

JANUARY 2001

The Netherlands

*Documentation*  
is a periodical  
of the Ministry of  
Health, Welfare  
and Sport

# D<sup>o</sup>cumentation

## Policy on voluntary work in the Netherlands

### **Background**

The official definition of voluntary work is "work done in any organized context that is carried out without obligation and without pay for other people or the community whereby the person doing the work is not dependent on it for his or her livelihood"<sup>1</sup>.

Voluntary work in the Netherlands plays an important part in health care, welfare work, nature conservation and the environment, culture, education and recreation. Volunteers contribute to the community. They take their social responsibilities seriously and in doing so represent a counterbalance to professionalized institutions. Their work contributes to the social quality of the community.

Voluntary work offers individuals the opportunity to reduce social isolation and in doing so provides avenues for self-fulfilment and development.

### **History**

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, social and cultural traditions in the Netherlands changed radically as a result of industrialization. Here too we find the foundations of today's voluntary work.

Voluntary work in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was carried out primarily by a small group of wealthy individuals who, because of the very widespread poverty among most of the population, devoted themselves to the general cause of the community. Church and private institutions were

<sup>1</sup> *Social Quality, Work in Progress (Sociale Kwaliteit, Werk in uitvoering)*, 1999-2002 Programme Spearheads, Welfare Policy Document (*Programmalijnen Welzijnsnota 1999-2002*). H. 6 2000-2002 Voluntary Sector Policy, Overall Plan (*Vrijwilligersbeleid 2000-2002, Plan van aanpak*).

also involved in caring for the poor, and in doing so involved many volunteers. Government involvement increased at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and social security measures were embedded in legislation and regulations. This improved many people's standard of living. There was more free time available, and consequently more people undertook voluntary work in all sorts of associations.

Since then being a volunteer has no longer depended on the social class into which someone was born. Involvement is based instead on a voluntary commitment to a principle.

Between 1945 and 1965 a welfare state was created in the Netherlands. All sorts of amenities on the social front grew rapidly after the Second World War. The government embedded this initiative that originated in the private sector in legislation and regulations, and subsidized or regulated it through national insurance schemes.

What started as supplementary assistance for the weakest in society had developed into a package of provisions for the vast majority of the population. Examples are the health insurance funds, unemployment benefits, the state retirement pension and incapacity benefits.

The provisions of private bodies are no longer solely intended for their own constituencies. Care providers are becoming experts through special training.

This trend towards professionalization has major implications for the traditional role of the volunteer. Many of the tasks originally carried out by volunteers have been taken over by paid workers. The health care system has become professional and comprehensive. As a result of this there is no need for volunteers on the one hand and no stimulus to become a volunteer on the other.

Since 1965 new types of voluntary work have emerged. This trend is linked to the advent of new social movements and criticism of the performance of, for example, institutionalized welfare work. Women's refuges are an example of a new form of voluntary work. The growth of this 'anti' movement encourages more people to look critically at the performance of paid workers. People also wanted a greater say in matters that concerned them personally. The creation of parents associations in schools, environmental focus groups and neighbourhood committees are examples.

The last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were characterized by individualization. This had an impact on the willingness of the public to do voluntary work. In the 2000 Social and Cultural Report from the Social and Cultural Planning Office (SCP)<sup>2</sup> it is pointed out that while there has been a substantial drop in the membership of political parties, trade unions and church organizations, this has had no effect on the overall level of voluntary work in the Netherlands (Table 1). According to the SCP investigation into how people spend their time, the number of people doing voluntary work has been fairly stable since 1975. Approximately three million people do voluntary work in all kinds of associations and organizations (Table 2). This is about one fifth of the Dutch population. The average time spent by a volunteer doing voluntary work is around 15 hours a month. Most voluntary work takes place in the volunteer's residential and social environments. This does not include help given to family and neighbours. Seen in an international context, the Netherlands is towards the middle of the group (Table 3).

