systematically. We also need to use common theoretical frameworks, common concepts, and common variables in the investigations. That is why a series of case studies, each of them employing the same conceptual framework, makes the best sense at this point.

Our plan for the case studies involves deep and thorough investigation into:

(1) The initiation of the study

Who initiated it? For what reasons? For what purposes? Did the initiators evince concern for the application of results of the research to practical action? Was there a formal proposal or Request for Proposals? How was the research performer chosen? Who funded the study?

(2) Review of the proposal for the study

Who judged its merits? Were there conflicting opinions about the worth of the study? Was the expected usefulness of results a criterion for approval? Did reviewers consider the methodological quality of the proposed study? Did they consider the academic reputation of the researcher(s) and/or their organisation?

(3) The researcher(s)

What was their reputation as researchers? What was the reputation of their research organisation? Had they done research of this kind before? What was their disciplinary affiliation?

(4) Conduct of the study

How long did the study take? How many people worked on it, in what capacities? Were stakeholders, including policy makers, involved in the conduct of the study during its course? Did the research have an explicit theoretical basis? What research methods were used? How were data collected? How were the data analysed? Did the methodology adhere to sound technical principles? What kind(s) of report(s) were written?

(5) Findings

What did the findings show? Did they provide clear direction for action? Were the implications of the research a need to make changes in current policy or programming? Big changes or small changes? Did the findings run counter to established policy or agency interest? Would implementation of the findings be expensive in financial terms? Would implementation of findings require changes in agency structure or standard operating procedures?

(6) Dissemination of results

How were results of the research communicated to research audiences? to policy making audiences? Did the researchers speak at conferences, or training sessions for professionals, or in public forums? Did researchers attempt to reach policy makers with their findings? Was there a "research champion" outside of the research team who publicised the findings? Did the media report any of the findings? Did other "intermediaries," such as think tanks or interest groups, communicate the findings to policy audiences?

(7) Political context

What was the history of the issue-arena, e.g. decentralisation of educational administration, privatisation of day care provision? Had the topic been debated before? Were there clear supporters and opponents of the direction that the research supported? Were divisions between supporters and opponents long-standing and firm? Did the issue-arena respect research evidence? What other research findings, if any, were in currency? What other information was being supplied to decision-makers? What groups were lobbying decision-makers in support of which causes? Did any of the lobbying interests use research findings in making their case? Was their time pressure for reaching a decision? Were decision-makers facing a crisis in which existing solutions were unworkable?

(8) Prospective users

Who were the most appropriate users of the research? What positions do they hold? What is their disciplinary background? How long have they worked in the issue-arena? Did they learn of the findings of the research? Through what channels? If they heard about findings, did they believe them? Did they believe that the findings were relevant to their issues and the conditions they faced? Did they interpret the findings fairly, or did they misinterpret or distort the findings?

(9) Utilization

Did decision-makers, in fact, use the findings to reconsider what they were doing or planning to do? Did they make changes? If so, were they big changes or small changes? Which findings were ignored? How much time elapsed before they implemented changes related to the research? What factors promoted consideration of the research? What factors inhibited consideration of the findings? How satisfied were decision-makers with the extent to which the research served their needs?

Research Methods

Documents and records will be used for data collection wherever possible. For example, information on the length of the study and its funding will be sought in records, as will characterisation of the history and configuration of the issue-arena. We will also use records to learn the names and current locations of the individuals involved in the case, as initiators, funders, researchers, reviewers, disseminators, and prospective users. These people will be the subjects for interviews. Where records of participants are incomplete, we will begin interviewing and ask respondents for the names of other people who were involved.

Most of the information will not be available in records or documents, and we will need to interview participants in the research and utilization processes. Interviews can be conducted with multiple actors in the case, in order to hear about many different perspectives. Multiple interviews will also allow identifying and disregarding any erroneous information supplied, either through ignorance or for self-serving purposes. It is anticipated that respondents will offer different interpretations of events not so much because of outright falsehoods as because they see events differently. A serious hearing will be given to the various perspectives, which will then be used to make sense of the case.

Before each interview, a review will be undertaken of whatever materials that can be found about the individual and his/her role in the case. Each interview pursues questions that are appropriate to that role. A master list of questions exists, drawn from sections (1) – (9) above, and use will be made of questions suitable for each individual.

To arrange interviews, it has been found in other work that the best approach is a phone call, followed, if the respondent desires, by a letter explaining the purposes of the study and its methods of inquiry. Shortly thereafter a second call is made to set up the interview.

Each case will be analysed as a whole. Quantitative data will be combined with the narrative accounts from the interviews and attempt to reconstruct the "story" of the confrontation of the research with the debate and negotiation in the issue-arena. Through the information collected, it will be able to test various hypotheses about conditions that promote careful attention to research findings. For example, it will be possible to analyse whether involvement of prospective users in the research process enhances KU, whether policy makers with social science backgrounds are more likely to take research results seriously, whether long-standing contention between factions thwarts the use of research.

If the series of case studies in different countries follows similar frameworks of inquiry, this will provide the MOST Programme and its constituents with a great deal of knowledge about the use (and non-use) of research. Our intent is to draw conclusions, even if tentative, about the extent to which various mechanisms advance the use of research in social transformations.