DEVCOBA

Developing Collective Bargaining in the Care Sector

WP3 Case Study Report
THE NETHERLANDS

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Contents

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Introduction

The aim of this report (WP3) is to identify the repertoire of actions and initiatives adopted by the social partners in the Netherlands to tackle issues of skills and labour shortages in the care sector.

The Dutch care sector is struggling with severe labour shortages and insufficient capacity in service delivery. This problem of growing staff shortages became more obvious during the Covid-19 pandemic and led to social dialogue in the tripartite Social Economic Council (SER) in the early 2020s (SER, 2021, 2023). National policy recommendations focused on better terms and conditions of employment, improving job quality (including higher wages, professional autonomy and reduced workloads), higher labour productivity, increasing the number of new workers in the sector and increasing the number of contractual hours in the many (small) part-time employment contracts in the care sector. In this paper, we analyse three case studies where employers' associations and unions are involved in the initiative for and/or implementation of labour market policies in the care sector

Methodology

This report selected the following two case studies in ECEC:

Case study 1: Development path and new group assistants in ECEC

Case study 2: Enlargement of part-time contracts in ECEC

Case 1 was chosen because of its quite developed and regulated measures in tackling both skills and labour shortages. Case 2 was chosen because of the large potential to promote more working hours for the very high prevalence of (small) numbers of part-time workers in the sector. Both cases involve subsidies from the government.

Employers and trade unions in the LTC sector also govern a sectoral fund for labour market, education and training programs in the sector, financed by employers' premiums set in the sectoral agreement. The case study in LTC is initiated and financed by this fund and is aimed at better job/professional quality and employee retention in the sector, through the promotion of dialogue in the workplace, through workers' voices in topics such as sustainable employability, workload and technological change. It consists of two recent regulations and actions and was chosen because of its innovative nature.

Case study 3: Promoting employees' voices in LTC workplaces

In all case studies, we followed a mixed data-collection approach by mainly interviewing the key stakeholders (in total 13 interviews, see appendix), combined with additional content analysis of policy documents and related regulations.

Introduction, ECEC

Social partners in ECEC have been remarkably very active in initiating sectoral projects in recent years relating to job quality and the labour market. To mention some of the projects announced in the two last CAs (Collective Agreements): 'Worker participation', 'Simplification of leave forms', 'Healthy scheduling in working hours', 'Reducing regulatory burden', 'Pilot professional employee participation', 'Childcare Leadership Program', 'Job classification system and job differentiation', 'Experiment with shortened working week'. Some of these projects are financially supported by the '*Fonds Collectieve Belangen*' (FCB), a sectoral fund that is financed by obligatory contributions from the employers in ECEC at a percentage of the total wage sum in the companies, as arranged in the CA. In the most recent CA 2025/2026, companies have to contribute to this fund with an annual contribution of 0.086 percent of their total payroll.[1] '*The employers' obligation for contribution in ECEC, gives us more guaranteed resources to operate*' (interview KW). '*Kinderopvang-werkt!*' (KW) is an organisation that is financed by the sectoral fund FCB and is responsible for organising two platforms for regular social dialogue among all social partner organisations in ECEC. One platform focuses on CA affairs and terms and conditions of employment in ECEC (in between the formal rounds of negotiations for new CA's). The other platform focuses on labour market affairs in ECEC. KW is governed jointly by all three employers' associations (BK, BMK, BvoK) and two unions FNV and CNV, and employs a small staff dedicated to the management of dialogues, projects and programs in both platforms. Many labour market projects are supported by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment (SZW). The Ministry has three policy pillars relating to the ECEC sector: (i) promoting new entrants into the ECECs labour market, (ii) retaining employees in ECEC and (iii) enlarging the number of working hours among part-time workers in the sector (interview SZW). Therefore, there is a broad scope of action, leading to a '*variety of measures with a variety of solutions*' (interview KW). Although the private sector of ECEC is itself responsible for staff policies, the government do have an interest in sufficient ECEC capacity for working mothers and fathers in the Dutch labour market. '*SZW has a vested interest in addressing labour market issues and childcare, you know… and yes, they are happy to support social partner initiatives through subsidies… and I must say, this is done in a very pleasant way, because they don't attach all sorts of conditions to it* (interview KW). SZW is an important actor in both case studies in ECEC (see sections 1 and 2). Once every 3 months, SZW organises a labour market platform meeting with the three EAs, two unions and one organisation for professionals in ECEC[2]. According to the Ministry, the social partners in the sector do see the overall sectoral interests in combating scarcity in the labour market, but it also observes tensions at the table when the actors are negotiating a new CA (interview SZW). '*The many parties at the table make it sometimes difficult to come to agreements, but enough is happening in the end and many actions are being set up*' (interview SZW).

