Neighbor support for older people in the Netherlands

Hanna van Dijk
hanna.vandijk@bmg.eur.nl

Anna P Nieboer
Jane Cramm

ERASMUS UNIVERSITEIT ROTTERDAM
INSTITUTE OF
HEALTH POLICY & MANAGEMENT

Background

- 2011: 2,6 million 65+ (15,6%) --> 4,6 million (25,6%) in 2040
- More independently and single-living older people 65+ (2011: 41%)
- Emphasis on importance of informal support networks

- Informal support networks → functioning and well-being older people
- Family support: personal care, advice on personal problems and care over a longer period
- However, decline of family support networks due to geographical, demographical and economic changes

Neighbor support for older people in the Netherlands: what is known?

- The number of informal support-givers among older people (65-74) is rising from 200.000 (2006) --> 300.000 (2020)
- Neighbor support-givers averagely provide 9 hours of support per week

- Compensatory role
  - During nights and weekends
- Task-specific role
  - Instrumental and emotional support

Main assets:
  - Proximity and flexibility of support
  - Familiarity

Collaboration between formal and informal support-givers

- Different value-systems and conflicting role expectations

- **Informal support-givers**
  - Rely on personal knowledge and devotion
  - On spontaneous basis
- **Volunteers**
  - Provide support in an organized context
  - On voluntary basis
- **Professionals**
  - Operate from technical skills and specialized information
  - On paid basis

Objectives

(i) explore *types* of informal support provided by neighbors to older people and;

(ii) discuss *experiences* of neighbor support-givers, volunteers and professionals of providing support to older people.

Methods

- 26 semi-structured in-depth interviews with neighbor support-givers (all >65 years), volunteers and professionals
- Minimal criteria: provide support to older people in Rotterdam
- Participants were recruited via a variety of social and health care organizations
- Fuzzy line between different roles; carefully analyze interviews
- Latent content analysis

Results: types of neighbor support

- **Social monitoring support: mutual control**
  - e.g. trade keys, phone network

- **Instrumental support**
  - e.g. doing ones shopping, picking up mail, lifts

- **Emotional support**
  - e.g. making a chit-chat, drinking coffee, leisure activities

  → safeguard health and well-being

Neighbor support: an example

*So every morning and evening, we called each other **to make sure everything was fine**. (..) Once, I called in the evening and got no answer. The day after, I called again in the morning, **she still didn't answer**. Then, I called the police. They broke open her door and **found her on the toilet in a polluted state, but still alive**.*

Experiences of neighbor support-givers

- Neighbor support tended to expand during time, sometimes ending up in a too heavy burden

  *"Over time my support **expanded**.. Out of nothing, it became a lot".*

- Customer-like behavior of older people

  "*She's becoming increasingly difficult. If I bring along a wrong grocery.., well, she gives me a talking-to. (..) .I think she perceives me as her grocery maid"*
  "*It became that worse that I walked home being all in tears.She insulted me."*

- Some had troubling handling these situations

- None of the overburdened neighbor support-givers received any support from professionals

Experiences of volunteers

- Volunteers distinguished themselves from neighbor support-givers *and* professionals

- Volunteers felt they were better capable of, and more devoted to, supporting older people

   *"They studied at a university or whatever, but actually, they don't know a thing. Since they don't walk around in the neighborhood. **They're unaware of what happens outside**."*

   *"We, as being volunteers, **work from our heart**. (..) It's not just about having your diploma (..) **it's about helping the person**"*

- Scarce or mainly negative experiences with collaboration

Experiences of professionals

- Optimistic vs. pessimistic professionals with regard to mobilizing neighbors

- Several constraints:
  - Fuzzy line between being a support-giver and older person in need
  - Lack of accountability
  - Capability of neighbor support-givers and volunteers
    "It's too hard for a neighbor to tackle."

- Formalizing support?

  "Of course it's important to equip a volunteer, but it's not always necessary. Do I need training if I want to do the shopping for my neighbor? If my neighbor asks, I will do it."

- Fear of getting replaced by volunteers & neighbor support-givers

  *"I asked the district as well; **what is our job then**? If the things we do have to be **replaced** by informal networks.."*

Conclusion

- Mutual disassociation --> scarce or no collaboration between neighbor support-givers, volunteers and professionals

- **Complementary roles** neighbor support-givers, volunteers & professionals; **exploit the potential**

- Neighbor support-givers and volunteers may overburden themselves which may affect *their* well-being --> professional back-up essential

- Professionals should increasingly perceive and approach neighbor support-givers and volunteers as **co-workers**

Contact details

Hanna van Dijk

hanna.vandijk@bmg.eur.nl

Institute of Health Policy & Management, part of the Erasmus University in Rotterdam

www.ibmg.nl