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# Unmasking scenario planning: The colonization of the future in the ‘Local Governments of the Future’ program



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## ABSTRACT

In the Netherlands, the ‘Local Governments of the Future’ program has been introduced by the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations in 2014, in the context of the ongoing transformation of the Dutch welfare state; more specifically, the transformation of the social care sector. Scenario planning is a major preoccupation in this program and two major reports have been published in this connection. In this article, the authenticity of the scenario planning of the ‘Local Governments of the Future’ program is questioned. It is found that the ‘Local Governments of the Future’ program’s scenario planning is not a real scenario planning but, instead, a continuation of the neoliberal discourse by hegemonic stakeholders that seek to ‘close’ the future. It is concluded in this article that in the ‘Local Governments of the Future’ program the future is colonized and presented as an impersonal trend in which governmental agency for creatively negating and transcending the neoliberal discourse is irrelevant.

## 1. Introduction

In the Netherlands, the ‘Local Governments of the Future’ program has been introduced by the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations in 2014. The impetus behind this program is the transformation of the Dutch welfare state; more specifically, the transformation of the social care sector. The Dutch welfare state has been reformed since the 1980s, in line with a neoliberal discourse of ‘less government’ and more ‘self-responsibility’. In 2003, the ‘Other Government’ program was introduced and announced as a ‘new social contract’ in which governmental tasks and responsibilities would be increasingly decentralized and shifted to local citizens (Meijer, 2016; Ossewaarde, 2007). A new type of legislation called ‘participation legislation’ (contrasted with the so-called Keynesian ‘care legislation’) was introduced; its aim was the creation of governmental facilities for stimulating activation and participation, primarily and above all, labour market participation. Several waves of decentralization of tasks and responsibilities have been initiated in the past decade. The so-called ‘transitions’ in the social care sector in the year 2015 refer to three major administrative decentralization operations in the social care sector (youth care, employment assistance and health care), which amounted to new, additional tasks and responsibilities for local governments. The ‘transformation in the social care sector’ program, established in 2015, aims at changing local government’s organizational practices in the social domain, in such a way that they come to more effectively facility and foster the self-reliance of citizens. The ‘Local Governments of the Future’ is a program that, on the one hand, provides a platform for exchanging ideas about the best ways of realizing the ‘transition’ and ‘transformation’ and, on the other hand, is a stimulus for thinking about the next step after the ‘transition’ and ‘transformation’. In other words, the program manifests a fascination with the future direction of the social care sector.

Scenario planning is, next to listed program themes such as asylum seekers, privacy, professionalization, and regional

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cooperation, a major preoccupation in the ‘Local Governments of the Future’ program. The Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations (BZK) has published two reports in this connection. The first, inaugural document, *Trends and Developments for the Local Governments of the Future*, contains 104 pages and was written and published by the Ministry itself, in cooperation with BeBright, a Dutch consultancy firm that specializes in trend analyses in the private and public sector, in May 2014. The purpose of this scenario planning report, as is stated in the foreword by the program manager (a civil servant of the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations), is to initiate a dialogue on the transformation in the social domain in the period 2015–2020. It is stated that the aim of the scenario planning report is to make local governments think beyond their past and current practices, so as to realize the transformation in the social domain program, that is, to create a ‘new local network, new culture, relationships, ways of working’ (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2014: 8). In this document, scenario planning is presented by the program manager as ‘an ideal instrument’ (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2014: 2) that makes it possible to develop new insights on how local governments can realize the objectives of the transformation in the social domain program in their own local settings, given their unique local identity and the unique structural characteristics of their municipality.

To facilitate the scenario planning for local governments, the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations (BZK) provides a catalogue of trends. This catalogue (which contains 92 from the 104 pages in the report) is the core of the *Trends and Developments for the Local Governments of the Future* report. The second scenario planning document is a scenario planning process report, *Exploration Transformation Social Domain: Future Scenarios by and of Dutch Local Governments*, that was published in December 2015. It contains 95 pages, was written by local governments, and published by the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations (BZK), as part of its ‘Local Governments of the Future’ program. This report is presented as a collective work of both the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations (BZK) and Association of Dutch Municipalities. In contrast with the first document, this second scenario planning report is less concerned with the transformation of the social domain program (2015–2020), but, instead, futuristically explores local governments’ tasks and responsibilities in the social care sector in 2030. *Exploration Transformation Social Domain* is a report based on three national foresight workshops which were organized in 2015. These workshops included 130 stakeholders and resulted in the making of three scenarios for the social care sector.