### Trends

Trends in society impact the demand and the supply of voluntary work. The tight labour market and equal opportunities have been the major factors affecting the availability of volunteers. During the nineteen-eighties more people on unemployment and incapacity benefits started doing voluntary work. The improved state of the economy has reduced their availability. The demand for labour has also resulted in more older people, school children and students giving priority to paid work. Furthermore, more women have jobs and therefore have less time for voluntary work. Increased prosperity means that there are competing alternatives to spend free time, for example television, surfing on the Internet and vacations.

Trends in the community translate into both threats and opportunities. Demographic trends, such as ageing and immigration, are making participation by new groups of volunteers possible. A new trend is that companies are increasingly prepared to make facilities available for voluntary work and to encourage their employees to do voluntary work, in the boss's time or in their own.

The demand for voluntary work is also subject to change as a result, for instance, of the increased professionalism and growing awareness in relation to nature conservation and the environment. However, the expansion in the

<sup>2</sup> 2000 Social and Cultural Report (*Sociaal en Cultureel Plan Rapport*), SCP The Hague, September 2000.

health care sector also resulted in sick, elderly and handicapped people asking for support at home. They are therefore calling on informal help, some of which is provided by volunteers.

**Government policy**

The Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport (*Ministerie van Volksgezondheid, Welzijn en Sport*) coordinates the activities of other departments and stimulates them.

Each of the departments is supposed to pursue its "own" voluntary sector policy.

Local authorities and provinces also have their own voluntary sector policies. The provinces have their own support functions, which have a part to play in disseminating and implementing new methodologies at local level. Local authorities and provinces are working together with central government on plans to reinforce local voluntary work.

Broadly speaking there are three types of organization:

- a. Organizations of members for members (sports, scouting);
  - b. Campaigning organizations (environmental focus groups);
  - c. Aid organizations (Red Cross).
- Each category of organizations has its own specific support needs.

A joint social agenda makes it possible to arrive at agreements about voluntary sector policy between the different levels of government and other parties. The result of this has been incorporated in the 1999-2002 Programme Spearheads Welfare Policy Document (*Programmalijnen Welzijnsnota 1999-2002*)<sup>3</sup>. The elaboration and harmonization of the actions in the voluntary sector take place in a number of ways, including through consultation between central government, the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (*Vereniging van Nederlandse Gemeenten - VNG*) and the Association of Provincial Authorities (*InterProvinciaal Overlegorgaan - IPO*).

**Policy players**

*a. Local authorities/the local level*

The Netherlands has approximately 500 local authorities. The local level is the most important level at which members of the public are active, for example in shelter for the homeless, neighbourhood and club houses and care. Local authorities are responsible for the executive

level of welfare activities. They subsidize local organizations and provide facilities, such as sports centres. In some cases local authorities involve the voluntary sector in formulating policy, through panels or voluntary sector platforms for instance.

Local authorities have the lead in supporting change processes at local level. They receive support to this end from the provinces.

*b. Provinces/ the provincial level*

The twelve Dutch provinces play an important part. They support the paid support staff at local level. They also disseminate knowledge and information that is produced at different levels, including by national organizations.

*c. Central government/the national level*

Central government has been involved in policy for more than twenty years. Policy documents were published in 1980, 1985 and 1991. In these documents voluntary work was described as "indispensable to the community, but just like other unpaid work often invisible". The current policy, as set forth in the 1999-2002 Welfare Policy Document (*Welijnsnota 1999-2002*) is aimed at giving voluntary work greater visibility, at enlarging the support base for support and appreciation, and nurturing voluntary work for the future.

Central government policy has the goal of equipping the voluntary sector sufficiently so that it can respond to the challenges that changes in society generate.

