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## Experimenting with Income Support in the Netherlands: Utrecht

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Numerous governments and private initiatives are currently planning or have recently begun to experiment with new forms of income support, sometimes similar to or at least inspired by the concept of basic income. The B-MINCOME project in Barcelona, which was launched at the end of 2017, is one example. Our article concerns the study '*Weten wat werkt*' (English: What works), which is currently taking place in Utrecht and is one of six independent municipal experiments on income support in the Netherlands. As the research is still running at the time of writing this article, unfortunately we cannot focus on results. Instead, we will elaborate on how the experiment came into being, describe the experimental design, and compare what is happening in Utrecht to other ongoing experiments around the world.

### 1. The Dutch Experiments

In the fall of 2017 the City of Barcelona and its partners celebrated the launch of B-MINCOME, an ambitious project to tackle poverty and social exclusion in deprived urban areas of Barcelona. B-MINCOME combines a guaranteed minimum income and active social policies targeted at low-income households. During the two-year trial several types of income support and activation policies will be tested in an experimental setting. Barcelona therewith joins the club of numerous governments and private initiatives that are currently planning or have recently begun to experiment with new forms of income support, sometimes similar to or at least inspired by the concept of Basic income.

Other examples are the Dutch municipal experiments on income support, sometimes also referred to as *Trust Experiments* or *Dutch Basic Income Experiments*. In the Netherlands, dissatisfaction with the current social welfare scheme has led at least six Dutch cities to test out new ways of delivering income support to its citizens. They include the City of Utrecht, where the study goes by the name '*Weten wat werkt*' (English: What works) and includes more than 700 current recipients of public income support. For the duration of the experiment reintegration duties and welfare sanctions tied to income support will be eliminated to make room for more autonomy. Other innovative aspects include a more tailor-made approach in supporting welfare recipients and increasing financial incentives to take up paid work. Trials in the other five cities follow a similar set-up and will likewise be evaluated in terms of fostering labour market reintegration and societal participation, as well as by looking at the effect on participants' health, well-being and financial situation. With this article we aim to introduce the Utrecht experiment as well as the policy and institutional context in which it takes place to a broader and international audience.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. We start with a brief policy background in Section 2 to explain how the current Dutch income support system works. In Section 3, we will trace back the history of the Dutch experiments and elaborate on the main factors that contributed to their emergence. Section 4 focuses on the theoretical underpinnings of the experiments, whereas Section 5 introduces our experimental design and the outcome indicators we will focus on. In Section 6 we discuss the differences and similarities between our study and four similar income support studies around the world. Section 7 concludes and elaborates on the further prospects of the study.

## 2. Policy Background: Income Support in the Netherlands

To understand the nature of the Utrecht experiment and explain the emergence of similar experiments across the Netherlands it is instructive to briefly introduce the institutional setting of providing income support in the Netherlands. In the Netherlands, income support is set up as a Minimum Income Guarantee (MIG) scheme. In other parts of the world such schemes are also known by the names *social assistance*, *social welfare* or *social safety net*. We use these terms interchangeably throughout the article. MIG refers to a non-contributory transfer programme that provides a monthly cash transfer to the poorest households identified based on a means and work test<sup>1</sup>. The Dutch MIG regulations are extensive and complex, which is why we focus on the most important rules and conditions. Dutch MIG foresees a monthly transfer payment of maximum 1,026 EUR for a single-person household<sup>2</sup>. On top of that, welfare recipients may be eligible for child, housing and healthcare allowances. The policy is designed as a temporary safety net aiming to deliver income support until recipients can provide for their own income again (mostly by finding employment). Accordingly, welfare recipients have to comply with certain rules, such as writing application letters, accepting job offers or following skill-development programmes. Recipients that fail to comply with the rules may be sanctioned by freezing or cutting their monthly payment. Exemptions apply to those who are incapacitated for work or face severe health problems.

An important feature of the institutional setting in the Netherlands is that local governments (municipalities and regional councils) are charged with the task of executing the scheme, that is, helping claimants to reintegrate into the labour market. Whereas before 2001 all local expenditures on MIG were reimbursed by the central government, local authorities now receive a budget to provide MIG. The budget (also called reintegration budget) is based on a sophisticated formula taking into account the makeup of the local population. Whereas reintegration budgets are essentially lump sum payments based on objective population parameters, actual expenditures on MIG also depend on local policies, as well as regional economies and labour markets. According to economic theory, this set-up will give local governments an incentive to reduce the caseload of MIG recipients and to better adjust their policies to local conditions. Hence, MIG is provided in a fully decentralised setting in which the national government establishes the legal framework and local authorities carry out the scheme. This set-up will prove to be a facilitating force in the recent emergence of the Dutch experiments.