Both trade unions temper their enthusiasm about the high numbers of initiatives in the sector. According to FNV: '*announcements of further research plans in collective agreements are often a compromise in negotiations: a party can then present such an agreement to its members to demonstrate that something has been achieved*' (interview FNV1). An example is the agreement on 'workers' participation' (*medezeggenschap*) in 2024, where real action was confined to just doing an inventory in the sector (interview FNV1). CNV is also critical: '*the shop floor often notices little of all these policy measures taken*' … '*making just announcements of doing research or to start a pilot is also a way of employers not to take action it all, or to slow it down, illustrated by the recent agreement on starting a pilot in an organization about the topic of 'professional employee participation' where we know already that this will have good effects, as seen in other care sectors*' (interview CNV).

[1] For members of employers' associations, the percentage for the collective agreements contribution is a bit lower, namely 0.0836 of the total payroll.

[2] PINKK; this is neither a union nor a collective bargaining party, but a professional association for higher educated employees in ECEC.

We already mentioned, in the country report on the Netherlands in the DEVCOBA project WP2, the complicating effects of instability and fragmentation in the representation of the employers and workers in collective bargaining (Tros, 2025).[3] Interviews in the sector confirm that these factors play a role not only in distributive bargaining about labour costs, but also in more integrative/productive bargaining about tackling labour and skills shortages in the labour market. According to the secretary of KW: *'the different perspectives that employers' organisations BK, BMK and BvoK have on childcare, make it sometimes difficult to come to a certain decision about whether or not to do something, or whether or not to publish something… that does create a complication'* (interview KW). The hesitance of parties and slow decision-making in the sector are confirmed in other interviews (interviews CNV/PO). In general, the fact that FNV has not signed the current CA imply that FNV is no longer involved in social dialogue about terms and conditions of employment, including the many projects announced in the last CA. CNV formally had 50% of the votes in this bipartite platform, but CNV feels isolated because '*representatives from 3 employers' associations have more manpower than one or two union representative(s)*' (interview CNV). Nevertheless, FNV continued participation in the other platform (about labour market policies) and round-table discussions at the Ministry (interviews FNV1KW/SZW).

[3] Tros, F. (2025). Collective bargaining and representation in the care sector in the Netherlands. DEVCOBA, DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.22844.14722 / https://devcoba.unimi.it/reports/wp2/

Case 1: Development path and new group assistants in ECEC

Introduction

The Development Path for Childcare is a sector-specific programme for the childcare sector.[4] This policy is co-created by the government and employers associations in ECEC, together with some other stakeholders in VET and public employment services in the sector. Unions have a more consultative role. In response to staff shortages, the programme encourages job seekers to work in ECEC and develop further careers in the sector. Candidates start as 'group assistants', an entry-level position with no educational prerequisites. The programme supports candidates in gradually learning tasks in practice from their position as a group assistant to a potentially pedagogical staff member, including public subsidies for employers' costs towards their salaries, supervision and training. The first version of the Development Path for Childcare was launched in November 2023, with a follow-up at the end of 2024.

Goals

The programme aims to promote the inflow of new employees below the BTEC 3 level into ECEC and to train all or some of them to the level of a pedagogical employee. The programme aims also to reduce the workload of existing employees in ECEC where these assistants can help them with simple, non-pedagogical tasks. The Development Path is targeted at people who want to work in ECEC, but do not yet have the right educational background. Some of them have the ambition to develop into a pedagogical staff member, but this is not necessary. Specifically, it is targeted at people with greater support needs, such as people with a (psychological) disability, early school leavers, students from a lower secondary education status, and Ukrainians. The goal is that, with the help of the subsidy scheme, 200 to 300 new group assistants per year can start a career in ECEC.[5]

Description of the case and actors' interests, resources and strategies

Unions have been long-time advocates of a programme for the entrance of new workers 'with a distance to the labour market' and have lobbied together with employers' associations in ECEC for extra financial resources from the Ministry (interview FNV1/CNV). But according to CNV '*the government took over … also because of the slow decision-making process and the inefficient debates between the social partners in ECEC'* (interview CNV). Employers seem to be consulted more: '*only when* everything *was more or less settled, the unions were allowed to have their* say (interview CNV). KW also got on board later. KW pointed to the over-optimistic employers' views on achieving the big step to training people from group-assistants to pedagogical employees, but they later strengthened their cooperation with the Ministry and social partner organisations in the sector (interview KW).

