

# Fuel to the fire? The sensemaking of volunteer firefighters and public managers in the context of public reform

The sensemaking of volunteer firefighters

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to advance ongoing debates on the organizational impact of wider public sector reform in the field of organizational change management by presenting an analysis the regionalization of the fire service in the Netherlands. How regionalization has impacted the work floor of local fire stations, where the workplace majority comprises volunteers, requires further empirical investigation.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The authors apply an interpretive approach and qualitative methodology to study how volunteer firefighters and public management make sense of public reform and the ensuing organizational change.

**Findings** – Findings indicate that while the fire service has professionalized, notable tensions have emerged between public management and volunteers, the regional and local level of fire service and between professionalism and volunteerism which are problematised in the paper.

**Originality/value** – The originality of the paper is found in the insight it provides in the sensemaking of volunteer firefighters and public managers of diverse of change regions and fire stations during the regionalization process by applying an emergent perspective to change.

**Keywords** Sensemaking, Organizational change, Volunteers, Public reform

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

On May 12, 2000, in the city of Enschede, the Netherlands, a firework storehouse exploded wounding 950 and killing 23 people and destroying over 200 homes. This catastrophe, termed “the Enschede firework disaster,” was the biggest explosion in the nation since the Second World War. Not much later during the 2000–2001 New Year transition, the interior of a cafe caught fire in Volendam, wounding 241 and killing 14 people, due to inadequate safety measures. These incidents, among others, prompted the Dutch government to take serious action to advance its emergency preparedness, and crisis management and prevention. The Dutch fire service was seen as too fragmented as most fire stations operated independently and were managed by municipal authorities due to their strong local basis (Scholtens, 2008). Therefore, a governmental inquiry resulted in the realization that the local-oriented management structure of local fire stations was insufficiently capable and equipped to counter crises for which multidisciplinary operation, coordination, response and learning are needed.



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Consequentially, in 2010, the “Safety Regions Act” was passed in the Netherlands, which led to the establishment of 25 safety regions where fire service, medical assistance and crisis and disaster management are regionalized and integrated as multidisciplinary actors. As a result, local fire stations have been reorganized and sometimes fused or closed, and their coverage territories, specialisms and materials have been redistributed. Moreover, new public management (NPM) has been appointed at the regional level to take charge in order to enhance professionalism, uniformity, efficiency and decrease costs, among other purposes (Justice, 2013). While there is a legitimate urgency to bring about such public reform to advance crisis and disaster management (Boin *et al.*, 2016) and multidisciplinary operation and coordination (Boersma *et al.*, 2012), how this process has translated to the work floor of local fire stations in the Netherlands requires further empirical investigation. Indeed, “how change recipients make sense of and evaluate change is a critical aspect of understanding how planned organizational change unfolds” (Jacobs and Keegan, 2018, p. 87).

It is clear that the main purpose of public reform in the case of Dutch fire service regionalization is the professionalization of its workforce. Therefore, gaining a better understanding of how public reform impacts local fire stations and their staff is invaluable, particularly volunteers because they comprise approximately 70 percent of the total workforce of the Dutch fire service (Scholtens, 2008). Volunteerism here does not mean a rigid opposition to full-time firefighters since both subgroups must meet the same training standards and professional competences. Still, volunteers receive a relatively small reimbursement (per deployment) compared to their salaried colleagues, meaning that they might make sense of reform differently. The scant yet extant research on the regionalization of the fire department in the Netherlands claims that it has become increasingly difficult to retain volunteers, as public reform takes its toll on their workplace motivation, well-being and satisfaction (Kerstholt *et al.*, 2013). While public reform may impact the work spirit of paid professionals, the impact on volunteers might be even more profound as their desire to join the fire service draws almost exclusively on intrinsic motivation (Bruno and Fiorillo, 2012). It is therefore necessary to investigate how both volunteer and salaried professionals make sense of public reform.

Beyond the fire service, though volunteers in public and non-profit organizations have been the subject of much scholarly attention, focusing on recruitment, retention and identity for example (e.g. Jamison, 2003; McBride and Lee, 2012; Warburton *et al.*, 2018; Nesbit *et al.*, 2018), there is less research on how volunteers make sense of organizational change resulting from wider public reform. The wider literature on public reform in the field of public administration (e.g. Ackroyd, 1995; Schedler *et al.*, 2000; Skålén, 2004; Horton, 2006) reveals limited empirical evidence on what the ensuing organizational change means for the work floor. This is needed to show how public reform affects the perceptions, activities and identities of workers, let alone volunteers (Fernandez and Rainey, 2006; Kuipers *et al.*, 2014). Moreover, literature in the critical management tradition of organization science has warned that public reform initiatives can create or widen chasms between management and the work floor and pose a threat to professional identity and organizational culture, which raises concerns about the implementation, translation and impact of public reform (Thomas and Davies, 2005; Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2016). In light of the above, we formulate the following research question:

*RQ1.* How do volunteer firefighters and public managers make sense of public reform – i.e. the regionalization of the fire department – in the Netherlands?

We focus on sensemaking to show how volunteers attribute meaning to, reflect on, and attempt to understand their experience of regionalization, as a novel, ambiguous and disruptive phenomenon (Weick, 1993; Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). To provide a balanced perspective, we subsequently inquire how public managers, i.e.

station commanders (the heads of local fire stations) and regional managers (heads of safety regions) reflect on the regionalization process. We make this hierarchical distinction because position and authority may have important implications for how public reform is translated to the work floor and made sense of. By answering these queries, our paper offers a contribution in two main ways. From a societal standpoint, we provide empirical evidence regarding volunteer retention, well-being, motivation and satisfaction among the Dutch fire service (Kerstholt *et al.*, 2013), permitting us to draw further conclusions and offer pragmatic advice. From a theoretical standpoint, we build theory on the social and cultural implications and (un)intended consequences of public reform and organizational change. Namely, by adopting a critical management perspective on organizational change, we found that public reform with a NPM ethic can seriously threaten the culture, identity and autonomy of local organizations and volunteers. In line with this, we agree with Kelman (2005) who claims the field of public administration would benefit from a stronger connection to organization theory which we provide in the paper.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. First, we link the regionalization of the Dutch fire department to literature on public reform and NPM. We then draw from organizational change theory in the critical management tradition to conceptualize change resulting from public reform, after which volunteers are distinguished as a unique workforce and relevant theme in this research. In the methods section, we provide a case description, research operationalization and data analysis. In the findings we first describe the context of regionalization, after which we discuss the sensemaking of volunteer firefighters, followed by the sensemaking of public regional managers and station commanders for a balanced account. We then put change into perspective by elaborating on the local embeddedness of fire stations, the relationship between volunteers and regional public managers and between volunteers and station commanders. In the discussion, we debate public reform and emphasize the local embeddedness, translation and implication for volunteers. Finally, we offer conclusions, research contributions and suggestions for further research.

## Theoretical framework

### *Public reform and new public management*

As mentioned in the introduction, the Dutch fire department's regionalization has been actualized via the establishment 25 safety regions that are run by a new layer of regional public managers who implement organizational changes, having (un)intended consequences for local fire stations and their staff. The public reform of regionalization contains elements of NPM – particularly bureaucratization, budget cuts, performance measurement and the introduction of new managerial layers (Boon and Verhoest, 2018; Worrall *et al.*, 2000; Fernandez and Rainey, 2006; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011). Theoretical underpinnings of the NPM doctrine reveal the application of economic, rationalistic and positivistic approaches and tools for efficiency and performance measurement and enhancement in organizations (Gruening, 2001; Ashworth *et al.*, 2007). For example, in the regionalization of the Dutch fire department performance measurement is used to allocate coverage territories to fire stations situated in close proximity who can prepare for deployment the fastest; and efficiency is enhanced via uniformization and the redistribution of materials and specialisms among regional fire stations.