In this article, the authenticity of the scenario planning of the ‘Local Governments of the Future’ program is questioned. The underlying premise of this thesis is that a scenario planning is a dialectical process in and through which discursive powers are unmasked, critiqued, negated, and transcended, thereby creating the space necessary for envisioning and creating alternative futures (Barben, Fisher, Selin, & Guston, 2008: 992). Scenario planning, therefore, is by its very nature radical: scenarios may well be stories of futures in which power elites may be different from those who rule the world today. But if current rulers or dominant stakeholders assume a leading or hegemonic role in the scenario planning process, they may be tempted to ‘close’ the future. It is highly conceivable that they are not able to resist the desire to secure their powerful and comfortable position also in future worlds. Correspondingly, they have to rule out certain futures beforehand. In such a reification strategy, the future is colonized and presented as the successful outcome of current policy programs, a self-celebratory spectacle of policy effectiveness. It means that strategic action is limited to conforming to the demands that unambiguous and inevitable trends place upon decision makers who, accordingly, do not make worlds creatively but obey the imperatives of so-called technological, financial or economic necessities (Jütten, 2011). Such colonization of the future is discernible in the two scenario planning documents of the ‘Local Governments of the Future’ program, which, in this article, are used as semi-subjects of analysis. It is argued that the invoked ‘scenario planning’ is, in fact, a continuation of the neoliberal discourse. In the aforementioned scenario planning reports, the future is discursively presented as an impersonal trend in which governmental agency for creatively negating and transcending the neoliberal discourse is irrelevant (cf. Pitkin, 1987). The end of history, or the final and definite victory of neoliberalism, is therefore presumed and constructed.

## 2. Scenario planning and the quest for open futures

Scenario planning can be understood as a dialogical enterprise or ‘dialectical negotiation’ (Bowman, 2016: 90). It therefore involves the ‘art of friendly dispute’ or ‘clash of minds’, which in turn enables the critique, negation, and transcendence of established ideologies, imaginaries and frames that determine the present and future (Weil, 1958; Gouldner, 1965; Ossewaarde, 2010). Scenario planning is a quest for alternative, still to be decided, open futures, in which different understandings of the world are reconciled through compromises (cf. Collingwood, 1992: 207–213). Chosen courses of actions informed by various (conflicting) possible scenarios reflect such compromises. As Habegger (2010: 51) emphasizes, in scenario planning ‘there is no such thing as “the future”.’ Clashes between ideologies, imaginaries and frames, accordingly, are not problems a scenario planning must get rid of; instead, they must be embraced as a sine qua non for advancing the knowledge of futures, if only because such contradictions or different intellectual orientations increase the awareness of possible future worlds (cf. : 241). There is no one necessary or inevitable path to one future.

A scenario planning is a dialectical process involving the creative quest for futures (Barber, 1998). Contemporary scholars therefore draw a parallel between scenario planning and the writing of futuristic stories (Korte & Chermack, 2007). Science fiction, for instance, is widely recognized as a valuable asset for envisioning undetermined or undecided futures and stimulating utopian (or, dystopian) enquiries (Birtchnell & Urry, 2013). Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* and George Orwell’s *1984* are examples of literary works that provide the imaginative component of scenario planning (cf. : 133). The purpose of scenario planning is, of course, not to produce science fiction-like stories as such; ‘scenarios are far more than stories’ (Chermack & Coons, 2015: 189). Instead, scenario planning generates scenarios that are not simply linear extrapolations of the present. It involves reckoning with – imagining – unpredictable or possible events. The resulting scenarios, in turn, entail and demand a wide range of policies hitherto unheard of (Habegger, 2010; Volkery & Ribeiro, 2009). The imaginative part of scenario planning is therefore intimately connected to world-

making, to decisions and strategic actions, which are directed to changing the course of history (Amer, Daim, & Jetter, 2013; Korte & Chermack 2007; MacKay & McKiernan, 2010). Along this line, scenario planning always involves and requires (1) new imagination of future worlds, (2) debate about alternative futures, and (3) the creation of manoeuvring room for strategic actions that correspond to different scenarios (Chermack, 2004; Korte & Chermack, 2007; Volkery & Ribeiro, 2009).

The imagination of future worlds is enabled by literary methods that evoke distrust of fixed images and iconic representations (Shapiro, 2016). Hence, parables, the articulation of paradoxes, allegories, symbolisms, and metaphors make it possible to understand and reckon with ambiguous, elusive, or latent (not yet fully manifest) phenomena in scenario planning (: 29; 218). Literary methods, and writers (poets in particular) can inspire truly new insights and strengthen the belief in different possible worlds, past, present and future. In other words, in these works, the reader comes to the realization that what is, or what has passed, could have been different; or what possibilities have been missed (Dufva & Ahlqvist, 2015; MacKay & McKiernan, 2010; Shapiro, 2016). From such literary angle, futures unfold when events – which may be the results of strategic decisions – rupture ongoing trends and disrupt established patterns. In contrast with trends, events happen suddenly and can evoke shocks (MacKay & McKiernan, 2010; Schulz, 2015). A scenario planning has to include the possibility of such surprising historical moments through organizing so-called ‘what if’ scenarios, and must, accordingly, be organized in ‘an atmosphere detached from daily routines’ (Dufva & Ahlqvist, 2015: 265). In this way, the enthusiasm for and openness to unexpected events, for un-grounding the present and the emergence of newness and radical transformations, is not stifled.

