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EUROPEAN COMMITTEE ON DEMOCRACY AND GOVERNANCE
(CDDG)

THE TWELVE PRINCIPLES OF GOOD DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE:
SOCIAL DISCONTENT, PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND PUBLIC
PERCEPTION – THE EXPERIENCE IN THE NETHERLANDS

For discussion

Secretariat Memorandum
prepared by the
Directorate General of Democracy
Democratic Governance Department

Introduction

The CDDG oversees the Council of Europe's intergovernmental work in the field of democracy. The overall aim is to promote the common goal of democratic security through the sharing of information about policy, the dissemination of best practice and the development as appropriate of possible standards relating to: modernisation of democratic institutions, public administration reform, citizens' democratic participation and democratic governance (including e-governance and e-democracy) at all levels, including at the local and regional levels.

It is generally acknowledged that "effective democracy and good governance at all levels are essential for preventing conflicts, promoting stability, facilitating economic and social progress, and hence for creating sustainable communities where people want to live and work, now and in the future".

In 2007, the Council of Europe, in adopting the Strategy for Innovation and Good Governance, has tried to place citizens at the heart of all democratic processes and encouraged authorities at all levels, and in particular at the local level, to improve their governance in accordance with the Twelve Principles of Good Governance.

Since then, the financial and economic crises, social challenges, expectations of citizens, populism, radicalisation and the continuing evolution of new technology and the way in which the latter is used, have also presented a multitude of challenges which impact on the work of authorities and public officials at all levels and affect the outcome of the aim set out above. In addition, increasingly the legitimacy of authorities' decisions are being challenged.

The analysis prepared by the Netherlands' Ministry of the Interior presented in appendix seeks to examine the interaction between all these factors and to reflect on ways in which the dialogue between public administration and society can be redefined; it may also present important considerations for member states to take into account in implementing public administration reforms.

Action required

The CDDG is invited to take note of the working document appended and to engage in a preliminary reflection on the impact of the study's findings for the CDDG in a) promoting the implementation of the Twelve Principles in member States b) fulfilling the tasks it is set in its new terms of reference 2018-2019, and, lastly, c) how these relate to reforms in member states.

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APPENDIX

Social discontent

Recently the chief strategist of the Netherlands ministry of the Interior published a annexed paper on social discontent and its implications on public administration. The paper analyses contemporary national and international literature and research on social discontent to clarify whether this current feeling of discontent is different to previous periods of discontent and how it might affect the functioning of the Netherlands' public administration. Subsequently, it identifies the implications for the Netherlands' public administration and the feasibility of acting on it.

Social discontent is a complicated and controversial phenomenon. In the context of everyday use, the term refers to the feeling that people have that the deterioration of society is out of control and therefore cannot be stopped. That feeling is frequently linked to the question whether people believe that they will be as well off as their parents, or whether their children will be doing at least as well as they did themselves. Also, social discontent is related less to people's individual situation and more to society as a whole. Put more scientifically, it can be asserted that social discontent is a latent feeling of anxiety among citizens concerning the precarious state of society. This feeling consists of a perceived deterioration of five aspects of that society: (i) a loss of confidence in human capabilities, (ii) a loss of ideology, (iii) a loss of political power, (iv) a loss of a sense of community, and (v) increasing socio-economic vulnerability.

In this definition, social discontent consists of three elements. Firstly it concerns a latent attitude on the part of citizens. In addition, the feeling of anxiety among citizens is related to the precarious state of society. Lastly, it consists of the perceived deterioration of the five aspects of society mentioned above.

Social discontent is not a phenomenon which is typical of modern times. The feeling of collective deterioration also existed in antiquity and in the Middle Ages. However, having said that, these days the feeling is more powerful than it used to be. That has to do with a linear view that is related to a belief in continuous progress. This progress facilitated an increase in, and spread of, personal freedom, free markets and prosperity. As a result, the perceived deterioration has a greater impact, all the more so given that there is no hope of a better future. Social discontent is a latent attitude. It is an undercurrent in society and there too lies the difference for us with phenomena such as social unrest or anger. With respect to some sections of the population, social unrest or anger is an extension of this discontent and the people in question feel more rage and have a more negative view of developments and resentment is stronger. Social unrest or anger occurs when the discontent comes to the surface and becomes the dominant feeling in society. The latent anxiety about the precarious state of society is evident among many groups in society. The feeling of discontent may also be more acute among one social group than among others. The scale is definitely gradual, without there being any exact contrast in society between those who are 'comfortable' and those who are uncomfortable'. Background characteristics which are relevant where variations in social discontent are concerned are the level of education, gender, age, religious conviction and place of

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residence. Above anything else, people with a lower level of education appear to experience greater social discontent.

The paper emphasizes that discontent is the result of a combination of various, converging causes. The causes referred to also affect each other and, as a result, exacerbate the consequences. For the purposes of this analysis, the paper distinguishes between three causes. These are socio-cultural, socio-economic and political causes.

On the basis of the analysis of these three perspectives, the paper identifies four key consequences for the functioning of the public administration. In the first place, it observes that increasing social discontent is bringing pressure to bear on the legitimacy of the public administration. This decreasing legitimacy may eventually result in less effective and efficient public administration. In the second place, it observes that people who experience significant social discontent change their electoral preference. They then tend to vote for parties that have acknowledged this discontent. In the third place, it concludes that greater social discontent and the expression thereof can also have a positive effect on the incumbent political-administrative elite because they become aware of existing injustice. After all, some of this discontent is based on fact. Lastly, it notes that increasing social discontent can change into dissatisfaction and unrest. In the course of the transition from undercurrent to dominant force, people may express their discontent in ways that go beyond the boundaries of common standards.

Finally, the authors used the insights gained and conclusions to examine the possible focal points for action by public administration. However, they are first and foremost intended to serve further discussion:

Links between public administration and society – Public administration should be aware that social discontent, as such, can be resolved. It is important that (new) links are created between public administration and society to redefine the dialogue. These links must enable those in public administration to determine what is going on and what is topical within society. These links also serve as a set of instruments to establish whether implementing the policy has the desired effect.

Treatment of citizens – Within public administration the causes of social discontent must be viewed as a reality. People's concerns must be taken seriously. In any case, it calls for greater understanding and empathy for social discontent among people on the part of administrators, members of parliament, and civil servants. This can translate, above all, into the way in which contacts between the government and citizens are structured.

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Tackling real problems – The causes of social discontent are, in part, based on real problems such as inequality and the feeling of having no say. Incidentally, acknowledging these issues can be a goal in itself without being under the illusion that social discontent will disappear as a result.

Alertness – Those in public administration – and democracies in general – are notoriously bad at predicting crises. It is essential to learn to identify *tipping points* that may arise if various trends come together and gain momentum. Those who work in public administration must be alert for signals that social discontent is turning to dissatisfaction and unrest, because that will threaten social stability.

More research – More research is needed into the causes of social discontent. In particular, there is a need for paying greater attention to, and for more research into, the economic causes of social discontent (uncertainty, loss of income, erosion of medium-level jobs, inequality).

In conclusion

From the perspective of the Netherlands, the paper and the exchange of view demonstrate that there is a need to redefine the dialogue between the administration and society. In order to redefine this dialogue with society five perspectives for the Netherlands' public administration were identified: public administration should be more 1) reliable and credible, 2) responsive, 3) performing, 4) empathic and 5) cohesive. These five perspectives are closely linked to the CoE's 12 Principles of good governance at local level and therefore the Netherlands delegation wishes to present its findings to the members of the CDDG and have an exchange of views on practical examples of improving governance and redefining the dialogue with society.

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