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The Sharing Economy in the Netherlands: Grounding Public Values in Shared Mobility and Gig Work Platforms

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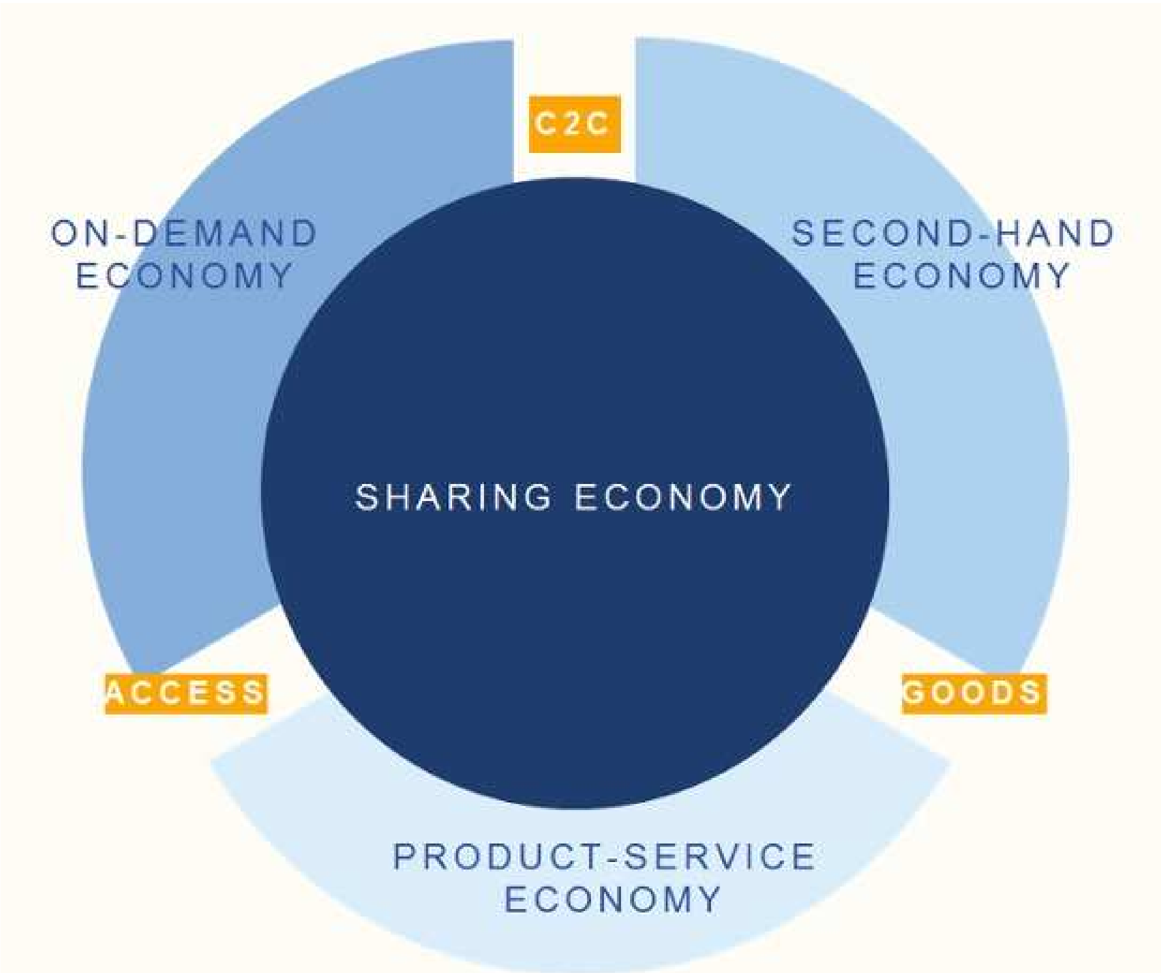
Introduction

The Netherlands has been known as one of the pioneers in the sharing economy. At the beginning of the 2010s, many local initiatives such as Peerby (borrow tools and other things from your neighbours), SnappCar (p2p car-sharing), and Thuisafgehaald (cook for your neighbours) launched that enabled consumers to share underused resources or provide services to each other. This was accompanied by a wide interest from the Dutch media, zooming in on the perceived social and environmental benefits of these platforms. Commercial platforms such as Uber, UberPop and Airbnb followed soon after. After their entrance to the market, the societal debate about the impact of these platforms also started to include the negative consequences. Early on, universities and national research and policy institutes took part in these discussions by providing definitions, frameworks, and analyses. In the last few years, the attention has shifted from the sharing economy to the much broader defined platform economy.