<sup>1</sup> The transfer programme is referred to as *bijstand* in Dutch.

<sup>2</sup> Two-person households receive 1,465 EUR per month. MIG payments are tied to the level of the statutory minimum wage: single-person households receive 70% of the net minimum wage, while two-person households receive 100%.

**Table 1. Fast facts City of Utrecht**

Population (2018)	347,574
Gross Domestic Product/capita (2015)	23,100 EUR (NL: 24,700 EUR)
Gross Domestic Product growth (2017)	3.2% (NL: 3.2%)
Unemployment rate (2017)	4.6% (NL: 4.4%)
MIG recipients (2018)	10,124 households (5.7% of all households)

Table 1 shows that Utrecht (the fourth biggest city in the Netherlands) is performing decently on different socio-economic parameters (also compared to the Dutch average). The share of MIG recipients in Utrecht is comparable to other Dutch cities with more than 100,000 residents. Nonetheless, Utrecht's goal is to further improve its welfare services.

Sources: Statistics Netherlands, Municipality of Utrecht

### 3. From Idea to Experiment – How It All Started

To understand why local governments in the Netherlands, including the Municipality of Utrecht, decided to launch such experiments we have to go back to early 2015. At that time, the Netherlands reformed its social welfare support under what is called the Participation Act (*Participatiewet*)<sup>3</sup>. The reform also included a tightening of MIG regulations, imposing stricter rules and making the scheme more conditional. People on welfare now had a stricter duty to accept work and had to be prepared to commute up to three hours for a new job. Municipality councils were also given the power to specify what welfare recipients had to do in return for their benefits. This quid pro quo could vary from volunteer work to care work to other “unpaid socially useful activities”. Recipients not complying with the welfare regulations could now be sanctioned (by freezing or cutting benefits) more quickly and severely.

The new law caused some concern among local governments, who were –thanks to decentralisation– instructed to execute the scheme and finance it with their reintegration budget. Some expected that the new approach would prove to be bureaucratic and time-consuming after all. Due to the additional regulations, controls and special exemptions, the complexity of benefit claims would increase, leading to more work for local welfare agencies and their caseworkers. Others were concerned that tightening regulations and threatening claimants with sanctions would create a conflict of interest and stir up distrust between caseworkers and claimants, making it more difficult to work together on people's reintegration.

However, the 2015 reform also gave room for experimenting with new policies. With the aim of improving welfare policies in place, a special provision (Article 83) had been written into the new law that allowed municipalities to experiment up to two years with social policy innovations. Keen to change the currently reformed system, local governments thankfully embraced this innovation clause and soon started developing their own ideas on how to improve welfare policies and how to put their ideas to the test in practice. Soon more than 40 municipalities had started their own initiatives. While local motivations to start an experiment varied from municipality to municipality, a general dissatisfaction with the 2015 reform runs like a red thread through all local initiatives started during that time (Dent, 2017).

Many municipalities teamed up with their local universities, which were asked to design randomised controlled trials (RCT, also referred to as field experiment). The four municipalities of Utrecht, Groningen, Tilburg, and Wageningen were heading the movement as frontrunners and in mid-2015 they started negotiating with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment the terms under which experiments with new rules could take place. It took another two years until the first

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion on how the emergence of the Dutch municipal experiments related to development of the (Dutch) welfare state, see Groot et al. (2018).

experiments could finally start. Political conflict between the local governments –which demanded freedom to follow their initial plans– and the national government –seeking to contain the movement– resulted in ongoing negotiations and eventually forced municipalities to redesign or scale-back their experiments<sup>4</sup>. On the way, many municipalities decided to abandon their plans altogether. By now, experiments making use of the innovation clause in the Participation Act and altering MIG regulations are running in six municipalities (Utrecht, Groningen, Tilburg, Deventer, Wageningen, and Nijmegen; see also section 7). Four other cities (Amsterdam, Apeldoorn, Epe, Oss) are currently planning or conducting experiments with MIG without altering the existing regulation.

#### 4. Why experiment?

After describing the institutional set up that paved the way for the Dutch experiments, we also want to elaborate on the rationale behind the experiments from a theoretical point of view. Or put differently: Why do we –as the researchers involved– think that experimenting with different rules and regulations for MIG is a good idea?