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[4] In the Netherlands, the Development Path in ECEC has been a precursor for other sectors, such as for Construction, Technology & energy, Care & welfare, and Green. A sectoral Development Path describes how a (new) employee can gradually develop through various roles and specialisations within a sector to become a fully qualified professional.

[5] https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/actueel/nieuws/2024/04/04/nieuwe-acties-tegen-personeelstekorten-kinderopvang

The programme allows for tailor made implementation at the regional level by regional stakeholders, such as employers, municipalities, Public Employment Service (UWV) and educational institutions (SBB). An evaluation study concludes that regions made various choices in training modules and in practices involved in recruiting, selecting, supporting and providing aftercare for candidates in the programme (Jongerius et al., 2025).[6]

There are three national subsidy options linked to the Childcare Development Path: firstly, a wage cost subsidy for the new group assistants in the period 2024-2026; secondly, a subsidy for guidance and supervision at the workplace; and thirdly a subsidy for compensation of costs for education ('SLIM'[7]).

Results

The initial goals of 200/300 group assistants a year in ECEC has not been achieved. The Ministry cannot give exact numbers, but thinks that the recent adaptations to the programme will have a positive effect in the number of participants. The programme was evaluated in 2024 in five regions (Jongerius et al., 2025). The researchers found large differences between regional approaches. The regions which had already better cooperative structures were faster, and also the involvement of large-scale childcare providers boosted the implementation process. The researchers call for clear governance structures, strong selection of candidates, clear guidelines for employers and person-intensive guidance for the candidates.

The HR advisor from a large ECEC organisation, who was interviewed, was enthusiastic about this programme. 27 locations in her organisation worked with new group assistants: '*I think it is great, also from a social perspective, that people are given the opportunity to get started in this field, even if they do not reach the level of a pedagogical employee*' (interview HR). Based on experiences, she pointed to the success factor of *'extensive guidance and integration into a team, especially during the first six months; if that goes well, it guarantees they'll stay with the organisation for many years to come'* (interview HR).

The Ministry have heard from the sector that, in the first weeks/months, the workloads of other employees will perhaps not be reduced instantly because of the extra supervision tasks, but that '*means that once they've settled in, they can take over the childcare worker's chores… so, preparing meals, doing a few loads of laundry, and tidying up occasionally... this really helps with the workload, but also just plain boosts their job satisfaction, as people can finally give their full attention to the children again'* (interview SZW). The Ministry assumes that ECEC providers will learn from this new way of organising work, and will experience the benefits, so that they continue with recruiting group assistants, even after the subsidies come to an end (interview SZW).

Limitations

The programme had some start-up issues. Many employers in ECEC were not sufficiently informed about the subsidies, and employers felt hindered by the limitation of a maximum of 2 group assistants a year (Jongerius et al., 2025), a condition that was recently changed (interview

[6] Jongerius, M., Van der Vegte, H., Van Renssen, E. (2025). De implementatie van het ontwikkelpad kinderopvang in vijf arbeidsmarktregio's: eindraportage. In opdracht van het Ministerie van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid. Significant Public.

[7] For all sectors in SLIM (so not only in ECEC) a total of €73.8 million was allocated up until 2027. https://www.uitvoeringvanbeleidszw.nl/subsidies-en-regelingen/slim-scholingssubsidie\

SZW). The interviews points to other barriers, such as the difficulties SMEs have in applying for the subsidy, some defects in the regulations and lack of clarity in the financial rules.

CNV points to the lack of capacity among ECEC providers to give the necessary guidance to new group assistants in the workplace, and '*why not provide them with a job-guarantee?*' (interview CNV). The HR managers we interviewed illustrated the extra challenge regarding the target group and the language requirement '*while we have here two refugees from war zones'* (interview HR). KW is prudent in evaluating the results for the sector: '*it is still too early to say if it is a success or not. we simply need more time to make an overall evaluation*'.

In summary, this case can be framed in a positive perspective of low thresholds and easy access of new entrants to the sector but, from a more critical perspective, the programme seems not to offer great guarantees for the workers in (training) guidance and sustainable employability. It might even risk a kind of 'deskilling' of the sector if low diploma requirements become normalised. These limitations of the programme might be related to the very modest role and influence of unions in its creation.