Definitions

Various definitions for the collaborative economy have been used in the debate in the Netherlands. A Dutch term used regularly is “deeleconomie”—a literal translation of sharing economy (delen = to share). Originally, this Dutch term was used to refer to both platforms that allow citizens to make use of each other’s goods, as well as to platforms that offer various kinds of services. In order to discern between informal citizen initiatives and commercial services belonging to the formal economy, Koen Frenken, Toon Meelen, Martijn Arets and Pieter van de Glind narrowed down the definition of the sharing economy as "consumers granting each other temporary access to underutilised physical assets ("idle capacity"), possibly for money" (Frenken et al. 2015). This definition has three elements. First and foremost, the sharing economy concerns transactions between consumers ("consumer-to-consumer," also referred to as "peer-to-peer"). Secondly, the transactions involve "temporary access" to an asset. Thirdly, it involves assets and not services.

Figure 1. Defining the Sharing Economy



Source: Frenken et al. (2015).

Later on in the debate, the term gig economy or "kluseconomie" has been introduced to refer to platforms that provide access to services. In the gig economy, consumers supply services for one another rather than providing access to goods (Rathenau 2017). Frenken (2019) and van Slageren (2019) shared their definitions of the gig economy at the 6th International Workshop on the Sharing Economy in Utrecht 2019: "Freelancers who provide paid services in the form of ex-ante assigned tasks mediated by online platforms." This definition focuses on four features that conceptually distinguish the gig economy from other forms of labour. First, in the gig economy, workers are classified as independent workers. Here the gig economy is different from traditional employment, where the workers are employees. Second, the gig economy differs from online volunteering since there is a monetary remuneration given to the gig worker. Third, since the gig economy handles labour services, it is distinct from sharing economy and second-hand platforms. Finally, supply and demand are mediated by online platforms in the gig economy."

Increasingly, discussions on the sharing or collaborative economy are seen as part of an emerging platform economy. In a report to the Dutch government, TNO (the Netherlands Organization for Applied Scientific Research, a Dutch office for research and consultancy) uses the term "platform" defined as "a (technological) basis for delivering or aggregating services/content from service/content providers to end-users" (TNO 2015). Their examples include sharing economy platforms, but also entertainment and e-commerce platforms such as Netflix, Bol.com, and Facebook.

Key Questions

The sharing economy, as well as the broader defined platform economy, are hotly debated in the media and in politics. Cases such as Airbnb, Deliveroo, and Uber are widely discussed. Part of the discussion focuses on economic opportunities provided by new digital platforms; yet there is also a lot of concern for the ways that public values (various definitions abound, but they usually include quality, affordability, inclusivity, accessibility of particular services) are anchored through these platforms, and what the rise of platforms means for arrangements with regard to the organization of labour in society. Many fears a further flexibilisation of labour and an undermining of workers' rights; others see opportunities for economic growth; others still are interested in platform cooperativism.

One discussion concerns the regulative frameworks that should be applied to platform work. ATR (Adviescollege Toetsing Regeldruk, the Dutch Advisory Board on Regulatory Burden) has investigated these frameworks. Currently, there is a difference in regulation between platform mediated work and more traditional modes of operation. For example, a home cook has fewer requirements to meet than a comparable small restaurant, even if they have about the same number of customers. This is because regulation differs based on the location of activities rather than the activity itself. ATR recommended that regulation should be re-organized based on the actual activities performed rather than the locations or revenue models involved (Bex et al. 2018).

Debates about the sharing economy are also tied to debates about the negative consequences of tourism. Especially Amsterdam has joined the ranks of cities such as Barcelona and Venice, in which local residents feel overwhelmed by masses of tourists who—in the views of these locals—are taking over their city. In Amsterdam, the city council has decided that residents can only rent out their houses and apartments for a maximum of 30 days a year. So far, enforcement of this rule has been problematic as Airbnb does not want to provide data about rentals to the local government. The introduction of sharing bikes by a Chinese company in Amsterdam was also greatly discussed and perceived as an unwanted usurpation of public space for commercial gain. The local government removed the sharing bikes and made the practice at least temporarily illegal. Other cities such as Rotterdam and Breda have allowed bike-sharing schemes to enter their territories.

