

## UPDATE

### Young people's participation

#### *Introduction*

Young people's participation is still in its infancy in the Netherlands. The Convention on the Rights of the Child is characterized by the 3 Ps, namely Provision, Protection and Participation. However, the Dutch Government would appear to have forgotten the last P of the Convention. Fortunately this slightly seems to change since the start of the government *Balkenende IV* in 2007. The first signals are hopeful, but it is too early to draw conclusions.

The focus of the former government was focused almost exclusively on the 15% of young people who constitute what is referred to as 'the group of young people at risk' and ignores all other young people in the Netherlands. This one-sided focus was due to the Dutch Government's belief that the majority of young people will be able to look after themselves. Nevertheless, participation still plays a marginal role in all policy, but new initiatives seem to suggest a policy change. It is important not to keep focussing on problems but also give consideration to the favourable contribution that can be made by young people.

The Dutch Government had not drawn up a definition of young people's participation, and had not implemented a national overall policy. But in the mean time a change in favour and interest in young people's participation seems to have appeared. The problem remains that the young people's participation policy has been decentralized to the municipalities. However, the municipalities have not received sufficient time or support for the assumption of this responsibility. The municipalities are under an obligation to conduct a young peoples' participation policy, but because of a small frame setting way of acting and is it a moot point whether all municipalities will actually do so. The support provided to young people's organizations has deteriorated on the abolition of institutional subsidies and the support provided to the regional *Vorming, Training en Advies* (Education, Training and Advice' VTA) institutions.

Also volunteer work gets less attention under the current government. When the current temporary stimulation regulation ends, it will open up a gap. The risk of this is that valuable initiatives will disappear. The establishment of the social traineeship is not at all a alternative for an active volunteers policy.

#### **1.1 Recommendations from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2004**

##### *Recommendation 36 from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child*

Young people's participation (Article 12 of the CRC)

The Dutch Government needs to strengthen its support of the National Youth Council and youth organizations, and intensify its support of organizations of young people of foreign origin and integrate them into networks of dialogue and participation.

#### **Follow-up given to the recommendations**

Young people's participation has to be seen as a valuable contribution to the policy. It is important that young people how get in touch with participation in an early stage, also become citizens who participate more actively within society en have stronger democratic attitudes.

The institutional subsidy provided to the National Youth Council has been. Although the subsidy was not discontinued, the Dutch NGO Coalition for Children's Rights is of the opinion that the Dutch Government has not followed up the recommendation from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child by not strengthening its support of the National Youth Council and youth organizations. Nor has the Government adequately intensified its support of organizations of young people of foreign origin, and there has been virtually no integration of them into networks of dialogue and participation. The changes to the subsidy policy have greatly weakened the Dutch networks for young people's participation.

At the end of 2003 the Dutch Government made fundamental changes to its subsidy policy, also influenced by the wish to make more effective use of subsidies as an instrument, and to ensure that policy responsibilities were borne by the appropriate government layers. These general changes in the Dutch Government's subsidy policy have also had an influence on the support provided to young people's participation.

The new subsidy policy has resulted in the complete phasing out of the institutional subsidies provided to youth organizations. In the first instance organizations of young people with a disability were excluded from this phasing-out scheme. However, it has since been announced that the institutional subsidies for these organizations will also be phased out, as a result of which the institutional subsidies for these organizations will have been phased out completely after 2009.

According to the Government the subsidies are being phased out gradually to enable youth organizations to find other funding for their activities. The institutional subsidies have been replaced by two new subsidy schemes offering project subsidies, namely the *Buurt-Onderwijs-Sport Impuls* ('Neighbourhood-Education-Sport Impetus, *BOS Impuls*) and the *Tijdelijke Stimuleringsregeling Vrijwilligerswerk voor en door Jeugd* ('Temporary incentive scheme for volunteer work for and by young people'). The *BOS Impuls* is also a temporary scheme, and all applications for subsidies must be submitted by municipalities. Consequently the *BOS Impuls* does not contribute to following up the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's recommendation to strengthen the support given to the National Youth Council and youth organizations.

