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## ABSTRACT

### **Mandatory Volunteer Work as Fair Reciprocity for Unemployment and Social Benefits?**

Modern welfare policies are increasingly based on notions of reciprocity. Citizens on welfare benefits have to do something in return, e.g. volunteer work. Notwithstanding general public support, social philosophers have been critical on 'mandatory' activities in community programmes. So far, the participants themselves have scarcely been asked about the (un)fairness of 'mandatory volunteering'. This small exploratory study aims to reveal the perceptions of female participants in mandatory volunteering programmes and to formulate directions for further research. We analyse how in Rotterdam the transition from labour market re-integration policies to a mandatory reciprocity approach is viewed by long-term unemployed women who were already volunteering. Surprisingly, they claim that the new approach better recognises their contribution to 'society'. They also view the policy as necessary and fair to other benefit claimants who are perceived to lack any motivation to give something back to society. An agenda for further research is presented.

JEL Classification: J24, J28, J64

Keywords: social justice, welfare policies, gender, unemployment, reciprocity, volunteering, social benefits, austerity, Rotterdam

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## Introduction

The collapse of the Lehman Brothers bank in September 2008 heralded the start of a financial crisis that rapidly engulfed most of the developed world. National governments have responded with major reforms and cuts in spending on welfare, healthcare, education, infrastructure, and housing construction. But the wider discourse on the impact of institutional and economic changes involves more than austerity. It also brings in the political narrative that welfare systems have undermined civic engagement and solidarity. The British Prime Minister David Cameron is a clear proponent of this position. He has stated that “welfare has sent out some incredibly damaging signals. That it pays not to work. That you are owed something for nothing. It has created a culture of entitlement. And it has led to huge resentment among those who pay for the system” (quoted in Hoggett *et al.*, 2013: 581). Cutting social services and limiting welfare arrangements are not only framed as regrettable but necessary measures, but also as a good means of activating presumably inactive members of society (see also Verhoeven & Tonkens, 2013: 415).

In this context, perspectives on social security and social benefits are rapidly changing. Social security is increasingly becoming conditional, also in the Netherlands. Since 2012, new legislation has enabled Dutch local authorities to require unemployed people receiving social benefits to carry out unpaid work for ‘the benefit of society’. These ‘something-for-something’ programmes are framed by politicians as ‘normal’ and ‘fair’ (Hoggett *et al.*, 2013), and indeed, they are popular among the general public (Saunders, 2008; Goodin, 2002; Veldheer *et al.*, 2012). The last decade has shown increasing public support for a shift in the balance between rights and responsibilities in social policies (Van der Veen *et al.*, 2012). However, while prevailing attitudes among the general public are well-known, the views of the participants in such activation programmes have scarcely been considered in these debates. So far, there is only a very general assumption that those who receive social benefit payments are somewhat less supportive of mandatory reciprocity than the general public as a whole (Van der Veen *et al.*, 2012).

While ‘something-for-something’ programmes aim at unemployed people from various ages and backgrounds, it is interesting to take a closer look at the position of elderly<sup>1</sup> women. Not only are they more often unemployed than elderly men, their age poses difficulties in (re-)entering the labour market, while this is considered as necessary in view of problems related to ageing, funding of pensions, labour supply shortages, and decreased fertility (Jaumotte, 2003). The reciprocity approach tops existing policies to increase the female participation rate on the labour market (Cipollone *et al.*, 2012). Raising the formal retirement age will probably not make a substantial difference. Some researchers suggest that the key lies in addressing work norms and values. Wielers and Raven (2013) have shown that the growth of part-time work among Dutch women, has declined the support for the work obligation norm, i.e. “the extent to which people perceive work, paid or unpaid, as a social obligation towards their society” (ibid.: 106). Stam *et al.* (2014) have found that women’s values are important predictors of their labour market behaviour. The implication is that policymakers should strengthen women’s work ethic by emphasizing that work is a moral duty and by promoting more egalitarian gender role values (ibid.: 609). Yet, the chances of elderly women becoming employed (again) are generally slim, so many of them will face prolonged exposure to reciprocity policies.

In this article, we will therefore focus on the question how unemployed female participants in an activation programme in the Rotterdam district of Hoogvliet perceive the mandatory reciprocity component of the new ‘Social Contribution’ policy that replaces the existing activation programme. Through a small qualitative pilot study (that may precede a larger study), we aim to explore the extent to which female programme participants view

these notions of obligation and reciprocity as fair or unfair. What is special about our pilot study is that all the respondents were already involved in volunteer work *before* the introduction of the new policy. Thus, we are not dealing with a random sample of unemployed women on social benefits, but with a specific group of participants who have experienced a shift in the focus of the programme from employability to mandatory reciprocity. They are well-positioned to compare the social justice implications of both programmes.