Case 2: Enlargement of part-time contracts in ECEC

Intro

In ECEC, people work an average of 26 hours per week. One third work less than 22 hours a week, one third work between 22-29 hours a week and another one third has an employment contract for more than 29 hours a week. The high proportion of small part-time contracts in ECEC is related to the extreme high majority of female workers in the sector, combined with the traditional gender-related division of working and caring in households in the Netherlands. But also ECEC organisations are used to working with small part-time contracts that give them flexibility. This case will analyse two projects which aimed to support ECEC workers and organisations in extending part-time employment contracts:

1. 'Increasing part-time hours in childcare', financed by the bipartite *Childcare Works!* and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, including the pilot by the HPP foundation in the sector (since 2022).
2. 'More hours works!', financed by the government, in which the Ministry of Social Affair and Employment worked together with the employers' associations, trade unions in ECEC and others.

Goals

These two projects had different goals. The first focused on exploratory research into the extent to which part-time workers would like to work more hours and on elaborating on the associated and barriers in ECEC organisations. Further, it aimed to raising awareness of the importance of the topic in the sector for female workers and employers' staffing policies. The second project formulated an ultimate goal of achieving 'a new part-time culture in which part-timers will work an average of 2.7 hours more per week'. It formulated a target of approximately 90 million extra hours worked per year for the whole Dutch labour market. This programme formulated ambitions in terms of broader social-economic challenges like higher GDP (because unused labour potential would be used), better service quality in the targeted sectors of education, healthcare and childcare, and more economically independent citizens because of greater purchasing power and lower pressure on social provisions.

Description of the case and actors' interests, resources and strategies

Both employers and unions in ECEC agree that larger part-time employment contracts have advantages for all stakeholders in the sector, firstly by providing more labour supply in times of scarcity in the labour market and secondly by promoting financial independence among (female) workers in society. Also, in the context of having more colleagues at the workplace, this can provide workers more scope for employee development, and it might reduce workloads. In addition, offering larger contracts can make the sector more attractive to a group who previously opted less often for childcare because of the tradition of small part-time contracts and to the group who is now leaving due to not having the chance to choose larger employment contracts.

In both projects, the bipartite organisation 'childcare works!' (*kinderovang-werkt!; KW*) plays an important coordinating role. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment subsidises both projects. The new project '*Meer uren werkt!*' is the main responsibility of the Ministry, costing 30-45 million euros over a 10-year period, not just for ECEC but also for the education sector and other care sectors.[8] *Het Potentieel Pakken* (HPP) is another subcontracted stakeholder on the first project. HPP emerged from a McKinsey's practice, and is a not-for-profit organisation aiming for a better position of women in the Dutch labour market, organising cooperation among organisations and promoting initiatives, social campaigns and generating financial funds, all with the mission of improving the position of women in the labour market in all kind of sectors, but especially in the care sector. HPP started its research and consultancy activities in the care sectors, with subsidies from the Ministry of Public Health, Welfare and Sports. Later ECEC followed with a pilot-organisation in ECEC, a large social childcare organisation with around 500 locations and 3,000 employees in many regions of the Netherlands. Two HR advisors in this organisation were interviewed (interview HR). The University of Utrecht is a key actor in the second.

In 2022, before KW decided to cooperate with HPP, it organised a 'feasibility study' that discovered a potential 5% increase in the total working hours in the sector if part-timers worked more hours (interview KW).[9] Based on this assumption, the social partners in KW decided to co-invest in a pilot study. This pilot was commissioned by KW and subsidised by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment.

The second project has a broad scope, with the University of Utrecht investigating the initiation, development and evaluation of six kinds of interventions. The ECEC subscribed for three interventions: (1) restructuring tasks, (2) combining jobs with primary education and (3) good conversation (interview SZW). Proactively, the strategy of KW was to convince the Ministry to be flexible in adapting the set-up of projects to the conditions and practices in ECEC. KW was successful in adopting the previously established sectoral approach 'the good conversation' - that also aimed for more job control and job satisfaction on the part of employees in ECEC.[10] *'This active involvement of the sector itself, means that ECEC appeared to be a bit of a forerunner to other sectors'* (interview KW).

Results

First project

For the organisation that undertook the pilot, the results can be described as a success. Within three months, 19% of the 89 participants had already completed an extension.[11] The approach focused on organising good and personal conversations between managers and individual employees, with the core question: 'if you (potentially) want to work more, what do you need?' Before that, the organisation had started with a survey among employees *'which findings contradicted the assumption of managers that they all know what employees want regarding their number of working hours'* (interview HR). So, through confronting managers in group sessions with these findings, '*the pilot removed already certain beliefs in the organization'* (interview HR). For the pilot-organisation, the pilot was so successful that they rolled out the same approach to other locations in other regions in the