The *Tijdelijke Stimuleringsregeling Vrijwilligerswerk voor en door Jeugd (TSVJ)* was in operation from 2004 to 2006 inclusive. This temporary scheme made 7.1 million euros available to national volunteer organizations to strengthen the local volunteer networks and enable more young people to carry out local volunteer network. In the longer term this temporary incentive scheme was intended to train up to 19,000 new young volunteers. The reviews of the applications for a subsidy were based on factors such as innovation and disadvantaged young people. The *TSVJ* has been continued in the form of the *Tijdelijke regeling Vrijwillige Inzet voor en door Jeugd 2007-2008* ('Temporary scheme for voluntary deployment for and by young people, 2007-2008'). This scheme makes funds of 4.7 million available, and provides subsidies to comparable projects.

The Dutch NGO Coalition for Children's Rights emphasises the importance of structural rather than temporary financial support for voluntary projects for and by young people. The Dutch NGO Coalition for Children's Rights is sorry to see that the budget for the *Vrijwillige Inzet voor en door Jeugd* will no longer be available after 2009. The funds will be transferred to the municipalities, as a result of which there will be no further support for a national young people's participation network. Several scientists are warning about the social consequences of this frame. The loss of a youth people's participation network which stimulate young people to grow up as active citizens can eventually cause for more expenses for the society.

## 1.2 Trend

A variety of trends can be observed in young people's participation in the Netherlands. The major trends are the Government's negative focus on young people in the form of its concentration on problems and deployment of young people's participation as a means of prevention, and the decentralization and project-based nature of Dutch policy on young people's participation.

### *Negative focus*

The Dutch youth policy is primarily focused on ensuring that young people do not fall between two stools, and on helping those young people who *have* fallen between two stools find their place. The Convention on the Rights of the Child is characterized by the three Ps, namely Provision, Protection and Participation. The Dutch NGO Coalition for Children's Rights is of the opinion that the Dutch Government has forgotten the last P of the Convention. There is no definition of young people's participation or national overall policy. Young people's participation is regarded as an element of preventive youth policy; it is a means of enabling young people to learn skills and to become independent and socially-involved citizens, and a means of preventing young people from dropping out from society. Young people's participation is not appreciated as an objective as such. In the opinion of the Dutch Government the objective of young people's participation is to ensure that young people can achieve an effective performance in *Schooling, work and society*

Consequently the Dutch Government focuses its policy on the 15% at risk of coming into problems rather than on the remaining 85% that the Government believes can look after themselves. The Dutch

Government focuses primarily on the group of young people at risk since this is perceived as the most efficient use of the limited resources available. Trying to prevent young people from coming into problems was also the main objective of *Operatie Jong* ('Operation Young'). This emphasis on prevention was also reflected in the 12 items on *Operatie Jong's* agenda. None of these agenda items devoted attention to young people's participation or information for young people. The great emphasis placed on problems left no scope for attention to the positive contribution young people can make to society, or to the importance of enabling young people to develop into active citizens.

#### *Decentralization*

The young people's participation policy has been fully decentralized to the municipalities, and the national policy is being phased out. The objective of this decentralization is to bring the decision-making process closer to the young people involved. The financial resources required to support the activities of youth organizations and training programmes designed to improve young people's participation are being decentralized. However, the Government has not issued the municipalities any guidelines or minimum requirements for local young people's participation policy; consequently the municipalities are not under an obligation to formulate policy relating to young people's participation, and municipalities opting to develop a young people's participation policy are all required to re-invent the wheel.

The quality of this policy – if there actually *is* a policy – varies greatly between the municipalities. It is certainly a moot point whether all municipalities possess the capacity and the resources required to conduct a high-quality young people's policy. The absence of a framework policy results in fragmentation in young people's participation.

#### *Project-based policy*

The Netherlands' young people's policy is largely of a project-based nature. There is no structural viewpoint on young people's participation. Nevertheless a large number of temporary policy projects and incentive schemes are continually being introduced, thereby resulting in a large number of policy plans – but little change in the implementation.

### **1.3 The Dutch NGO Coalition for Children's Rights' concerns**

#### *The right of the child to a personal opinion*

##### *A negative focus on young people*

One of the Dutch NGO Coalition for Children's Rights major concerns is that Dutch youth policy for a long time did not assign priority to young people's participation, in spite of the positive signals from the current government there is no reason for jubilation. The Dutch Government has not formulated an explicit definition of young people's participation. The Dutch NGO Coalition for Children's Rights understands young people's participation as the opportunity for young people (between 0 and 18) to think about, take part in and be involved in the decision-making relating to issues of relevance to them. Consequently this extends beyond being merely a respectable member of the public who goes to school or is a member of civil-service organizations; it means that young people also have a say in the design of their environment. Disguise participation needs to be prevented. Letting young people be part of a delegation without a substantive contribution, but not looking good for the picture, is not participation.