To set out the theoretical foundations of the experiments we have to choose as a starting point the standard economic model of human behaviour. This model portrays humans as rational, perfectly self-controlled and narrowly self-interested decision-makers that optimally trade off the costs and benefits of their actions. Accordingly, the ‘economic human’ (*homo economicus*) attempts to maximise his or her utility (satisfaction experienced from a good) as a consumer and profit as a producer. This image of the human being has proven to be a powerful tool for both economic analysis and policymaking. To date, it remains the benchmark for most economic applications, but also for many policy frameworks, which still rely on information, financial incentives and regulation as the main tools to change human behaviour.

A growing body of evidence from the field of behavioural economics, however, challenges our orthodox view on how humans behave and make decisions. Behavioural economics incorporates psychological insights into economic analysis in an attempt to gain new theoretical insights, better predictions, and more effective policy solutions (Camerer et al., 2004). As opposed to standard economic theory, behavioural economics assumes, for example, that humans (i) have limited cognitive ability to make decisions (bounded rationality), (ii) make choices that are not in their long-term interest (bounded willpower), and (iii) are willing to sacrifice own interests to help others (bounded self-interest) (Mullainathan & Thaler, 2000). Building on these assumptions and acknowledging people’s psychological biases, a growing body of research in behavioural economics suggests new ways to think about policy interventions.

From this literature we learn, for instance, that traditional policy instruments such as fines and sanctions can be counterproductive and reduce cooperative or compliant behaviour (Gneezy & Rustichini, 2000), whereas small policy shifts can ‘nudge’ people into making better decisions and achieve non-forced compliance (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). We also know that people use simple shortcuts (*heuristics*) when making decisions or that they systematically overvalue the present and undervalue the future, all of which are insights that can and have been used to develop new policy instruments. Coming back to the Dutch experiments, there are in particular three insights from behavioural sciences that we claim to play an important role in social welfare. Those insights have motivated the design of the Dutch municipal experiments and form their theoretical underpinning.

The first insight concerns recent findings on the impact of poverty on people’s mind. Research in this relatively new field of study demonstrates that (financial) scarcity and poverty stress reduces people’s cognitive resources (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013). Resources that are needed for an array of information processing tasks, such as planning, focusing, reasoning, prioritising and resisting

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<sup>4</sup> In contrast to initial designs, municipalities had to add an experimental group exposed to more intensive treatment by the welfare agency. The amount of money participants were allowed to earn in addition to their benefits in one experimental group also had to be cut back.

immediate responses. It seems plausible to assume that welfare claimants are dealing with those detrimental effects of (financial) scarcity. Surviving on low income, welfare recipients have to deal with numerous monetary concerns, like juggling expenses, meeting payment deadlines, or deciding about trade-offs in consumption. They find themselves in a situation in which wrong decisions, however small they may be, can have huge consequences. Assuming that financial scarcity and compliance activities consume large parts of their cognitive resources, little is left for other important and equally cognitively challenging tasks, such as job seeking and sustainable reintegration. Reducing the conditionality of welfare programmes, such as MIG, might alleviate the cognitive burden of recipients and free up resources for other tasks.

The second behavioural insight stems from psychological motivation theories and refers to the observation that extrinsic incentives can crowd out intrinsic motivation (Frey & Jegen, 2001). Self-determination theory suggests that intrinsically motivated people engage in an activity because they find it enjoyable and interesting (Deci & Ryan, 1985). It thereby appears that intrinsic motivation comes with several advantages, such as more effective and persistent behaviour and enhanced well-being and satisfaction. We observe that in many situations extrinsic incentives, such as rewards (positive incentive) or fines (negative incentive), have a counterproductive effect and can undermine intrinsic motivation. Therefore, reducing welfare conditionality and eliminating negative extrinsic incentives (such as sanctions) may foster recipients' internal motivation. Higher internal motivation, in turn, is expected to lead to better behavioural outcomes.

The last insight concerns the prevalence of social preferences or values, such as reciprocity and trust. Reciprocity describes a preference for repaying kindness with kindness and meanness with meanness, which means that individuals are inclined to reward favours (positive reciprocity), while taking revenge when being harmed (negative reciprocity). We observe reciprocal behaviour in many different contexts. Workers respond to monetary gifts from their employer by working harder (Bellemare & Shearer, 2011). Smiling waitresses manage to collect more tip than their less friendly colleagues (Tidd & Lockard, 1978). Also, approaching people in a positive way is often reciprocated by showing cooperative behaviour. Hostile actions, in turn, are frequently retaliated. Wage cuts, for example, have been shown to increase employee theft rates (Greenberg, 2002). Social welfare schemes, such as MIG, commonly rely on negative incentives such as sanctions and fines to motivate welfare recipients. If recipients have strong preferences for reciprocity, negative incentives might not be the best way to induce cooperative and compliant behaviour.