[8] https://www.nationaalgroeifonds.nl/english

[9] In more detail, the study found that (1) one in five employees in day care wanted to work more hours and that in after-school care, this share is even higher (one in three employees); (2) 6% wanted to work less; (3) those who wanted to work more wanted to work a whole extra day: workers in day care wanted to work 7 hours and workers in after-school care wanted to work 9 hours extra; (4) 18% might even leave the sector because of a contract that was too small (https://www.kinderopvang-werkt.nl/sites/fcb_kinderopvang/files/2022-06/Rapport-deeltijdfactor-kinderopvang.pdf)

[10] https://www.kinderopvang-werkt.nl/werkgevers/alles-over-het-goede-gesprek

[11] Proeftuin deeltijdfactor verhogen levert contracturen én enthousiasme op - AZW Info

Netherlands without subsidies. The approach has been secured in the organisation through making 'suitable contract hours' ('*passende contracuren*') a regular topic in all annual individual employees' reviews about performance and (career-) development in the organisation, albeit with some adaptations for organisations' own interests. '*Basically, working hours are depending on the formation you need, right? … the organisation is now also busy with the question 'how can we plan working hours more efficiently?'* (interview HR).

Based on the lessons learned from the pilot, HPP gave a series of workshops to 17 ECEC organisations in the country. The interviewees differed in their evaluation about the impact of the pilot on the whole ECEC sector. According to KW: '*honestly, we were somewhat disappointed that the approach of HPP appeared to be of limited scale ability to the entire sector, especially to SMEs in the sector*' (interview KW). FNV stressed the high costs of the pilot given the limited results in extra working hours (interview FNV1). The Ministry is most positive and evaluated '*the results of HPP as very positive and promising; we heard from the field that quite a few organizations continued on their own with HPP to start their own projects'* (interview SZW).

It is still too early to evaluate the second project.

Limitations

To understand barriers in extending part-time employment contracts, it is important to see the continuing effects of the structure of the Dutch labour market in combination with the distribution of care responsibilities in family households. The persistence of social expectations of gender-related working hours at all levels (politically, in organisations and in families) is very high in the Netherlands, and even higher in the care sector.[12] This context makes the position of FNV ambiguous: '*FNV wants women to become more economically and financially independent, but at the same time caregiving responsibilities are unfairly distributed with men*' (interview FNV1). The underlying social problems are colouring the opinion of FNV: '*the HPP project isn't bad, but it did require a significant investment of time and SZW subsidies, with limited results… results that are too small to call it a success*' (interview FNV1). In line with FNV, CNV points to the important condition of assuring a work-life balance for those that want to work more hours. '*Half of the workers do want to work more, but also have the care for their own children or other care responsibilities in their families'* (interview CNV). And, for many workers, the Dutch tax system requires a big step up in the number of hours before income positions really improve (interviews FNV1/CNV). The CA in ECEC has made small steps in improving the control of workers over their working hours, such as the abolition of the regulation that part-time workers had to be available for work an extra weekly day, and the employee's right to have an annual interview with the employer about the days the employee could work in the context of her/his private life. '*But this was already difficult to reach*' (interview CNV). CNV addressed several times the idea of giving workers in ECEC priority in childcare for their own children, but it is common practice in the sector not to place your own children in daycare where you work (interview CNV). CNV has experienced in ECEC that workers surrender too easily to employers' wishes: '*there is a culture of fear*' (interview CNV). '*Even collecting mail from the union during collective bargaining rounds can be daunting for an employee in this sector, because they might be confronted about it by their manager or team leader'* (interview CNV). The unbalanced labour relations at the workplace in ECEC

[12] https://www.scp.nl/onderzoeksprogramma/de-rol-van-werkgevers-bij-arbeidsvoorwaarden-van-werknemers-in-verschillende-sectoren

seems to be a structural feature. It remains to be seen if the recent campaigns in the sector to promote '*het goede gesprek*' (good conversations) will improve more balanced communication in the workplace.[13]

KW points to the structural barrier among after-school care providers to working with larger contracts because of the opening hours of this type of childcare provision. '*This is a reason to promote combination jobs*' (interview KW). Not every employee seems to want that because '*many employees say, 'Yes, I do want more work, but at my own location*'' (interview HR).

[13] https://www.kinderopvang-werkt.nl/werkgevers/alles-over-het-goede-gesprek

Case 3: Promoting employees' voices in LTC workplaces

Intro

This case study is about the promotion of employees' voices in the context of changes and challenges in the LTC sector. Promoting direct worker participation at the workplace level can contribute to job satisfaction and to sustainable employability, and therefore also to retaining workers in the sector.

Two innovative measures are covered by this case, both interconnected by the idea that 'the employees in LTC must be put first' (NB: in the same year, the CA was given the title 'Client-centric - EMPLOYEE FIRST!', see Tros, 2025:).

