

# Social Cohesion and Cultural Policy in The Netherlands<sup>1</sup>

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*Abstract:* The deterioration of social cohesion throughout the Netherlands has caused the government to take action toward improving social conditions within schools, neighbourhoods, villages, and cities. This article looks at how Dutch government initiatives, through education and lifelong learning, are providing the social tools for citizens to empower themselves. Three case studies are brought to light, demonstrating how cultural policy can be linked with art-directed policy and how social cohesion can be achieved through this method. The paper concludes with an analysis comparing traditional and new cultural policy terms, and questions whether or not the two can be integrated successfully.

*Résumé:* La détérioration de la cohésion sociale dans les Pays-Bas a poussé le gouvernement à agir pour améliorer les conditions sociales dans les écoles, les quartiers, les villages et les villes. Cet article examine les initiatives du gouvernement néerlandais pour fournir, au moyen de l'éducation et de la formation continue, les outils sociaux permettant aux citoyens d'accroître leur pouvoir. L'article cite trois études de cas qui démontrent comment on peut associer une politique culturelle à une politique orientée vers l'art et comment on peut ainsi renforcer la cohésion sociale. L'article se termine par une analyse comparant les conditions de politiques culturelles traditionnelles avec les nouvelles et cherche à apprendre s'il est possible d'intégrer ces deux politiques avec succès.

Supplemental to the figures of the national budget for 2000, the Dutch government stressed the importance of social cohesion. Major changes in society such as the emergence of a multi-ethnic population, ongoing individualization, and secularization seem to have put an end to the cohesive power of traditional social ties. Governments are aware of the fact that people no longer flock together through shared customs and collective institutions. Instead of belonging to a specific social class, people now voluntarily take part in different social activities, organized by single-issue movements.

According to the Dutch government, the social infrastructure cannot be strengthened by prohibition or protection, but only by giving citizens the means to

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empower themselves individually and socially. New developments, above all those in the field of new technologies, should be welcomed as possibilities for mutual understanding, social integration, and as stimuli for young people to start unusual careers and hopefully become successful economically and socially. On the other hand, when social groups and individuals tend to be marginalized in substantial numbers, a general feeling of solidarity should be generated to intensify participation and emancipation of the deprived members of society where possible.

### **The emergence of a new cultural policy**

More specifically, the ministers say that neighbour-to-neighbour contacts are suffering from social disintegration. To prevent further deterioration of social cohesion in neighbourhoods, villages, and street corners, education should be enforced. Schools and adjacent educational institutions must bring back a feeling of unity and solidarity in the urban community. For this reason, programs are developed for the so-called extended school day: young people are offered guided activities of different kinds at school, before and after the regular school day. To quote the government: "A well-described target group of youngsters that have not enough possibilities for participation in social activities are offered a special programme through which they will be able to join the regular school programme again" (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 1999, p. 8).

Outside schools, the government is also looking for new means to achieve more social cohesion. Here again, education plays a key role. The Minister of Education promotes the idea of "life-long learning." During all phases of their life, it is important that people show an interest in all kinds of social phenomena. The government favours combining disciplined educational habits with cultural habits. It mentions culture and media, because they can be looked upon as agents of social cohesion, bridging the gap between "information society" and newcomers into society. More specifically, according to the government, culture gives meaning to life, gives pleasure, and stimulates innovation in thinking and action.

Activating the lifelong learning practice widens the scope of cultural policy. Through this practice, cultural policy draws closer to the fields of sports, health care, and social work—fields in which people are also "disciplined" by regulated and guided activities. Engaging people in valuable activities seems to be the principal element of what we call the social cohesion-oriented cultural policy. Through this new kind of cultural policy, community feelings can be triggered by both educational and cultural activities. Intercultural confrontations and shared experiences become essential within this policy. The authors of this government document state that individual development should be encouraged, but this development should not happen in solitude because they fear that many people are experiencing fewer social encounters. To stimulate encounters, cultural policy will be focused on the transfer of ideas. This can be accomplished by involving youth in art education and, in a broader sense, by asking cultural institutions to develop new presentation forms in order to bring their performances and exhibitions to new consumers.

Can social cohesion-directed cultural policy be linked with art-directed policy? We assume that previously a general change in cultural policy towards more social cohesion targets were impossible, given the situation in the existing art world that for a long time had been legitimized politically by this very same government. During the past few decades, official art policy focused more and more on autonomous, professional art and on the corresponding autonomous way the audience was reacting to art supply in more or less official venues. At the same time, the officials in art education tended to identify themselves more and more with the objectives of traditional art. During these past decades a problem gradually emerged: art audiences tended to be more and more elitist in terms of educational levels. This audience also tended to be more for an aged population and more and more of them were white, which was quite remarkable taking into account the large numbers of black people who have settled and grown up in the Netherlands. For a long time no specific policy provisions were made for blacks in the field of culture and social diversity. Today, it is the general theme of social cohesion that can now make it possible to rephrase, to some extent, the objectives of our national cultural policy.