In some cases, the sharing economy is also seen as an opportunity to increase the sustainability of cities, as well as to improve social capital, although there is not much proof yet to underwrite these claims. In the debate, there is much attention on the positive impact of car-sharing, and the national government has stimulated a so-called "green deal" between three ministries, a number of cities and various car-sharing companies to strive towards the introduction of 100,000 shared cars by 2018 (see also below: developments).

Examples

There are various initiatives to map the collaborative economy in the Netherlands. The research project "Deeleconomie in Nederland" has counted around 250 platforms. A catalogue of 150 of these is available at www.deeleconomieinnederland.nl, and as a spreadsheet is available here: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1IgaTSb1-sTU4DEHKiTNGUb9PN-5yQ4u6rTbGkNZR6_M/edit#gid=0

Peerby

It was one of the first sharing economy platforms to receive widespread media attention. It was founded in 2012 and provided citizens with the opportunity to borough tools and other goods from each other. In 2019, the site is still operational and has now added rental services.

SnappCar

It is a Dutch platform for p2p car-sharing. Over the years, it has expanded to Denmark, Germany, and Sweden. It has recently received investment from Europcar and Tango—a subsidiary of oil company Q8. In 2019, it reported 700,000 users across Europe. Recently, it closed deals with private lease companies that provide discounts when customers make their leased cars available through the SnappCar platform.

Thuisafgehaald

It was founded in 2012 and is a platform through which "home cooks" can offer meals to customers. Yearly, the platform serves around 50,000 meals, offered by 11,500 cooks. The initiative presents itself as a social enterprise. One of its focus areas is the delivery of meals to people that due to age or health issues, are not able to cook for themselves. The platform pairs them with neighbours that are willing to provide them meals in exchange for a small remuneration.

Gearbooker

It was founded in 2017 and is aimed at creative industry professionals. The platform allows them to rent out cameras, lenses, studios, drones, and other equipment for creative work.

Gebiedonline

Although not part of the sharing economy in the narrow sense, this neighbourhood platform is an interesting initiative. It provides a white-label CMS for local communities that want to run a neighbourhood platform for sharing resources, discussing future developments, the exchange of information and collaborative practices. Gebiedonline is run as cooperation. Members decide collectively about the future development of the platform and remain owners of all their own data. As such, it wants to provide an alternative for commercial and proprietary platforms such as Nextdoor.

Context

The Netherlands have seen a number of legal struggles and debates between local and national governments and sharing economy platforms. Most of these concern discussions around Uber and Airbnb. Uber introduced the p2p service UberPOP in the Netherlands in 2014, claiming it did not need to comply with taxi regulations, as the drivers were private individuals offering a peer-2-peer service. After it was fined several times, the company shut down the service in 2015 and, in the end, received a 2,3 million EUR fine for its illegal activities in 2019. Uber made headlines again in early 2019 after a number of deadly accidents were caused by Uber drivers. Critics of the company claimed that Uber's business model stimulates drivers to make long hours on the road, cruising around the city looking for a fare and thus compromising safety. In reaction, the city of Amsterdam and Uber started discussions in the Uber Taskforce, leading to a social charter in which Uber pledges to improve safety, amongst others, by introducing in the future facial recognition technologies to make sure drivers do not mislead systems that check on maximum driving times. Uber will also start sharing data with the city of Amsterdam to make the practices of its drivers more transparent.

Another hot topic in the Netherlands is the regulation of Airbnb. Over the years, the city of Amsterdam has made several agreements with Airbnb. Most recently, the city has limited the maximum rental period to 30 days per year, and renters are obliged to register their rental with the city. However, rental platforms were not found willing to sign another agreement with the city to enforce the rule on their platforms. After much discussion, the national government has now proposed a new law to become effective in July 2020. The law requires renters to register their rentals with local governments but does not foresee mandatory enforcement of the rules by platform companies. Representatives of the four largest cities in the Netherlands have declared that for that reason, they are disappointed by the law.

Apart from these legal battles, in some cities, the sharing economy is also seen as an opportunity to brand the city and stimulate local innovation. The city of Amsterdam, for instance, also promotes itself as a European capital of innovation that is based on the "Amsterdam approach." This means an approach to smart cities that is not based on technology per se but rather seeks alliances with civil society and is organized around societal challenges. In this framework, the city has adopted an action plan for the sharing economy that consists of five main actions: Stimulating the sharing economy; Leading by example; sharing economy for all Amsterdam citizens; Rules and regulations; Putting Amsterdam on the map as a Sharing City. In Amsterdam, this programme so far has led to a small number of experiments.

