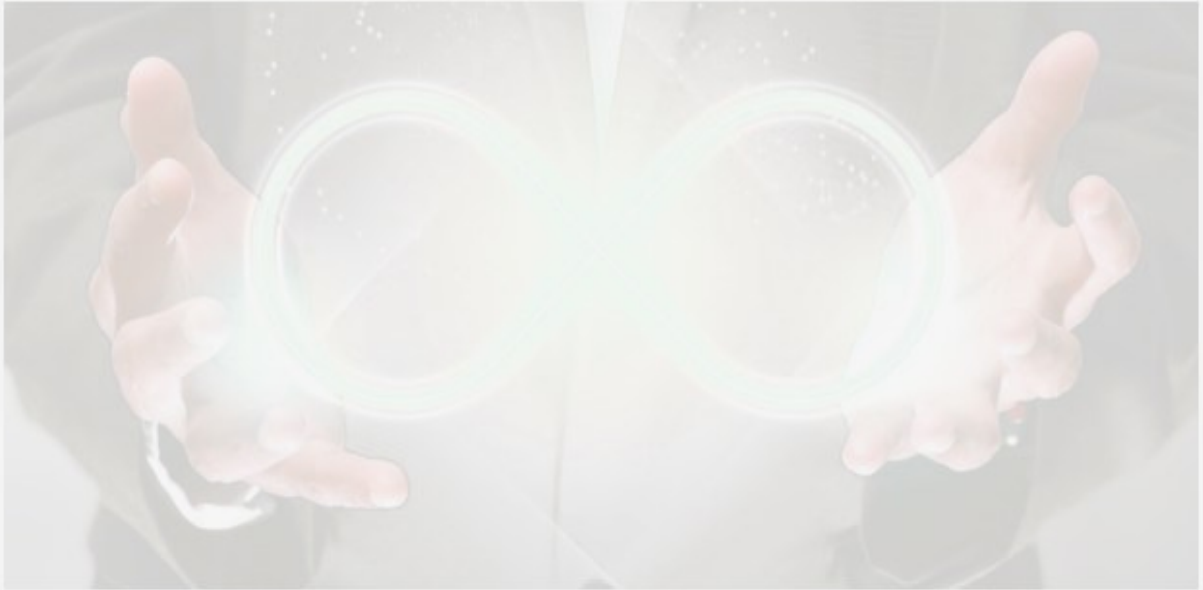


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The decline of institutional social frameworks
as a meaningful context. What now?

IMO Publishing House

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What now?

Adriaan Bekman

June 2025

Personal note

It is now 2025. I was born in 1947. 77 years of living in constantly changing circumstances.

My father and mother both married at the age of 33 and quickly had five children. I was the third. My father, born in The Hague, worked as a journalist, director of the newspaper De Zuid-Limburger, PR manager for the state mines, PR manager for the municipality of The Hague, and PR director for Holland America Line. He died at the age of 60. My mother(88) was a teacher until she married and took care of the family.

The family lived according to Catholic traditions, the children received an education that suited them, and they all turned out well. The relationships at home were crystal clear. Father was the leader, mother provided care, and the children fitted perfectly into this family life. At the age of 17, I went to study sociology in Rotterdam, first at NEH and later at Erasmus University. There, a social world opened up that you could enter as a student.

I participated in student politics, but as a member of the parish council in The Hague, I also conducted research into how Sunday relates to Monday in the lives of working people. Two separate worlds: religious life and work.

After graduating at the age of 21 and completing a year of military service as an officer, I applied for a job at Shell International, whose headquarters were close to my parents' home. I was hired with the task of initiating organizational development at Shell companies. This was something new at the time and would become an intensive movement to raise work practices, particularly leadership and collaboration, to a higher level.

After eight years of intensive work at Shell, I decided to move to the NPI Institute for Organizational Development, founded by Prof. Dr. Bernard Lievegoed. NPI offered me the opportunity to do consulting work worldwide. I was able to guide organizations and communities in their development, specifically by introducing a methodology for change.

The development work was based on a view of humanity that we as colleagues explored and developed together with our clients. The human being as an I-being, living in body, soul, and spirit, capable of developing and taking responsibility. Developing leadership skills, professional skills, social skills, and conceptual skills made it possible to “turn a dime into a quarter,”

something my mother had thought impossible (a dime will never become a quarter, she often said). Writing and publishing books about the insights, experiences, and concepts that developed in my work, teaching leadership to students as a lecturer/professor, and illustrating my own books brought me into contact with many facets of society.

From the age of 28, I played the saxophone, played in jazz bands, composed jazz pieces, and for several years now I have been composing piano and string quartet pieces.

Looking back on my life, I am struck by how I have been able to take my own steps throughout my life and take advantage of many social opportunities to lead a meaningful and creative life.

At the same time, I saw how all the institutional bodies of society were being expanded and managed, resulting in a huge increase in regulations, laws, rules, protocols, and data recording, which led to the comprehensive bureaucratization of society. It also became apparent how every community was influenced not only locally but also internationally, which led to increasing complexity and, consequently, a desire for control among those in charge.

In the course of my life, I observed how essential social institutions began to lose their power.

First of all, the churches, which in a short period of time lost their complete hold on people's moral lives and their coexistence. Then came political degeneration, with the binding force of political parties' fixed ideals and convictions being lost. This was followed by the collapse of important institutions, including taxation, transport, schools, hospitals, and universities. Then came the business world, which, under the pressure of laws, inspections, and technological innovations, began to lose its binding force on the people who worked there. Only 20% of people still have a connection with the organization; when I started out, it was definitely 80%.

