



Comments on the Government's Third Review and Appraisal in the context of the MIPAA by the Dutch Older Women's Network (OVN-NL)

The report by the Dutch government can be read as an overview of policy initiatives of the last five years. As such it can be appreciated, because it brings together the large number of policies and projects that have been developed over this period.

However, the report bears the subtitle Review and Appraisal, but there is very little appraisal to be found in the report. It is merely descriptive and thus presents the picture of an active government trying to undertake actions that it hopes will be beneficial for older people, but no attention has been given to the effects of these actions or the way in which older people have experienced them.

A first general comment can be that it is amazing that not once the economic crisis and its aftereffects has been mentioned, although the crisis certainly has been felt by older people and many of the measures taken by the government were inspired by the intense austerity policies embraced by the Government.

Complimentary to the Government's report we want to mention here some of our major concerns about the state of affairs regarding older people in The Netherlands.

Lack of a coherent ageing policy.

The Dutch government has decided there is no need for an ageing policy. We think it is high time to reintroduce it. Be it a Coordinating Ministry or a high status Advisory Board, as long as it has an overview of all policies that are pertinent to older people and can make relevant proposals that will be taken seriously. Special categories of older people may need more detailed attention because they have special problems: for instance older women and older migrants.

We note that so far the government has not considered the position of older migrants, although their numbers are increasing rapidly.

What has been presented in the government's report as the achievements of the last five years seems to be mostly a collection of projects, some with a very high level of aspiration but without any information about their effectiveness. Nor is there any indication of what will be done with the results once the project will be finished. Will the results be consolidated or will everything go back to the pre-project situation because there is no more project money?

The employment situation

It is difficult for unemployed older people to find a new job. The two major problems are a lack of suitable jobs and reluctance on the part of employers to engage older workers. The government has made many efforts to strengthen the position of older job seekers by programmes teaching them how to present themselves better when applying for a job or increasing their networking skills, but

these efforts have not been very successful and cannot be successful if the jobs are lacking. In this respect the government's policy focusses on the wrong issue. The fact that the pension age is being raised does not make the situation any easier for older workers.

Income

Unemployed older people below pension age are in a really difficult situation and may end up with social assistance.

Although Dutch older people have a firm financial basis because of the State Pension, which is high compared to what older people in other countries receive, older people with only the State Pension live on a minimum income. Considering the rise of costs of health- and long-term care and housing it is difficult for many of them to make ends meet.

For first generation older migrants, who have built up incomplete pensions, the situation has become more difficult because supplementary payments have been reduced.

Figure 12 in the Government's report shows how especially older women have an increased risk of poverty. So far no policies have been developed on this issue.

Second Pillar pensions have been frozen or have been reduced and are likely to be reduced further in the future, so the spending capacity of older people lags behind that of workers. The government even wants to increase this gap. Not a very positive prospect for pensioners!

Health- and Long-term care

In this sector the most drastic reforms have taken place. From the Treasurer's point of view these reforms can be deemed successful: a considerable reduction of expenditure has been realised.

From the point of view of older people it can be said that the reforms have caused many problems and certainly have not been an improvement at all. Residential homes are closed down, older people have to remain longer in their present home and are supposed to go to a nursing home only after they have become totally dependent. Major cutbacks have been effectuated in home care and bureaucracy has been intensified by making municipalities responsible for most services for home care with the exception of nursing.

There are now more and more dependent people at home with fewer professional home helps. No less than 77.000 paid jobs in the care sector were lost over the past few years. (News release by the Ministry of VWS, 04-11-2016).

Informal carers are supposed to take over without payment the work that used to be done by paid workers. Many of the unpaid carers are older women. They direly need support, but this is now relegated to the municipalities and it differs from place to place. (Informal) carers have no formal rights, do not get financial support for the costs they make by being a carer nor is there any compensation when they give up their job in order to be able to care. There are respite facilities, but carers do not have a right to annual respite. Emotional and practical support may be available locally but there are no national guidelines on this issue.

Carers are mentioned in the government's report but what is being proposed is totally inadequate.

The Government reports on many projects that have been started to improve the quality of care in nursing homes. It must be said that the government has really made an effort to improve the quality, but this was very much needed indeed.

On the other hand: cutbacks have had adverse effects. There are not enough hands-on workers and because people who enter a nursing home are more dependent than they used to be, the care workers must have a higher degree of competency. There is an urgent personnel problem in the nursing homes, which is not mentioned in the government's report.

We understand that it is necessary to contain costs in the health- and social care sector, but the question that we should like the government to consider is the following (which we borrow from an unknown writer): "It is not the care that is expensive, but it is the care system."

Our care system has become far too complicated and major economies can be effectuated when the system is simplified. Fortunately this is mentioned in the government's report as one of the good intentions for the future.

Participation

It is interesting to see which issues are discussed under this heading: de-institutionalisation, vulnerability, abuse, loneliness and isolation, culture, rights of LGBT and rights of older people in institutions, the ratification of the CRPD (rights of persons with disabilities) and regional population decline.

Two crucial issues are missing. The first is that there is no recognition of the contribution older people make to society as child minders, carers and unpaid workers (volunteers) nor of the fact that the government can play a role in sustaining the active involvement of older people in society.

The second is digitalisation and innovation. The very rapid pace at which digitalisation and innovations take place are more than frustrating for older people. Increasingly older people feel they cannot cope because they have to deal with innovations, system changes or new digital devices which they do not know how to use. This really makes them feel isolated and not belonging to the present-day society. It seems that policy makers and producers are not at all aware of this fact.

Conclusion

The government has concluded in the final section of its report that it has made considerable progress in achieving the objectives of the RIS and the MIPAA over the last five years by increasing the pension age, by the reform of long-term care and by improving the participation of older people in society.

Looking at this conclusion we can agree that some of these reforms were necessary for budgetary reasons and that financial targets were reached. However, the government has not been able to grasp what this has meant for a great number of individual older people and has not been prepared to give older people sufficient support to deal with the changes. The government assigned this task to the family and the informal network of older people. Therewith it has laid a heavy burden on many citizens and it is now becoming clear that the government's expectations of what volunteers and informal carers can do have been far too high. Older people do not see the past five years as a period of progress and they are worried about their future.

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