Prior to the 2006 national elections the Dutch NGO Coalition for Children's Rights called on the new government to ensure for the intensive involvement of young people in the development of all new youth policy, and consequently also called on the government to encourage the development and guidance of young people's policy. Young people's participation in institutions, schools and government bodies needs a statutory basis<sup>ii</sup>, participation must begin at early an age as possible, and adults must take young people seriously. Young people are equally able to participate as adults, although the manner in which they participate will vary according to age category. Young people's participation is possible solely when society develops an attitude of valuing the opinion of young people. Professionals working with young people need to be trained to listen to young people's opinions and actively ask them for their opinion. The Dutch Government focused for a long in almost exclusive concentration on the group of young people at risk. However, youth policy should not be restricted to the group of young people at risk, and for this reason the Dutch NGO Coalition for Children's Rights advocates the implementation of an overall and favourable youth policy. Young people should not only be perceived as a potential source of problems, but also as a creative source in society who require support in their development. Providing this support in the form of material resources and training to young people who dedicate themselves to youth organizations, sports clubs

and other voluntary organizations will enable them to develop into active members of the public and offer a creative contribution to society. The establishment of the Local Government award is a positive example of taking young people's participation serious. The Dutch NGO Coalition for Children's Rights is enthusiastic about the will of the current Government to take young people's participation more serious than the former Government. Also the support to several youth representatives and the positive attitude towards a Children's ombudsman give reason for optimism. The structural support to those initiatives contributes to a serious, recognizable and effective form of young people's participation.

#### *Decentralization*

As such, there is nothing wrong with decentralization, and bringing decision-making closer to young people is a favourable development. However, the absence of a national framework policy results in fragmentation. In addition, pursuant to the decentralization of young people's participation policy national schemes are being phased out since these are to be transferred to the municipalities. However, it takes time to develop young people's participation policy, and the national schemes are being terminated before local replacement networks have been set up. Although municipalities are considered to develop young people's participation at a local level, the current approach is still to informal. The requirements imposed on municipalities in the absence of guidelines to assist them in formulating this policy may result in municipalities regarding the development of a positive youth policy as an excessive burden, with the risk that young people's participation does not take note of that. .

The Government is of the opinion that young people's participation is now an element of the local democratic process and that it would be inappropriate for the Government to intervene in that process. However, this is a political choice made by the Government. The Dutch NGO Coalition for Children's Rights advocates the development of a national framework youth policy. Implementing this framework policy will ensure that municipalities are thoroughly informed about national and international developments in youth policy, that best practices are exchanged, and that municipal youth policies meet certain minimum criteria. The municipalities retain their powers to decide on the specific form of the local youth policy and the prioritization. However, the municipalities are no longer compelled to repeatedly re-invent the wheel, and they receive the guidelines they need to develop a positive youth policy that achieves an appropriate performance.

The decentralization of the financial support given to youth organizations and the training and advising of young volunteers is resulting in the deterioration of the national young people's participation network.

#### *Subsidies for youth organizations*

The Dutch NGO Coalition for Children's Rights is concerned about the changes in the Dutch young people's participation subsidy policy. Although the Dutch Government states that it recognizes the importance of young people's participation and engagement in civil-society organizations, this is not reflected in the support the Government gives to these activities in its youth policy. According to the Social and Cultural Planning Board (SCP) this is also applicable to the participation of all members of the public, and consequently the SCP has doubts as to whether the municipalities are in a position to provide appropriate support to voluntary work.<sup>iii</sup>

The phasing-out of the institutional subsidies provided to youth organizations has caused serious damage to the network of organizations that enable young people to devise and implement projects. The subsidies were withdrawn within a very short period of time, and there are few alternatives for these subsidies. The phasing-out of institutional subsidies and the transition to project subsidies has reduced the autonomy of Dutch youth organizations. Youth organizations wishing to come into consideration for subsidies are required to comply with priorities imposed by the authorities. Consequently youth organizations are less able to accommodate needs expressed by young people, thereby actually reducing the opportunities for young people to devise and implement social projects. These project subsidies increase the Government's control over the form of young people's participation.

