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Non-take-up of social support and the implications for social policies

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Chapter 8

Policy implications
(research stage III)

ABSTRACT

This chapter reflects on the implications of the research findings for The Hague's social policies. Drawing from our improved understanding of non-take-up of social support, the contents of The Hague's social policies will be revisited. Hereby, a constructive approach is adopted to determine what can be learned from the study of non-take-up of social support in order to improve social policies. More specifically, this chapter will first revisit the following social policy elements: 1) the demarcation and definition of actor roles, 2) the categorization of target groups, and 3) the policy assumptions. What are the implications of this study's findings for those specific policy elements? Thereafter, some of the caveats and blind spots that were found in The Hague's policy documents will be addressed. How the findings of this study may be applied to redress some of these omissions will be discussed. Finally, based on the findings from previous chapters, several crucial ingredients for a more comprehensive approach to help-seeking for social support will be provided – again with the aim of providing policymakers with useful input for future social policies. This chapter aims to enrich the broader debate about welfare state reforms and to contribute to (future) social policies.

How does this research stage fit into the broader research project?

This third and final research stage connects the results from the previous research stages and discusses what the research findings imply for The Hague's social policies. With our improved understanding of non-take-up of social support by potential welfare recipients (research stages IIa and IIb), this research stage revisits the contents of The Hague's contemporary social welfare policies (which were described earlier in research stage I). This is the research stage in which the practice of non-take-up of social support meets the 'paper reality' of social policies, to put it more colloquially.

CHAPTER 8 - POLICY IMPLICATIONS (RESEARCH STAGE III)

8.1. INTRODUCTION

Previous chapters have examined the contents of social policies (chapter 5) and have contributed to a more thorough understanding of non-take-up of social support in The Hague (chapters 6 and 7). This chapter will bring these elements together. It considers the following question: *What are the implications for contemporary social policies that emanate from our study of the phenomenon of non-take-up of social support in The Hague?* A constructive approach is adopted to see what policymakers may learn from this study of non-take-up of social support. This chapter will therefore concentrate on those policy elements that could (potentially) benefit the most from the knowledge and insights that were acquired in this study.

The chapter proceeds as follows: first, the implications of the findings for the demarcation and definition of actor roles, the categorization of target groups and the policy assumptions put forward by local policymakers in social policy documents will be discussed. Second, some of the omissions, or blind spots, that were found in these documents will be addressed. Finally, local policymakers are provided with crucial building blocks to develop a more comprehensive approach to help-seeking for social support. It is hoped that this chapter will help policymakers and will enrich the broader debate about welfare state reforms and contribute to (future) social policies.

8.2. REVISITING THE HAGUE'S SOCIAL POLICIES

In chapter 5, a set of policy design elements was derived from the policy literature. These were used to structure the content analysis of The Hague's contemporary social policies. This section will revisit three of those policy elements, namely: 1) the demarcation and definition of actor roles, 2) the categorization of target groups, and 3) the policy assumptions.³⁶

First, regarding the demarcation and definition of actor roles, the roles of the key actors in the system of social service delivery are summarized as follows: local government confines its role to policymaking and to facilitating other parties in delivering social support services. Third sector organizations are emphatically placed at the forefront of the social service system: they are expected to develop and deliver social support services to welfare

³⁶ When referring to specific policy documents, the labels that were assigned to the documents (see chapter 5, Table 5.2; labels D1-D11) are used for more efficient referencing.

clients – including individuals from hard-to-reach target populations. Finally, (potential) welfare clients are expected to adopt an active role in addressing their personal welfare problems. The Hague's social policies thus emphasize values of self-reliance and participation (see, e.g., D4, p. 13), individual responsibility (see, e.g., D1, p. 15), entrepreneurialism (see, e.g., D3, p. 13), having an active attitude (see, e.g., D4, p. 16), ownership (see, e.g., D2, p. 3), and the need to control one's own welfare (see, e.g., D10, p. 8).