**Policy elements and areas of attention**

There are four main elements to central government policy:

- a. Work development, research and support
- b. Reinforcement, promotion and image improvement
- c. Quality enhancement
- d. Facet policy and legislation and regulation

*a. Work development, research and support*

The Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport (VWS) is involved with development, research and support relating to the voluntary sector through the facilitation of national organizations. These organizations are concerned with information, advice, methodology development and research on behalf of voluntary sector organizations, provinces and local authorities.

<sup>3</sup> *Social Quality, Work in Progress (Sociale Kwaliteit, Werk in uitvoering). 1999-2002 Programme Spearheads, Welfare Policy Document (Programmalijnen Welzijnsnota 1999-2002). H. 6 2000-2002 Voluntary Sector Policy, Overall Plan (Vrijwilligersbeleid 2000-2002, Plan van aanpak).*

There are two national development organizations, the Netherlands Voluntary Sector Organizations (*Nederlandse organisaties vrijwilligerswerk - NOV*) and the Volunteers Management Trust (*Stichting vrijwilliger-management - SVM*). There are also eight national training centres where 32,000 trainees a year, all volunteers or aspiring volunteers, receive instruction. VWS also subsidizes a number of national volunteers organizations' activities for specific target groups (for example the handicapped, chronically sick, elderly, youth, ethnic minorities, women (including women in rural areas) and benefit claimants) and organizations with specific tasks relating to sport, care and ideology. Many activities in the Netherlands relating to the reception and guidance of refugees and asylum seekers, for example, are carried out by volunteers. The Dutch Refugee Council (*Vluchtelingenwerk Nederland*) and Refugee Organizations Netherlands (*Vluchtelingen Organisaties Nederland - VON*) receive financial support from VWS.

#### b. Reinforcement, promotion and image improvement

The areas of attention in the policy for reinforcing, promoting and improving the image of voluntary work are:

- recruiting and keeping volunteers from specific categories (minorities, youth, the handicapped, elderly and women), including the Trendsetters Project (*project Smaakmakers*), which focuses on young people and voluntary work;
- the interculturalization of voluntary work through the Interculturalization of Voluntary Work Sector Plan (*Sectorplan Interculturalisering Vrijwilligerswerk*);
- strengthening local voluntary sector support points;
- responding to the changing behaviour of volunteers, to which end the Volunteers Management Trust (*Stichting VrijwilligersManagement - SVM*) is experimenting in a number of local authority areas with flexible working, based on the example of employment agencies (*Free Flex Project*);
- improving the information supply by disseminating more widely the information provided by the NOV which, among other things, publishes a volunteers newspaper on the Internet;
- contributing to the development of strategy in the area of fundraising;
- giving visibility to and amplifying appreciation for volunteers. Among the activities in this regard is the award of a national prize "the National Pat on the Back" (*"het Nationale Compliment"*). This prize has been made possible by the Rabobank;

- utilizing the willingness of companies to invest in voluntary work through, among other things, the Partnership in Involvement Project (*project Maatschap in betrokkenheid*);
- promoting the UN International Year of Volunteers in 2001 and the World Volunteer Conference in January 2001 through the 2001 International Year of Volunteers Trust (*Stichting Internationaal Jaar van Vrijwilligers 2001, IJV 2001*).

#### c. Quality enhancement

Action items to enhance the quality of voluntary work are:

- stimulating pilot projects aimed at improving the coordination of the activities of organizations, local authorities and provinces;
- developing methods for better local authority voluntary sector policy;
- education, training and professional coaching of volunteers, operatives and managers of voluntary sector organizations (including through the eight training centres);
- certification, primarily for those volunteers who want to acquire experience and want to find work, for example benefit claimants, women with insufficient qualifications who want to return to work, and young people.

#### d. Facet policy and legislation and regulation

The position of volunteers in the spectrum of government policy and legislation is an ongoing area of attention. Voluntary work not infrequently comes into contact with the realm of legislation and regulations relating to work and management.