In the field of public administration, there is a common consensus that NPM is typified by an exceptional growth and dominance of managerialism in the public sector (Worrall *et al.*, 2000; Thomas and Davies, 2005; Simonet, 2015), which has become apparent in the Dutch fire department as well. As Thomas and Davies (2005, p. 684) argue, “it is generally accepted that increased political attention given to the management of public service professional organizations has been marked by the ascendancy of the managerial prerogative and the legitimacy of management.” Scholars have problematized this trend with a call to strike a

better balance between managerial interests and those of professionals, and to emphasize the needs and expertise of professionals without completely aborting the need for public reform and management that seeks efficiency, effectiveness and value for money (Overeem and Tholen, 2011; Rhodes, 2016).

The literature on public reform, and particularly NPM, lacks an empirically grounded comprehension of the translation, daily enactment and micro-level perceptions of reform in organizational settings (Thomas and Davies, 2005). Extant research betrays that public reform may not always benefit organizations and their staff alike; quite the contrary. For example, a study on municipal reform in Toronto shows that public servants felt “disquietude, even anguish, [...] over being unable to provide the level or quality of service that they wished” (McDonough 2006, p. 643) in the context of public reform. In a similar vein, Kuhlmann *et al.* (2008, p. 859) claim that “staff members are increasingly tired of reforms and perceive the modernization primarily as downsizing and cutback management.” Relevant, for our case, is that volunteer firefighters perceive increased work pressure and decreased motivation and well-being as a consequence of reform (Kerstholt *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, there is a need to understand the various ways in which reform and NPM are “responded to and received, supported and subverted, translated and created, by [individuals]” (Thomas and Davies, 2005, p. 685) at the local level of investigation.

Moreover, it has been argued that public reform entails the redefinition of the workplace and transformation of professional identities, to the extent that NPM has been labeled as an identity project (du Gay, 1996; Meyer and Hammerschmid, 2006). The NPM reform agenda tends to overlook the specific characteristics and cultural dimension of public organizations and to impose a uniform identity on their members (Skálén, 2004). For example, Jacobs *et al.* (2008, p. 245) show how a NPM change project at the German police force “produced violations of cultural norms that were central to the continuity and stability of the police.” Therefore, in our study we must acknowledge that the fire service is locally embedded with a unique cultural background (Desmond, 2006), in which opposing values such as safety awareness vs risk taking, and family culture vs para-militaristic doctrines co-exist. Previous studies on the motivation of volunteers in the fire service reveal that it is precisely this mix of values that makes the service attractive for them (McLennan and Birch, 2008). Hence, it is relevant for us to investigate how volunteer firefighters make sense of and identify with their profession and organizational culture in the context of regionalization which contains elements of NPM. Not least because firefighters may inspire bottom-up pressures that subvert, resist or constrain managerial efforts to implement organizational change (Thurnell-Read and Parker, 2008).

#### *Organizational change: the translation of public reform to the work floor*

To conceptualize the translation of public reform – in this case regionalization – to the work floor of local fire stations, we draw from organizational change literature, thereby connecting the fields of public administration and organization science (Kelman, 2005). Organizational change is here defined as a process of organizational renewal, in terms of its direction, structure, culture and competencies, to respond and adapt to ever-changing internal and external needs, pressures and dynamics (Moran and Brightman, 2000; Todnem, 2005). However, there is limited research on organizational change in public sector organizations resulting from wider public reform and the NPM movement. The majority of this research is from the private sector, and private sector models of change are often mimicked in the public sector (Fernandez and Rainey, 2006). Moreover, private sector change models may be problematic in the public sector, due to their top-down, managerialist implementation and disregard for public sector issues (Worrall *et al.*, 2000; Jacobs *et al.*, 2008; Simonet, 2015). To help us remain sensitive to the issue of managerialism in the public

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sector, including the fire service, we draw from literature on organizational change from the critical management tradition (e.g. Alvesson, 1992; Burnes, 1996; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002; Jacobs *et al.*, 2013). This will help us to unravel the otherwise hidden perspectives and sensemaking of organizational members on the work floor who are an integral part of the organizational change resulting from wider public reform and NPM doctrines.

Alvesson and Sveningsson (2016) problematize the representation of workers as passive receivers of organizational change rather than active agents who make sense of, respond to, appropriate and shape change. Therefore, critical management scholars promote a processual perspective of change (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002) as an emergent, contextual and ambiguous process transpiring at the work floor in the daily sensemaking, narratives, activities and interactions of diverse organizational actors (Van Marrewijk and Van den Ende, 2018). As such, organizational change is a multi-level and multi-actor process, where top managers, middle managers and workers produce everyday changes at the micro-level, which in turn serve to (re)shape meso-level processes and macro-level organizational fields, and vice versa (Pettigrew *et al.*, 2001; Seidl and Whittington, 2014; Langley *et al.*, 2013). In such change processes, it is key to account for the sensemaking of diverse organizational members, defined as the mechanism by which they attribute meaning to, reflect on, or attempt to understand their experience of organizational change (Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010; Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). According to Lüscher and Lewis (2008, p. 222) organizational change represents a difficult context for sensemaking because it intensifies complexity and ambiguity and shifts work demands.

Prior research in the critical management tradition has warned that it may become difficult to motivate and retain the workforce in the midst of “large-scale, planned, strategic and administrative change” (Fernandez and Rainey, 2006, p. 168) like public reform, often provoking resistance among the work floor (Thomas and Davies, 2005; Jacobs *et al.*, 2008). An explanation of resistance must be situated in the perceived threats to organizational culture and identity as it cannot be explained by an objective impact of change on the work floor (Jacobs *et al.*, 2008, p. 253). In the literature, workplace resistance as a response to change is often seen as something negative that must be averted and quelled (e.g. Lines *et al.*, 2015; Fiedler, 2010), which has been challenged by critical management scholars (Ford *et al.*, 2008; Ogbonno and Wilkinson, 2003; Thomas *et al.*, 2011; Courpasson *et al.*, 2012) who claim that discrepancies, power dynamics and opposition are natural and integral to change. For example, Mumby (2005) understands resistance as a set of situated practices that can constrain but also enable change, transpiring as a negotiation of power relations and interpretation of change. A processual perspective of change takes professional discretion central and acknowledges that resistance can also be telling and productive in change processes (Courpasson *et al.*, 2012).

In the debate on organizational change, resistance or otherwise adverse perceptions of or reactions to reform are relevant because the Dutch fire service struggles with issues of retention related to growing work pressures and diminishing well-being (Kerstholt *et al.*, 2013). Given that 70 percent of all firefighters are volunteers in the Netherlands these are critical issues, because if the fire department fails “to create a sense of commitment to the organization, an increase in volunteer turnover could occur, severely straining the ability of localities to protect life and property” (Henderson and Sowa, 2018, p. 54). Besides, individuals usually get involved in volunteering with the aim to satisfy social and psychological needs related to career, esteem, community and reciprocity (Sokolowski, 1996; Allison *et al.*, 2002; Manatschal and Freitag, 2014). Helping others increases individuals’ well-being and encourages people to continue volunteering as part of their identity (Matsuba *et al.*, 2007). Though volunteering is a personal act and thus personal motives should be considered, macro-level fields and meso-level processes, such as public reform, also affect the decision to become and remain a volunteer (Yeung, 2004). Hence, to study whether and how such matters

are entangled with public reform, it is crucial to scrutinize the social and cultural implications of organizational change and new managerialism at the work floor of local fire stations for volunteers in more detail.