The imagination of futures beyond current trends require a particular kind of radicalism from participants in the scenario planning process, namely, the transcendence of their current assumptions regarding the world. In other words, their capacity to invent new futures depends on their willingness and capacity to critically re-examine what they conceptualized as trends that would continue into the future (Bowman, 2016; Chermack, 2004; Korte & Chermack, 2007; van Wijck & Niemeijer, 2016). They must, accordingly, abandon any pretence of knowing the ‘laws’ of the world, thereby leaving open the possibility that the world might have been very different if other power constellations had been in place. Concretely, such attitude requires giving up biases, dogmas, ideological distortions, and compulsive identifications with a particular (well-known) order, stereotypes, and clichés. Indeed, it is only through the critique, negation and transcendence of established conceptual frameworks, practices and current policies that it is possible to generate new ways of seeing the world, and hence to envision alternative worlds (Amer et al., 2013). Ideological discourses freeze (reify) established patterns (typically described as ‘progress,’ ‘development,’ or ‘transformation’) and obscure ambiguities.

Scenario planning results in increased scope for strategic action to realize undetermined possible futures. Though it tends to limit itself to descriptions of alternative futures (Amer et al., 2013; O’Brien, 2016; van Wijck & Niemeijer, 2016), without prescriptive claims, it is a powerful instrument that can serve or undermine democracy and its future (Barber, 1998). Its liberating potential depends on the range of different accounts of the world and of possible future worlds that is taken into account during the process. The exclusion of alternative images of the future on the basis of current assumptions and beliefs – for instance, the salvation of the world lies in technology – from scenario planning makes the latter a sham. Since the inclusion of conflicting worldviews is the hallmark of democracy, a pseudo-scenario planning that presumes and legitimizes one desirable future clearly undermines the democratic ideal of debate or of the publics (cf. Ravetz, 2011).

### 3. Colonization and the closing of futures

Scenario planning is meant to be a dialectical quest for open futures, whereby alternative worlds are envisioned and judgement as to the most desirable world is suspended. Such a dialogical process, associated with democratic politics of world making, typically implies the critique, negation and transcendence of the established power constellation, which is by its very nature conservative. Hence, power holders are tempted to believe that their rule is indefinite and that history has ended – since all activities are directed towards the maintenance of the current order. Conversely, action, which ‘has an inherent tendency to force open all limitations and cut across all boundaries’ is discouraged (: 190). Hannah Arendt therefore went so far as claiming that ‘action, seen from the viewpoint of the automatic processes which seem to determine the course of the world, looks like a miracle’ (: 246). Established power elites may have an interest in scenario planning, but the future with which they are fascinated is the prolongation of their current worlds. In other words, scenario planning is used for colonizing the future. In a colonized ‘scenario planning’, predominant or currently powerful stakeholders do not search for alternative futures, but, instead, enact their own ideological discourses, imaginaries and frames. The current power constellation is left unquestioned, and taken for granted in the scenario planning, as if established power factions will perdure in the future. The negation of well-established biases and prejudices is held in check, in order to safeguard the status quo. Such conservatism is legitimized by referring to current trends that are endowed with the aura of necessity or inevitability (natural and eternal laws). A colonized ‘scenario planning’ therefore masks unequal and often illegitimate power relationships.

Historically, it appears that scenario planning has more often than not been a tool for colonization, designed to secure the future rule of the established power complex. In the 1940s, Herman Kahn and the RAND Corporation developed scenario planning to enable US military rulers to forecast the moves of potential opponents and to accordingly develop counteroffensives in the nuclear arms race (Tevis, 2010). In the 1970s, Pierre Wack and Royal Dutch/Shell established scenario planning activities as an integral part of strategic management, to secure oil interests in the context of ecological crisis and the oil crisis (Chermack & Coons, 2015; Wack, 1985). The stimulus for scenario planning in these cases was the perceived rise of uncertainties in a world that had become more unpredictable and potentially apocalyptic. Horror scenarios of nuclear wars and a Third World War had become commonplace in the 1950s. Stories of ecological catastrophe, with a vision of large tracts of the earth rendered uninhabitable, the collapse of global food production, the

acidification of the oceans, sea-level rise and storms, and droughts of growing intensity, became common since the publication of the Club of Rome report in 1972 (Wright, Nyberg, de Cock, & Whiteman, 2013). In the hands of ruling military, governmental and corporate powers, ‘scenario planning’ became a method for ensuring strategic victory in a context of uncertainties and complexities. Since such scenario planning aimed at predictability, ambiguities were undesirable factors that were better eliminated, both in theory and practice (Amer et al., 2013). Computer simulations, game theoretic tools, forecasting methods, trend research, horizon scanning, and visual imageries filtered out all that which could not be mapped (O’Brien, 2016).

Pierre Wack, who introduced scenario planning at Royal Dutch/Shell, emphasizes that the future is only half closed. He made a plea for the incorporation of both literary and technical methods in scenario planning, to facilitate both the imagination and calculation of probable futures (Chermack & Coons, 2015). According to Wack, the future is partly determined by trends that cannot but persist (van’t Klooster & van Asselt, 2006). Population growth and ageing are examples of such trends; and the corresponding implications for food demand, transport, housing, and other kinds of infrastructure clearly have to be reckoned with in any scenario planning. At the same time, for Wack, the future cannot be fully outlined based on these data and graphics. The partial openness of the future lies in the unpredictability of future generations’ actions in reaction to these trends. Robotic warfare is one possible future; large-scale euthanasia is another. But it is also imaginable that ecological disasters may wipe off entire populations. These futures are imaginable and yet not simply fictive because the ‘material’ for their ‘creation’ is already available here and now. For instance, it is highly probable that white Americans will no longer be the majority population in the United States by 2050, but the question as to how white Americans will cope with living as a minority in the US invites different answers (Martín Alcoff, 2015: 24; 26).