##### *Tax matters*

The main goal of policy is to enable people to be economically independent. There are support options for those who cannot do this. Under certain circumstances it is possible under the Income Support Act to grant an exemption from the obligation to apply for a job if someone is doing voluntary work. Some may participate in a social activation trajectory. In such a case there may be an encouragement premium.

The Netherlands permits volunteers to receive an expense allowance tax free up to a maximum amount of NLG 1470 (667.06 €) per year, indexed (1-1-2000). Up to this amount volunteers do not need to account for expenses. Needless to say costs above this amount

may be reimbursed, but it is necessary to demonstrate that the costs were incurred.

It is possible for organizations to claim donations against

tax under special conditions. There is also an exemption limit for organizations' incomes from fund raising.

This limit is NLG 70,000 (31,766.62 €).

**Table 1: Percentage of the population aged 18 and above in a number of Western countries who carry out voluntary work in political, charitable, religious and other fields**

<b>a. Political activities of volunteers in an international context</b>				
	<b>No</b>	<b>Yes, 1x</b>	<b>Yes, 3-5x</b>	<b>Yes, 6x or more</b>
United States	90.0	6.6	1.8	1.6
Sweden	95.7	2.1	0.8	1.5
Norway	92.3	4.5	1.4	1.9
Netherlands	96.0	2.3	0.6	1.1
(Western) Germany	95.2	2.8	0.6	1.3
Ireland	95.6	2.4	0.7	1.3
Italy	96.0	1.4	1.0	1.6
United Kingdom	96.1	2.6	0.4	0.9
<b>b. Charitable activities of volunteers in an international context</b>				
	<b>No</b>	<b>Yes, 1x</b>	<b>Yes, 3-5x</b>	<b>Yes, 6x or more</b>
United States	61.3	20.5	9.7	8.6
Sweden	72.9	13.3	5.2	8.6
Norway	67.1	14.4	7.3	11.2
Netherlands	69.4	12.4	7.3	12.8
(Western) Germany	95.2	2.8	0.6	1.3
Ireland	77.2	10.3	5.2	7.3
Italy	89.5	1.5	2.6	6.4
United Kingdom	96.1	2.6	0.4	0.9
<b>c. Religious and church activities of volunteers in an international context</b>				
	<b>No</b>	<b>Yes, 1x</b>	<b>Yes, 3-5x</b>	<b>Yes, 6x or more</b>
United States	64.2	15.6	6.9	13.3
Sweden	88.9	3.6	1.6	5.8
Norway	85.3	5.5	2.8	6.4
Netherlands	85.4	5.5	2.7	2.8
(Western) Germany	87.5	6.1	2.3	4.1
Ireland	88.4	5.8	1.9	4.0
Italy	89.9	2.0	2.4	5.7
United Kingdom	87.5	5.0	1.7	5.8
<b>d. Other sorts of volunteer activities in an international context</b>				
	<b>No</b>	<b>Yes, 1x</b>	<b>Yes, 3-5x</b>	<b>Yes, 6x or more</b>
United States	61.7	18.1	8.9	11.3
Sweden	65.2	12.2	7.4	15.3
Norway	51.5	17.9	11.1	19.5
Netherlands	65.5	9.4	5.9	19.3
(Western) Germany	82.1	6.8	4.1	7.0
Ireland	81.8	7.3	4.3	6.7
Italy	91.4	1.8	1.9	5.0
United Kingdom	81.1	7.6	4.1	7.2

Source: SCP (International Social Survey Project 1998, weighted results)

**Table 2: Volunteers as a percentage of the Dutch population aged 18 and older  
1980 - 1998**

	1980*	1986	1992	1997	1998
Youth club house work	3	4	4	4	4
School (class parent, parents association, school governor)	5	11	9	9	9
Sports club	13	16	13	12	14
Hobby club	15	11	8	5	6
Culture (singing, music, theatre and other cultural)	6	8	7	5	5
Church, ideology	7	9	9	9	9
Occupation, trade, class-related organization	3	4	4	4	3
Politics, political party	2	2	2	1	1
Women's movement, -association, -café	2	3	2	-	-
Other social goal (Amnesty etc.)	1	3	4	-	-
Total (excluding women's organization and social goal)	35	38	36	37	35

Source: CSB/SCP (Different lifestyle surveys, weighted results)

\* There was a criterion used in 1980 that one had to do voluntary work for at least one hour a week. Since then only the question of whether someone does voluntary work has been asked.