We begin with a brief description of the context of mandatory reciprocity in Rotterdam. We then take a closer look at theories of social justice, mutual obligation and reciprocity. Subsequently, we show how Rotterdam has enacted a policy transition from individual employability programmes to mandatory volunteering. After explaining our data collection and methods, we analyse the perceptions of program participants in the Rotterdam district of Hoogvliet regarding the implications of this policy transition. The article ends with discussion and an agenda for further research.

### **Austerity, social activation and the reciprocity discourse in Rotterdam**

As mentioned, new legislation enacted by the Dutch government enables local authorities to demand some unpaid work from welfare recipients. Strategies based on this legislation are being pioneered by the city of Rotterdam. The recent white paper *Rotterdam Werkt* ('Rotterdam works' - 2010) states that every citizen in Rotterdam has to participate in society up to the limits of their capabilities. Unemployed citizens that can still work on the labour market are obliged to accept any paid job that they are offered. Those who are seen as having a slim chance of finding work on the labour market (due to language deficiencies, their age or the lack of proper education) are obliged to do volunteer work for at least twenty hours per week. Policymakers expect most volunteering to consist of community work such as helping at schools and sports clubs. Informal care is also an option. "People on benefits can do the shopping for elderly people who have lost their professional care due to the budget cuts. This is necessary for their own employability and to avoid isolation but also to maintain services like elderly care and libraries at an acceptable level", according to alderman Florijn (Volkskrant, November 30, 2012, *translation ours*). This argument for reducing welfare costs is also discernible in white paper statements such as "the policy reduces the burden on public money" (Municipality of Rotterdam, 2010: 5).

Hence, on the one hand, the policy embodies a vision of meaningful and maximum participation in society, either through paid employment or (obliged) volunteering (or both). On the other hand, it reveals the harsh reality of a local authority that has to implement drastic public budget cuts. The urgency of these cuts is emphasised by increasing numbers of citizens applying for unemployment benefits. Personal needs of employability are being reduced to a complementary policy goal. The dominant frame is that one's primary personal responsibility should be to meet the needs of 'the community'.

### **A social justice perspective on the fairness of mandatory reciprocity**

Modern political philosophers seriously disagree about the nature of social justice. There is, however, a common starting point in the work of John Rawls (1971). In his book *A Theory of Justice*, he postulates the principle that 'all social primary goods – liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and the social bases of self-respect – are to be distributed equally, unless an unequal distribution of any, or all of these goods is to the advantage of the least favoured'.

Rawls supposes that if all people were ignorant of their own position, they would favour a societal structure that best protects the rights of the worst-off. The work of Rawls is very much in line with the principle of income protection and redistribution in social democratic Western welfare states. Many of the debates following Rawls' work have focused on the question of whether the principle of universal deservingness should apply regardless of personal choices. For example, what should be done about free riders? (Dworkin, 1981). Others have asked whether the redistribution of incomes is a violation of the rights of owners who have earned their property by fair means (Nozick, 1974). Another important issue is whether we should formulate a full theory of social justice (Rawls) or a less ambitious theory about the capacity to live according to certain basic standards (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2003). Nussbaum and Sen also stress the importance of both material *and* immaterial minimal 'capabilities'. This is not by coincidence. Nancy Fraser (2000) has pointed out that in the 1990s the central theme of social justice shifted from (Rawlsian) redistribution to recognition. Not money, but respect became the dominant currency. Fraser warned that especially respect-seeking groups such as women and homosexuals should be careful with dropping claims for a higher socioeconomic status. She made a plea for a policy that opposes both misrecognition (stereotyping etcetera) and lack of resources. In Fraser's perspective, a social justice policy for women should focus on the establishing of individuals as "full partners in social interaction (...) capable of participating on a par with the rest" (Fraser, 2000:113).