At the same time, the content analysis found a few snippets that attest to *some* awareness among local policymakers of the problems and difficulties (potential) welfare clients may experience in seeking social support (see chapter 5). In addition, one of the policy documents contained a statement that there is too little understanding of why individuals refrain from asking for social support (see D2, p. 10). Notwithstanding these findings, the dominant image of the (potential) welfare client within The Hague's social policies is that of an individual who will actively seek social support as soon as he/she notices a certain need for help.

However, in light of the findings from chapters 6 and 7, it is recommended that this rather one-sided emphasis on participation, ownership, self-reliance and individual responsibility be attenuated and that the reality of non-take-up of social support be more explicitly taken into account – which will be addressed in more detail later in this section. Moreover, the research findings also warn us not to overestimate the ability of third sector organizations to reach all (potential) welfare clients. As this study illustrates, many potential welfare recipients remain 'hidden' from third sector organizations. Even when social support sources are offered in the vicinity of potential welfare clients, the simple fact is that not all individuals who are in need of social support are reached by these third sector providers.

Second, regarding the categorization of target groups, what policymakers should better explain why and how they select certain target groups, as the content analysis in chapter 5 has shown, only scant attention is paid to this topic in policy documents. The method of target group identification and categorization is either entirely left out (the reader is presented only with the selected target groups) or is only superficially substantiated (by referring to some process of data analysis; see, e.g., D6, p. 21). Since defining and categorizing target groups is a fundamental element of social policies (see, e.g., Schneider & Ingram, in: Howlett & Mukherjee, 2017; Pierce *et al.*, 2014) and since policy documents play a vital role in this process, policymakers should be more attentive to this issue.

Third, this study has several implications in relation to the policy assumptions on help-seeking for social support that were identified in The Hague's social policies. First, these assumptions are summarized in Table 8.1 below:

- 1) **The assumption of vicinity.** This is the assumption that when social support services are offered near (potential) welfare clients, these support services will be utilized by those who need them. Closely related to this is the idea that lowering the threshold for social support services by improving their physical accessibility will lead to higher take-up of those services by individuals who need help.
- 2) **The assumption of a demand-driven social service system and tailor-made support services.** It is assumed that individuals who need social support are able to make a rather precise 'calculation' of their help need, know where they can find proper help, and are able to express their specific help demands to others.
- 3) **The assumption of integrity and comprehensiveness.** Policymakers assume that a closed support network of nonprofessional caregivers, volunteers and professionals can be formed around (potential) clients so that social support needs will be signaled and can be addressed as early as possible.
- 4) **The assumption of awareness and 'voice'.** This entails that (potential) welfare clients 1) are aware of their own help needs, 2) know what is best for them, and 3) are able to express their help needs to others (whether someone within their personal social network, third sector representatives, or others).
- 5) **The assumption of informed action.** When potential welfare clients receive information about and become aware of the availability of potential sources for support, they will then also utilize those services.
- 6) **The assumption of prevention.** This concerns the expectation that (potential) welfare recipients will address their personal help needs as soon as they detect that they have (a) welfare problem(s). The idea is that by responding to their help needs as early as possible, any worsening of the problem(s) can be prevented – otherwise, solving the problem would amount to higher welfare costs in the future.

TABLE 8.1: Key assumptions of help-seeking for social support in The Hague's social policies

In reviewing this set of policy assumptions, it may be concluded that the assumptions paint a one-sided picture of help-seeking for social support. The assumptions are clearly geared towards take-up of social support and disregard the (possibility of) *non*-take-up of social support. In other words, in the way the policy assumptions are currently framed, they appear to underestimate – or even negate – the complex, multidimensional nature of the phenomenon of non-take-up of social support. Moreover, the policy documents have a rather limited scope, focusing mainly on the individual welfare client while largely neglecting other influencing (f)actors in the broader environment. Consequently, any (policy) intervention that is based on such a one-sided account of help-seeking behavior has a higher likelihood of producing – to use Hirschman's (1991) famous *tricolon* – futile, perverse, and/or jeopardizing effects. Although probably well intended, the intervention runs the risk of having no effect at all (futile effect), accomplishing the opposite of what was intended (perverse effect), or producing harmful effects (jeopardizing effect).