The *Tijdelijke Stimuleringsregeling Vrijwilligerswerk voor en door Jeugd* ('Temporary incentive scheme for volunteer work for and by young people', TSVJ) does not restrict applications for subsidies to youth organizations largely operated by volunteers. Consequently smaller youth organizations are forced to compete with larger welfare organizations which can contract professionals to draw up applications for

a subsidy. Youth organizations have much smaller resources available for these applications, as a result of which subsidies are more likely to be granted to applications drawn up by professionals. The transition from institutional to project subsidies has resulted in attention being focused on innovative projects. Often no funds are available to continue innovative projects which achieve favourable results.

The TSVJ increases the emphasis placed on the efficiency of projects carried out by youth organizations. The youth organizations are compelled to carry out projects that lead to quantifiable results. However, the Dutch NGO Coalition for Children's Rights is of the opinion that the short-term quantification of major results achieved by young organizations' projects is not feasible. The authorities would appear to focus on the number and nature of young people reached by a project rather than on what young people learn from a project and on what effect this has on their performance as active members of the public. The outcome is more important than the output; unfortunately the outcome is also much more difficult to quantify.

The Dutch NGO Coalition for Children's Rights is also of the opinion that young people who are not members of a youth organization should be offered an opportunity and support to take initiatives to set up new youth organizations.

#### *Training*

The provision of support to youth organizations in the form of material resources, training and advice is of great importance to the appropriate performance of a young people's participation network. Providing training and advice to young people enables them to participate fully in society; young people need to acquire specific skills if they are to be able to participate in an appropriate manner, such as the ability to express their opinion clearly, and consequently this should be an important element of an overall positive youth policy. For this reason the Dutch NGO Coalition for Children's Rights is extremely disappointed about the termination of an important subsidy scheme for volunteer training. The welfare policy subsidy scheme granted the regional *Vorming, Training en Advies* (Education, Training and Advice', VTA) institutions institution subsidies for the low-cost training of volunteers in a wide variety of skills. The VTA institutions provided support to tens of thousands of volunteers in the form of training that enabled them to improve the quality of their activities and develop their personal skills. One of the VTA institutions' spearheads was young people's participation, and they provided training to many young people with key positions in youth organizations who were then able to disseminate their knowledge within their organizations.

#### *Project-based policy*

The last trend which was distinguished was the increasingly project-based nature of the Dutch youth policy. A long-term viewpoint on young people's participation is required to set the course of the policy. This long-term viewpoint serves as the basis for a structural policy that devotes continuous attention to young people's participation.

#### *The right of the child to information*

The provision of information is an important condition to be met for young people's participation, since young people can take full part in society only once they are aware of their opportunities and rights. The Netherlands has not implemented a national overall youth information policy. The youth information policy is an element of the preventive youth policy that falls under the responsibility of the municipalities. National youth information campaigns focus on the prevention of (health) problems amongst young people such as alcohol and drug abuse, becoming infected with sexually transmitted diseases, and injuries caused by fireworks.

The Dutch NGO Coalition for Children's Rights advocates the implementation of a national overall youth information policy laying down the minimum requirements to be met by municipal youth information policy. One of the major requirements relates to the need for the information to be compatible with young people's needs, and for this reason the information they receive should not be restricted to protecting them from hazards but should also extend to informing them how they can make their contribution to and exert an influence on their milieu. Consequently young people need to be involved in the preparation of (large-scale) information campaigns intended for them. This ensures that the provision of information is brought into line with young people's needs, since the young people are themselves involved in the dissemination of information (peer education).

The *Kinder- en Jongerenrechtswinkels* ('Child and Youth Legal Advice Centres') constitute an

important element of the Dutch young people's information network, and consequently the Dutch NGO Coalition for Children's Rights is extremely concerned about the Government's termination of financial support to these centres.

The provision of appropriate information is also of importance in rendering the national and local authorities' policy compatible with young people's milieu, and consequently the Dutch NGO Coalition for Children's Rights welcomes the development of a national Youth Monitor. However, the Dutch NGO Coalition for Children's Rights is disappointed to note that the Youth Monitor does not include indicators for young people's participation or the provision of information to young people. If this is not going to change, despite the hearing of involved parties by the Minister of Health, Welfare and Sports, no action seems to be undertaken.