The dominant theorist on mutual obligation is Lawrence Mead (1986; 1997). His general argument is that there should be a balance between the rights and obligations of individuals. His ideas are strongly influenced by the social justice theories of Rawls, Dworkin, Sen, and Nussbaum. Mead starts with the assumption that welfare benefits ought to be conditional. Like Dworkin, he wants to include behavioural requirements before support is given to the worst-off. Under his vision, the work ethic is the key norm that should become a requirement. This notion that people only deserve social compensation if they act according to certain morals, is clearly inspired by the work of Dworkin (1981) who questions "whether it is fair to tax the hardworking for the benefit of those who are equally capable of hard work, and equally talented, but choose to laze around instead" (quoted in Wolff, 2008: 19). Mead also assumes that a change of lifestyle will improve people's capabilities to improve their life chances. Here we can hear some echoes of the work of Sen and Nussbaum: people should at least be able to pursue their objectives, and these objectives are closely related to social norms. At the same time, Mead is ambivalent about individual outcomes as goals. "Programmes to reorganize the lives of the needy by integrating them into mainstream society seek order (for society) rather than justice for individuals" (Mead, 1997: 11). Mead assumes explicitly that the majority of the worst-off do not act in the interest of the collective unless they are forced to do so via a top-down process of 'responsabilisation'.

Many of Mead's thoughts are fundamental to the 'work for the dole' programmes established in Europe, the United States and in Australia. In the late 1990s, the Australian Howard administration used a narrative inspired by the work of Dworkin and Mead directed towards young unemployed citizens: "If you are able, you should be active, and otherwise you do not deserve to be supported by the community. In return for receiving a welfare benefit, you have to give something back to community". The effectiveness of the Howard administration approach was questioned by critics from the start. The economic results have been poor, with not many people finding new jobs. There were also unforeseen side effects, such as the risk of displacement or the 'job carving' of regular jobs and an increase in illegal work as a consequence of avoiding strategies (Neville, 2003). Another issue of concern is the risk involved for care receivers – such as the elderly – in terms of the integrity of some of the unwilling 'volunteer workers' who have been forced into this area of work and the quality of the work they do (Sawer, 2006).

More fundamental moral critique have also been formulated, e.g. in relation to labelling of welfare beneficiaries as the ‘undeserving poor’. Notions of passivity and calculating behaviour, especially among females without work (‘welfare queens’) were seen as reinforcing a rather negative stance towards unemployed citizens. Several scholars have argued that participants’ obligation to do something in return for the support of society is a “humiliating and harassing” experience (Goodin, 2002: 592), which stigmatises people as being of an inferior status as ‘welfare fraudsters’ (King, 1995; Soldatic & Meekosha, 2012:142; Trommel & Van den Berg, 2012). A direct critique of Howard’s ideas on reciprocity was formulated by Moss (2006: 95-98). Moss stated that many of the unemployed have already ‘given something back’ in purely financial terms while they were taxpayers and workers (or they may do so in the future), and have thus proved their work ethic already. There is thus an imbalance between rights and obligations from the perspective of the needy. Furthermore, a lack of improved labour market prospects does not conform to Rawls’ famous principle of social justice that social arrangements should be arranged to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged.

The philosophical arguments for and against the fairness of mandatory reciprocity scarcely include the opinions of actual unemployed people themselves. In the Australian study by Sawyer (2006), the research question relates to the perspective of young unemployed people on the link between mandatory volunteering and finding work. Sawyer (2006: 12) states that the central issue is to decide whether the gains mentioned, such as new skills or heightened self-esteem, really count as an outcome. However, operationalised in this way, it remains unclear how respondents view the balance between gains and losses from participating in the work for the dole programmes, and how this affects their view on the fairness of the programme. The study of Kampen, Elshout & Tonkens (2013) focuses on emotional gains and losses relating to several voluntary forms of workfare, aimed at personal development. They found that activation programmes that included workfare volunteering can have ‘soft benefits’, i.e. unemployed participants (re)gaining their self-respect. Kampen and colleagues also state that this positive self-framing is fragile since many meaningful others perceive volunteer work as a surrogate solution for regaining self-respect. Work remains ‘the real deal’, also for women (see also Rubery & Rafferty, 2013: 428).

Based on these philosophical reflections, we would expect that mandatory volunteering programmes with strict behavioural requirements would not be regarded as fair by unemployed female participants. Before describing the results of our pilot study in Hoogvliet-Rotterdam, we will take a closer look at the transformation of social policies.