**Methodology**

*Case selection and methods*

In collaboration with the Union of Volunteer Firefighters we selected five safety regions across the Netherlands in which we conducted case studies at six different fire stations (see Table I). We selected these different regions and fire stations on the basis of their differences in demographic aspects (level of urbanity), different specialisms and their distinct local-regional safety issues. We applied a qualitative-interpretive approach to study regionalization according to the perspectives and sensemaking of organizational members (Hatch and Cunliffe, 2006); in our case volunteers, station commanders and regional public managers. The main purpose of our study was to investigate how regionalization impacts local fire stations and, more specifically, how volunteers, station commanders and public regional managers make sense of the change process.

Prior to entering the field, we conducted a small desk study of relevant policy-documents after which we composed a topic list which guided our in-depth interviews. Topics such as the nature and content of firefighting, local embeddedness and organizational culture of fire stations, the identity of volunteer firefighters, the implementation of the organizational change by (middle) management, the changes in practice due to the regionalization and motivating and demotivating elements were taken into account. These topics were operationalized in open ended questions so that respondents could use their own language in order to elaborate their perceptions and thoughts about these topics.

During the data collection period between May and August 2017, we were assisted by seven interviewers who – under supervision of the authors – conducted the interviews. All interviews were recorded and transcribed *ad verbatim* in Dutch. Only the quotes used for this paper were translated into English literally and/or to convey the same meaning if literal translation would render the meaning lost. Translations were discussed and verified by the research team to ensure their accuracy. The interviewees met the firefighters at their fire stations and in some occasions trainings and briefings were observed. Because some of the topics could be interpreted as sensitive, it was necessary to anonymize the safety regions, fire stations and respondents. In total, 60 in-depth interviews were conducted using purposeful and snowball sampling. In a first phase, 51 volunteer firefighters and 5 station commanders were interviewed as listed in Table I. In a later phase, four regional managers were interviewed to balance our account. While we aimed to document the perspectives of volunteers and public management, this research prioritized a focus on volunteers which

Safety region Fire station	Northeast Greencity	Northwest Seasight	Southwest Hilltown	Mideast Eastvillage	Center Midland Fortcity		Total
<i>Gender</i>							
Male	8	9	9	10	10	7	53
Female	0	0	1	0	1	1	3
<i>Age</i>							
18–30	1	0	1	1	3	0	6
31–45	4	1	4	3	6	5	23
46–65	3	8	5	5	2	3	26
65 and above	0	0	0	1	0	0	1

**Note:** Names of regions and fire stations are pseudonyms

**Table I.**  
Distribution of  
respondents)

explains the difference in the number of respondents for each hierarchical level. This can be perceived as a limitation, but also as an invitation for further research that emphasizes the managerial perspective.

Looking at the distribution of respondents, it is striking that most of them were male and between the age of 31–65 years. While it seems this overrepresentation of middle-aged men could compromise the validity of our results, this skewed distribution was to be expected because 90 percent of the firefighter population consists of men between 31 and 45 years old; the majority of them volunteers. Therefore, we argue that our findings sufficiently reflect the opinions and attitudes of volunteer firefighters in the Netherlands.

*Analytical framework and data analysis*

For analytical purposes we focused our research hierarchically into three levels – macro, meso and micro – according to a tall relational ontology (Seidl and Whittington, 2014). This tall ontology is analytically resourceful, enabling us to systematically compare, contrast and connect various levels of research and to explain their interrelatedness and mutually constitutive relationship. Specifically, we applied this tall ontology to align our empirical and theoretical focus. Moreover, we structured our findings according to the multi-level sensemaking of: volunteers and the themes that emerged from the interviews as significant to how they made sense of regionalization (i.e. merging and closing of fire stations; coverage plan and redistribution of materials; bureaucratization of fire service) and of public managers and the themes that emerged as important to their sensemaking (i.e. managing change; coverage plan and redistribution of materials; motivating and retaining volunteers; plurality vs uniformity) (please refer to Table II).

To analyze our data we took a systematic approach to enhance methodological rigor and validity, particularly the inductive, grounded-theory approach as elaborated by Gioia *et al.* (2013), also known as the Gioia Methodology. According to this methodology, data are analyzed through three distinct levels: “first order concepts,” “second order themes” and “aggregate dimensions” helping to build theory by identifying new concepts and ideas, rather than solely relying on extant ones. While the first order coding is more empirical and informant-centric, the second order coding is more conceptual, and based on theoretically informed themes. The aggregate dimensions are then distilled from the amalgamation of first and second order codes to disclose the most significant analyses (refer to Table III for our operationalization). We elaborate on our aggregate dimensions more in-depth in the discussion section. The Gioia Methodology views respondents as “knowledgeable agents”

Analytical level			Empirical focus	Theoretical focus
Macro	National	Safety Regions Act	Regionalization of local fire stations into Safety Regions	Public reform NPM Organizational change
Meso	Regional	Reorganization of 6 fire stations in 5 safety regions Regional public managers	Managing change Coverage plan & redistribution of materials	Sensemaking Change agents Resistance
Micro	Local	Station commanders/public middle managers  Volunteers	Motivating and retaining volunteers Plurality vs uniformity Merging or closing of fire stations Coverage plan & redistribution of materials Bureaucratization of fire service	

**Table II.**  
Analytical framework according to a tall ontology

Hierarchical level	1st order concepts	2nd order themes	Aggregate dimensions
Regional managers	Active role at regional level No presence at work floor of local stations; distant Management has to oversee (too) many local fire stations	Public reform obligation for professionalization Top-down, planned change	Higher management <i>vis-à-vis</i> the work floor
Station commanders	Active role of in translating change to work floor Station commander "one of us" Station commander keeps volunteers motivated	Public reform mediation and implementation Top-down meets bottom-up change	Regionalization <i>vis-à-vis</i> local embeddedness
Volunteers	Local embeddedness of fire stations Loss of territories, specialisms, and materials Loss of station maintenance Unfair performance measurement Lack of involvement in organizational change Mild resistance	Public reform threatens ownership, autonomy and local identity and culture Bottom-up tensions and resistance	Professionalism <i>vis-à-vis</i> volunteerism Crucial role of change mediator

**Table III.**  
Multi-level data analysis according to the Gioia Methodology

who know what they are doing and can explain their intentions, thoughts and actions (Gioia *et al.*, 2013). Here the researcher, who is also viewed as a knowledgeable agent, has the role of giving an account of the respondents' sensemaking and reasoning, and of identifying patterns in data and drawing conclusions about relations between concepts and ideas.

**The context of regionalization: the Dutch fire service under pressure**

The Netherlands has around 28,000 firefighters; an estimated 19,000 of whom work on a voluntary basis. That is about 70 percent of the entire workforce. The fire brigade is ready to work 24/7 out of passion for the profession and sometimes at the risk of their own lives to help people and animals in need. After the Second World War, the Dutch fire brigade was organized at the municipal level. From that time on, cities and larger towns worked with a professional fire brigade of around 8,000 forces (with the exception of Amsterdam, where a private corps was established on August 15, 1874). In urban areas it was simply too busy to put all the burden on volunteers. The vast majority of medium-sized and smaller municipalities, however, remained dependent on volunteers who should be present in their barracks within a few minutes of being alerted. That is why fire brigades traditionally have a strong local embedding. Some large private institutions, including airports, chemical companies and universities also have an internal fire brigade (Justice, 2013).