Colonization aims at ruling out openness, with the aim of shaping a future (preferably one that seems to be the product of predetermined trends that cannot be altered by human decisions) in which the current status quo is preserved. O’Brien (2016) explains that Royal Dutch/Shell’s interest in scenario planning is motivated by its will to shape a future in which remains a dominant key actor that moulds the world in its own interest: its scenario planning practices and its wish to maintain its hegemony are interconnected. ‘Shell’s scenario plans,’ O’Brien (2016: 334) notes, ‘are credited with the company’s success in outwitting the thugs, and thereby contributing to the larger project of securing Western interests amidst the turmoil of globalization.’ Such a hegemonic project has its prices in terms of human rights abuses, oil pollution and corporate crimes (Hennchen, 2015; Holzer, 2007). The organized fossil-fuel industry is powerful enough to protect its vested interests and to promote a strategy of inaction (no reduction of fossil-fuel emissions), so that nothing really changes. Michael Mann, a leading climate scientist, explains that to safeguard the current status quo, the fossil-fuel industry, including Royal Dutch/Shell, funds a ‘climate change denial campaign’ to discredit climate science – which advocates radical change now – and prevents dialogues. In this campaign, a significant part of the established power elites, including the Koch Brothers, and influential politicians like John McCain and Joe Lieberman, makes a mockery of climatology, and of particular scientists (Wright & Mann, 2013). The pertinent question that ought to be raised, O’Brien (2016: 341) therefore concludes is: ‘whose future is being planned, by whom, for whom and to what ultimate end?’ When scenario planning is a tool for colonization, the future is planned by and for the established power constellation, even if ‘larger’ entities such as national, European or Western interests are invoked. Such scenario planning is legitimized by discrediting ‘doom scenarios’, through discourses on the liberating potential of technology (which should be able to solve the problems that it creates) and (correspondingly) on the inevitable course of history.

#### 4. The ‘Local Governments of the Future’ program: colonization issues

The scenario planning of the ‘Local Governments of the Future’ program, initiated by the Dutch Ministry of Interior Affairs (BZK), betrays the traits of colonization. In the two scenario planning reports, *Trends and Developments for the Local Governments of the Future* (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2014) and *Exploration Transformation Social Domain* (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2015), scenario planning is presented as a quest for the future of the Dutch welfare state, in particular, of the role of local governments in the social care sector. Yet, it is obvious that the scope of the ‘scenario planning’ referred to does not transcend the particular context and horizon of ongoing neoliberal welfare state reforms. The ‘scenario planning’ of the ‘Local Governments of the Future’ program must be understood as an instrument that is used to push for further descacralization of the Keynesian aspirations state (such as realizing full employment, social justice and social rights) of the Dutch welfare state. In its post-war development, in the period 1945–1980, the Dutch welfare state had been Keynesian. The experience of the Second World War in Western Europe had led to an unprecedented sense of social unity and to growing demands for government to play a leading role in the shaping of a more egalitarian society marked by collective responsibility for social care (cf. : 18). Full employment, redistributive justice and social rights, including (universal) entitlements to economic welfare, social security, education, health care, employment, housing and social provisions, reinforced the sense of social unity and kept the breeding ground (unemployment, social injustice, inequality) for resentment and totalitarian temptations in check.

In the Netherlands, the Keynesian welfare state had been subject to widespread criticism the moment the economic boom of the 1950s and 1960s ended. By the late 1960s, the welfare state was criticized as a paternalist state that did not generate liberation but welfare state dependency. By the 1970s, the government had indebted itself so much that it faced severe difficulties in financing its inefficient civil service. This unsustainable public indebtedness was the origin of the neoliberal reforms: to reduce public debt the government had to play a more limited role, drop the Keynesian (egalitarian) aspirations, show monetary discipline, take austerity measures, and replace entitlements to social care provision by individual responsibilities. In the 1980s, the neoliberal discourse of ‘less government’ and ‘more self-responsibility’ was firmly established, with the government starting to transfer some of its responsibilities for social care to companies and to citizens. In the 1990s, ‘less government’ was synonymous with ‘more market’. The social care sector was restructured so as to support rather than to obstruct the operation of the (global capitalist) market system. In

the past two decades, ‘less government’ has been mostly identified with ‘more participation’. Activated citizens are expected to be less reliant on the government and to be more self-responsible for their own welfare and social care. The recent ‘transitions’ in the social care sector in the year 2015 (three major administrative decentralization operations in the social care sector) and the ‘transformation in the social care sector’ (the creation of a new local network, new culture, relationships, ways of working in the social care sector) are the latest of neoliberal reforms.