#### *Children's ombudsman*

As stated earlier the Dutch NGO Coalition for Children's Rights advocates the appointment of a Children's ombudsman. The Children's ombudsman will also be able to monitor the right to participation and the right to information as laid down in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. A Children's ombudsman would be able to supervise the inclusion of young people's participation and the provision of information to young people in Dutch youth policy at both a national, the Dutch NGO Coalition for Children's Rights is pleased that the current Minister of Youth and Family seems to advancing this point.

## **1.4 Recommendations to the Dutch Government**

### *Article 12*

1 The Dutch youth policy needs to adopt a positive approach. For this reason the Government should draw up a National Plan of Action for Young People's Participation, in collaboration with the civil-society organizations active for young people, which specifies a long-term viewpoint on positive youth policy so as to counter the current ad-hoc nature of the youth policy. This National Action Plan should also extend to policy on the provision of information to young people. The National Action Plan for Young People's Participation should specify the Government's role as a centre of expertise, the minimum criteria to be met by municipal policy, and the role to be played by the civil-society organizations. This framework policy is necessary both to put young people's participation on the map in the Netherlands and to prevent fragmentation.

### *Articles 12 and 13*

2 Ensure that young people are intensively involved in the formulation of new youth policies at all administrative layers. Young people need to be involved from the time of the issue identification for the policy right through to the implementation and evaluation.

### *Article 12*

3 Municipalities should be placed under the obligation to formulate a young people's participation policy. The national authorities should offer guidelines to municipalities for the formulation of young people's policy so as to avoid the need for the municipalities to repeatedly re-invent the wheel. Young people must be involved in the development of this policy to ensure that it is compatible with their needs.

### *Articles 4 and 12*

4 Arrange for the provision of structural and appropriate material support, and for regional and national youth organizations. These subsidies must be earmarked for youth organizations since their volunteers cannot usually compete with professional institutions.

5 Arrange for structural and appropriate training facilities that devote specific attention to young people's participation.

6 The professionalization of youth organizations must be support by financing administrative grants. Young people need to be able to make time available to devote attention to youth organizations. The Government already provides administrative-grants support to political youth organizations and to student and pupil organizations; this support should be expanded to include all youth organizations.

7 Introduce a structural incentive scheme to enable young people to take their own participation initiatives, since many young people who are not members of a youth organization need to be offered an opportunity to participate.

*Article 17*

8 Arrange for adequate support for the young people's information network such as the *Kinder- en Jongerenrechtswinkels* ('Child and Youth Legal Advice Centres'), *Kindertelefoon* ('childline') and *Jongeren Informatiepunten* ('Youth Information Points'), so that young people know how and where they can participate.

9 Include indicators for young people's participation and young people's information in the Youth Monitor.

*Articles 4 and 12*

10 Young people's participation in institutions, schools and government bodies must be given a statutory basis. Young people's participation is not a favour, but a right.

*Article 4*

11 The Children's ombudsman to be appointed by the Government should be granted explicit powers relating to young people's participation.

*Article 12*

12 Participation must be encouraged from a very early age. For this reason the training courses given to people who are to work with children should devote attention to how professionals can offer children scope for participation.

---

i *Operatie Jong* ('Operation Young') was launched by seven ministries in 2004 with the objective of improving the cohesion of youth policy. A joint agenda was formulated that was used until 2007. The Government also appointed a Commissioner for Youth Policy to advise the ministries.

*Operatie Jong* was concluded on 1 January 2007.

ii The Dutch NGO Coalition for Children's Rights (2006) 10-point plan for the rights of the child policy and youth policy.

<http://www.kinderrechten.nl/site/pages/volwassenen/nieuws/10puntenflyerv2.pdf>

iii Social and Cultural Planning Board (2005), *De sociale staat van Nederland 2005*. The Hague, p 205. According to the SCP both policy proposals and implemented policies exhibit an emphatic focus on civil society and the participation of the public. "Nevertheless, volunteer organizations are confronted with a wide range of cutbacks in subsidies. The new *Wet maatschappelijke ondersteuning* ('Social Support Act', WMO) assigns municipalities the duty of encouraging volunteer work. However, it a moot point whether the municipalities possess the capacity and resources required to fulfil this duty. An earlier report argued that these cutbacks in subsidies [...] could cause problems for a wide range of organizations."