In 2000 and 2001, two major incidents put Dutch firefighting and disaster management higher on the political agenda: the fireworks disaster in Enschede and the café fire in Volendam. Suddenly there was a realization at the political and administrative level that the prevention of fires, the granting of permits and the supervision thereof, and the quality of fire service itself could be improved and professionalized. This realization also corresponded with current society, which is sometimes described as a "risk society": accidents and disasters are lurking everywhere, can affect many people at the same time and have a huge political and social impact. The increased political and administrative attention to disasters and crises meant that the fire service organization had to be regionalized. This was done by

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combating local fragmentation and by placing a greater emphasis on “prevention” (preventing fires, accidents and disasters) rather than just “repression” (extinguishing fires, offering help, saving people or animals). Regionalization would also lead to an improvement in quality and professionalism among firefighters. After much political fuss, the current 25 safety regions became a reality on October 1, 2010. Together, the regions aim to strengthen cooperation between fire brigades, disaster and crisis management, ambulance services and the police (Justice, 2013).

For the fire service, the implementation of safety regions meant a radical organizational transformation. Municipal fire brigades disappeared, replaced by regional control of these corps. That was against the will of a large number of municipalities. Safety regions did appeal to their residents, but municipalities meanwhile lost control of their own fire brigade. In 2012, a special amendment to the Security Regions Act was even required, forcing municipalities to hand over “their” fire brigade to the regions. Moreover, the Physical Safety Institute was set up to act as a support organization of and for the safety regions. Meanwhile, the fire department is under considerable pressure and social and cultural developments and trends department lie at the basis of this. Therefore, in the following sections we aim to show how volunteers and public management of the Dutch fire service have made sense of this drastic change process.

### **How volunteer firefighters make sense of regionalization**

The noticeable aspects and translations of the regionalization of the fire service differ per local fire station. Overall, while respondents indicate little has changed concerning their daily work practices and activities since the reorganization, our data shows that other factors have resulted in consequences and changes that emerged in their sensemaking of public reform, particularly in relation to: the mergers or the closing of stations, the “coverage plan” and allocation of territories, the redistribution of specialisms and materials and the bureaucratization of the Dutch fire service. This section will delve deeper into each of these themes to shed light on the process and consequences of regionalization and how volunteers make sense of this.

#### *Merging or closing of fire stations*

The process of regionalization means that fire stations have gone from being municipal to being regional. Whereas previously the municipality was responsible for its own fire brigade, there is now a safety region that covers several fire stations. Due to budget cuts and a new division of the regions, some stations have been closed or merged with a clear impact on the organizational culture and mutual ties. Respondents from the station Eastvillage said that there was concern about a possible closure because it is located next to a larger municipality, though this did not happen in the end. At station Hilltown, a more serious closure threat occurred in 2011/2012 due to the new coverage plan, meaning that the deployment territory would be taken over by other surrounding stations. This decision was challenged by the firefighters, with the support of the Union Fire Brigade Volunteers (VBV). In this case, resistance and campaigning were productive to ensure that the planned closure of the station was reconsidered and canceled, only fourteen days before the planned closing date.

#### *The coverage plan and allocation of territories*

According to most respondents, the coverage plan used to allocate deployment territories to local fire stations is the most debated intervention resulting from the regionalization. In order to determine a coverage territory, municipal boundaries were previously applied, whereas after the regionalization this area is now allocated on the basis of the turnout time, i.e. how quickly a fire brigade unit can mobilize to depart their fire station and deploy for an

incident. The performance and departure times are periodically collected and measured within a safety region in order to adjust service areas. On the one hand, respondents think that this is understandable and rightly so because it is crucial for citizens to receive help as quickly as possible: "If my house is on fire, I need a fire truck as soon as possible. [...] My wife and my children must be saved" (respondent 6 – Fortcity).

On the other hand, respondents perceive and experience the measurement and reclassification of coverage areas as dishonest, disappointing and demotivating. The new coverage area is sometimes determined by a difference of merely a few seconds concerning departure times. This was the case for station Hilltown, which had to transfer the area around a motorway to another station because they were a couple of seconds "slower" than another station. One respondent explains that this is regrettable, because volunteers can now gain less practical experience by reducing the coverage area and therefore the chances of deployment. Additionally, several respondents claimed that some stations "played false" by pressing the button to indicate completion before the crew was in fact complete and prepared to deploy. This resulted in measurement errors, which affected the allocation of coverage territories. Moreover, if a coverage territory is taken away from a fire station and allocated to another, emotions can run high as volunteer firefighters expressed to be quite territorial and attached to their local environment.

#### *The redistribution of specialisms and materials*

In addition to the reclassification of coverage areas, regionalization went hand in hand with the reorganization and redistribution of specialisms and materials via the so-called "material distribution plan." The general purpose of this plan is the efficient management, standardization and uniformization of the fire service as a whole, though its impact does vary per station. For example, the station Fortnesscity has retained the specialisms "ladder," "diving" and "large-capacity pump" but have lost a fire truck. At the station Eastvillage, the specialisms "diving" and the "warning and reconnaissance service" have been removed and transferred. The station Greencity in particular has been hit hard because, in addition to losing specialisms, they also lost materials. Six of the eight fire trucks had to be redistributed to other stations in the region. This "came over [the station] like a cold shower" (Respondent 3 – Greencity).

The "material distribution plan" has not only ensured that some stations have to surrender materials or vehicles, but also that volunteers have less or no say in the purchase of materials and how the stations are equipped. According to volunteers, whereas they used to be able to exercise influence over these matters, regional management now decides on this. In this sense, the former autonomy of fire stations has been replaced by a bureaucratic-style system of management:

It has become somewhat cumbersome, now there are some other people who decide about your material, your stations, or your things. You do not know them, or you hardly know them, and they are located far away in Utrecht at offices. But on the other hand, this also has an effect, because the people on the shop floor do not have to do that anymore. (Respondent 5 – Greencity)

Evidently, this can have an adverse effect on the motivation of volunteers, because they value being able to manage and decide over their own stations and materials. In the worst case it can also influence their willingness, in the sense that some respondents indicate that they now turn down requests for assistance more often than before.

On the other hand, respondents also feel that there is indeed a need to think carefully about public funds, and that helping the citizen has priority: "It is community money. I really do not care if I drive in a Mercedes or in a DAF, if the citizen is only helped" (Respondent 3 Eastvillage). Moreover, due to the increase in scale resulting from regionalization, the equipment can be used more quickly in another area if there is an

emergency. Even at the station Greencity, which was most affected by the regionalization, some respondents were positive about the standardization of specialisms and materials because all the stations in the region now have the same appearance in terms of clothing, vehicles and safety and can also collaborate better “The good thing about regionalization is that everything becomes a bit more uniform” (Respondent 1, Greencity). Thus, it should be noted that the standardization of the fire department also entails positive issues such as greater professionalism, in the eyes of our respondents.

