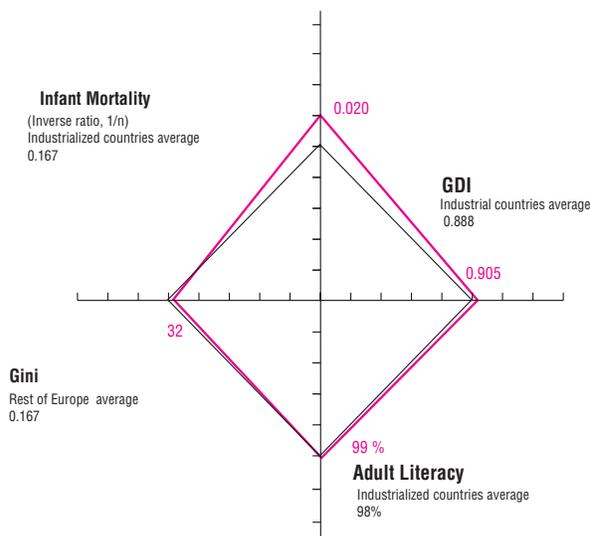


• GERARD OUDE ENGBERINK¹

POLDERS AND TIDES



The Equity Diamond: National values in terracotta compared to regional ones in blue.
 Source: **Infant mortality:** UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children, 1998*; **Adult literacy:** UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children, 1998*; **GDI** (Gender Development index): UNDP, *Human Development Report 1998*; **GINI:** World Bank, *World Development indicators 1998*. (The regional average for this indicator was calculated by *Social Watch*).

pensioners, the disabled, single-parent families, and long-term unemployed. Among them where a surprisingly large number of persons of ethnic origin and women.

By the end of the seventies, the Netherlands had reached a relatively high standard of national well-being and societal decency. The effects of economic recession reinforced by economic recovery policies, however, produced a number of unintended and unwanted consequences. Faced by the need for economic restructuring to stay competitive in a global market, by growing claims on social benefits, and by the influx of many immigrants at the bottom of the social pyramid, consecutive governments in the eighties opted for a neo-liberal approach to economic and social problems.

In the neo-liberal approach, regeneration of the economy and fostering of economic growth was considered to be the definitive solution. The «new prosperity» resulting from economic restructuring would slowly trickle down to those who temporarily suffered the negative consequences. Economic progress had to be financed out of the cutbacks on collective expenditure.

Accordingly, the well-developed Dutch welfare state, which guaranteed every legal resident a decent standard of living and largely succeeded in fulfilling this mandate, was reduced, and freed funds were invested in innovative economic projects. By the end of the eighties and beginning of the nineties, economic recovery was successful beyond expectation and the Dutch economy flourished as never before (the booming «polder-model»).

The religiously-held belief that wealth would trickle down, however, did not hold true. On the contrary, processes of social exclusion in many dimensions of Dutch society posed a threat to social cohesion. Groups most affected were those who depended on social benefits at minimum level: old age pensioners, the disabled, single-parent families, and long-term unemployed. Among them where a surprisingly large number of persons of ethnic ori-

The national government recognised in 1995 that «some policies to cut collective expenditure might have gone too far» and that poverty had «reappeared» in the Netherlands. Groups most affected were those who depended on social benefits at minimum level: old age

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gin and women. The main causes of their social and economic exclusion were the lack of financial resources to fully participate in society and their diminishing access to support systems for which eligibility criteria had been raised.

The national government recognised in 1995 that «some policies to cut collective expenditure might have gone too far» and that poverty had «reappeared» in the Netherlands. **To counteract these tendencies, policies were developed to combat poverty and foster social integration.** These policies present a new characteristic: they all accentuate the participation of the «objects of policy» in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of the policies in question.

By 1998, these measures seem to have succeeded in halting the downward movement of some groups, but not in turning the tide. The affected population groups appear to be caught in forms of hard core unemployment and financial problems and they are somehow segregated from mainstream development in Dutch society. About 4% of all households are caught in a permanent condition of poverty; 11% of all children live in households with a minimum income.

Housing costs (rent, energy, taxes), which increased over the years to an average of 50% of the total household income in 1997, constitute the main financial burden for people living on social welfare or state pensions. Specific measures to combat long-term unemployment do not seem to save people from poverty.

THE COMMITMENTS

Commitments 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 have led to new policies in various fields of action in the Netherlands, but these can hardly be called decisive. Policies adopted in the wake of the Summit have to be viewed as corrective measures taken within the neo-liberal «economistic» framework, which is still viewed as inescapable and therefore dominant.

Although moral commitment to the values of education and health (Commitments 6a and 6b) is high, policies in these areas suffer from long-term cutbacks in collective expenditures. Corrective policies are gradually being developed. **The Dutch government, supported by a large majority of the population, is still deeply committed to international cooperation, especially with respect to Africa** (Commitment 8), to social development as basic condition for sustained and sustainable economic growth (Commitment 9).

The issue of democratisation of policy formulation, implementation and evaluation in the Netherlands deserves special attention. The commitments undertaken at the Social Summit, the Fourth World Conference on Women, and Habitat II in Istanbul, and by the Comité de Sages (European Commission) repeatedly stress the need for participation of the «grassroots level» and its organisations and for development of partnerships among the various stakeholders. Following the Copenhagen Summit, the Dutch government organised «participatory conferences» in two consecutive years (1996, 1997). **Contrary to the idea of participation and partnership, however, the conferences were perceived by «the benefit claimants» themselves as characteristic «top-down affairs» in which «the bottom» played only a marginal role.**

In Parliament, a number of politicians put the issue of inclusion of the expertise of grassroots organisations in the formulation and implementation of anti-poverty policies onto the political agenda. Consequently, legislation was enacted to oblige local governments to include «client participation» in the development of social policies. In many municipalities, this «client participation» is somehow taking shape, albeit often still with marginal influence.

The grassroots organisations involved in this process (mostly voluntary organisations of benefit recipients with meagre means and high commitment) stress empowerment of the claimants as the major issue. Empowerment should be facilitated, not only through financial and organisational support, but also through recognition of the value of the experience of benefit recipients in attaining the goals of a democratic social system.

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- The National Committee for International Cooperation (NCDO) with about 80 member organisations, is a forum for debate on social policy issues in the Netherlands. The steering committee of the social policy work group endorsed the report.