



institutional trust, careful consideration must be given to the nuances and sub-groups. Finally, it examines the lessons learned for the water sector?

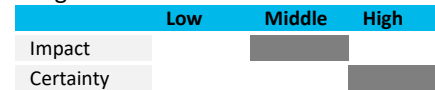
Institutional Trust

This trend alert looks at the topic of institutional trust. The Netherlands has traditionally been considered a relatively stable ‘high-trust society’ when looking at institutional trust. But why has there been a decline since the 1990s? At the same time, there have been volatile fluctuations in the trust citizens have for institutions over the last 18 months during the corona pandemic.

This two-fold trend alert examines the trend of institutional trust on both a long-term timeline and a short term timelines, i.e. what happens in times of crisis. More importantly, it explores how drivers such as the shift in the attitude of the average citizen and the spread of disinformation influences the level of trust citizens have in political and scientific institutions. And when looking at

Consequences for you

Long – term



Short-term (times of crises)



(Image 1, Executive Forum, 2021)



Trend description and background

What is institutional trust?

Traditionally, institutions are usually defined to include bodies such as the House of Representatives, the European Union, civil servants, the military, banks, the legal system, and large companies. Such institutions tend to be larger organisations and rather traditional forms of governance (Anheier & Isar, 2007). If we take a closer look, the Dutch water sector is made up of various institutions including that of drinking water companies, waterboards, various government ministries, provinces, municipalities, VEWIN, and knowledge institutes such as KWR.

Institutions play an important role in being part of the foundation and architecture for a modern, healthy, and democratic constitutional state. Its practical application has led to the branching and development of various organisations addressing the political, economic, social, and cultural needs of citizens. The various forms in which institutions address and deliver these needs have very direct consequences for the general public, and there is a correlation between their performance and the level of trust citizens have for institutions.

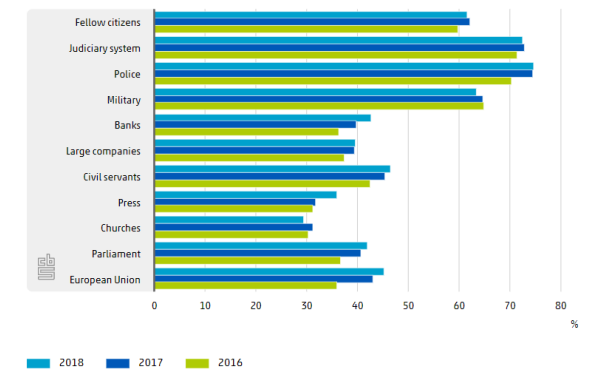
But what exactly is meant by *trust*? The term is a nuanced concept and can differ per context. In this trend alert, trust in institutions implies that the agents of institutions are regarded as competent, credible, and likely to act in the interest of those being asked. Moreover, that citizens trust these agents and related institutions (Levi, 1998). The importance of trust for institutions are essential. If citizens begin questioning or doubting for example every policy that a government is executing, it can impede democratic consensus. Governments with more public support usually function more smoothly and effectively than those with less public trust (Bovens & Wille, 2008).

Setting the scene

For decades the Netherlands has sat in the comfortable position of being considered a relatively 'high-trust society' within a global context (Dekker & de Hart, 2002). Generally speaking, and according to the CBS, the level of trust in the judiciary, the military, large companies, and the church remain relatively stable as seen in figure 1 (CBS, 2019).

And whilst it has been considered relatively stable when placing it against a global context - within the Netherlands itself, trust has gradually been decreasing. The Netherlands remained a high-trust society and exhibited growing confidence in its institutions from the early 1970s

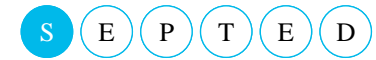
Social trust levels, population aged 15 years and over



(Figure 1, CBS, 2019)

up to the late 1990s' – not following international trends where trust was on the decline (Hendriks, 2009). In 1997, 66% of the population reported having trust in the national parliament, but by 2004 that had dropped by 21% to 45% (Hendriks, 2009). And whilst between the years of 1997 and 2004 there was a significant decrease in trust, since 2004 it has continued to gradually decrease.