Hence, it is recommended that local policymakers be more explicit about the definition of actor roles, the categorization of target groups, and the policy assumptions they make

about the help-seeking behavior of (potential) welfare clients. Overall, when juxtaposing the findings of this study on non-take-up of social support with the findings on the contents of The Hague's contemporary social policies, it is found that the various policy elements could – and should – be better aligned with what actually happens in practice. This means that policymakers should start by formulating their beliefs, ideas and assumptions about help-seeking behavior more explicitly in social policy documents. Second – and more importantly – they should found these ideas and expectations on what actually happens in the local social service system. Not only would this be beneficial for the transparency of social policies, but it would probably also render these policies more effective – which that will be addressed in the final chapter of this thesis.

8.3. ADDRESSING SEVERAL OMISSIONS IN THE HAGUE'S SOCIAL POLICIES

As was concluded in chapter 5, The Hague's social policies have several striking omissions in regard to the phenomenon of non-take-up of social support. These omissions are as follows: 1) hard-to-reach target groups are being overlooked; 2) potentially relevant sites to inform help seekers about social support services are neglected; 3) there seems to be ambivalence about whether to organize tailor-made or generic services; and 4) there is a one-sided and incomplete account of the help-seeking process. Below, these four omissions will be elaborated on, and how they may be addressed by using the knowledge and insights gathered in this study will be discussed.

1) There is a risk of overlooking hard-to-reach target groups in efforts to improve service delivery. As policymakers aim to gather the needs and preferences of the target groups, they seek to contact welfare clients, for instance, through measuring the 'customer-friendliness' of social services by conducting so-called customer journeys and usability studies among clients (see D4, p. 19). The aim is to better understand the experiences of these clients and, if necessary, to adjust and improve service delivery. In light of this study, what is problematic about such initiatives is that the experiences are being measured only among *existing* clients. While this approach probably yields valuable knowledge, it is important to remember that it does not provide a complete image of the needs and preferences of all (potential) welfare clients. Therefore, policymakers should (more) actively try to reach and include hard-to-reach target groups to try to take their preferences into account as well. They should be careful not to formulate social policies only on the basis of the needs and preferences of existing clients, or 'easy-to-reach' individuals.

2) The Hague's social policies neglect relevant sites to inform potential welfare clients about social support services. Currently, social policy documents focus on the 'usual' sites

to inform individuals about sources of support, such as information counters in different neighborhoods. As this quotation exemplifies, “*Deze servicepunten worden gerealiseerd in bestaande loketten en fysieke inlooppunten in de wijken zoals bijvoorbeeld buurthuizen, CJG’s, Centra voor ouderen, I-shops, bibliotheken*” (D3, p. 31). Particularly in chapter 7 – on non-take-up of social support by caregivers – the respondents in the focus groups suggested other, perhaps more ‘unusual’ sites. These were schools, taxi services for the elderly, markets (e.g., *De Haagse Markt*, one of the major markets in The Hague), museums, ‘pop-up stores’ that caregivers frequently pass in their daily lives (in strategic locations spread over the city), and ‘culturally specific locations’ such as Chinese tokos and restaurants. Nonetheless, many participants believed that word of mouth is by far the most effective way of communication, as this would also reach the more hard-to-reach caregivers.

3) There is some ambivalence with regard to the design of social support provisions: should third sector organizations develop generic or tailor-made services? On the one hand, policymakers emphasize the importance of tailor-made services (see chapter 4), while on the other hand, some quotations that were retrieved from the policy documents stated the exact opposite. Some policy documents, for instance, stated that support provisions should not be developed for specific target groups: “*Voorzieningen zijn zo min mogelijk gericht op specifieke (sub)doelgroepen*” (D3, p. 13 and D4, p. 17). Based on this study, it would, in contrast, be recommended that social support services be tailored to the needs and preferences of specific target groups as much as possible. Although this study does not prescribe any ‘definitive set’ – if such a thing exists – of target groups, when the goal is to improve take-up of social support services, it is important to recognize and take into account cultural dimensions of help-seeking behavior. Not only should policymakers pay more attention to defining the target groups (see the previous section), but they should also be more aware of the help needs and preferences of different target groups and tailor appropriate support provisions to these needs.