#### *The bureaucratization of the Dutch fire service*

In the eyes of our respondents, regionalization has been accompanied by the bureaucratization of the Dutch fire service as a whole, which is considered as unpleasant and unwanted by essentially every volunteer we spoke with. The current fire department has become larger and more uniform and is now organized from “above,” whereas in the past it had a more horizontal structure that was appreciated by the volunteers. Whereas in the past everything could be arranged locally, and the volunteer had one municipal contact point, communication now takes place via several departmental layers. This makes it so that decisions take longer and that more obstacles or layers need to be passed to get something done. As one respondent notes:

It does not work at all [...] those layers [...] before [the matter] arrives higher up, it's already solved or it's no longer necessary [...] it's never on the line it's supposed to be [...] you have to go to a flat organization. (Respondent 10 – Eastvillage)

Uniformization and professionalization are main manifestations of regionalization. At station Seaview, a respondent gave the example that all fire brigade vehicles in all stations must be the same. If a single station wants an extra storage compartment, this must be implemented on all vehicles. Furthermore, extra (training) requirements and rules have been set that do not necessarily contribute to the enjoyment, autonomy and motivation of volunteer firefighters. Increasing demands and rules of the firefighter profession also mean that the fire service is not always perceived as a “hobby” anymore and that the combination of private life, paid work and voluntary work is under pressure: “firefighting, your hobby, but if you run into these issues all the time [...] [then it is no longer a hobby]” (Respondent 6 – Hilltown).

The regionalization and experienced bureaucratization have also made it so that volunteers feel a loss of control: “The volunteer is facilitated but has no control” (Respondent 3 – Seaview). Respondents state that they are no longer allowed to have a say or exercise influence on policy decisions, processes and changes. Rather, such issues are now decided and directed from “above” in a top-down fashion:

Before we were able to have a say in what we liked and what our wishes were; now things are put out to tender and 'here you have it and good luck with it.' I do not think senior management listens anymore to the [volunteer] fire brigade [...] It is a sort of reversed Christmas tree, we are at the very bottom of the point and the management is [at the top] very broad with people in the office and nobody knows what they are doing. (Respondent 5 – Eastvillage)

However, another respondent mentioned that when it comes to matters of safety, reactions are now being made quicker than before and action is being taken. In that sense, the fire service has become more efficient and professional.

#### **How regional public managers make sense of regionalization**

This section contains the results of interviews with four regional public managers. Unlike the common assumption of volunteers that regional managers are not “one of us,” two of the manager respondents started as volunteer firefighters themselves and climbed the ladder up

toward management. The other two do not have a firefighting background but became responsible for the fire service as a result of the regionalization. We structure this section according to the themes that emerged as significant in terms of how managers made sense of public reform, being: managing change; the coverage plan and material redistribution plan; motivating and retaining volunteers; and plurality vs uniformity.

*Managing change*

The interviewed regional managers first and foremost describe the regionalization as a legal obligation, which they all consider in a positive light. They describe “doing more for less money” and “delivering good care from a larger collective” as constructive and necessary developments. The quality and uniformity of equipment (including the purchase thereof), exercises, training and (preventive) activities have increased according to regional managers. The interviewed administrators realize that a number of fire stations had to take a step back because of cost saving and efficiency considerations. About the fact that some stations have indeed been faced with the reduction of, for example, vehicles and specialisms, one regional manager gives the following analogy:

[It is as if] we started ‘living together’. If you start living together you will see that there will be several pieces of many things. Think of your cutlery, crockery [...]. That can be a bit less. So, we decided to go further in a number of places with fewer vehicles and fewer people. (Regional Manager 2)

All interviewed regional managers consider it essential that volunteers are involved as much as possible in these – occasionally painful – changes and that they are informed about this as well as possible. They believe commitment, transparency and communication are essential to make a translation between management and the shop floor. Respondents claim volunteers contribute personal wishes and preferences through a number of work sessions and the Works Council, to which management feels compelled to comply. In addition, managers claim to engage in discussions with volunteers about the number of people in a station, the coverage plan and the risks within a certain area and the need for realistic practice. The managers, therefore, consider the input from the work field to be very important because volunteers must be able to carry out their work properly on a daily basis.

*The coverage plan and material redistribution plan*

The interviewed managers unanimously believe that decisions regarding redistribution will always be made on the basis of providing citizens with the fastest possible assistance. Management attempts to do this as honestly as possible, though this does not mean that fire stations and their volunteers sometimes have to give up areas. According to managers, volunteers should also realize that the municipal fire service was not always better. Even before regionalization, cutbacks and redistributions took place. Ultimately, it is about what is best for society at large, while managers acknowledge that not all volunteers will be satisfied with the result of regionalization. Change is never easy:

It will occasionally hurt at stations where things are taken away. It also hurts when vehicles are exchanged. Change hurts. The art is to decide at times like this to communicate well, to share, and to gain an understanding of why you are doing it. (Regional Manager 3)

That is why managers aim to paint as clear a picture as possible of what they do (transparency) and explain why some decisions have been made (communication). Especially for sensitive decisions such as removing vehicles, specialisms or coverage areas, it is important to engage in a dialogue and explain why such things happen. For example, a manager indicated that it was difficult, but necessary, to remove a diving team from a station: “As a diver I do not think that’s wrong, because sometimes we had diving teams

where there was no water; [...] it is all about what you need and what is surplus to prevent all risks" (Regional Manager 1).

### *Motivating and retaining volunteers*

The managers state that there is a declining trend in the number of volunteers nationwide. Yet our research shows this is not experienced as such at local fire stations. Within a safety region, for each fire station the inflow and outflow of volunteers differs; sometimes there is a shortage and sometimes a waiting list. How such fluctuations work out in practice is therefore circumstantial. Yet, aging, a changing balance between work and private life, and a faster turnaround (people want to commit less to a volunteer organization than before) do have an impact on the fire department. One manager says that "people are not threatening to stop but generally stay shorter in the fire department. They have enough motivation and hope for a fire" (Regional Manager 1). In general, managers find it admirable that even though some stations have been hit hard, volunteers remain motivated.

While managers observe that volunteers have generally retained their passion for firefighting in the context of regionalization, they do indicate that the increased input demanded from volunteers might diminish their passion. The classic fires remain, but additional work is now required, and training courses and practice sessions have been intensified. Professionalization plays a role here, but also pressure from the government. Managers adhere that the increase in training requirements should not have a negative impact on the volunteers' enthusiasm for their hobby of firefighting. Moreover, if there is an incident, training is refined while stricter requirements will never reduce existing risks to zero. This is a difficult issue for management:

I come from the volunteer world myself, so I want to be careful not to professionalize too much. The quality has to go up, but the feeling of being a firefighting volunteer must also be nice. People have to have fun. (Regional Manager 1)

Therefore, according to managers there needs to be a better balance between the legal, political and administrative requirements of the regionalization process on the one hand, and the preservation of an informal, hobby-like atmosphere on the work floor on the other.

### *Plurality or uniformity?*

There is a tension between what a fire station can do autonomously and what is centrally regulated. The director of a safety region thinks that the right balance must be found between the proper expenditure of municipal money and the relinquishment of overly strict regulation. They contend that fire brigades are different and that you must cherish those differences in order to maintain the motivation of firefighter volunteers. Two managers say:

We want to uniformize everything, but sometimes you have to let things go. It is also a wave movement; first everything needed to be the same, but what have we achieved? We cannot even order flowers locally anymore. (Regional Manager 2)

How far do you standardize, or do you accept differences? I advise my administrators to accept that differences will exist and continue to exist, and that – if need be – you standardize them, but that does not necessarily have to be the case. (Regional Manager 3)

Given the fact that the regionalization process increases the distance between top management and the work floor, managers think about whether and how to assign more responsibilities to the stations themselves. After all, the increase in scale and bureaucratization clashes with the need to arrange certain things locally: "I will hold my breath when the fire department is scaled up even further. Then you get a bit of what the National Police also has: that no one feels at home anymore, [...] lethargy" (Regional Manager 4).