- First, the regulation in the CA in LTC, new since 2022, on '*mee-spraak van medewerkers bij voorgenomen veranderingen in de organisatie'* (here translated as: 'Employee Participation in Proposed Changes within the Organisation*')*.
- Secondly, the theatre project in the sectoral programme '*OverMorgen*' (translated as: 'About Tomorrow').

Goals

The trade unions (FNV, CNV, Nu'91, FZB) and the employers' associations (ActiZ, zorgthuisnl) agreed to the new regulation in the sector agreement because '*Employers and trade unions in LTC believe that the knowledge, insights, experiences, and expertise of employees should be utilized to the fullest*' (CAO-VVTJ 2025-2026, p. 37). An important driver of this new regulation was the growing shortages in the labour market in LTC. Through the recommended conversations between managers and workers, employees are given greater attention, aiming for greater employee engagement that ought help to prevent workers leaving the care providers.

The OverMorgen Programme aims to support workers' sustainable employability in the LTC sector. The idea of the programme is that it is not enough to keep individual workers fit for work, but that LTC providers also have to adapt to new perspectives in the sector, like more complex care service delivery, working with fewer staff, more demand for homecare, more use of technology, and establishing new collaborations with higher numbers of informal caregivers (interview OM). LTC organisations are in transition, and they also have to support workers in all these transitions. '*The program contributes to raising awareness among employees... there will come simply many more elderly people who need care... you are already working hard, you can't keep running and working even harder... that simply doesn't work….you have to do things differently* (interview OM). The case study focuses on one of the main activities of the programme: the theatre project entitled 'can I kiss you?' (mag ik je kussen?).[14]

Description of the case and actors' interests, resources and strategies

The new regulation titled '*Employee Participation in Proposed Changes within the Organization'* is formulated as follows: '*You can expect your employer to be genuinely interested in your opinion and to enable you to express your opinion at an early stage when a proposed decision affects the organization and performance of your work or your profession. This applies regardless of your job level: whether you work in a support or staff role, as a Home Helper, Assistant, Caregiver (IG), (district) Nurse in a treatment role, or a Nurse Specialist. The*

[14] https://www.vvtwerktaanmorgen.nl/in-gesprek/theatervoorstelling

strength and effectiveness of the healthcare organization are determined by the collective contribution of all employees' (CAO-VVTJ 2025-2026, p. 37).

The theatre project in the 'OverMorgen' programme is a very innovative way of promoting dialogue among employees and between managers and workers about transitions and demands in the field of work and care delivery in LTC. '*In a previous project that aimed for awareness about these challenges, we showed a lot of numbers (about ageing, budgets, labour market)... well, that goes in one ear and out the other, it doesn't get through at all, so it just doesn't work to just shout things out about how important things are. In the theatre performance, however, we really let people experience that awareness, so that it really sinks in'* (interview OM). The theatre project is targeted to all LTC workers and LTC providers in all regions in the Netherlands. Each performance involves groups of around 150 people, in a small theatre hall with professional decor, professional actors, dance and music. *'It truly resonates, as many people are in tears by the end of the performance'* (interview OM). Immediately after the performance, everyone engages in conversation about questions like 'What touched you, what does it evoke in you, and how could you incorporate this into your work?'. Some employers in LTC have sent all their staff to this and used it as a starting point of a transition process in their own organisation. The programme is financed by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment (SZW) and by the sector fund in LTC, governed by the social partners in the sector. It is agreed in the CA that every employer covered by the CA pays a premium of 0.04%/0.03% of the payroll to finance this sector fund (CAO-VVTJ 2025-2026, p. 43). The budget for the whole 'OverMorgen' programme, including the theatre project, is 15 million euros (interview OM).

In both measures, all collective bargaining parties play a main role. As mentioned before, the first measure is agreed in the CA. The second measure is co-financed and co-ordinated by the sector fund. All collective bargaining parties in LTC are in the board of the 'OverMorgen' programme and help with communication to the workers and employers in LTC (interview OM). A small steering committee is closely involved in the programme, with members from Actiz, Zorgthuisnl and FNV. For example, they were also involved during the phase of reviewing the script for the theatre performance (interview OM). One interconnection is that both measures in this case study have the same personal driving force from the same manager at ActiZ (interview OM).[15] He has been a social connector, whose background is also in the trade union movement (interview OM).