I have to conclude that what was painstakingly built up over centuries from a sense of meaning, solidarity, and community spirit until the two world wars was then rapidly dismantled. In addition, since the industrial revolution and the far-reaching automation in all areas that followed, we have increasingly paid the price in successive crises: financial crisis, climate crisis, mental

disorder from young to old. These crises can no longer be resolved by the weakened social institutions, and it looks as if these crisis are here to stay and everyone will have to bear the consequences.

The social development of society over the last 70 years

70 years ago, society was structured along fixed institutional lines. These lines were predominantly shaped by religious beliefs.

Each religion had its own church, its own school, its own infrastructure, its own businesses, and its own political frameworks. In Dutch society, there was a principle that applied, and that was the “polder principle.” You had to bridge different visions and practices. A pragmatic attitude was required to do so.

In the 1960s, a movement developed in society that questioned many of the practices of everyday life. The Netherlands had become a country of sprouts air and needed a breath of fresh air. It was not only the Provo movement that represented this desire to break with the established order; almost all areas of society were looking for innovation and creative initiatives.

Initially, these were referred to as “alternatives,” but later they turned out to be the seeds of new practices. Pop music, total football, religious renewal, new political parties, organizational development in business, open colleges and universities, the emancipation of family life, and many other impulses set society and the people within it in motion.

The Netherlands gained a global reputation for innovation, social solidarity, and prosperity. Schoolmasterly and ministerial practices were pushed into the background. They were replaced by management thinking. Models and concepts gained popularity, and being in control became an increasingly important aspect of a comprehensively organized existence.

The parallel technological revolution, culminating in the internet, email, algorithms, and now artificial intelligence, has turned us into screen-watching individuals, with social interaction with family and friends becoming increasingly limited in our lives.

International developments such as migration, an increase in senseless violence, feelings of uncertainty and insecurity began to dominate people's minds and hearts. This led to the questioning of self-evident democratic

principles and the reinforcement of increasingly authoritarian attitude among world leaders, which was copied by others.

Institutional bodies are losing their binding effect

Democracy in a country depends on the proper functioning of social institutions such as the tax authorities, the police, the army, healthcare, education, and infrastructure such as roads, trains, and airplanes. These institutions function under good leadership. People who work in these institutions feel that they are making a meaningful contribution to the well-being of others. Customer awareness is important, as is involving stakeholders in the organized context. This creates a solid network that enables the political democratic governance of the country. These social institutions however lose their solid foundation when they are burdened with excessive demands from citizens and politicians.

Some examples.

The global reputation of the Dutch tax authorities was put at risk when they were forced to handle strange processes. Not only the collection of taxes, but now also the payment of subsidies and allowances. These are two completely different processes that require a completely different approach from all those involved.

Educational institutions are burdened with administrative record-keeping and critical inspection visits, which distracts attention from the core process.

Insurance companies are determining the availability of medicines.

Corona measures imposed by the government are bringing society to a standstill, which is hitting young people and the elderly particularly hard.

Migration and the influx of people from other countries where their lives and survival are at stake is leading to a radical closing of borders.

Wars over blood and soil, trade wars, racist domination and oppression are taking place worldwide.

The big and small crises

All these developments are leading to crises large and small. Everything we take for granted is being swept away by violence.

Wars on different continents.

Conflict within national communities, between the right and the left, for example.

Disagreements in boards of directors.

Conflicts between spouses

Neighborhood disputes

Internal conflicts inside people

In the past, we were able to keep many things outside our homes, but today everyone is confronted with conflicts and crises on different levels. I see this as a sign that every individual is confronted with the question of meaning: what is the meaning of all this and what meaning can I create for myself in order to be strengthened to turn these crises and conflicts into a meaningful next step in the lives of people and communities?

A local and a global order

Every person lives in different contexts, from private to work, to local, to regional, to national, to continental, to global, and to humanity as a whole. We cannot escape this because of the global economy and global politics. The many media outlets bring this to our attention every day.

The old boundaries are disappearing, and the world's population is now left on its own. This raises the question for all of us: How do I give shape and meaning to my life and to community life together with others?

What can we expect in the coming years?

After the Second World War, a social undercurrent emerged that we can characterize as “we help each other with our own resources.” Instead of being embedded in and able to fall back on a strong social infrastructure, we are now increasingly dependent on our own initiatives and sensemaking.

In the Netherlands, more than 4 million people are actively involved in voluntary care for others. This applies not only to physical support but especially to mental support. It is the encounter with the other person, the conversation with the other person that matters. In addition, there are more and more self-employed people who have to shape the entire process of work and private life themselves. To this end, they form networks of colleagues who help and support each other, especially in difficult times. On a small but also on a larger scale, “Islands of Humanity” are emerging, as Bernard Lievegoed described. In these islands of humanity, we learn not to diminish each other but to see each other a bit greater.

This means that personal leadership will play a major role in living together. Not vertically hierarchical leadership, but horizontal, dialogical personal leadership.

Existing and performing from the “I”-spirit in the soul is an art that we can practice together in our cooperation and coexistence. It bridges all cultural differences and is based on a universal truth. This truth has been passed down to us through generations by philosophers and other leaders of humanity, all inspired by spiritual beings such as Christ and Michael. It is about love, freedom, and respect.

Let us rid these forces of all the historical abuse of wanting to use them for our own convictions and free ourselves as free people to realize our ideals together. These are forces that are available to every human being if they see and practice attention to others and turning themselves toward the (unknown) other as a way of life in society.

This can be supported by good horizontal leadership in all institutions on all levels, less bureaucracy and management and more involvement of the people at work in the development of the organism and themselves.