**Table 3: Percentage of volunteers in an international context**

Country	%
United States	46
Canada	43
Sweden	39
Norway	39
Netherlands	36
(Western) Germany	30
Belgium	28
Ireland	26
Denmark	26
Italy	24
France	23
United Kingdom	22

Source: SCP World values 1990

## Policy on voluntary work in the Netherlands

### General voluntary sector policy finances<sup>4</sup>

Subsidies to institutions: Amounts x 1000

Years	2000	2001	2002
Organizations	12302 (€ 5582)	12302 (€ 5582)	12302 (€ 5582)
Education and training	21419 (€ 9720)	21419 (€ 9720)	21419 (€ 9720)
<b>Project grant:</b>	<b>3985 (€ 1808)</b>	<b>4842 (€ 2197)</b>	<b>5152 (€ 2338)</b>

Amounts (reference date 1 April 2000)

<sup>4</sup> This relates to the sums available for voluntary work, excluding the resources for voluntary work in the youth, elderly, sports and health care sectors.

**Addresses**

**Ministerie van Volksgezondheid, Welzijn en Sport**  
**(Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport)**  
**Directie Sociaal Beleid (Social Policy Directorate)**  
 P.O.Box 20350  
 2500 EJ The Hague Netherlands  
 Internet: [www.minvws.nl](http://www.minvws.nl)

**Ministerie van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid**  
**(Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment)**  
**Informatiepunt Sociale Activering (Social Activation Information Point)**  
 P.O.Box 90801  
 2509 LV The Hague Netherlands  
 Internet: [www.minszw.nl](http://www.minszw.nl)

**Ministerie van Financiën (Ministry of Finance)**  
 P.O.Box 20201  
 2500 EE The Hague Netherlands  
 Internet: [www.minfin.nl](http://www.minfin.nl)

**Nederlandse Organisaties Vrijwilligerswerk**  
**(Dutch National Volunteer Centre)**  
 P.O.Box 2877  
 3500 GW Utrecht Netherlands  
 Internet: [www.vrijwilligers.nl](http://www.vrijwilligers.nl)

**Stichting VrijwilligersManagement**  
**(Volunteer Management Trust)**  
 P.O.Box 12080  
 3501 AB Utrecht Netherlands  
 Internet: [www.svmgroep.nl](http://www.svmgroep.nl)

**Nederlands Instituut voor Zorg en Welzijn**  
**(Netherlands Institute for Care and Welfare)**  
 P.O.Box 19152  
 3501 DD Utrecht Netherlands  
 Internet: [www.nizw.nl](http://www.nizw.nl)

**Stichting Internationaal Jaar van Vrijwilligers 2001 (IJV 2001)**  
**(2001 International Year of Volunteer Trust)**  
 P.O.Box 2877  
 3500 GW Utrecht Netherlands  
 Internet: [www.volunteer.nl](http://www.volunteer.nl)



This publication is issued by the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport for the Netherlands.

It can be ordered by writing to the Public Information Office at the address below or by calling or faxing the following numbers:

T +31 (0)70 340 78 90

F +31 (0)70 340 62 51

**Address for visitors**

Parnassusplein 5  
 The Hague, The Netherlands

**Postal address**

P.O. Box 20350  
 NL-2500 EJ The Hague

**Internetadres**

[www.minvws.nl](http://www.minvws.nl)

January 2001

DVC 00-208