

Richer than ever - and tougher



Although the issue of physical security is high on the public and political agenda in the Netherlands, it is insufficiently visible in the broader context of human security for all. The fact that the national economy has become richer did not lead to more space for humane policies and more tolerant attitudes towards migrants, refugees, the elderly or other vulnerable groups in society. On the contrary, more obstacles for human security have been put in place. On global human security, there has been continuity in Dutch foreign policies, but these policies are under increasing political pressure.

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The Netherlands is proud of its longstanding tradition of promoting human security, both nationally and internationally. The country enjoys a good reputation, with one of the best social security systems in the world, a hospitable and tolerant attitude towards immigrants, and an active contribution to international peace and development. Unfortunately, Dutch society and politics, under pressure from an economic downturn, are moving away from this tradition and adopting a tougher attitude towards less advantaged people. Internally, this shift is reflected by a gradual decrease in social security. Externally, national interests are prevailing over international peace and development priorities.

Globalisation and the welfare state

As one of the most open economies in the world, the Netherlands was one of the countries in Europe that benefited most from world economic growth in the 1990s. The economy grew at an average of nearly 3% per year - compared to the European average of 2%. At the beginning of the 21st century, the Netherlands is richer than ever.

However, the economic boom has not been used to eradicate poverty everywhere: even inside the Netherlands relative poverty continues to exist. Globalisation increasingly means competition not just among businesses, but among countries as well. They compete for investments by reducing labour costs and relaxing fiscal regimes. Consequentially, minimum wage levels and national fiscal and social security systems are under continuous pressure.

The sufferings of the open economy

Now that the economic boom seems to be over, the open Dutch economy is suffering more than other

European countries. In 2003, economic growth fell below zero for the first time in 20 years. The Government's "Poverty Monitor" reported that the percentage of low-income households in the country, which had dropped from 15% in the mid-1990s to 10% in 2001, will rise again to 11% in 2004. The percentage of low-income households among non-Western immigrants is three times higher than average: one third of them are below the national poverty line.²

Poor households suffer not just from the recession but are also affected by a deterioration of social services in public health insurance, housing subsidies and tax benefits. The situation for low-income groups is likely to worsen in 2004, as the Government is using the economic downturn to legitimise further cutbacks in the welfare state.

Globalisation has also meant an increased flow of immigrants into the Netherlands. The population, especially in the big cities, is becoming increasingly diverse. Non-Western foreigners make up ten percent of the total Dutch population, a quarter of the urban population, and a third of the (legal) residents of Amsterdam and Rotterdam.³ This situation has not remained without inter-communal tensions. In 2002, integration of non-Western immigrants suddenly became the most important political subject in the election campaigns. Much of Dutch political debate nowadays centres on the acceptability of predominantly "black" schools, Islamic schools, pupils wearing headscarves and even Islam as such. In general, the political climate regarding immigrants, asylum and integration has toughened considerably.

Asylum and efficiency

When interviewed in 2002, UN High Commissioner for Refugees and former Dutch Prime Minister Ruud Lubbers showed his disappointment about European, and particularly Dutch refugee policies: "A high temperature against foreigners in Europe crossed a new threshold, especially in countries like Denmark and the Netherlands, traditionally

major UNHCR donors and supporters. Interestingly, the number of refugees in Europe has dropped considerably, but many people and politicians still cry out as if they were facing national disasters because of them."⁴

Since the mid 1990s, the number of refugees seeking asylum in the Netherlands has dropped considerably as a consequence of the introduction of more restrictive and more efficient decision-making procedures. In April 2003, Human Rights Watch published an extensive report that raises great concern about recent policies adopted to hasten the processing of asylum claims at the expense of the protection needs of refugees: "Over the past several years, the Netherlands has left behind its traditionally protective stance toward asylum seekers to take up a restrictive approach that stands out among Western European countries."⁵

Human Rights Watch reports that the Dutch fast "AC Procedure"⁶ is being used to process cases for which it is inappropriate. The procedure - which lasts only 48 working hours - was originally designed to screen out "manifestly unfounded" cases, but is now used to process at least 60% of asylum claims. Human Rights Watch stated that the process gives applicants little opportunity to document their need for protection, to receive meaningful advice from a lawyer, or to effectively challenge a negative decision on appeal. Particularly for cases involving humanitarian concerns or complex legal or factual questions, Human Rights Watch found the AC Procedure to be inadequate. "The Netherlands runs a very real risk of violating its obligation of *non-refoulement* (that is, not to return a person to a country where his or her life or freedom would be threatened because of persecution)."⁷

Dutch policy and practice regarding the care and protection of migrant children, as required under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, is also inadequate. Human Rights Watch found that

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2 Social and Cultural Planning Bureau (SCP). *Armoedemonitor 2003*. December 2003.

3 On top of that, an estimated 46,000 to 116,000 foreigners (0.3% to 0.7%) reside illegally in the country. Central Bureau for Statistics (CBS). *Statistische Dossiers*. No 7, 2003.

4 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). *Refugees*. No 129, 1 December 2002.

5 Human Rights Watch. *Fleeting Refuge: The Triumph of Efficiency over Protection in Dutch Asylum Policy*. April 2003, p. 2. www.hrw.org/reports/2003/netherlands0403

6 Editor's note: AC stands for *Aanmeldcentra*, registry centres for asylum seekers.

7 Human Rights Watch, *op cit*, p. 13.

interviews of children are often conducted in an inappropriate manner and without the benefit of consistent assistance from a lawyer or guardian. Moreover, the report criticised Dutch policy on asylum seekers' reception conditions, including food and housing. In one reported case, a family from Rwanda was evicted from the asylum reception centre after the immigration authorities rejected their asylum claim. When a court later overturned that decision, the family could not be found.