#### **Cohesive culture**

The Ministry of Culture first introduced the theme of social cohesion when the 1998 state budget for culture was presented. The Secretary of State for Culture, Mr. Aad Nuis, attempted to bring the new (a complex multicultural society) and the old (a society of pillarization) situation in Dutch society into balance. His view was that after the decay of the pillar society, traditional classes, and inwardly oriented ethnic groups, more possibilities for individual development arose for everyone. However, he also pointed out that at the same time feelings of fear, isolation, and aggression were creeping in, occasionally leading to nihilistic attitudes and criminal forms of conduct.

By the end of 1999 the new Secretary of State for Culture, Mr. Rick van der Ploeg, presented a plan of action for a better social accessibility of culture: "Actieplan Cultuurbereik" (Cultural Outreach Action Plan). Apart from facilitating a socially more balanced use of the existing cultural institutions and facilities, the plan stressed the importance of realizing more social cohesion through culture. A new perspective for cultural policy was found in the connection between different art disciplines, accommodations, and (open air) venues, artists and art gatekeepers, as well as cross relations with other policy fields like education and social welfare. Schools, centres for art education, and other platforms, as well as Internet facilities, were also considered to be vital places for the stimulation of what could be called "cohesive culture." All places mentioned here could together accommodate an extended cultural supply in order to reach a much more socially heterogeneous audience. The new cultural policy is not restricted to professional artists and it is also accessible for amateurs and for not-yet-discovered talent in the primary target group: young people belonging to cultural and ethnic minorities.

**The presentation of cases**

To provide an idea of what is now currently being practiced, some case studies follow.

**Case Study 1: The Site, Infocaf, Amsterdam**

The Site, located at Infocaf, is a youth information centre in Amsterdam, under the direction of a general director and an assistant. However, youth counsellors working in the centre who have formed an advisory council accomplish the actual work. The council provides information to other youths about education possibilities, travelling and working abroad, health issues, law and rights, and housing, and acts as an employment agency.

The Site provides all sorts of information for people between the ages of 15 and 21, attracting a broad range of young people from different backgrounds who are studying in Amsterdam. The Site also provides Internet access, and a reading table with the latest newspapers and magazines. Among Infocaf's activities are projects aimed at schools, workshops, talk shows, presentations, and demonstrations on various issues, including cultural, artistic, social, or political. Where other institutions fail to reach the so-called "newcomers" (immigrants) to town, The Site succeeds, possibly thanks to the staff, who come from various backgrounds. Approximately 80 youths visit The Site every day.

The main underlying aim of The Site is to stimulate youths to develop their own vision of the future and their place in it. The (thematic) activities are developed and executed by youths, ensuring an interest in the subject by the target group. Recently explored issues included "The Art of Islam" (school project), "Safety in Amsterdam" (debate), and the conference "Future," where youths gave their view of the political landscape in Amsterdam.

For its artistic programming, The Site works together with the Kunstweb Institute for Art Education in Amsterdam. Kunstweb offers courses in, for example, Street Dancing and Web design, focusing on both the active and the contemplative side of art. Art is used as a tool to improve, explore, and expand social and artistic abilities.

**Case Study 2: Fresh Academy,  
a pilot project based on stand-up comedy, Amsterdam**

Fresh Academy is a pilot project involving stand-up comedy and is a mobile act, travelling throughout the schools of Amsterdam. Fresh Academy follows the framework of the World Culture program of Cultuurnetwerk Nederland, the Dutch National Expertise Centre for Arts Education, which executed several pilot projects to stimulate cultural diversity in the field of arts education. The projects were documented and will serve as practical examples for future inter- or multi-cultural initiatives.

Cultuurnetwerk Nederland supports the notion that the basic principle of art education is art itself, rather than a socio-cultural point of view. Fresh Academy is only one of many possible ways of dealing with cultural diversity issues. It is a joint venture between Fresh Wagon, a Dutch stand-up comedy group, Kunstweb, the Institute for Arts Education in Amsterdam, and Krater, a local organization for

arts education in the suburb of 'Zuidoost' (South-East) in Amsterdam. The project targets 14- and 15-year old school kids with multiple cultural backgrounds and has been executed in two schools, reaching a total of 270 pupils.