In the two scenario planning reports, the future of the Dutch social care sector is presented as the continuation of the neoliberal discourse of ‘less government’ and ‘more austerity’, as if there were no alternative future to perpetual neoliberal reforms. In the inaugural document, *Trends and Developments for the Local Governments of the Future*, which seeks to initiate a dialogue on the transformation in the social domain in the period 2015–2020, the future of the neoliberal Dutch welfare state is the explicit starting point. In the introduction of the report it is stated that ‘the call for participation and self-reliance require a new system. The welfare state must be replaced by an eco-system in which value creation is central’ (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2014: 6). In this so-called ‘new system’, the local government of the future is expected to play a mediating role’, in the sense that it is expected to bring together local partners and develops with such partners ‘a common vision of participation and self-reliance of citizens’ (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2014: 6). In the kick off document, the scenario planning is introduced as an instrument that challenges local governments to transform in such a way that they limit themselves to playing a mediating role in the promotion of self-reliance and self-responsibility.

In the kick-off document, *Trends and Developments for the Local Governments of the Future* (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2014), the alleged ‘new system’ is presented, not as a political or ideological choice, but as the necessary outcome of trends, including demographic, economic, societal, political, and technological developments. In the report, these trends are catalogued and presented as quasi-laws that will decide the future of the Dutch welfare state. For instance, in a description of a demographic development, ‘polarization of lifestyles’ is presented as an inevitable phenomenon that cannot be altered via strategic decision making or political intervention:

‘In the Netherlands there are big differences in lifestyle and health development related to social-economic status (SES). Polarization is discernable as people from the lower income class feel less often healthy, have limitations for a long time, and more often have one or more chronic diseases. As the difference between rich and poor increases, the difference in lifestyle, and hence the healthy life expectancy, will increase’

In the kick-off document, all trends are presented as if they are unalterable laws of nature that, as a force of necessity, deliver a neoliberal future for the social domain. Not only demographic developments but also economic trends are presented in this way. For instance, an economic development identified as ‘changing labour market’ is presented as follows:

‘Less vacancies and more flexible work. The Dutch labour market has changed in recent years in the direction of a flexible labour market with an increased unemployment and increased influx of labour markets from Central and Eastern Europe. Some jobs become redundant due to technological developments or other skills are demanded’

Also political trends are described as if they were forces of nature. For instance, a political development labelled as ‘do it yourself’ is catalogued and presented as an ambiguous outcome of a necessary process of political development. This political trend is described as follows:

‘The relation between citizen and government changes, the citizens take more initiative. The government assumes a more facilitating role. Due to austerity measures, politics calls for more self-reliance of citizens and more social support from networks (family, neighbourhood, informal care)’

In *Trends and Developments for the Local Governments of the Future* (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2014), the establishment of these particular (and presented as unambiguous) trends that allegedly automatically produce a neoliberal welfare state is based on a collective exploration with local governments, think tanks, partners in the social domain (welfare, care, education, labour), and representatives of The Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) (a government agency), The Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis (CPB) (a government agency), the Association of Dutch Municipalities, and the National Ombudsman. In the description of the trends as unambiguous phenomena, there is no academia included.

In the second scenario planning report, *Exploration Transformation Social Domain* (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2015), a collective work of the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations and Association of Dutch Municipalities, a toolkit is presented, including 21 ‘trend cards’ (very much based on the catalogue of trends provided in the *Trends and Developments for the Local Governments of the Future* report), instruction cards, animation films, tips for performing the scenario planning, and announces that a three day masterclass called ‘Local Government beyond the Horizon’, organized by the Association of Dutch Municipalities, is held in 2016. This report explores the tasks and responsibilities of local governments in the ‘new system’, in 2030, and is based on three foresight workshops which included 130 stakeholders from the social care sector (mainly civil servants). The three workshops were organized on 24 June, 23 September and 18 November 2015; and they had a strict time schedule. Each workshop was organized as a four hour session, including presentations from invited guest speakers. The first two workshops included presentations of the scenario planning toolkit and presentations by Royal Dutch/Shell, Philips and the Ministry of Defence about the use of scenarios in strategic decision making. In the second workshop, participants, organized in teams, were invited to create and discuss scenario’s about the future of the social domain and identify key uncertainties. The third workshop presented the scenarios that had been made.

Participants created three scenarios of how the ‘new system’ may possibly look like in 2030. None of these scenarios provide a

negation of the neoliberal discourse: all presume that the future will be neoliberal. The first scenario was marked by minor economic decline, high degrees of decentralization, and high levels of social cohesion – the desirable future. The second scenario was defined by major economic decline, major austerity measures, and high levels of administrative centralization – the worst-case scenario. And the third scenario was characterized by minor economic growth, high degrees of regional cooperation between municipalities, and low levels of administrative centralization. The three scenarios have been visualized in three short animated films and uploaded on the ‘Local Governments of the Future’ program website (<http://gemeentenvandetoekomst.nl/>). Given the ‘trend cards’ that were used in the three workshops, neoliberalism, with its items of less government and more self-responsibility, is styled in *Exploration Transformation Social Domain* (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2015) as the natural outcome of ongoing trends that are beyond political or democratic control. The underlying assumption of both the scenario planning reports is that local governments and citizens are powerless when it comes to curbing the listed trends. The message is therefore to adapt to what is most probably coming (a closed future), and not so much to change worlds or to create futures. Three implicit futures particularly illustrate the neoliberal discourse that is expressed in the colonizing ‘scenario planning’ of the ‘Local Governments of the Future’ program. They are the futures of less government, of more austerity, and of technological salvation.