Development co-operation

The Government that started its mandate in 2003 has maintained the Netherlands' commitment to spending 0.8% of GNP on international development co-operation. However, like all recent governments, the new one has also burdened the Official Development Assistance (ODA) budget with expenses that do not contribute to poverty eradication in developing countries. Major expenses are related to the shelter of refugees during their first year in the country, amounting to almost EUR 200 million (USD 252.8 million) or 5% of the ODA budget.

Even larger is the amount that has been reserved for the cancellation of debts related to export credit insurance granted to Dutch exporters exporting to developing countries: EUR 500 million (USD 379.2 million) or 13% of the ODA budget in 2004. Export credits and guarantees are not an instrument of development co-operation but of export promotion. Moreover, at the UN Financing for Development Conference in Monterrey (2002), it was agreed that debt cancellation would be additional to existing ODA commitments.

These hidden budget cuts reflect a change in the political climate, rather than a change in public support. Ongoing research on public support for international development co-operation by the OECD and NCDO shows that the public is relatively well informed and highly engaged. Compared to most other OECD countries, Dutch public support for development co-operation is generally strong.⁸ This strong public support may be explained by the Government's continued support for education campaigns in the Netherlands and for "people-to-people" development co-operation. A considerable part of the ODA budget is channelled through NGOs.

On the positive side, sustainable poverty reduction remains the main objective of development co-operation, and the Millennium Development Goals are its concrete goals. Dutch aid will focus on five sectors: education, health, HIV/AIDS-eradication, environment and water. An increasing part of the ODA budget (up to 15% in 2007) is earmarked for educa-

tion, in a very positive response to the Global Campaign for Education. On the other hand, the gender equity strategy of the Government remains unclear. Gender equity will be "mainstreamed" in all policies and operations, but no strategy to make this work has been unfolded.

War and peace

An important new policy development is the integrated approach to international conflicts. Conflict prevention and peace-building are important priorities for the development co-operation minister: "Poverty reduction strategies do not work in a country where a violent conflict is going on. Peace and stability are necessary preconditions for development."⁹ A Stability Fund has been established to be able to quickly finance peace and stability promoting activities.

There is a great common political and material effort in facilitating peace processes, particularly in the Great Lakes Area, Sudan, the Horn of Africa and Indonesia (Aceh). This has taken the form of common peace promoting missions of the two ministers of Foreign Affairs and Development Co-operation, active involvement in peace talks, putting pressure on conflicting parties, and dedicating funds to UN peace forces in those regions.

However, on only one occasion have Dutch troops been sent to Africa: to Ethiopia in 2002. In 2003, a military hospital ship was sent to offshore Liberia, but no troops landed. Dutch civil society and a parliamentary minority called in 2003 for troops to assist in the de-escalation of conflicts in Liberia and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The calls were rejected because the safety of Dutch troops could not be guaranteed. However, Dutch troops are participating as stability forces in Afghanistan and as occupation forces in Iraq, where safety is not ensured.

Arms and trade

The Netherlands is an ally in the plea by Nobel Peace Prize Laureates and the Control Arms campaign¹⁰ for a legally binding International Arms Trade Treaty. Generally, the Netherlands strives to comply with the EU Code of Conduct on Arms Exports, a politically (but not legally) binding instrument. The Code prohibits the export of weapons to countries where they risk being used for internal repression, against another country or in human rights violations.

However, even though complete overviews of export licenses are not public, it is known that the Netherlands has supplied arms and military goods to countries that do not comply with the EU Code of Conduct.¹¹ For example, the Netherlands has supplied arms to Indonesia, whereas the Indonesian army has been accused of systematic violations of human rights.¹² Those arms may now be used by the army in Aceh.¹³ At least 20% of official export credit guarantees are being granted for military orders, thus encouraging international arms flows – including to Indonesia, Jordan, Turkey, Venezuela and South Korea, where the armed forces have questionable human rights records.¹⁴

The Netherlands, in the heart of Western Europe, is an important transit country, especially through Rotterdam Harbour (the world's biggest seaport) and Schiphol Airport (Europe's fourth biggest airport). There is little control or knowledge about the volume of transit of military goods. In contrast with its restrictive export policies, the Netherlands still allows transit of arms to countries that do not comply with the EU Code of Conduct, most notably to Israel. ■

8 See www.ncdo.nl. And: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). *Public Opinion and the Fight Against Global Poverty*. 2003.

9 Ministers of Foreign Affairs and for Development Co-operation. *Kamerbrief Oprichting Stabiliteitsfonds* (Letter to Parliament on Establishment of a Stability Fund). 3 October 2003. Tweede Kamer, vergaderjaar 2003–2004, 29 200 V, No 10.

10 www.controlarms.org.

11 Ministries of Economic Affairs and Foreign Affairs. *The Netherlands Arms Export Policy in 2001, 2002*.

12 European Network Against Arms Trade. *Indonesia: Arms Trade to a Military Regime*. 1997.

13 A picture showing the use of Dutch military technology in Aceh appeared in *NRC Handelsblad*, 23 May 2003.

14 <http://atradium.com/nl/dutchstatebusiness/overheid/afgevegenpolissen>