But *why* are we seeing this long-term decline in institutional trust in the Netherlands? According to Bovens and Wille (2008) economic outlooks and political crises do not explain the trend of more structural and



gradual trends with regards to institutional trust, which occur more likely over a longer period. These trends tend to not have single root cause (Dalton, 2004). Rather, these long-term trends of institutional trust are best explained by various causes which include rising expectations of citizens, increasing diversity of issue demands, and a more critical voice of certain interests in contemporary debates (Bovens & Wille, 2008). Whereby, Hendriks argues that this gradual decline in trust is caused by underlying systemic and structural drivers. This includes a shift in the attitudes and expectations of the average citizen and an increase of what is known as the “risk society”.

Consensus democracy model: a shift in the average citizen

The consensus model has long been the dominant decision-making model in the Netherlands notably that in the political sphere (Dahl, 2000). Whereby, joint consultation among representative of various sections of society has traditionally been the dominant manner of collective decision-making (Hendriks, 2014). The core quality of consensus democracy is pragmatic collaboration and attempting to reach agreement through careful deliberation (Hendriks, 2009).

At the same time, this form of democracy calls for a specific type of leadership and citizenship. Leadership

being that of ‘regency’; not grand, but considered as being careful and thorough (Daalder, 1995; Te Velde, 2002). The individuals in such institutional dealing rooms reach compromises in what is described as pragmatic and de-politicised. At the same time, the characteristic of the average citizen within a consensus democracy, is seen as compliant and demonstrates a pattern of observation with occasional participation (Hendriks, 2014).

Yet, in more recent decades a shift has taken place. Citizens are more observant of their representatives and decision-making is increasingly considered as being too paternalistic and patronizing (van Gunsteren, 1992; Van den Brink, 2002). In turn, citizens are keen to play a more crucial role during the decision-making process and want to have more of a say.

This can also be seen in the water sector. There is a growing interest in citizen science (CS) projects within the Netherlands. According to experts, one of the reasons for the growth in citizen science is driven by a “legitimacy crisis” of science alongside the erosion of authority and expert knowledge. Citizens have been questioning why their knowledge would be inferior to an expert. Citizen science, in their opinion, can address these issues (Brouwer et al., 2018, p.283). And whilst there has been a shift in the average citizen, globalisation and complex

networks have also contributed to the decline in intuitional trust.

Risk society: globalisation and complex networks

In its most basic form, the idea of a risk society coined by sociologist Ulrich Beck involves the recognition that the risks involved in the production of many goods have risen to such a level that risk rather than material scarcity has now become the central worry of contemporary society. It is not that industrial society produced no risks, but rather that the nature of current risks tends to become more visible and worrisome as a more affluent society demands a better quality of life (Beck, 1992; Fischer, 1998). Hendriks (2014) adds that the risk society is a result of developments related to transport and communication technologies. This notion of “deterritorialization” has been on the increase - a process which has altered the world of clearly defined units into one of interconnected and complex systems (Castells, 1996). The further expansion of globalisation, migration, multiculturalization, and multimediatization are expansions which have also acted as a catalyst for new questions, anxieties, and uncertainties (Elchardus, 2002). The Netherlands had been able to maintain the illusion of “manageability” and cherished its self-image and order for many years (Boutellier, 2002). However, the rise of new networks, dynamics and events has disrupted the



illusion of the Netherlands being an oasis of security and peace (Hendriks, 2014).

Arguably a less traditional, hierarchal, and paternalistic form of governance may be effective. As mentioned above, citizen science projects are an example which may prove useful in enabling citizens to understand how water management functions and by whom – shedding light on this awareness gap and giving insight on the complexities which are not easily communicated (OECD, 2014).

Short term volatility

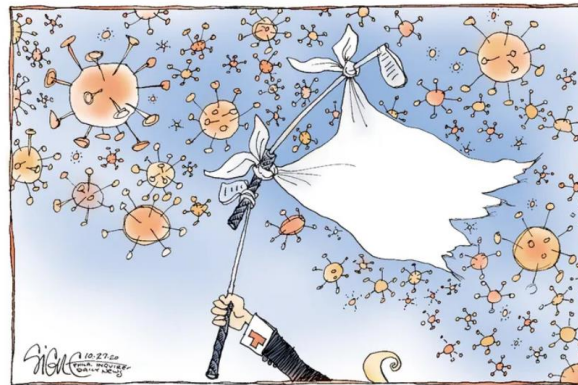
And whilst we are seeing a long-term trend decline in institutional trust in the Netherlands, in times of crisis, we see much more volatile fluctuations in levels of trust. COVID-19 has been an interesting event to explore these fluctuations and the various drivers which influence them.