### **Recent transitions in Rotterdam’s activation policies**

Between 1996 and 2012, areas of Rotterdam that were suffering from high unemployment rates benefited from an ‘OK Bank’ (translates as ‘Underused Talent Bank’). The basic idea of this social programme was to activate the long-term unemployed that were living in isolation or at risk of this. The approach consisted of individual and demand-led counselling to maximise the labour market prospects of the participants. The primary objective was reintegration into paid work, even though reinforcing ‘civil society’ was on occasion cited as a secondary goal. Participation in the OK Bank was voluntary, but that did not mean that no obligations were involved at all. Those that did not want to develop their own employability for at least half a day a week, remained under the old system of the activation policy and were obliged to apply for jobs on a weekly basis. Social activation usually took the form of voluntary work. Every month, volunteers received €63 on top of their benefit payments.

In 2011, the process of transforming the OK Bank into a part of the new Social Contribution policy (*'Maatschappelijke Inspanning'*) began. The counselling was set on hold and the new policy was started in seven pilot areas. In these areas unemployed residents with limited opportunities to find work had to achieve certain objectives in order to receive their benefit payments. This involves working in a socially useful role in their local neighbourhood or work in a care-giving role for at least 20 hours a week. But unlike the OK Bank approach, personal development and employability are much less prominent goals under the new approach. The chief priority is now making a contribution to society and helping to reduce the impact of spending cuts (Municipality of Rotterdam, 2010).

For former participants in the OK Bank, the new regime of the Social Contribution policy means a significant shift along the continuum of volunteer work (see Cnaan *et al.*, 1996). This shift means a move away from freedom of choice towards mandatory activities; from coaching for participation to finding voluntary work yourself; from a focus on self-interest to a commitment to the public interest. There has also been a shift from additional remuneration to financial punishments if their volunteer work is not done. In 2013, Rotterdam received 'something back' from 15% of all those receiving benefits payments on the basis of these principles. There have been some delays, however, in searching for suitable positions in volunteer work.

Research into mandatory reciprocity pilot programmes in Rotterdam is just starting, and our pilot is one of the very few studies. Initial results indicate an increase in the amount of volunteering (hours per week) among unemployed people. However, this increase comes without any realistic improvement in their prospects for paid employment (Van der Aa, 2012), and with new problems of fitting the effort required into current daily schedules, as a result of health problems and child care issues (De Jong, 2012: 23-24).

## **Data and methods**

Below, we focus on the question of how unemployed elderly female participants who had already been involved in the OK Bank programme perceive the mandatory reciprocity component in the new Social Contribution policy. As mentioned earlier, these participants are well-positioned to compare the social justice implications of both programmes. Our research population is limited to OK Bank programme participants in the Rotterdam district of Hoogvliet. This district is the target area of a much larger, multi-method study into urban regeneration and long-term social mobility.

### ***Research area***

The city of Rotterdam expanded rapidly following the Second World War, largely due to housing shortages caused by war damage. Hoogvliet, a district in the south-western part of the city, was built mainly during the 1960s and was created to house employees in the nearby petrochemical industry. In the following decades, however, economic recessions and restructuring adversely affected the industry and unemployment rose rapidly. Early in the 1990s, the district authorities launched a social regeneration policy to reverse Hoogvliet's decline. This predominantly socially motivated approach paved the way for a large-scale urban renewal project that started in 1999 and is now nearing completion (ODPM, 2006). The key principles of the renewal were framed in terms of improving collective (local economy, social cohesion, housing stock, public space, civic involvement and image) and individual goals such as improvement of the social economic position (ODPM, 2006). Activation programmes, including the OK Bank, were part of the renewal programme.



### **Research Population and Methods**

Our pilot consists of a small cross-sectional qualitative study. We were able to use a list of all the OK Bank female clients (N=25) in Hoogvliet in the last OK-bank years 2011 and 2012, courtesy of the official agency responsible for the OK Bank in Hoogvliet. All clients received a letter announcing our study. Subsequently we approached all 25 participants repeatedly by phone or by calling at their home in person. We asked them to be interviewed either at home or at some other location chosen by the respondent. We could not trace nine persons due to incorrect address details or incorrect phone numbers. Four participants refused to respond and two declined because of serious illness. We interviewed the remaining 10 participants, who received a credit note as a token of appreciation. All but one of the female respondents were older than 50, with few qualifications and long-term unemployed (see Table 1). Many of them report physical or psychosocial problems, and many have been volunteering for several years. The initial volunteering was mostly a way to deal with a significant “life event”, such as divorce, children leaving home, death of a spouse, et cetera.