Results

Experiences in employee participation during organisational change

The collective bargaining parties have not (yet) evaluated the regulation about employee participation. '*In recent years, we have been dealing with so many topics in social dialogue that this "topic of participation" has somewhat faded away among the other topics' (interview FNV2).*

As an alternative to sectoral evaluation, I did three interviews in a LTC organisation[16] to discuss the experiences in workers' participation during organisational change, and the role of the new

[15] This manager is no longer working at Actiz, but used to be the author of the CA and a member of the board of the sector fund and of the steering committee in the OM programme (interview OM)

[16] This organisation provides long-term care in the Province of South Holland in the Netherlands (1200 employees, 90% female). It manages six locations for intramural care (nursing homes) and provides homecare in the region. The organisation has Protestant Christian backgrounds and is a private, not-for-profit company.

regulative measure in this area. A first important finding in the organisation, that can be seen as an indirect positive result of the new regulation in the CA, was that the management, partly motivated by the new regulation in the CA, introduced new leadership styles, according to the principles of the 'Rhineland leadership model'. In this model, responsibilities are set as low as possible in the organisation: '*the specialist may say it*' (interview BM). The 'Rhineland model' prescribes '*that you deliver performance together as a team'* and that initiatives for conversations come from both sides. Before this initiative, the organisational structure and culture were more top-down. In that period, employees regularly sighed: '*here comes the middle management again with all those plans that we have to implement again'* (interview BM). An external consultant helped the organisation with this transformation. The management agreed, as a rule, not to make decisions before having heard the 'portfolio holder', someone who has a managerial position at the workplace level. This 'portfolio holder' has to agree (or not) with the managerial proposal after having listened to the team of workers who are involved and the other team leaders. Enjoyable work, lower workloads and a realistic time schedule for implementation are all important considerations for these dialogues (interview BM). The second finding in this organisation was that the new regulation in the CA about employee participation had led to improvements and intensification of the conversation cycles. Before 2022, there were few annual appraisals with the employees. In 2024, the HR department developed guidelines for managers and team leaders to give feedback to employees, and to achieve a higher quality of individual and team conversations. Employees are supported in giving their opinions to managers and giving feedback in workers' teams. It turned out that most of the conversations addressed employees' problems relating to work-life balance, workload, sustainable employability (especially among the older workers), and training and career issues (interview BM). The works council is in favour of these talks, preferably once every six months, to monitor the arrangements agreed in the annual talks. '*We believe that care workers should become more professional and independent, and should develop'* (interview WC). The new regular consultations in the organisation provide a better supportive structure for employees to be guided in their own development.

Evaluation of theatre project

The theatre project met high enthusiasm in the sector. In the beginning, '*there was a huge tsunami of requests, and we had to make an intensive schedule of 2 performances in a day, 5 days a week and during the whole first year, working with a triple cast' . We are, mid 2025, still receiving requests from LTC providers and performances are still going on (*interview OM). In total, up to now, 50,000 workers in LTC have participated in the theatre project, or more than 10% of all workers in LTC.

The 'OverMorgen' programme recently evaluated the theatre project though a survey among workers and LTC providers that had participated in the theatre project. The large majority of the employees agreed that 'the performance feels like a heartening message for employees' and had also 'shown the importance of discussing the future of healthcare' (80-87%). Half of the participating organisations held discussions with employees after the theatre day and incorporated the theme into projects related to the topic (informal care, appropriate care, etc.), to increase awareness of the topic in the context of the organisation. 27% of the organisations saw changing patterns of behaviour among their staff, especially improved listening to clients, family and colleagues, and greater self-reflection on their own situation.

According to the programme manager of 'OverMorgen', the critical success factor for promoting employees' voice in LTC workplaces is 'attention'.' *Attention, that's really the golden word in my opinion...*

paying attention to those doing the work and listening to what they think, and then involving them and giving them a role in realizing those ideas … to try, to do…' (interview OM). *'Really standing alongside people, especially around technology, is crucial, for example, saying, "We're all going to implement this together"* (interview OM)… 'that is more than just giving workers a say' (interview OM).

Limitations

As mentioned earlier, the social partners in the sector have not yet evaluated the new regulation in the CA on employee participation. The interviews with a large LTC provider were mostly positive about practising direct worker participation during organisational change, although they pointed to the importance of a well-coordinated and integrated transformation process at all organisational levels. This condition will only be met in a minority of the LTC organisations in the sector.[17] By implementing and practising a new leadership model, the organisation is trying to secure employee involvement, although the chair of the works council points to the fact that this consultation culture, even in an organisation that embraces innovation, '*does not land well with everyone because they do not understand it, or because too difficult words are used'* (interview WC). Another limitation in the LTC organisation we investigated is that the focus on *direct* worker participation easily leads (unintentionally) to the situation where workers' representatives are overlooked when discussing organisational transformations. '*I would like it if the works council were not only reactive, but also addressed major issues, such as technological developments in relation to personnel*' (Interview BM). The Business Operation Manager acknowledged that management should also give information earlier about plans or ideas, in order to ask the works council for a response. A condition for social dialogue with works councillors, however, is that they need to have a good understanding of what is going on in professions, in work processes and with the employees themselves.