4) Finally, even though help-seeking is considered a process by policymakers, several important aspects of this process are still lacking in the policy documents. Help-seeking is still too often depicted as a rather straightforward affair. For the respondents in this study, and probably for many other potential welfare clients, help-seeking simply is not that easy. Policymakers should therefore be more cognizant of 1) the existence of many potential barriers and problematic factors that ‘operate’ at various levels of the local social service system, 2) the negative impact these barriers (may) have on help-seeking, 3) the underlying mechanisms of non-take-up, and 4) potential ways to address them (if at all possible or feasible). However, much is still unknown about how non-take-up of social support ‘works’, so additional research is needed to further aid policymakers in formulating more effective social policies. For now, it is suggested that the complexity of

help-seeking for social support be accepted and incorporated into future social policies, as has already been done with other complex policy issues – debt problems, public health, and social and emotional loneliness (see, e.g., D1, D6, D10 and D11). Policymakers could – should – do the same regarding non-take-up of social support.

8.4. TOWARDS A MORE COMPREHENSIVE IMAGE OF HELP-SEEKING FOR SOCIAL SUPPORT

An important precondition for developing effective social policies is a sound understanding of help-seeking behavior by (potential) welfare clients. This study has made some important progress in that regard. It has produced a more fundamental understanding of the ‘how and why’ of non-take-up of social support, thereby providing local policymakers with knowledge and insights that can be used for future social policies. In other words, this study provides them with a starting point to develop a more comprehensive view on help-seeking for social support. In particular, the results from chapters 6 and 7 offer some useful building blocks for such efforts.

The help-seeking process of type I individuals

As was established in chapter 6, non-take-up of social support can be caused by different factors that operate at different levels of the local social service system – ranging from the internal, personal level to the interpersonal, social level and the broader, organizational and system level. The help-seeking process of (potential) welfare recipients is located within this multilayered social service system. Furthermore, one may distinguish between different phases of the help-seeking process.

First, at the personal level, a potential client has to be aware of his/her need for social support, and he/she must be aware of sources of help that are available. If the individual does not – for whatever reason – recognize or acknowledge his/her help need and/or is *unaware* of available support and/or *perceives* that help is unavailable, then the result is non-take-up. Suppose that a client is aware of the available help; then, the question of whether the potential welfare client is ‘psychologically ready’ to receive help arises. This pertains to psychological factors of reciprocity and retaining one’s (feeling of) independence. As was reported in chapter 6, the latter factor in particular proved to be a critical barrier in help-seeking for social support. There was also some evidence of individuals having developed a ‘resistant attitude’ towards asking for help. For example when they lose existing help due to budget cuts or other types of policy reforms and are ‘forced’ to find alternative forms of help. Not only did they lose existing help that they trusted and depended on, but were required to go through the whole process to seek replacement.

The third stage of the help-seeking process is located at the interpersonal level and pertains to the social and cultural context. This involves social conventions, cultural aspects and *feeling rules* regarding whether it is considered appropriate to ask for help. Finally, help-seeking for social support depends both on personal capabilities and on the presence and magnitude of external (bureaucratic) obstacles. As pointed out in chapter 6, the (perceived) bureaucratic barriers had a critical impact on the help-seeking process of many respondents who were interviewed. These bureaucratic barriers ‘operated’ at different levels of the social service system, and factors at the organizational level appeared to be most pronounced. It must be emphasized that follow-up research is needed to determine not only the relative impact but also the origin of these barriers (how do such bureaucratic barriers arise, or why are they perceived as bureaucratic barriers?) and – arguably the most challenging issue – how to eradicate or at least reduce them.