**TABLE 1. Personal characteristics of the interviewees**

<b>Respondent</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Years of unemployment</b>	<b>Highest educational attainment</b>	<b>Ethnic background</b>	<b>Health situation</b>
R1	F	53	> 10	Primary school	Hindustani	Chronic physical pain
R2	F	62	> 10	Advanced elementary education*	Dutch	Chronic physical pain
R3	F	58	> 10	Primary school	Surinamese	Physical complaints
R4	F	56	> 10	Primary school	Surinamese	No problems
R5	F	55	10 years	Advanced primary education	Surinamese	Chronic physical pain
R6	F	56	10 years	Lower general secondary education*	Dutch	Chronic physical pain
R7	F	61	> 10	School for domestic science*	Dutch	Physical complaints & psychological problems
R8	F	50	5	Primary school	Turkey	Physical complaints
R9	F	57	> 10	School for domestic science*	Dutch	Physical complaints
R10	F	29	4	Secondary school	Iraq	No problems

*\* These are forms of primary and secondary education that have already disappeared in the Netherlands, as a result of educational reforms.*

We used a semi-structured instrument based on open-ended questions. These questions covered topics relating to their personal life history, their experiences with volunteering through the OK Bank, their current volunteering activities and their ideas about Rotterdam’s new policy for mandatory volunteering. The interviews were conducted in respondents’

homes and lasted between 30 minutes and an hour. All the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed (verbatim).

Given the pilot nature of the study, it is impossible to generalise the findings to the whole group of unemployed female volunteers that is the target group for mandatory volunteering. As many respondents were already doing voluntary work, we deal with a highly specific case study - a study of a rather unusual group among the full target group for the Social Contribution policy. However, the respondents' personal characteristics did not differ significantly from Rotterdam female benefit claimants in general. Just like the average female unemployed "Rotterdammer", our respondents are relatively old, suffer from health problems and have few basic qualifications (Gemeente Rotterdam, 2010: 8). Nevertheless, the non-response rate may reflect some issues of selection bias. For instance, the 'refusers' may be people who want to keep their view on welfare and policy changes for themselves, and therefore did not take part. Theoretically, accessing the confidential files of welfare agency running the OK Bank program would yield useful information about the 'refusers', but this strategy would raise serious ethical objections.

### ***Coding Procedure***

The interview transcripts were coded in three steps. First, we identified three phases in the transition from the OK Bank to the Social Contribution policy: (1) the period during which the volunteer work was directed by the OK Bank (until 2011). The supervised volunteer work was focused on activation for employment and a small remuneration was granted; (2) the period between the OK Bank and Social Contribution. During this period, the main features were the cessation of counselling and remuneration; (3) the near future phase of Social Contribution. In this stage, the respondents were primarily asked about their future expectations about Social Contribution. This subdivision in phases yielded a first 'layer' of code labels, which we also used as a structuring element in the Results section. Second, we coded the text that corresponded to these overarching themes and key concepts in detail (e.g. skills, motivations, benefits, voluntary versus mandatory programme components). Third, we examined the coded text carefully to detect other (unexpected) themes that emerged from the data, through a more inductive approach.

## **Results**

### ***The OK Bank phase: empowerment without employability***

The respondents perceived the impact of old-style volunteering as strong in terms of its psychological effects. It was not so much that they felt that this had made them immediately more employable on the labour market, but that it enables participants to forge new social relationships and personal growth, both while working (practical skills) and in the form of new contacts (social skills).

*'When I started giving cooking classes I came into contact with more people, I learned more Dutch, I learned how you had to deal with people in the workplace. And then I was able to cut down on the number of tablets I was getting from the GP. I regained my self-confidence.'*

**(R1):** 53 years, unemployed for over ten years)

*'It is very important for your self-image and your confidence'*

**(R6):** 56 years, unemployed for over ten years)

*'I have become more open, yes, yes. Now I talk to people in the street and things, let's say at the bus stop or something. I did not do that before. I kept to myself.'*

(R7: 61 years, unemployed for over ten years)

The quotes show how a combination of volunteering, new contacts, and (new) practical skills had contributed to the self-confidence of the respondents (mostly former housewives). The main benefit mentioned was social recognition. This is consistent with the findings of Kampen *et al.* (2013), who argue that self-esteem among socially active unemployed people grows according to how much recognition they receive from the outside world for their activities.