To sum up, insights from (i) scarcity theory, (ii) psychological motivation theories and (iii) notions of social values and preferences, provide a rationale for experimenting with new rules for MIG. In the next section we will set out the design of the Utrecht experiment specifically and how we intend to evaluate the working of the new rules.

## 5. Experimental Design and Outcomes

The Utrecht experiment is a cooperation between Utrecht University, the Municipality of Utrecht and the Utrecht labour market region. For the experiment participating welfare recipients have been randomly allocated to four different research groups –one control and three treatment groups– each testing a different approach (see Table 2). The random assignment of participants to research groups makes sure that observed differences across the groups can solely be attributed to the treatment itself. This allows us to draw causal inferences about the effect of the different approaches tested. The three different treatments have been coordinated at national level during negotiations with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment. As a consequence, all participating cities experiment with the same treatments or a combination of those. The target group for the experiment consists of all welfare recipients in Utrecht, unless participating was a risk or not possible<sup>5</sup>. In total, more than 700 recipients have signed up to take part in the study, which makes up for around 10% of the targeted population.

<sup>5</sup> Recipients under the age of 27 were excluded, for example, as they fall under a different set of rules.

Table 2. Utrecht experiment research groups

Research group	Description
A. Reference group	Random group of claimants who were not invited to participate in the experiment and are therefore subject to the normal welfare regime.
B. Control group: <i>Measuring what works</i>	Claimants who want to participate in the experiment and are allocated to the normal welfare regime.
C. Treatment 1: <i>Getting in action by yourself</i>	Claimants who are exempted from the usual obligations to maintain their benefit, such as applying for jobs or joining reintegration programmes.
D. Treatment 2: <i>Getting in action with extra help</i>	Claimants who are receiving extra support through tailor-made supervision and intensive mediation from the Municipality of Utrecht.
E. Treatment 3: <i>Work pays off</i>	Claimants who are allowed to keep additionally earned income to a larger extent than under current regulations.

Source: Own construction

Research groups A and B have been included as control groups, which means that participants in those groups have to comply with the usual welfare regulations, that is apply for jobs, accept work, participate in active labour market programmes, or perform services in return for their benefits. Noncompliance can lead to benefits being frozen or cut. Participation in the experiment is voluntary, which introduces the danger of selection bias, meaning that results can be skewed because the group of participants is not random. In order to check for potential selection biases, we have included a second control group, the reference group.

In the first treatment condition, group C, we exempt participants from the usual obligations to maintain and thus eliminate benefit sanctions. Participants in this group are thus given freedom of choice and full autonomy when it comes to looking for work or participating in another way. It allows us to test hypotheses on the effect of eliminating hostility and negative extrinsic incentives.

In the second treatment condition, group D, the Municipality of Utrecht will provide participants with extra support compared to the control group. This allows us to test the importance of extra assistance as an incentive to reintegrate into the labour market or participate in another way. Furthermore, we can test if extra support delivered by a team of dedicated professionals will lead to more hostility or to more cooperation.

In the last treatment condition, group E, participants are allowed to keep additionally earned income (to a larger extent than according to the current regulation)<sup>6</sup>. This allows us to test the importance of own income as an incentive to reintegrate into the labour market.

We plan to evaluate how the three different schemes work in a comprehensive manner. Consequently, we are looking at six different types of outcomes. As primary outcome we regard differences in the uptake of paid work (full time and part time). Other outcome variables are recipients' financial situation, societal participation and social activation, participants' health and well-being, participants' satisfaction with the rules, as well as the cost of the different schemes.

To collect data, we use administrative data as well as surveys. Data is collected at three points of time. We started with a pre-treatment measurement, which allows us to establish a baseline measure. Follow-up measurements will take place half-way and at the end of the experiment. The different stages of measurement allow us to keep track of treatment effects over the course of the experiment. In total, the study is scheduled to run for 16 months. Table 3 below sets out the timeline of the experiment.

<sup>6</sup> Participants in this group are allowed to keep 50% of their additionally earned income to a maximum of 202 EUR per month for the duration of the experiment. The current rules allow for 25% of additionally earned income to a maximum of 202 EUR for a maximum of six months.

**Table 3. 'Weten wat werkt' experiment timeline**

Date	Experiment phase	Measurement
February – May, 2018	Enrolment phase	1. February – May, 2018
1 June, 2018 – 1 October, 2019	Intervention phase	2. January, 2019 3. September, 2019
Starting January 2020	Publication phase	

Source: Own construction

## 6. Same But Different? / Comparison With Other Studies

As stated in the introduction, various experiments with income support are currently either being planned or already carried out around the world. In this section we describe four studies that in our eyes form the most prominent examples. We will briefly discuss to what extent those experiments share similarities with, or are different to, the experiments in the Netherlands<sup>7</sup>. For a more extensive comparison we would like to refer to Kate McFarland's (2017) contributions on the website of the Basic Income Earth Network.