The set up of the venture focuses on bringing Fresh Wagon Theatre performances to students during school hours. It consists of short workshop stand-up comedy presentations for groups of 25 and lasts approximately 90 minutes. For enthusiasts, a voluntary extracurricular workshop and presentation is designed for groups of 15 and consists of 6 after-school sessions.

This particular case is interesting because it combines the involvement of professional performers engaging young people in theatre with teaching them about trust, values, social skills, and identity. Fresh Wagon consisted of people from different backgrounds, as did the groups they were working with. Without pointing it out or emphasizing it, but through the choice of subjects to be discussed in the stand-up performances and through the examination of the meaning of the issues to the group, social and cultural differences as well as ideas were exchanged.

### **Case study 3: Brede School, a community school**

Community Schools are, in the words of the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, "networks of education, welfare and care for children and their parents. The network consists of a school and other facilities (for example, welfare institutions, culture, sport, police), aiming to stimulate children to actively participate in society, to offer children a daily routine, to deal with possible arrears, and to enforce their social competencies."

All over the Netherlands, primary and some secondary schools are being converted into Community Schools. The concept was developed in response to several trends and wishes in society:

- a large number of children have serious learning arrears;
- a growing number of parents both work outside the home;
- a growing number of single-parent families; and
- an aspiration for an integrated youth policy in order to more effectively prevent trouble.

In practice, schools and surrounding institutions do see the possibilities of attaining these goals. The primary school De Kameleon in Den Bosch has been working with this concept for seven years and is now showing results. The academic performance of the pupils has increased from being far below average to average. Thanks to the early involvement of youth work from the age of 12, the percentage of kids quitting school or getting into trouble has been cut back from 20% to zero. The day-care facility for 2 to 4 year olds has helped immigrant children develop their Dutch language skills before starting school.

Critical remarks are directed at the execution of the concept rather than the idea itself. Most Community Schools are so-called "black schools," where the majority of the children are "newcomers" to town. Keeping after-school activities inside the school segregates them from other groups even more. There has also

been criticism directed at the parents who leave their children at school all day. The extracurricular activities, some as broad as music, dance, computers, or sports, in Community Schools are voluntary and are available for a very small fee. If pushed by their parents and with nobody at home in the afternoon, children do not really have a choice: “Of course, I’d much rather play outside, but my mom paid a tenner (fl.10. = 4.5 EUR, which is good for 10 lessons),” remarks nine-year old Kelly.

### Conclusions

These case studies shed light on what the new cultural cohesion policy is aimed toward. The main focus is not on institutions, but on activities. Policymakers try more and more to understand what the cultural preferences of young people are, especially those of minority groups, and what kind of cultural and artistic values they share. As these values are likely not to be compatible with the existing values that support the “traditional,” official ministerial art policy, a more or less peaceful coexistence of two distinct cultural policies seems to be gradually developing.

What are the main differences between art-directed cultural policy and social cohesion-directed cultural policy? For the moment, we will just restrict ourselves to a summing up of some key words:

<b>Art-directed cultural policy</b>	<b>Social cohesion-directed cultural policy</b>
sphere of influence: narrow	sphere of influence: broad
institutions-directed	activities-directed
“high” art and culture	“low” art and culture
art as an autonomous phenomenon	art as a means to speed up social integration
first governmental level: central	first governmental level: decentral
first public actor: department of culture	first public actors: department of education and the Ministry of Public Health and Social Welfare and Sports
art as a special, momentous activity	art as a lifelong “educational” activity

Although the Secretary of State for Culture claims to be the founding father of social cohesion-directed cultural policy, this new variation in cultural policy cannot easily be explained as an extension of the traditional and official state policy in the arts and culture. It is merely a corrective reaction to it. The legitimization of a new set of values being addressed by governmental cultural policy must be sought outside the official, professional cultural sector. Apparently, the public has not been ready for readjustments to the traditional cultural system that politicians have judged to be necessary in order to reflect new, yet not so specific, cultural needs of young people and ethnic groups. As our cultural systems and arts institutions were still too occupied with carrying out the traditional aspects of caring for artistic quality and diversity, the government decided to step in to create a completely new set of cultural policy goals with new means to meet these new

policy expectations. These new means were found outside the inner circle of art institutions, mostly in the fields of education, amateur art, and social welfare.

The next step is to obviously stimulate an overlap between the old and the new cultural policies. Whether this step will be successful cannot be said with certainty at this time.

#### **Note**

1. This article was published in *Culturelink*, 33 (April 2001, Vol. 12) and is reprinted here, in a slightly revised form, with permission.

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