In an attempt to capture the nuances and complexities of the help-seeking process (the different guises of non-take-up in the process and the causal mechanisms of help-seeking), the integrated flowchart of non-take-up of social support below visualizes the various stages in the help-seeking process, accompanied by determinants of non-take-up of social support and the various labels of non-take-up that can be attributed to them (see Figure 8.1).

This integrated flowchart can aid policymakers and practitioners in designing future social policies and interventions. Those who are active in the social domain may incorporate this flowchart to further improve accessibility of social support services. The flowchart can aid them in placing the help-seeking process of type I individuals in a much broader perspective – moving beyond the narrow focus only on the individual welfare client towards a more ‘holistic view’. This will enable them to identify all the relevant actors, can help them to pinpoint the problems and obstacles in the local social service system, and will be useful for formulating (policy) interventions to address those problems.

The help-seeking process of type II individuals

Figure 8.2 visualizes when and how the different types of administrative burdens can negatively impact the help-seeking process of caregivers (type II individuals), resulting in non-take-up of social support. It ties together the various stages of the individual help-seeking process that were described more elaborately in chapter 7. Analytically, a caregiver ‘moves’ from the *ex ante* stage (before any encounter with a third sector provider) through the encounter stage, when she/he is ‘at the (digital) doorstep’ of the service provider, the stage when she/he goes through the application procedure(s) for a service, and the final stage of actual service utilization.

However, owing to the criticism of the stage models in the help-seeking literature (see the literature review in chapter 2), one does not want to become bogged down with the same

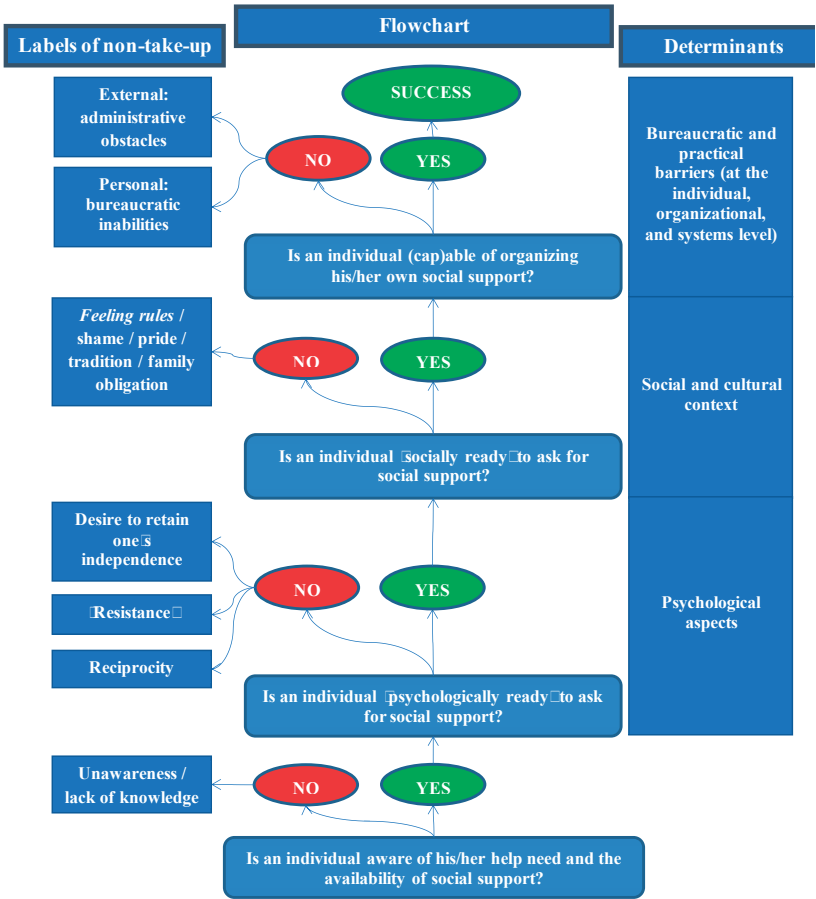


FIGURE 8.1: Flowchart of the help-seeking process of a potential welfare client (eligible for social support)