The “Coronarally”

What we saw at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis was a significant increase in trust for political institutions, in April 2020 this stood at over 70% - a record high since the 2008 financial crisis (Miltenburg et al., 2021).

But why the sudden increase in trust for political institutions? According to the political scientist John

Mueller, the reason for the increase is due to a trend known as the rally ‘round the flag’ effect. During events which are of an international nature, where a country and their political leaders play an active role, and the event is specific, dramatic, and receives a lot of attention – trust in political institutions significantly increases within a short period of time. Research shows this with terrorist related events such as 9/11, but also with natural disasters.



Trump raising the flag on COVID-19 (Image 2, Wilkinson, 2020)

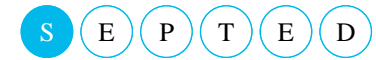
This effect in times of COVID-19 has been termed as the “Coronarally”. In these uncertain and anxious times, citizens felt that the Dutch government demonstrated good leadership and solidarity, were transparent in their approach, and compared to other countries satisfied with the manner of which the Dutch government was handling

the crisis. Moreover, that politicians were competent and were well intended (Miltenburg et al., 2021).

This positive view was short-lived. As the year progressed and COVID-19 proceeded, trust decreased from over 70% in April 2020 to 44% a year later in political institutions. This sharp decrease is linked to the rise in infection rates, growing anxiety and fears regarding future and economic repercussions, and governmental response regarding COVID-19 related measures being critiqued as too slow and at times not logical (Miltenburg et al., 2021). This surmounting to citizens having an overall pessimistic view of institutions.

The rapid rise and fall of institutional trust in the corona crisis is by no means unique. Indeed, whilst research highlights that a crisis can increase the trust that people have in institutions, this increase tends to be short-lived. Previous studies related to the rally ‘round the flag’ effect showed that these high figures in institutional trust return to the previous levels (Broek-Honingh van den et al., 2021). This fluctuation in trust is also seen in the context of the pandemic.

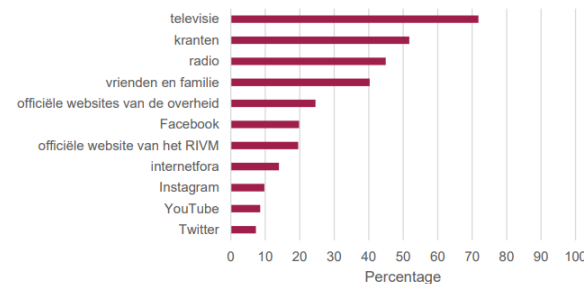
The rally round the flag effect does show that at the beginning of a crisis institutional trust surges, but this is only a short-lived effect. One of the reasons for the decrease in trust is related to the spread of information



and disinformation during times of crisis. COVID-19 witnessed a wave of information of unproven medical treatments, prevention techniques and other information flooding the internet and being disseminated by users whose concerns are reinforced by the overwhelming volume of conflicting information (OECD, 2020). The World Health Organisation (WHO) has stated that the fight against the “infodemic” is high priority in managing the COVID-19 pandemic (OECD, 2020).

‘Infodemics’

The media has played an important role in informing the public about the pandemic from COVID-19 related measures, mutation developments, to the vaccine - all underpinned by medical science. Statistics (figure 2) show that 72% of the public make daily or weekly use of the T.V. for information relating to COVID-19, followed by 52% using newspapers, 45% the radio, and 40% indicated that they use family and friends (Broek-Honingh van den et al., 2021)



(Figure 2, Broek-Honingh van et al., 2021)

However, a phenomenon during a crisis’ and times of uncertainty is the need for more information and this increases the impact of the media discourse (David & Sommerland, 2021). As described by Anwar et al., (2020) this can lead to an “infodemic” referring to a rapid and far reaching spread of both accurate and inaccurate information about a disease. In the pandemic we have seen that facts have been mixed with rumours, and it becomes difficult to learn vital information about an issue (Anwar et al., 2020). This inflated because of the 24 hour news cycle, whereby pressure for creating content which leaves little time for fact-checking, leading to incidences where wrong (or made up) information has dominated news headlines. And on top of that, social media and its underlying technologies mean that ‘facts’ and information are no longer just spread through journalists and articles, but any person with a social media account (KWR, 2017).

