

T H E N E T H E R L A N D S

R E P O R T

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THE OTHER FACE

In 1995, the Dutch Queen declared in her annual speech: «*Hidden poverty and social exclusion must be dealt with unanimously and with force. With this statement the Dutch government has put the poverty problem on the political agenda*». The policy paper «The other side of the Netherlands: dealing with prevention and fighting poverty and social exclusion», is a first concrete step in implementing the recommendations of the World-top of Social Development. The policy paper shows that the government aims at creating more jobs for the unemployed (350.000 extra jobs) and aims at giving city-councils more freedom for financial support of people in problematic financial situations.

Other goals are a more integral solution of individual debts with special attention for prevention and improving the information about special financial support programs. Further aims are to improve the research on poverty. Researchers will monitor the development in poverty in the Netherlands for the coming years.

Finally, the government plans to organise an annual «social conference» (up until the year 2000) where NGO's and the government meet, discuss and contribute to fighting poverty and social exclusion. The first conference was held in October 1996, together with the publication of the first report «Poor Netherlands».

FIGURES

Poverty can be looked upon in a subjective or an objective way. The first approach investigates poverty as an individual experience. In the latter approach, individual judgement is not relevant. Poverty is also a relative concept, related to the standard of living in a society.

The World-bank considers one dollar a day the minimum level of subsistence.

Dutch re-searchers of two important research-institutes (SCP & CBS) call the poverty limit «the social minimum». This minimum level is in the Netherlands Fl. 1852, – monthly for a couple. For an individual it is Fl. 926, – and for an individual parent 1296 Dutch guilders a month, excluding a holiday-bonus. Social security for couples is equal to the minimum-wage. Individuals get half. If persons can prove they live alone, it is possible to get a bonus of 370 guilders a month.

According to the Dutch research «Poor Netherlands», 4 to 5%

of the population (between 230.000 and 319.000 households) are living below the social minimum. Another 7–9% (27.000 to 66.000 households) live on or just a little above this minimum. The number of people with a low income (118% of social minimum) is even bigger (900.000 households in 1994). There are no figures available yet on the number of children living in poverty.

Generally, women run a bigger risk to live in poverty than men. The main reasons are: divorces, insufficient or no recent job experiences and a lack of child-care centres.

Other groups with special poverty-risks are: unemployed people, individual parents, people adapted to financial support by the government, low educated people. Minorities living in one of the four big cities (Amsterdam, The Hague, Rotterdam and Utrecht) run a higher poverty risk. Illegal immigrants do not get financial support at all.

TRENDS

The longer poverty lasts, the more serious its consequences are. For example, «big expenses» can only be covered with more difficulty. Almost half of the households with a low income (around 397.000) find themselves almost four times a year in this situation. This concerns mainly elderly women.

Although the percentage of poor people decreased slightly since 1980, the intensity of poverty increased. In 1983, the average shortage of income was 2.200 guilders, in 1995 it was 3.500 guilders. The recent research «Poor Netherlands» shows that 22.000 households are short of food. 43.000 cannot afford a daily hot meal and 160.000 households do not have enough money for heating and telephone. 576.000 thousand cannot buy new clothes.

These issues also cover the surviving strategy of poor people: first clothes, secondly heating and telephone, thirdly rent, water, energy and finally food. «Poor Netherlands» concludes that poverty and social exclusion will be a permanent situation for a large number of people.

CAUSES

A household in the Netherlands can go below the «minimum

level» for different reasons. Poverty is a cumulative problem. It is a congestion of setbacks such as unemployment, bad health and higher expenses for rent etc. Especially the elderly and women are vulnerable for these setbacks.

Debts

Unimportant factor are debts. 150.000 to 200.000 households have problematic debts. Very often these households have little social and economic perspectives. The government intends to work hard on reducing these debts. City-councils will get more possibilities in debt relief.

Income support and extra financial support

People with a minimum income make little use of rent subsidies and other regulations for financial support. According to the poverty-researchers this causes half of all the poverty. The city-council, for example, can also give special financial support for renewing a washing-machine, but households hardly use this possibility for reasons of shame or fear of detailed and difficult administrative procedures. In particular elderly people do not use special financial support and health insurances.

Unemployment

The main cause for poverty is unemployment. 83% of the households living on the minimum level do not receive a salary. People who are not able to work, like the elderly, occupational disabled people and welfare mothers, are forced to live in poverty. The government wants to stimulate job participation, based on the idea that «paid work is the main source for income and social participation». Around 350 thousand extra jobs will be created at the bottom of the labour market. These extra jobs, however, are not sufficient to really fight unemployment, according to the poverty researchers and many NGOs. There are simply not enough jobs for everyone. NGOs are also disturbed by the fact that the government has not talked yet about a radical re-allocation of work in creating jobs for everyone.

For a working individual parent on the social minimum the government stimulates extra support for child day-care centres. Women's organizations also stress the importance of additional investments in special educational programs for women, especially now, when the government is abandoning many of these programs.

Housing costs

Housing costs and local taxes are an increasing burden on incomes. Half of all the households with a low income pay 25%. The government aims to achieve the same percentage for all the households in the Netherlands. According to some critics this does not solve the problems, because housing rents have been rising quickly over the last few years.

The government also spends more money on care-centres of homeless people. One of the criticisms of NGOs is that the present growth in the number of homeless people is also caused by financial cuts in mental health care.

Health care and education

In their publication «Social mirror», a group of NGOs accuse the government of paying hardly any attention to health care and education in its poverty policies. The present situation shows that sick and low educated people have less and less chances on the labour market.

NGO-VIEWS

NGOs stress the importance of focussing on the reality of the people concerned. Their main criticism is that the government talks about the people concerned, rather than talking with them. The policy should be more focussed on using human social energy for improving their situation. Bishop Muskens of the city of Breda Summar public awareness about poverty by making it a hot in his speech. Many Dutch NGOs have been discussing poverty and social exclusion.

One of the fora for debate is provided by the working group «Social Policy» of the NCDO (National Committee for International Cooperation and Sustainable Development). Its goal is keeping the problems of poverty, social exclusion and unemployment on the political and social agenda. Around eighty NGOs, varying from poverty organizations and gender groups to environmental and development organizations, participate in this working group. These NGOs also participated actively in the preparations for the UN-conference on Social Development in Copenhagen in 1995.

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