*'It's rewarding work, yes. Yes, that is certainly true; it really is like I said, that is something you also get from the appreciation the old folk give you, because it's just a good feeling, right? They need me and I actually need them too. That's sort of how I look at it. I sort of feel like... yes, I'm giving something back.'*

(R2: 62 years, unemployed for over ten years)

This respondent indicates that there is in fact a form of reciprocity involved that is not required of the volunteers in advance, but which comes about in a 'natural' way because the OK Bank volunteers offer something that other people need, namely practical support, care and attention. Because for our respondents, it has scarcely ever served as a stepping-stone to work: none of the respondents found employment or had a serious prospect of employment. They saw volunteering less as part of a process of reintegration into the labour market. In some cases, they also viewed the old style of volunteering as a way of giving something back for the money they receive:

*'I would prefer a job; I have made 1100 applications, but you end up giving up on that (...) This is a way for you to atone for it. I mean I can't do it by working, but I can make a contribution to society this way.'*

(R9: 57 years, unemployed for over ten years)

### ***The end of the OK Bank: the end of remuneration and counselling***

The end of the OK Bank had a direct impact on two aspects of volunteering: the end of remuneration and the end of individual coaching. The disappearance of remuneration is sometimes perceived a disappointment as it gives participants the feeling that they are less valued than before.

*'I didn't come via Social Services, but through my manager at the OK Bank, so I did get a little bit extra on top of my benefits for the work I was doing. It wasn't much, but the money was a token of recognition and appreciation. That no longer exists.'*

(R6: 56 years, unemployed for ten years)

Even though the remuneration does not appear as high in absolute terms, the end to payments can undermine motivation.

*'I was happy with the money. It was better then, because you can buy your own things. Because you are going to work somewhere - you don't want to go looking scruffy, you want to look a bit smart. We don't have much money to spare and now we don't have this either. I can continue to do volunteer work. Next April I want to know if my contract will be extended or not, I don't know what I want yet.'*

(R4: 56 years, unemployed for over ten years)

But not everyone makes a direct link between remuneration and motivation.

*'If you receive benefits, it's quite a nice amount to be able to save if there's something you need to save for (...) But even now that I don't get any money, I just keep doing it.'*  
(R9: 57 years, unemployed for over ten years)

The phase in which the counsellor 'let go' of the participant has led to a decline in self-reliance in some cases. Some participants do not consider themselves independent enough to make their own choices. The loss of personal contact with the coach is sometimes described in emotional terms.

*'The OK Bank made me think positively: there is something for you out there (...) Instead of sitting at home, I really wanted the OK Bank to come back to find me somewhere to work in society. I feel lost without the OK Bank, I don't know where to go.'*  
(R1: 53 years, unemployed for over ten years)

R5: *'I think it's a shame they have stopped, yes. We used to get a small contribution from social services, but now we get nothing (...) I think it's a shame, it was just more fun with the people from the OK Bank. I used to have a proper conversation with them, when they asked 'how is your work?' Now there is nobody.*

I: *But can you still volunteer alone, without them?*

R5: *No, I think it's more fun with them.'*

(R5: 55 years, unemployed for over ten years)

Other respondents mentioned the lack of a helping hand, but this was expressed in less emotional terms and discussed in the third person, implying that it was other people that need personalised coaching.

*'Yes, I think with some things they are doing it the wrong way, with these spending cuts. Including with this, yes. I mean after all it's a way of giving people the counselling that they need. And they [the people from the OK Bank] don't push you, but they do give you pointers and tips like, yes go and try that.'*  
(R7: 61 years, unemployed for over ten years)

*'You have no idea how many people sit at home, who would really love to work, but who actually don't know how they should go about doing it or where to start.'*  
(R6: 56 years, unemployed for ten years)

There are also respondents who see themselves growing and developing. After years of counselling, they now consider themselves strong enough to stand on their own feet:

*'I'm actually now at the stage where I can just do things independently.'*

(R2: 62 years, unemployed for over ten years)

### ***The new upcoming phase: is mandatory volunteering perceived as fair?***

The municipality of Rotterdam and the general public see the idea of 'giving something back' in return for receiving benefits as fair. They emphasise that every right comes with a corresponding responsibility. However, critics speak of a stigmatising and humiliating approach (Soldatic & Meekosha, 2012; Trommel & Van den Berg, 2012). Based on our literature review, we assumed that the mandatory nature of volunteer work under the new policy and the displacement of personal goals as a priority, would be seen as unfair. However, it appears that the respondents can sympathise with the idea of 'giving something back'. Some of them seem to be intrinsically motivated to give something back in return for their benefit payments.