The interviewed managers see opportunities for more decentralized and independent operations of the stations, resulting in more plurality. This will reap appreciation from volunteers, because issues need not pass through multiple organizational layers. This also means that there should be more consideration for the history, context and embeddedness of local fire stations:

Leave the stations their autonomy. I think the fire stations should retain their individual identity; whether they want to practice on Monday or Wednesday. I do not want everything uniform [...] That is not fun at all and you should not want that either. (Regional Manager 2)

In sum, according to managers, change process must establish a balance between unity in diversity. That is what the managers strive for, with an eye for the connection between the local stations and the higher levels of management and government of the security regions. The station commander is the crucial link herein, which will be elaborated below.

### **Putting organizational change into perspective**

To fully understand the impact of public reform on local fire stations and volunteers' experience and sensemaking of organizational change, there are three main themes that should be considered: the local embeddedness of fire stations; the relationship between volunteers and regional managers; and the relationship between volunteers and station commanders. These themes demonstrate how volunteers relate to their local stations and their managers, and – more importantly – how these relations have taken shape in the context of public reform and the ensuing organizational change.

#### *The local embeddedness of fire stations*

The local embeddedness of fire stations and their volunteers emerged as a significant theme at all studied cases, playing an important role in the sense of attachment and ownership volunteers have. Volunteers form a tightly knit group that, in their view, run their own fire stations. For example, according to respondents, recruitment transpires from “father-to-son” or in a “mouth-to-mouth” manner, via family, friends, colleagues and/or acquaintances. The same applies to recruiting volunteers within the workforce of a fire station. If a new vacancy becomes available at a fire station, potential candidates or applicants are often discussed within the team. The brigade therefore has a say about who is eventually accepted for recruitment. This is essential because members must be able to cooperate and rely on each other. Consequently, the recruitment process contributes to “a very big bond in the group” (Respondent 1 – station Midland) and ensures that a newcomer gets the feeling “as if he or she [...] enters a kind of family” (Respondent 1 – station Seasight).

Furthermore, the local embeddedness of the fire stations is manifest in the positive work atmosphere, close ties and informal organizational culture that prevails within the studied cases. Characteristics such as “open,” “sociable,” “collegial,” “familial,” “fraternal,” “friendly” and “trustworthy” are often mentioned by respondents to describe the mutual bond:

You pay attention to each other, and you complement each other, in this sense it is in our culture and our education that we can trust each other blindly. You can see that in the group, we have a very open culture, everything is negotiable, nothing is behind closed doors. (Respondent 5 – station Hilltown)

The ritual of drinking a beer together after a practice or turn out is often mentioned as a binding factor: “Then we will have a drink together at the station [...]. A kind of group of friends you can call it. We are one together, we fit together” (Respondent 4 – station Midland). During these informal events or social activities there is room for chitchat and jokes, but also for serious conversations. Almost all respondents indicate that unpleasant or

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serious events and experiences are discussed together afterwards. Mutual support is essential, so that volunteers can process their experiences:

I had never experienced anything so bad; [after the incident] I had difficulty with work and also with concentration for a time. [...] Well, everything has a place now and I still think about it a lot, but it has happened. It is important that you can give it a place and not simply hide it away. (Respondent 7 – station Midland)

A close bond and open culture within the fire stations makes dealing with unpleasant or traumatic incidents more bearable for the volunteers.

Finally, the local embeddedness of the fire brigade is evident in terms of the public service and societal involvement of the studied fire stations. This means that voluntary firefighters contribute to the community in which they are stationed, for example through disseminating (fire prevention) information or support at primary schools, organizing open days and demonstrations, and contributing during fairs, Christmas and New Year's. The community involvement of firefighters is important to "show potential candidates that [the fire department] is not only occupied with misery but is also there for society" (Respondent 6 – station Hilltown). In sum, it is important for volunteers to demonstrate what they do for the community.

#### *The relationship between volunteers and regional managers*

When asking volunteers about their relationship with higher regional management, the interviews indicate a potential problem. In the view of the volunteers, the appreciation and communication from regional management needs to be improved. Management is physically invisible and too far from the work floor, while firefighters would prefer to be treated in a more personal way. Volunteer firefighters are mostly practical; they are "doers." This pragmatism is said to conflict with what volunteers call the "paper tiger" (because management is busy with paperwork at the office) or "the written fire department" where plans, procedures, rules and requirements are written on paper but not always applicable to the work practice at local fire stations:

People who have nothing to do with the fire brigade now make decisions. Before you had the Mayor who determined for his own people. The people who determine it now have never been here. (Respondent 9 – Greencity)

High up in management are often people who are not themselves firefighters, so they do not know the dynamics of a firefighter, they cannot put themselves in the shoes of a firefighter, but yet they take very crucial decisions that directly affect the fire department. (Respondent 5 – Fortcity).

Respondents indicate that regional management and their implementation of regionalization is "top down" and excludes participation or the voice of the volunteer. Consequentially, the fire brigade has become more bureaucratic and "businesslike." The consequence perceived and felt among respondents is that there is less acknowledgment and leeway for the autonomy, ownership and expertise of volunteer firefighters. At the same time, it is clear by the following account that some regional managers do their best to stay connected to the work floor, such as the regional commander who oversees all the stations of region "Centre": "The regional commander knows everyone by name, I think that's very nice. Yes, 2,500 men, I can meet him on the street and he knows exactly who I am, and I really like that" (Respondent 2 – Midland).

According to regional managers, making and maintaining connections with the work floor of volunteers remains a recurrent and problematic theme. Compared to the situation before regionalization, two layers have now come in between the "top" and "bottom," resulting in a greater distance – or more negatively expressed "gap" – between regional

management and volunteers. Sometimes it frustrates managers that they are no longer physically or personally able to visit all the stations. One manager says:

I can hardly go to all those stations; there are too many. That is annoyingly irritating because I know if I do that you are always approachable, but it does not work physically. Those intermediate layers must ensure that information comes to me in time. (Regional Manager 2)

On the other hand, a general director of a security region puts this problem into perspective. He agrees that he is farther away from the work floor, but also regards this as necessary: “if I am working with volunteers all day, I will not do my other work” (Regional Manager 4). This director emphasizes that there must be frequent contact with both the regional commanders and the station commanders about the needs of volunteers: can they perform their tasks properly; do they have good equipment; can they stand by and have sufficient training? If the fire service can meet such needs, it is not necessary to physically see the senior manager often.

#### *The relationship between volunteers and station commanders*

In contrast to the relationship between the volunteers and higher management, the relationship with the station commander, who also functions as a middle manager, is experienced by all respondents as “good,” “personal” and “informal.” Volunteer firefighters see the station commander as “one of us.” He is physically present and closely connected with the local embedment and the “family feeling” within a station and often has a strong connection with the village or the city of the station. Another important aspect of the relationship between the volunteers and the station commander is that the latter acts as mediator between the work floor and higher management. If there are questions or complaints about certain matters or changes on the work floor, volunteers can go to the station commander. He is their direct contact:

If there is there something, then you go to [the station commander] and he will arrange it with his employer. At a given moment you will hear back again. You do not have to go anywhere, you do not have to call ten people from the region, nine times out of ten you go to [the station commander]. (Respondent 9 – Eastvillage)

The station commander of the station Eastvillage described his relationship with the volunteers as follows: “The boys do a lot for me, and then I can do a lot for them too.”