The impact of this media landscape amidst a pandemic, has been detrimental at times for the science community and the trust that citizens have for scientific institutions. Any person with a social media account is able to post and share their views and opinions. However, when adding public figures such as Thierry Baudet or organisations such as “Viruswaarheid” to the mix who carry a large public and media following. Their questionable views have often led to huge waves of media exposure in the form of dozens of news articles, blogs, interviews, documentaries and social media trends critiquing the government and the scientific community. This wave of information and disinformation has had significant impact on the trust that citizens have for not only public, but also scientific institutions.

Trust in scientific institutions

In a recent report from the Rathenau Institute, a national survey highlighted an increase in trust for scientific institutions. In 2018, the trust citizens had in scientific institutions stood at 7, 07 (out of 10) and in 2021 this stands at 7, 42 (Broek-Honingh van den et al., 2021). Moreover, 40% of the Dutch public stated that their level of trust was influenced by COVID-19. Interestingly, 24% of the respondents believe that the fast-paced development of the vaccine increased their trust in scientific



institutions. At the same time, 16% of the respondents stated that their trust decreased also due to the speed of which the vaccines were developed. Highlighting concern relating to the reliability of the vaccine, and the mixed information and lack of clarity surrounding its development (Broek-Honingh van den et al., 2021).

And whilst statistics give a general perspective on the trust that citizens have for scientific institutions. COVID-19 has also been an interesting event to explore the more nuanced relationship of science and citizens. Whilst the pandemic has revealed the extent to which science underpins a country's national security, the novelty and uncertainty surrounding the virus has been a breeding ground for much anxiety within the public sphere. In the Netherlands, alongside the government, scientific institutions such as the RIVM and OMT have played an instrumental role in managing the pandemic.

And whilst dozens of experts and specialists have been working to coordinate this crisis, there has been backlash relating to the critique of various medical underpinnings – from COVID-19 social distancing measures to vaccine related death incidences. The issue lies with this false paradigm of thought, that the truth in a debate lies somewhere in the middle.

As discussed in a previous trend alert on “Post-Fact Societies” during COVID-19 this issue on ‘truth’ was frequently seen in the discussion surrounding vaccines. Scientific institutes such as the RIVM would have to continuously enter discussions with “concerned mothers” about vaccines (notably that on talk shows). The underlying idea was that the truth ultimately lay somewhere in the middle of both discussions, that both sides were right. However, from a scientific stance and facts related to vaccines – this was not the truth. The scientific evidence weighs heavily on the RIVM side of the discussion. Yet, public discussions and debates do not clarify this, and a distorted view of the truth is therefore delivered to the public.

Sub-groups

Whilst statistics can give a general view of institutional trust, if we take a closer look at sub-groups a more nuanced picture can be given of institutional trust.

If we take a closer look at demographics, we see other trends in the statistics. According to the CBS, one of the most significant factors in regard to institutional trust is related to education. The higher the education level, the more trustful citizens are, in almost a decade this has not changed. In 2018, in a social survey regarding social trust, 43% of people with only a primary school education

trusted their fellow citizens. Whilst citizens with a university education stood at 84%. According to the CBS, similar trends were also seen with regard to trust in (political) institutions (CBS, 2019).

This is also seen with regards to trust in science, whereby recent national surveys showed that respondents with a higher education or social status have a significantly higher level of trust in science – rating it a 7, 91 out of 10. Whilst respondents with a lower education indicated a lower level of trust in science, giving a score of 6, 6 (Broek-Honingh van den et al., 2021).

Relevance

This trend alert focused on the trend of institutional trust on both a long term perspective and within a shorter time frame, more specifically that of a crisis. Overall, Dutch citizens are experiencing a long term decline in trust for its institutions. However, in times of crisis as witnessed during COVID-19 there can be volatile fluctuations within a relatively short time period. And whilst generally speaking we have been able to identify various factors which attributed to these trends, a more nuanced picture of institutional trust can be seen within sub-groups within the Netherlands.