*'At home I was taught that you just have to work for your money. I do not see my allowance as a hand-out, but as a salary. Now in Rotterdam they've got to the stage where they are saying that anyone who receives a benefit should do some volunteer work in return. Well I think that is only right.'*

**(R6:** 56 years, unemployed for over ten years)

*'The standard of 20 hours is fine by me, I already do that much (...) I think I should have to do something for my benefit payments, I think I should have to give something back. I was brought up to believe that you don't get something for nothing in life, but others apparently think quite differently sometimes. They just say, I'm not leaving the house for that, you know.'*

**(R9:** 57 years, unemployed for over ten years)

Others take a similar view, especially if the new policy is used as an incentive for those 'difficult' benefits claimants who hardly move at all.

*'For young people, I do think it's okay. After all it's easier for them. And they still have a completely different... mentality in that area, as far as work is concerned. I think it's okay to make them do something. For older people I think you have to look at the individual case.'*

**(R2:** 62 years, unemployed for over ten years)

The respondents who are in favour emphasise that it is necessary to take account of individual needs, and that for example, childcare will need to be arranged. They are also concerned that their 'work' is going to replace the work of professionals.

*'But the danger then is, of course, that you will get a lot of volunteers who work are doing work that really ought to be paid work, and they are going to be in competition.'*

**(R6:** 56 years, unemployed for over ten years)

The limited program advantage towards one's labour market position was (not by coincidence) emphasised by one younger participant. She states that mandatory volunteer work means that integration into the labour market becomes more difficult because there is less investment in personal development and employability (courses, training, etc.) than before:

*'They used to helped people to develop... maximise their opportunities... I would rather that they invested in me by training me for a teaching job, than making me do volunteer work. If I was trained, I wouldn't need to ask for help any more. Now all I can hope for is a job at Blokker or Hema, and that's if they don't think I'm not qualified enough.'*

**(R10:** female, 29 years, 4 years unemployed)

This 'employability perspective' was far less outspoken in the other respondent's stories. They seem to be very aware that the chances of elderly women of becoming employed (again) are very small in the Dutch economic situation. In other words, they anticipate a prolonged exposure to mandatory reciprocity policies while being on social benefits.

## **Discussion and Further Research**

Public opinion in the Netherlands and other Western European countries is increasingly favourable to establishing a link between giving social benefits and insisting on a social contribution. Our pilot study looked at how unemployed older women view the transition

from activation and labour market re-integration policies to a mandatory reciprocity approach policy in Rotterdam. We expected unemployed volunteers to value the previous arrangements (before the introduction of 'Social Contribution') and emphasise the soft benefits of volunteer work aimed at improving their employability. We presumed that the shift towards a new and stricter policy regime (mandatory volunteering aimed primarily at community goals) would be perceived as unfair by these already active female participants.

Doing volunteer work through the OK Bank did, as expected, lead to an improvement in the self-image and self-confidence of the respondents. The major changes (i.e. cessation of counselling and remuneration and the de-prioritisation of labour market reintegration) are associated with concerns that the new mandatory approach may not be sufficiently tailored to individual needs. Nevertheless, our respondents generally agreed with the basic idea of mutual obligation with regard to their benefit payments. The introduction of the Social Contribution policy was rarely seen as unfair. This seems a remarkable finding for a group which had for some time already been 'giving something back' to society through volunteering and that had been receiving emotional and financial appreciation for this. However, disapproval was not in evidence. How can this be explained?

A first explanation is that we witness an internalisation of the dominant policy discourse. We should be aware that, generally, the Netherlands is a country of consensus. The content of this consensus may change from time to time, but the ever-present push for consensus hardly leaves space for dissonant opinions. The support for disciplining unemployed people might also be an echo of the authoritarian and populist view on the ethnic unemployed, who are labelled as unwilling to work (Van der Veen *et al.*, 2012: 42). Some of our respondents explicitly wanted to make clear that they are 'not like that'. Another potential explanation is that participants see soft benefits for themselves (see also Kampen *et al.*, 2013). They tend to formulate mandatory activities as a way to make them full and respected partners in social interaction and (becoming) useful members of society. In other words, you can be a full citizen even if you are on long-term benefits, as long as you do enough for society. This set of linked explanations and narratives joins seamlessly with the finding of a recent national study called 'An appeal to the citizen' (*Een beroep op de burger*, Veldheer *et al.*, 2012). This report shows that the majority of Dutch citizens agree with the principle of personal responsibility, but most people also believe they already take enough responsibility and that it is mainly other people who fail to do this (in particular those people who are assumed to fall back on benefits all too easily).