In order to allow the regionalization process to translate well to the work floor, senior managers facilitate middle management and station commandants – and vice versa. The role of the station commander in particular has become more important in recent years because the distance between regional management and the work floor has increased. Station commanders act as mediators of the change process and function like “the oil that keeps the station together.” Station commanders are responsible for the training and preparation of the station and also have a social function. It is up to them to translate news from management to the station and to involve the volunteers in the change process. The interviewed regional managers see this as a challenge: the station commander must comply and effectively communicate and validate decisions that have been made by higher management, otherwise volunteers are not well informed and resistance may arise. That is considered as undesirable, because the station must continue to function:

The station is *the* unit that has to offer the help. They are the unit that matters. Everything around it must be supportive of that station. The organizational chart should actually be turned upside down, so that the management is at the bottom and the station at the top. (Regional Manager 2)

In sum, station commanders serve an important function to keep local fire stations running and to encourage involvement and passion among volunteer firefighters.

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**Discussion: fuel to the fire?**

This paper focused on the regionalization of the fire department in the Netherlands, from the perspective of volunteer firefighters and public managers. Specifically, we asked:

*RQ1.* How do volunteer firefighters and public managers make sense of public reform – i.e. the regionalization of the fire department?

Reviewing our empirical findings, four main interrelated themes emerge that will be discussed: higher management *vis-à-vis* the work floor, the local *vis-à-vis* the regional fire service, professionalism *vis-à-vis* volunteerism, and the crucial role of change mediators. Though each theme overlaps, they will be elaborated separately in the light of our theoretical framework, after which we will try to find a middle ground by emphasizing the mediating role of the station commander and the importance of involving volunteers in public reform at the local level of independent fire stations.

*Higher management vis-à-vis the work floor*

While the dichotomy of “higher management vs the work floor” must theoretically be evaded, it is the case that volunteers, station commanders, and regional managers alike perceive and experience a gap between these layers, which is the main issue emerging from our research.

In the eyes of volunteers, regional managers are not “one of us”; they are “paper tigers” sitting in far-away office buildings and deciding what changes to implement at the local stations whereas they themselves are not firefighters or familiar with the activity of firefighting. However, from our balanced empirical account – which also documented the perspective of public managers – it can be argued that volunteers make sense of public reform and particularly its adverse impact on their local fire stations by pointing to regional management as a scapegoat for their grievances, ironically distancing themselves even further from management. In contrast to the common assumption that regional managers are not firefighters, two of our managerial respondents were, in fact, also firefighters themselves. The negative emotions expressed by volunteers in this research correspond with Maitlis and Sonenshein (2010, p. 567) who claim that organizational members struggle to make meaning of emotion-laden change processes.

Regional managers make sense of regionalization as a legal obligation and necessary to manage and coordinate the fire department on a national and regional level and to deliver better care to a larger collective. At the same time, regional managers do understand that “change hurts” for local fire stations and volunteers who have been hit harder. In order to soften the blow, regional managers emphasize the importance of involving volunteers in the organizational change process. Conversely, accounts of volunteers betray limited involvement of the work floor in the change process. Therefore, we propose there is room for improvement regarding the participation of volunteers, especially since “involving organizational members helps reduce barriers to change by creating psychological ownership, promoting the dissemination of critical information, and encouraging [...] feedback for fine-tuning the change during implementation” (Fernandez and Rainey, 2006, p. 170).

We propose the chasm between volunteers and higher management is related to the strong local embeddedness of fire stations and volunteers’ former sense of ownership and autonomy over their own territory, stations and materials, which they feel is now under threat of, if not outright taken over by, public reform and the novel autonomy of regional management. Volunteers experience the implementation of change by regional management as top-down and bureaucratic. As we argued in our theoretical framework, this has been problematized by prior literature warning that purely top-down and large-scale administrative change will have drawbacks when it regards workers as passive receivers

of change rather than as active agents who make sense of and appropriate the change, too (Jacobs *et al.*, 2008; Van Marrewijk and Van den Ende, 2018). Therefore, it is crucial that a sense of ownership and autonomy must be retained among volunteers, especially concerning organizational change that has an impact on their territory, stations, specialisms and materials.

*Regionalization vis-à-vis local embeddedness*

The reorganization of the fire department stems from wider public policy and reform on a national scale to advance crisis and disaster management and multidisciplinary operation and coordination. Nonetheless, it must also be acknowledged that the fire department and particularly independent fire stations are socially and culturally embedded on a local scale. Findings indicate that the network of emergency (public) service organizations – including the fire department, police and the ambulance – to ensure integrated safety measures has become more professional and efficient on a national and regional level. Moreover, the fire service organization as a whole has become more skilled, especially in terms of training, courses and exercises, and stations have become less fragmented like separate islands which can be perceived as advantageous. However, there are also notable (adverse) consequences and disadvantages for fire stations at the local level concerning the damaged pride, independence and ownership of volunteers and the distance and lack of communication from top management.

Regionalization has transpired as a centrally controlled process and largely deprived the locally oriented volunteers of their autonomy, specialisms, coverage areas, equipment and sometimes stations. Hereby it needs to be acknowledged that vehicles, equipment, territory and the station are not merely material aspects, but embody great symbolic value for the volunteers as an extension of their identity as firefighters. Hence, many volunteer firefighters feel more or less amputated. In their opinion, regionalization also led to more bureaucracy, by which managerial logic has displaced the practical, local wisdom, echoing critical literature on the impact of NPM (e.g. Simonet, 2015). This tension became clear through the performance measurement strategy implemented to allocate coverage territories which volunteers experience as unfair. Volunteers make sense of the coverage plan in terms of feasibility and craftsmanship, whereas management places an emphasis on efficiency and effectiveness which betrays a discrepancy.

The identity of volunteers and the organizational culture of their stations rest on their local ties, such as their locally based and even family based recruitment process, the close ties and bonding between station members, and the informal culture that provides support and enjoyment for volunteers. Imposing a uniform identity on these localities might constrain rather than enable their ability to do their job of protecting life and property (Henderson and Sowa, 2018) because public reform with a NPM ethic tends to overlook the local meaning and cultural dimension of public organizations. As we problematized in our theoretical framework, the NPM reform agenda can severely impact, if not redefine or transform professional identity and organizational culture through processes of standardization and uniformization (Skälén, 2004; Horton, 2006). This calls attention to ethical considerations of change, where workers' reactions do not simply concern themselves but reflect a wider concern for and identification with others (Jacobs and Keegan, 2018); in our case the “comrades” of firefighters who are part of their unit or “family” at work, as well as the people and animals in need who require their service. In our case, it is precisely the family culture and local meaning and activity of firefighting that attracts volunteers in the first place. Therefore, our advice to public administrators and policy-makers would be that public reform should account for the locality of individual fire stations with more selective professionalization that leaves fire stations their local culture, identity and autonomy.

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As one regional manager said during an interview; professionalize but “leave the stations their autonomy.”