At the same time, this trend alert mostly focused on the trust citizens have for political and scientific institutions. It can be argued that the Dutch water sector shares similar characteristics to these institutions. Therefore, the lessons learned from this trend alert can also be applicable for the Dutch water sector context.

If we look at the Dutch water sector, in a large scale questionnaire conducted in the Netherlands and Flanders results relating to institutional trust showed that citizens gave a 7,1 (out of 10) for drinking water companies (Brouwer & Sjerps, 2018). To put that in to context, the television received a 6, 3, newspapers 6, 3, judicial system 6, 5, businesses 5, 9 and the government a 5, 9. Therefore, the drinking water companies are the institution which scored highest in trust by citizens.

Relationship between the level of concern regarding the quality of tap water and the level of trust in a drinking water company

Level of concern regarding quality of tap water	Average grade in trust for drinking water company
A lot	6.0
Some what	6.8
Not too much	7.2
None	7.6
I don't know	6.7

**Customers who had concerns over drinking water quality have significantly less trust in a drinking water company*

(Spearman, p<0,-5)

(Figure 3, Brouwer et al., 2019)

With a longer term perspective in mind, an example of why trust is so important for the water sector relates to water reuse, alternative water sources, recycling technologies. Research has shown that simply improving public knowledge of water reuse and recycling technologies, and its associated environmental benefits are not enough for securing acceptance. Instead, the perception of risk (especially health risk) associated with the use of recycled water have been an important factor which shapes the response of reuse technologies. Researchers increasingly see the importance regarding the relationship between the institutions that oversee reuse schemes.

Arguing that higher levels of trust are correlated with lower perceptions of risk, which in turn increases the likelihood of acceptance of water reuse and recycling technologies (Brouwer et al., 2017).

One of the concluding and overarching observations with regards to institutional trust on a short-term perspective (or in times of crisis) is that it is very unpredictable and uncertain as to when it will happen. However, in the event that it does happen, the volatile fluctuations in institutional trust have a high impact on society compared to institutional trust on the long term. Whereby, institutional trust on a longer term perspective characterised by a more gradual decline or fluctuation is likely to happen. However, the impact of this sits on the medium scale. Below are some drivers to address these high and medium scale impacts.

In a crisis, an important driver with regards to transparency is communication. Reports relating to citizen perspectives highlighted that transparency and clarity with regards to strategy, management, and decisions were important factors determining the level of trust citizens had for institutions. In times of crisis, the water sector would do well in addressing these aspects sufficiently through strategic communication plans.



Citizens have in recent years become more critical of scientific evidence and have questioned scientific legitimacy, questioning the expertise of scientists. This trend with relation to scientific institutions is even more pronounced during a crisis – as witnessed with COVID-19.

Arguably, the media is a crucial driver in this aspect. This is not only in relation to public figures and influencers, who are able to share messages through various media channels but have also amassed an arguably loyal followings. In the context of water, this can have detrimental effects if such people were to express dissatisfaction with the quality or quantity of water in the Netherlands. Additionally, it is important to be aware that debates relating to complex issues are not always presented in a representative manner within the water sector. That the ‘truth’ does not lie somewhere in the middle between the opinion of a concerned mother and information based on hundreds of scientific articles. It is important that the water sector is adequately prepared for these types of public relation issues in times of crisis.

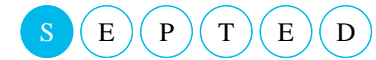
It is not only important, that the water sector is prepared from a communications perspective to handle these specific type of public relations issues. But at the same time, it is also a signal for transparency that citizens should become more informed and knowledgeable about

the facts (and complexities) related to water management and systems in the Netherlands.

Transparency

Institutional trust encompasses complex dynamics, therefore speculating possible solutions for maintaining or increasing trust does not come one-fold. However, if we look at one of overarching ideas – being more transparent can have various benefits. In the water sector sharing information and knowledge is one way of being more transparent, and as mentioned previously this is through clear and effective communication in times of crisis.

However, transparency is also important in general and over the long term. One way in which transparency can be increased within the water sector on the long term is through citizen science projects. Considering the effects in the changing attitude and perspective of citizens and living within a post-fact society, citizen science is an interesting avenue to explore. The opportunity for citizens to participate in projects within the water sector not only plays an informative role, but also gives the water sector the opportunity to co-create new knowledge and innovation (Brouwer et al., 2018).



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