#### 4.1. A future of less government

The Dutch Ministry of Internal Affairs’ ideological discourse on less government originated in the early 1980s and continues in the scenario planning of the ‘Local Governments of the Future’ program. It is a dogmatic discourse that repeats, independently of the changing historical contexts, that the welfare state has increased in size because it assumed too many collective responsibilities and must now be reformed into a new, compact, limited, efficient, and responsive government. To realize less government, collective expenses and social rights must necessarily be reduced. A ‘new social contract’ must be established in which it is agreed that the government assumes less collective responsibilities and citizens assume more self-responsibilities (Meijer, 2016; Ossewaarde, 2007, 2010). This is the neoliberal story that was narrated in the final years of the Cold War era. It is this same old story that informs the scenario planning of the ‘Local Governments of the Future’ program today. In *Trends and Developments for the Local Governments of the Future*, the future of ‘less government, more citizen’ (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2014: 19) is leading. In the document, the legend of the new social contract is once again re-articulated, and presented as if the ‘new relationship between government and citizen’ (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2014: 26) is to be enacted in the near future. (As mentioned before, the Dutch government had introduced the legend of the ‘new social contract’ more than a decade earlier, in its ‘other government’ program (2003)). In the scenario workshops of *Exploration Transformation Social Domain* (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2015), three scenarios are drafted, but none of these establishes a break with the ‘less government’ discourse.

And in this new social contract that is offered in the inaugural document, ‘self-responsibility is the starting point; support is directed towards the strengthening of self-reliance’ (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2014: 26). In other words, given the leading future of ‘less government’, it is concluded that the government’s responsibility, today and in the future, is to facilitate self-responsibility. The ‘Local Governments of the Future’ program thereby sets out to continue the desacralization of Keynesian institutions (like social citizenship rights), which had until the 1980s been protected from the rule of finance, if only because social justice was then deemed to be the highest priority. The same end defines the scenario planning document of 2015, *Exploration Transformation Social Domain*. Also in this document, the old ‘new social contract’ is put forward for the year 2030: ‘the relation between citizen and government changes’ (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2015: 31), in the sense that in 2030 ‘the citizen takes more the initiatives’ while ‘the government takes a facilitating role’ (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2015: 31).

The future of the social care sector is characterized by ‘small government’ (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2015: 34), ‘less collective arrangements’ (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2015: 34), ‘less formal care and services and more informal care and services (participation society)’ (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2015: 34), and ‘decentralization of tasks and responsibilities from ministries to local governments’ (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2015: 35). In other words, the scenario planning describes the future of the social care sector – and the tasks and responsibilities of the local government therein in 2030 – as the successful outcome of past and current reforms of the welfare state. Karl Mannheim (1954: 86) once observed that ‘knowledge is distorted and ideological when it fails to take account of the new realities applying to a situation, and when it attempts to conceal them by thinking of them in categories which are inappropriate [to the situation].’ Such is the case in the two scenario planning documents. Given the imaginary of the new social contract, the future of the social care sector is framed in terms of past and contemporary policy vocabulary of self-reliance, participation and decentralization – terms that have been employed in policy documentation over and over again since the 1980s.

#### 4.2. A future of more austerity

In the ‘Local Governments of the Future’ program, the discursive impulse for ‘less government’ and more self-responsibility is closely intertwined with the implementation of austerity measures. While the ‘less government’ scenario is focused on shifting collective responsibilities and governmental tasks to citizens who are to become more self-reliant and less dependent on state support, the ‘more austerity’ scenario is narrated in the language of financial management. The two futures are, of course, related. They are interrelated parts of the same discourse on welfare state reform. The language of financial management has been so powerful that the

enforcements of the new social contract went hand in hand with austerity measures. In the ‘the more austerity’ scenario, it is via a neoliberal ethos of financial discipline, budget-efficient policies, limiting wages and generous (expensive) social services that the ideal of ‘less government’ is to be realized. The ideal of less government rests on the assumption that big government entails financial crises, high inflation, and collective indebtedness that prove financially unsustainable.

In *Trends and Developments for the Local Governments of the Future*, it is argued that it is important to think about the future of the social care sector because of the ‘financial unsustainability of the welfare state’ (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2014: 6); ‘the welfare state is no longer tenable’ (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2014: 23). To ‘hold the purse strings’ is one of the key slogans that is voiced (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2014: 98). The same slogan finds its way into *Exploration Transformation Social Domain* (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2015: 34). It is noteworthy that the 130 participants reached the collective agreement that the future of the social care sector is defined by the ‘necessity to operate more efficiently as a result of austerity measures’ (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2015: 36). In other words, the founding of the so-called ‘enduring austerity state’ (: 233) is announced. The message of the ‘more austerity’ future, expressed in the two foresight reports, is that austerity policies are not merely temporary measures (spending cuts) to cope with immediate problems or a concerted response to a public debt crisis, but, instead, aim at a lasting reorganization of the balance of socio-economic forces. In other words, austerity policies are a structural part of welfare state reforms. They are an inherent part of the ideal of ‘less government’.