issues as those associated with the linear and cyclical stage models. Recall the two main drawbacks of those models, namely, a too-isolated focus on the individual, artificially separating him/her from the broader environment, and placing too much emphasis on the rational-cognitive aspects of help-seeking. The latter drawback is not an issue, as this study emphatically focuses on the *subjective experience* of potential welfare recipients. The former drawback will be further addressed below, where how the individual help-seeking process can – and should – be embedded in the broader social service system is discussed. Here, the individual help-seeking process is conceived of as a pathway with several critical stages. However, it must be emphasized that the stages that are invoked here are still preliminary and should be subjected to further empirical research to check

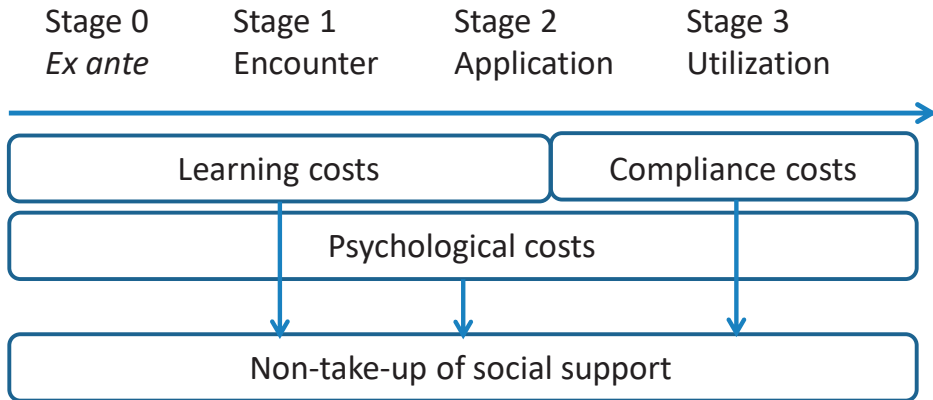


FIGURE 8.2: The 'time-ordering' of administrative burdens in different stages of help-seeking

whether they indeed remain useful in understanding help-seeking for social support from third sector providers. Such follow-up research could simultaneously focus on the question of how and to what extent threshold, trade-off, or triggering mechanisms are at play in each consecutive stage (*cf.* Van Oorschot, 1998).

Let us now zoom out and see how the subjective experience of administrative burdens in the help-seeking process can be connected to the analytical framework of non-take-up of social support (as developed in chapter 3). Figure 8.3 visualizes how the individual help-seeking process and the administrative burdens that may negatively impact it are located within and shaped by forces from the social service system. Different types of administrative burdens may manifest themselves at different levels of the social service system and at different stages of the help-seeking process.

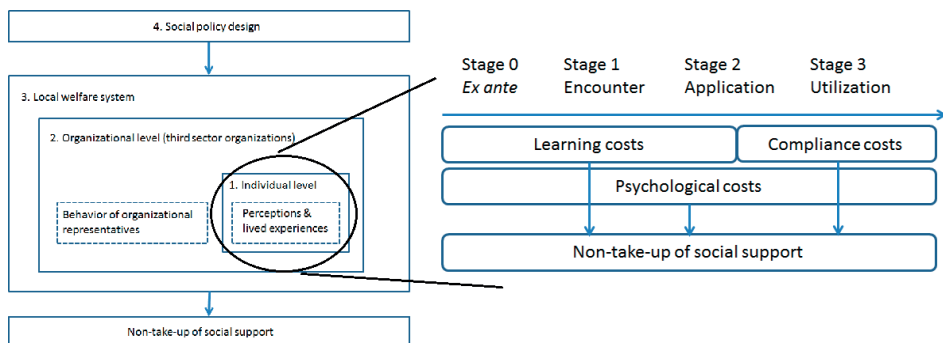


FIGURE 8.3: Caregiver's help-seeking process embedded in the broader social service system