A different type of explanation is that our respondents are well aware that the ongoing economic crisis is forcing municipalities to make significant cuts in social services. This means that some of the work that was previously done by professionals, must now be done by volunteers and participants in (mandatory) activation programmes. Incidentally, this narrative may have its pitfalls. For example, if participants are overwhelmed and little account is taken of personal circumstances and skills, or if the government fails to express any personal appreciation and recognition (see also Kampen, 2013). That prospect is by no means unrealistic. Of all the aspects that have changed under the new policy - less freedom of choice, less counselling, no remuneration, less emphasis on personal development, a weaker link to labour market reintegration - our respondents were the most upset about the disappearance of the personal counselling, i.e. having someone there who understands them and to encourage them now and again.

A final explanation is selection bias. Our counter-intuitive results may be related to unobserved negative attitudes by non-respondents who may resent the policy changes and increased emphasis on reciprocity instead of individual support, and thus decided not to take part in the study.

In the end, our respondents combined different narratives on social justice. On the one hand, they perceived mandatory volunteering as fair, because there is something in it for them in a Rawlsian sense. Social contribution does not bring benefits in terms of income or career prospects (since they are mostly too old to find jobs anyway), but in terms of another form of social justice currency: self-esteem. On the other hand, some answers were in line with the ideas of Dworkin (1981) and Mead (1986, 1997) on social justice. Just like these authors, our female volunteers criticised other welfare recipients, whom they presumed to be lazy, as ‘undeserving’.

Being a small pilot study, our findings do not by definition apply to other groups affected by the new policy. Nevertheless, the results provide interesting venues for further research. First, the target group should be substantially broadened to include elderly men, but also younger men and women on social benefits; this may reveal potential differences between people from various ages and various stages in the household cycle. Second, the research population should extend to other (Dutch) cities and municipalities. From 2015 onwards, they are legally required to formulate policy on mandatory reciprocity for social benefit recipients. Without generic national obligations about policy *content*, we can expect significant contextual differences between municipalities, which may in turn affect clients’ perceptions of mandatory reciprocity. Third, the cross-sectional nature inhibits a view on the longer term. Our results suggest that the de-prioritisation of employability and labour market reintegration may negatively affect the prospects for moving to paid employment in the longer term. Panel study designs can test this hypothesis in a rigorous way. Fourth, a wider scope is needed, but a focus on women remains relevant for further study. Earlier research in Rotterdam has revealed that the requirement of 20 hours per week seems difficult to fit in the daily schedules of unemployed women, due to (child) care issues (De Jong, 2012: 23-24). In the UK, the government is reducing active support for working mothers while increasing pressure on lone parents with a child over 5 years old to find paid work, so that “the right to work has become a requirement to work without a complementary right to care” (Rubery & Rafferty, 2013: 429). Furthermore, elderly women are disproportionately more often involved in volunteer aid (*mantelzorg*) for ill family members or friends than men. The largest share of people giving volunteer aid is found among those aged 50-65 years, and a significant share feel a heavy or very heavy burden (CBS, 2013). Requiring volunteer aid givers on social benefits to deliver reciprocity may accelerate physical and mental health problems related to overburdening and stress. With the increasing importance of volunteering, due to ageing, this danger of (further) overburdening by mandatory reciprocity merits serious attention. Fifth, the legal obligation for municipalities to enact reciprocity policies, from 2015 onwards, may create substantial displacement of (especially low-skilled) labour, as ‘volunteers’ take over various tasks formerly done by professionals. Mandatory reciprocity may even provide ‘perverse’ triggers to install further cuts in the available workforce of professionals active in the care sector or other domains. Further research is needed to establish the risk of these forms of displacement.

A final matter for future research is the definition of social justice. In this article we have followed the perceptions of respondents about what is fair. But is it the right criterion? Should we not follow the definitions of philosophers? Where our female respondents have stated that mandatory reciprocity policies enables full citizenship and therefore see them as fair, we might for instance wonder whether Nancy Fraser would agree with that interpretation of social justice.

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## Endnotes

1 In the Netherlands, definitions of ‘elderly’ vary between policy domains. Policies focussing on care usually label people of 75+ years as ‘older’, whereas labour participation policies target those aged 50–65 years (Van Nimwegen & Van Praag, 2012).

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