### 1. GiveDirectly's Basic Income Experiment in Kenya.

In November 2017, the American non-profit organisation GiveDirectly launched a Basic income experiment with 300 villages in Kenya (16,000 residents). The 300 villages are randomly assigned to either the control group, in which no cash transfers are given, or to one of three treatment groups, in which all residents receive some form of unconditional cash transfer (either monthly or as a lump-sum payment). The duration of the transfer payment varies, with some villages receiving the transfer for up to 12 years. The outcome variables of interest are: economic status, time use (education, work, community involvement), risk-taking, gender relations and outlook on life. In contrast to the Dutch experiments, GiveDirectly is testing unconditional transfers as a means of delivering development aid. GiveDirectly's transfers are universal (there is no means-test, everyone is eligible) whereas in the Dutch case access to the income support scheme depends on labour market earnings (among other criteria). That is also why the Dutch experiments are limited to those receiving social assistance benefits and not (as one would expect from a true Basic income experiment) the whole population. Similar to the Dutch experiments, however, are the outcomes of interest. Time use (work, education and community involvement) and outlook on life are also among the main outcome variables in the Netherlands.

### 2. The Basic Income Experiment in Finland.

In January 2017, the Finnish government started a two-year experiment including 2,000 randomly selected persons who at that time received unemployment benefits from the government. During the experiment the 2,000 participants would receive an unconditional monthly cash transfer of 560 EUR. The control group would receive the same payment, however, only upon demonstrating that they comply with welfare regulations (e.g. applying for jobs). Moreover, participants in the control group would lose their benefit when finding paid work, whereas payments in the treatment group would continue. Similar to the Dutch experiments, the target population in Finland consists of current beneficiaries and also in the Netherlands one treatment group is exempted from complying with (most) welfare regulations. Yet, unlike the Finnish payment the Dutch benefit is still means-tested. Besides, at this stage, the focus of the Finnish evaluation lies solely on employment status, whereas Dutch experiments are focusing on a variety of outcomes.

### 3. Ontario's Basic Income (Guaranteed Minimum Income) Pilot.

<sup>7</sup> This overview concerns the status of the projects at the time of writing this article. We set out the details of those projects according to our best knowledge.

In the Ontario pilot participants receive a cash transfer where the amount depends on their income and household status. The payment does not depend, however, on employment status, participation in job-seeking activities, training, or any other compliance activity. Maximum payments per year are 11,340 EUR (16,989 CAD) for single participants and 16,038 EUR (24,027 CAD) for couples. For every dollar of additionally earned income those amounts are reduced by 50 cent. As a consequence, in some instances participants will not receive any payment through the programme, because their incomes are too high. The government of Ontario is aiming to enrol 4,000 participants in its experiment. Unlike the Dutch experiments, the Ontario pilot targets all low-income households and not just welfare recipients. In terms of outcomes, however, both share the objective of investigating effects beyond employment status, e.g. health outcomes.

#### 4. The Barcelona B-MINCOME trial.

For the B-MINCOME trial, which is most likely well-known to the reader, 1,000 low-income households were randomly assigned to one of ten treatment groups (another 1,000 were assigned to the control condition). Participants in the treatment groups receive an unconditional monthly cash transfer; the amount depends on the composition and financial status of the household. Some treatment groups include social activation programmes such as training and education programmes. Focusing on social exclusion, the Barcelona trial, like the Dutch experiments, considers various outcomes such as labour market participation, participation in education programmes, health and well-being. Still, the B-MINCOME trial focuses on low-income households and is not restricted to welfare recipients as it is the case in the Netherlands.

#### 7. Outlook

At the same time this article is being written, field experiments testing new ways of providing income support have been launched in six Dutch cities, among them Utrecht. The start of the experiments marks the first time that local governments in the Netherlands team up with researchers on a large scale in order to test policy innovations in the field. Across the country, more than 3,000 welfare recipients will be taking part. While the exact set-up varies according to local circumstances and motivations, the nature of the treatments and the outcome variables of interest have largely been harmonised across the different cities. This allows for a comparison of the different studies and evaluating outcomes at national level. All studies share the goal of informing policymakers on the working of alternative ways of delivering income support. With all six experiments running until October 2019, final reports are expected to be published in the spring of 2020. At the same time, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment and the Dutch parliament will be informed about the outcomes. It is then up to the elected representatives both at local and national level to draw upon the lessons learned.

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