The main limitation of the theatre project in the 'OverMorgen' programme was that LTC providers themselves had to organise the dialogue with their staff and to initiate and co-ordinate organisational transformations. The responsibilities within the theatre project stop at disseminating the theatre performances and the dialogue, directly afterwards, about the perceptions among care workers and about working and organising care in the future. But after that day, people have to continue reflecting and communicating in their organisations without the programme's support. The 'OverMorgen' programme has developed some material for LTC providers to stimulate dialogue at the workplace in the programme titled 'what next'?. A number of the lessons learned from the theatre project are translated in the toolkits, available on the website.[18] But, in the end, dialogue is only limited: '*it has to be about behavioural change... people in healthcare simply cannot work any harder than they already do'* (interview OM).

[17] The interviews were done in an organisation that is a forerunner in technological and social innovation, and is for that reason not representative for the whole LTC sector.

[18] https://hoedan.nl/

General conclusions

Social partners in the Dutch care sector have initiated quite a lot of labour market policies to tackle interrelated problems of job quality and staff shortages during recent years (2022-2025). Beneficial conditions for initiating and implementing such policies are (i) the funding of sector funds, financed by mandatory employer contributions, regulated in the CAs, and (ii) collaborations with and associated subsidies from the state. Also, the separation of 'distributive bargaining', in the context of renewing collective agreements, from integrated bargaining, in the context of labour market policies, seems to be a beneficial factor in broadening the social partners' repertoire of actions aimed at joint strategies for tackling challenges in job quality and labour market scarcity. In this way, social dialogue on joint sector interests are shielded from conflicted negotiations in zero-sum bargaining.

Experiences in ECEC teach us that not all projects that are initiated come to implementation. Fragmentation in the representation of employers and instability in the inclusion of FNV are hindering efficient and effective joint decision making not just in the area of collective bargaining but also in the field of sectoral labour market policies. Nevertheless, there are several programmes ongoing in the sector: the bipartite labour market platform in ECEC, the sector fund in LTC and the supportive ministerial subsidies can bridge the different interests between the social partners.

This report describes three cases to illustrate the broad scope of social partners' repertoire of actions in ECEC and LTC in the Netherlands that might break the negative spiral of low job quality and staff shortages. Each case has its own target group, results and limitations. The first case of 'development path and new group assistants' relates more to just combating labour scarcity and not to job quality, because of the vulnerable position of the new entrants among the ECEC providers. This makes the sustainable employability of the new workers very uncertain. The second case of 'enlargement of part-time contracts in ECEC' has high potential for better job quality <u>and</u> combating staff shortages. The third case is very innovative in promoting workers' participation on job quality and sustainable employability in the sector, which is more and more under pressure from organisational and technological transitions and from limited resources in finance and labour.

All cases share the crucial factor of implementation in practice, in *local* labour markets and at the level of *workplaces*. In all cases, there is a need for investment in supportive structures for dialogue and the guidance of workers at different career stages relating to training, working hours and sustainable employability. Remarkably, social partners in both ECEC and LTC believe that better workers' voice and professional employee participation are good starting points for discussing job quality and sustainable employability. At the same time, these dialogue structures at the levels of providers and workplace levels demand strong frameworks of collective agreements and other regulations.

List of interviews

Case study 1
CNV: union, 3 respondents, ECEC (interview CNV)
FNV: union, ECEC (interview FNV1)
HR advisors (2x) large ECEC provider/pilot HPP (interview HR)
Kinderopvang-werkt!, bipartite platform, Secretary (interview KW)
Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, Direction ECEC (interview SZW)

Case study 2
CNV: union, 3 respondents, ECEC (interview CNV)
FNV: union, ECEC (interview FNV1)
HR advisors (2x) large ECEC provider/pilot HPP (interview HR)
Kinderopvang-werkt!, bipartite platform, Secretary (interview KW)
Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, Direction ECEC (interview SZW)

Case study 3
FNV: union, LTC (interview FNV2)
'OverMorgen', AO VVT, programme manager (interview OM)
Three interviews in a best case LTC organisation:
business operations manager (interview BM)
chair of the works council (interview WC)
head IT department (interview IT)