In the scenario planning documents, it is recognized, by its authors, that in the near future, precarity and social inequalities, the outcome of austerity politics, are destined to rise further. Rising poverty (especially for single parents), persistent unemployment and health inequalities are accepted as the necessary outcomes of the current trend towards ‘less government’. In the inaugural document, it is admitted that the ‘increase of health insurance premiums and individual risk, and the bad economic situation may undermine the Dutch solidarity principle’ (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2014: 89). At the same time, it is emphasized that austerity measures are not voluntary, strategic decisions of future making, but, are instead determined by the necessity of financial discipline. Moreover, in the scenario planning report, it is observed that health inequalities cannot be considered as public, that is, political problems of the future, if only because, given the new social contract, citizens are themselves ‘responsible for [their] lifestyle and health’ (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2015: 21). Accordingly, it is asserted that health problems signal irresponsibility, rather than being the results of the current ways of working and living in a ‘sickening world’ (cf. Illich, 1994).

#### 4.3. A future of technological salvation

In the ‘Local Governments of the Future’ program, the ideal of ‘less government’ is also closely intertwined with the belief in ‘technological salvation’. The self-reliant citizen is, in both scenario planning documents, also dubbed the ‘digital citizen’ (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2014: 21; Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2015: 15) – a subject who relies for his welfare on technology rather than on the government or fellow citizens. The belief in technological salvation appears not only to determine the direction of technological development and policies, but also the very identity of citizens. ‘Less government’ is interpreted as the natural outcome of a digital revolution through which more and more public services become digitally available. In the scenario planning report, a future is imagined in which ‘the local government of the future no longer needs a town hall’ (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2015: 37). The enchantment with technology is such that it is unquestionably accepted that technological innovation – irrespectively of its direction – is inevitable and good; that it creates new freedoms, and that all future challenges (climate change, economic crises, the aged society, etc.) will be taken care of by new technology (cf. Wright et al., 2013). Technological development is thought of not only as a trend, but also as an ideal (: 163). This belief in a technological future is sanctioned by calling on people ‘to trust technology’ (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2014: 80). A technological world of a perpetual Digital Revolution, defined by ‘smart living’, is envisioned (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2014: 20). Likewise, in *Exploration Transformation Social Domain*, a certain salvation is expected from this revolution: ‘technology offers more freedom and independence and may result in people remaining self-reliant’ (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2015: 36).

In an interview with *The Guardian*, new UN privacy chief Joseph Cannataci explains that today, particularly since the Snowden Affair, digital surveillance is ‘worse than Orwellian’ (*The Guardian*, 2015). While Cannataci points out that the Digital Revolution delivers new forms of domination, the scenario planning of the ‘Local Governments of the Future’ program is defined by technological optimism about ‘more freedom and independence’. And while Cannataci emphasizes the political character of information technologies that are invested with political and corporate interests, the ‘Local Governments of the Future’ program identifies the Digital Revolution as a neutral or a-political force that solves administrative problems that Dutch local governments face. In *Exploration Transformation Social Domain*, it is written that, by 2030, thanks to new ‘technological discoveries (breakthroughs) from bioscience, nanotechnology and sensor technology’ (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2015: 36), health care costs will be significantly reduced. ‘E-health’ (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2015: 37), monitoring patients ‘from a distance (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2015: 36), ‘self-monitoring’ (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2015: 69) and ‘do-it-yourself diagnosis’ (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2015: 80) define the future of healthcare. With respect to work, the demographic trend is such that the average age of the worker is increasing in the Netherlands – from 39.1 years in 2003 to 41.7 a decade later (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2014: 52). By 2020, the Dutch workforce will start shrinking as a result of the vast number of baby boomers leaving the labour market. Further digitalization and robotization is expected to maintain productivity

levels.

Technological progress has its prices. One of the many prices of technological evolution is rising inequalities. In *Trends and Developments for the Local Governments of the Future*, it is acknowledged that there will be ‘poverty risks’ (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2014: 57), and that ‘more and more people will get into financial troubles’ (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2014: 54). These are the unfortunate side-effects of the ongoing technological innovation in production processes. Moreover, it is remarkable that the desirable scenario for 2030 does not include less pollution and disease, less (Orwellian) surveillance, healthy bodies and minds, creativity and vital imagination. Instead, a ‘love affair with new technology’ (Hanks & Hanks, 2015: 468) at any cost is narrated. Hence, it is hoped that, by 2030, ‘the Netherlands is particularly successful in innovations in the field of digital economy, ‘fintech’ (financial technological solutions) and “digital health”’ (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2015: 74). The tendency to present technological development as unconditionally good in itself disturbingly reveals another form of ‘technological bluff’ (Ellul, 1990; Hanks & Hanks, 2015) or ‘domination of society by technology’ (: 574). If the people are to benefit from technology, then technology must be programmed for democratic purposes and some democratic control over the things that are made must be established (Barber, 1998). But, in line with the neoliberal discourse, the ‘Local Governments of the Future’ program denies the political character of technological development.