### *Professionalism vis-à-vis volunteerism*

Presently, and as it has been, the fire service is based on volunteerism. However, in the experience of our respondents, due to regionalization increasingly more is demanded from volunteers in terms of professionalization. Fire service volunteers are socially involved and driven to make a contribution to their community. In addition to fighting fires, disasters and crises, they also organize social activities like open days and participate in the community. Moreover, most volunteers have a full-time job, their own family and other activities, meaning that professionalization can threaten their work-life balance. At the same time, citizens call for more security and politicians promise to realize that through regionalization. In order to meet those expectations, the fire brigade is expected to act in a professional, proactive and preventive manner, making work more challenging. In addition to their deployments, the weekly exercises and additional courses demand a lot from volunteers. While respondents make sense of this extra emphasis on knowledge and skills as necessary for national security, in their personal opinion volunteer firefighting should not become too much like “real” work.

The interviewed regional managers acknowledge that the regionalization process among volunteers has led to necessary tensions, grievances and demotivation. But the sensemaking of respondents, both managers and volunteers, indicate that they do understand public reform also serves a societal purpose. Decisions made due to regionalization must always be relevant for improving the provision of aid to citizens and the environment. Managers see the professionalization in training and organization of the fire brigade as necessary developments but agree this should not go too far as this threatens to take away from the hobby-like culture of volunteer firefighting and the passion of firefighters. Hence, if the fire brigade becomes too professional, meaning that if the fire service becomes too standardized, uniform and bureaucratic for the sake of professionalization, we agree with Kerstholt *et al.* (2013) that this will constrain rather than enable the activity of firefighting which is based on local, territorial knowledge, experience and improvisation. As a regional manager warned; “be careful not to professionalize too much.”

Some regional managers wonder whether this system can be sustained in the long run. Can the fire service continue to work with volunteers in the future or will they require more paid professionals? In any case, it is vital that the current volunteers remain enthusiastic and willing to continue with their vocation. In the words of one regional manager, “for the future you have to make sure everyone remains excited to continue.” Thus, differentiation in tasks and training, and respect for the autonomy, identity and culture of individual stations are issues that require more attention and consideration from public administrators.

### *The crucial role of change mediators*

In light of the tensions described above, a main finding is that the position of the station commanders within the regionalization process has become increasingly important for the translation of change between the safety regions and local volunteers. Here it is relevant to mention that station commanders are the only paid professionals at the local fire stations. Thus, while a notable chasm has formed between local volunteers and regional management, we see a middle ground when we view the station commander as a paid professional, the translator of public reform and the mediator of organizational change. Therefore, a main implication of our research is that a smooth regionalization process can be facilitated and safeguarded by sound relationship and communication between volunteer firefighters and their direct supervisor, the station commander and by strong leadership from the station commander. Another main cautionary implication is that if station

commanders do not comply with or resist the change resulting from public reform, this is likely to have a domino effect on their station and ignite wider, more active resistance. These findings correspond with Lüscher and Lewis (2008, p. 221) who claim that middle managers – in our case station commanders – “serve as critical change agents.”

In the worst-case scenario, if the fire department continues to manage its workforce in a top-down and bureaucratic-style manner, without sufficient change mediation, we predict it will become more difficult to motivate and retain volunteers and entice more resistance from the work floor (Kerstholt *et al.*, 2013). Importantly, we found that station commanders as change mediators are the most responsive and accommodating to the needs and resistance of volunteers. At the moment, volunteers are not likely to quit, though resistance can be detected such as refusing to help with community tasks more often or in the case of volunteers from station Hilltown who successfully campaigned to stop the planned closure of their station. In line with others (e.g. Courpasson *et al.*, 2012), we argue resistance should be seen as integral to organizational change as it can be telling and inform administrators on how to implement change in a more mindful and tailored way.

Overall, to align different levels of actors in the fire service, it is up to regional managers, station commanders and the volunteers to stay involved, connect and invest in mutual communication. The trick is to find a workable balance between higher management and the work floor, the regional and the local, and professionalism and volunteerism.

### **Contributions and implications**

The originality of this research paper is found in the insight it provides in the sensemaking of volunteer firefighters and public management of diverse safety regions and fire stations in the Netherlands concerning the public reform of regionalization. The paper exhibits a critical and emergent perspective of organizational change to both challenge and supplement the dominant top-down and managerial approach to the implementation of public reform. Moreover, our research concerns public reform at a societal level while simultaneously emphasizing the implementation and management of organizational change and its social and cultural implications at the local level of organizations and their staff; especially volunteers. Therefore, our research is societally relevant for public service organizations and policy makers more generally.

This research provides a pragmatic and a theoretical contribution. Pragmatically, from a societal standpoint, we provide empirical evidence exhibiting the perceptions and sensemaking of volunteer firefighters, station commanders and regional managers, enabling us to spot the bottlenecks and issues that have developed during the regionalization process, and to induce critical reflection about the situational translations and nuances of public reform at the local level of investigation. Particularly, we address the crucial role of middle management change mediators, in line with prior research (e.g. Ogbonno and Wilkinson, 2003; Wooldridge *et al.*, 2008). Middle managers, in our case station commanders, serve to translate change to the work floor and accommodate the needs of volunteers. Therefore, these crucial change agents must be supported in public service organizations under reform. Additionally, we advise public administrators to respect and protect, rather than transform, the local culture, identity and autonomy of volunteers because these are integral to their motivation to provide adequate service to the public. Second, from a theoretical standpoint, we contribute to modest literature (e.g. Fernandez and Rainey, 2006) on the interrelation between public reform and organizational change, particularly concerning the hitherto overlooked social and cultural implications and (un)intended consequences of public reform with a NPM ethic on the culture and identity of volunteers. This is not only relevant for volunteer firefighters in the Netherlands but for public service volunteers more generally, such as the police and health care. As such, we suggest supplementing a planned, top-down and managerial perspective of change with a more emergent, multi-level and multi-actor

approach that gives voice to the work floor and especially volunteers. We agree that connecting the fields of public administration and organization studies is fruitful for theorizing the entanglement between public reform and organizational change (Kelman, 2005) as this paper has aspired to do.

We also have suggestions for future research and for practice. We see a need for further research that explicitly focuses on leading change in a public sector context, especially as there is limited empirical evidence connecting public reform theory to the impact of leadership in implementing organizational change (Kuipers *et al.*, 2014). In a similar vein, we suggest further research should be done on the perspective of higher public management, as our research mainly focused on volunteers with a limited number of managerial respondents. Furthermore, from a pragmatic standpoint, we suggest collaborative practices might help to alleviate discrepancies between the local, regional and national level of fire service, demanding further investigation and action-based research. Currently, fire stations are quite attached to their locality which hampers the regionalization process. Additionally, performance measurement to allocate territories within a safety region tends to make stations more competitive and resentful as our data has shown. Therefore, in order to enhance inter-station collaboration and multidisciplinary coordination and operation, administrators could organize regional inter-station events, trainings, workshops and fieldtrips, both formal and informal, for regional team building, learning and socializing, thereby helping to decouple stations from their steadfast localities. We expect this will include volunteers to actively participate in the regionalization process, to stimulate contact and collective action among stations, and to retain the enjoyability of firefighting and collegial exchanges. Perhaps then volunteers will be invited to see that distinct fire stations and their volunteers are more alike than they think. In the end, they all share the same passion for firefighting.

To conclude, it is clear that firefighting is a serious task from a professional standpoint, but it must not be forgotten that it is also a gratifying calling from a more personal standpoint, otherwise there would not be so many volunteers. Hence, we advise public management, and the fire service more generally, to aim for more flexibility between the professionalism and volunteerism of firefighting and to respect and protect the unique culture and identity of volunteer firefighters in the implementation of public reform.

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