All in all, the discussion on platform economy was not very centralized in the Netherlands, and stakeholders did not address issues together. A few dilemmas are recurring, especially because parties involved rather avoid these common topics. Martijn Arets of the Utrecht University organized in 2019 three private workshops about the platform economy to bring all stakeholders together. He invited up to 40 stakeholders for three workshops. Platforms, trade unions, academics, governments, and businesses are looking for solutions to dilemmas they have never really addressed together. During these sessions, trade unions such as FNV, platforms such as Roamler and Deliveroo and huge organizations such as TNO and KPMG were present. Representatives of KPMG, the Dutch Ministry of Economics and Climate and the UvA shared their insights.

Developments

According to Rathenau Institute, in 2017, “23% of the Dutch population participated in the sharing economy in 2016, compared with 6% in 2013.”

A number of developments can be noted in the Netherlands. First, there is a broad interest in the provision of mobility through platforms. Various car-sharing schemes have become active in the Netherlands (e.g., Car2Go, Greenwheels), signalling a partial shift from ownership to mobility-as-a-service. The car-sharing platform SnappCar has received investments from Europcar and Tango (part of oil company Q8).

In 2017, a “Green Deal” about car-sharing was signed by seven municipalities and 33 companies from different branches—insurers, governments, providers of sub-concepts, environmental organizations, and interest groups—and the ministries of Economic Affairs and Infrastructure and Environment. The Green Deal parties want to promote the benefits of car-sharing and accelerate growth. Through more intensive collaboration, joint communication strategy and the removal of obstacles, growth opportunities are better utilised. Although the initial target of 100,000 shared cars was not achieved in 2018, the number of shared cars has more than doubled from 16,617 in 2015 to 41,000 in 2018. The awareness of car-sharing has also increased, and car-sharing has been put on the agenda by local and national policymakers. There is now a constructive dialogue between municipalities and suppliers of shared cars, and there is an extensive network of parties active in car-sharing.

The interest in car-sharing is accompanied by the emergence of experiments around mobility-as-a-service that includes various modalities of transport in a single platform. An example is a Dutch start-up Tranzer.com. The Finnish start-up Whim has also announced plans to launch its service in Amsterdam. In this domain, a shift can be noticed towards private leasing. For instance, Swapfiets has grown into a widely popular platform through which consumers lease a bike for permanent private use.

Real estate developers and architects have also taken an interest in the development of sharing schemes as part of the properties they are developing. Some have started to experiment with car-sharing; others are speculating about offering an array of collectively shared services and resources for their future residents.

In another domain, the Netherlands has seen an uptake in the interest of energy cooperatives. From 2015 to 2019, the number of local energy cooperatives grew from 248 to 582, now servicing close to a quarter-million households (Schwenke 2019).

Issues

In general, the debate in the Netherlands had shifted from the sharing economy in a narrow sense to the broader defined platform economy. Various studies have pointed out the necessity to focus on public values in platform development and regulation. Debates have centred amongst others on transparency and accountability of platforms, data ownership and data portability, and issues related to algorithmic governance in platforms and the need for algorithmic transparency.

Other Major Players

The main players in the Netherlands are:

Utrecht University

Where researchers have addressed the sharing and gig economy in a number of research projects. The university has also organized several workshops that brought together various players in the field.

The Rathenau Institute

It is a national organization supporting the formation of public and political opinions on socially relevant aspects of science and technology. They have received various reports on the sharing economy and related issues in the last few years.

The VNG

The Association of Dutch municipalities was following the developments in sharing economy and published a report in 2017 which tries to create awareness at municipalities of the conditions to concern when working together with a sharing platform.

Martijn Arets

It is an independent consultant publishing a widely read weekly letter on the sharing economy in both Dutch and English.

ShareNL (www.sharenl.nl)

It is an organization that drives the debate and acceptance of the sharing economy in the Netherlands and beyond. They have launched the concept (and network) of the “Sharing City” that cities worldwide can subscribe to (Sharenl.nl).

Deeleconomie in Nederland

www.deeleconomieinnederland.nl is another group that maps initiatives, does research and consultancy on the topic.

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