## 5. Concluding remarks

In the past decades, scenario planning has increasingly become standard practice in government agencies and in public policy processes. Scenario planning encourages policy makers, and other stakeholders, to identify a range of new threats and opportunities in a context of rapid transformations. Transformation is therefore also the background of the ‘scenario planning’ of the Dutch ‘Local Governments of the Future’ program. Yet, as it has been argued in this paper, the program does not generate scenarios of transformed worlds. Instead, the scenarios that result from the so-called scenario planning are extensions of the present world. In other words, the picture of the future is one in which the present power structure is the same. Consequently, the challenge for present and future power holders is to govern processes to that ready-made future. Of course, these processes are presented as being inevitable. Quite unsurprisingly, the program offers no vision of a future beyond the neoliberal discourse and hence confirms what Colin Crouch (2011) has called ‘the strange non-death of neoliberalism’. In accord with the neoliberal discourse, the future is presented as if there were no alternative, determined by trends that miraculously all point to one neoliberal future that is planned. The ‘scenario planning’ of the Dutch ‘Local Governments of the Future’ program is, indeed, more about planning the future of the social care sector than about making scenarios. The program succeeds in reinforcing current language, assumptions, fixed beliefs or dogmas like the ‘new social contract’ and the ‘financial unsustainability of the welfare state’ among policy makers, thereby ensuring that no other future world, or no next historical era, will be imagined, let alone shaped. Hence the ‘scenario planning’ of the Dutch ‘Local Governments of the Future’ program manifests a short-sighted view. The Dutch Ministry of Interior Affairs and Kingdom Relations, the Dutch Association of Municipalities and the local governments maintain behaviour and policies that are myopic: the short-termism of the ongoing neoliberal discourse dominates the long-run perspective. This myopia is amplified by the structure of the social care sector that is informed by the neoliberal discourse.

The program lists trends that are believed to have wide-ranging administrative implications; yet, none of these trends, not even serious economic decline or possible technological breakthroughs, are considered as potentially disrupting the existing power constellations. The unambiguous way the trends are presented as things does not trigger any alarm by any potential calamity the trends may generate. Major economic decline – which is presented as a phenomenon that automatically triggers austerity measures – is the worst possibility imagined and this scenario does not in any way upset the (global capitalist) economic system. Louis Althusser once wrote that ‘history is nothing but the permanent revocation of the accomplished fact’ (cited in : 21). But the same is true of the future, it seems – at least in the narrative created in the scenario planning documents of the ‘Local Governments of the Future’ program. The main message of this program is that the future of the Dutch welfare state is determined by unalterable trends, to which governments and citizens must adapt. These trends (like demographic trends, labour market trends, political trends (including the rise of populism), etc.) are presented as unambiguous ‘hard facts’, and even as inevitable developments that cannot be curbed via strategic decision making or by political and administrative action. By relying on immutable trends, the ‘Local Governments of the Future’ program not only enforces the belief in, and experience of, some sort of technological, economic or political determinism, but also endows political and administrative decisions with some sort of necessity (cf. Feenberg, 2015; Hedrick, 2014; Pitkin, 1987). Technological development in particular is presented as obeying invisible laws, quite independently from strategic decision making. This strategy, of course, enables ruling powers to justify their ‘new social contract’ and perpetual austerity program since the latter simply obey the internal logic of administering history.

In a dialogical process, these long term trends would have been interpreted from multiple intellectual perspectives (including from multiple academic disciplines). They would not have been seen apart from other ‘trends’ or possibilities, such as new ways of living, working, dealing with scarce resources, and dealing with death; or from other dangerous possibilities, such as resentment and global wars. The capacity to see these other possibilities or trends depends on imagination and profound knowledge of human (social) affairs. Such capacity was notoriously absent in *Trends and Developments for the Local Governments of the Future* (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2014), which organized the description of the trends through its own established policy network (which excluded universities). In the workshops described in *Exploration Transformation Social Domain* (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (BZK), 2015), the trends are used as trend-cards, which have a conditioning and restricting impact, to the point that participants (mostly civil servants from the social care sector) are not enabled to imagine the unknown outside the scope of the (biased) trend-cards. Also, given the way the three workshops had been organized, in four hour sessions



(including informative presentations of guest speakers), the 130 participants had limited if any opportunities to question the catalogued trends and unpack given assumptions that were given to them. In the end, the ‘scenario planning’ was organized to make local governments and their civil society partners think about their possible future roles in the context of ongoing neoliberal welfare state reform programs. A scenario planning would have generated several scenarios which would have required radical, unprecedented history-changing actions – either to prevent or to realize these possible, plausible and desirable futures. Such a scenario planning could potentially unleash new imaginations and trigger a momentum for political action and provide hope for a new and possibly better future. In a context in which Dutch citizens appear, according to a recent poll, rather disillusioned with the Dutch government and appear quite cynical about the future (De Volkskrant, 2017), the ‘scenario planning’ of the Dutch ‘Local Governments of the Future’ program fuels widespread resentment through its continuation of the neoliberal discourse.

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