Placing the individual help-seeking process within such a broader analytical perspective also opens up interesting questions for follow-up research: What are the origins of ad-

ministrative burdens within the social service system? How do they come about? After all, administrative burdens do not appear out of nowhere. However, paraphrasing Moynihan, Herd & Harvey (2015), why, how and by whom administrative burdens are created (or reduced, for that matter) often remains rather obfuscated. Nonetheless, this study points to the need to investigate not only the *effect* of administrative burdens on the individual help-seeking process but also their origin as well as their persistence and diminution (their 'life cycle'). Other important questions for future research are as follows: What role do different actors – policymakers, administrators, third sector representatives – play in relation to administrative burdens? Are administrative burdens deliberately created and used as concealed policy tools, as what Lineberry refers to as "policymaking by other means" (1977: p. 71; see also Moynihan *et al.*, 2013), or are burdens the result of other processes and mechanisms? Do caregivers in other social service systems perceive or experience similar administrative burdens, or are there differences? How can these similarities or differences be explained? Whereas these questions are outside the scope of the current research, they underline the importance of focusing on the social service system as a whole, including all the relevant actors that populate it.

8.5. CONCLUSION

The question that was addressed in this chapter was *What are the implications for contemporary social policies that emanate from our study on the phenomenon of non-take-up of social support in the municipality of The Hague?* As this research into non-take-up in The Hague is of a qualitative nature, it must be cautious in providing too-strong advice or recommendations. This study does not claim to provide an exhaustive account of non-take-up of social support or a 'magical policy recipe' that will 'solve' all the issues and problems related to this phenomenon. More (large-N) research is needed before any firmer conclusions can be drawn, even though such research is challenging in investigating a 'hidden phenomenon' such as non-take-up of social support. Again, the qualitative research design of this study has provided an in-depth understanding of the problems and barriers that potential welfare recipients feel or experience in the process of help-seeking for social support.

In general, the research findings underline that the complexity of help-seeking for social support should not be underestimated. The reality is that, in spite of – or perhaps even because of – the emphasis in social policies on values such as participation, self-reliance and individual responsibility, it is not self-evident that all eligible individuals will always seek social support. Even when individuals are in need of (some form of) social support, they may perceive or experience many problems and barriers that inhibit them from effectively seeking and utilizing support sources. As this study has found and illustrated,

non-take-up of social support is caused by an intricate interplay of different factors that operate at different levels – ranging from the internal, personal level to the interpersonal, social level and the broader organizational and system levels. Moreover, even though policymakers sometimes (implicitly) assume that third sector organizations are able to reach all potential welfare clients, this is not the case. With regard to the categorization of target groups in policy documents, why and how the target groups are selected and defined remains largely unclear. More (methodological) transparency would be beneficial to better understand the considerations of local policymakers in this respect. Obviously, policy documents are not the same as academic studies, and this is by no means a plea to turn them into such a thing. Nevertheless, as the categorization of target groups is a fundamental element of social policies, more clarity on the ‘why, how and who’ thereof would be very helpful, and it would also be beneficial for the transparency of social policies.

Furthermore, the research findings were also applied to redress some of the omissions in current social policies. Based on these findings, The Hague’s (future) social policies should 1) incorporate the needs and preferences of hard-to-reach target groups as much as possible; 2) include more ‘unusual sites’ to inform potential welfare recipients about social support provisions; 3) stimulate specific, tailor-made social support services for various target groups in The Hague; and 4) take into account the multidimensional, complex nature of the process of help-seeking for social support. Overall, this study has shown the ramifications of non-take-up of social support for contemporary social policies in The Hague. In addition, it has yielded relevant knowledge and insights that can be used to address – and redress – several gaps in The Hague’s social policies. Finally, based on this study, the help-seeking process of potential welfare clients (type I and type II) has been visualized, together with the variety of problems and barriers they may encounter during that process. Hopefully, this provides local policymakers with a useful starting point to develop a more comprehensive view of help-seeking for social support.

This concludes the third and final research stage. The next chapter will draw together the key findings from all three research stages (I, IIa, IIb & III) and formulate an answer to the main research question of this research project.