



Coexistence International at
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Background

The chapters of the Netherlands' colonial past are unquestionably black pages in the country's history with long-lasting repercussions for Dutch society. During the post-colonial period, there were waves of immigration from East India, South Africa, the Antilles, and Suriname that nowadays make up 10% of the total population (around 1.7 million non-Dutch citizens). The largest ethnic groups are currently the Turks (370,000), Moroccans (327,000), and Surinamese (330,000).¹ In the 1960s and 70s, the Netherlands recruited laborers from Mediterranean countries, such as Yugoslavia, Turkey, Morocco, and Portugal. The growing diversity led to occasional hostilities; for instance, in 1975 when Malaccan extremists hijacked a train with 45 passengers and simultaneously kidnapped 105 children and their 5 teachers in an elementary school to demand a free republic of Malacca in the former Dutch colony. The nation was in shock.² Although no other forms of political violence took place in the Netherlands in the following two decades, the rise of ethnic tensions was a major concern of Dutch politicians. In 1979 the Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) released a report recommending a halt to the negligence of ethnic minorities and abandonment of the idea that laborers who entered the country in the 1960s and 70s would only stay temporarily.

Four years later the Ministry of Interior formulated the Minority

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Memorandum (minderhedennota), which officially recognized groups of immigrants as ethnic minorities on the basis of their social position within the Dutch society. The policy ensured ethnic minorities could maintain their own cultural practices. The Dutch government welcomed immediate relatives to make the move to the Netherlands, and funds were provided to establish and support ethnic homogeneous organizations and institutions. This stance of the Dutch government toward the growing diversity was based on the pillarization system,³ a power-sharing arrangement between Catholics, Protestants, and Social Democrats formed at the turn of the twentieth century, in which religious and socio-political groups maintained “subsidized autonomy.”⁴ Every pillar had its own leaders, sports clubs, school systems, and cultural activities. The leaders enacted policies (polder model) that ensured a common national identity, with the Dutch language as the main binding agent. Citizens from any pillar had equal access to societal and political institutions and access to equal opportunities. The New Minority Memo funded ethnically homogeneous organizations. Islamic schools were set up beside the already existing Protestant and Catholic public schools. Ethnic organizations were encouraged to participate in policy formation through councils and advisory groups. The Minority Memorandum built upon the concept of multiculturalism where different cultures are moderately integrated into society through institutionalizing a multicultural arrangement with little imposition or enforcement.⁵ The minority policy was successful in improving the legal status of immigrants through dual citizenship and voting rights for local and national elections, with the help of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (IND), a subdivision of the Ministry of Justice.

Already during the end of the 1980’s critique started to be voiced in the media and through political outlets around the minority policy, and only grew stronger throughout the mid 1990’s. A new policy (allochtonenbeleid) was formulated in 1989 in attempt to address the weak socio-economic position of ethnic minorities. Another policy change was proposed in 1994, the so-called Contourennota Integratiebeleid Etnische Minderheden. Ethnic minorities were now labeled as “allochtonen,” derived from the antonym of autochthonous, which means indigenous or

native.⁶ The focus of the new policy shifted from group pillars to individual integration, and was enacted to enhance the immigrant’s position in the economy. The national employment service became actively involved in positioning immigrants in the labor markets. Local municipalities gave out toolkits of Dutch language training and information on the functioning of Dutch civil society.⁷ Implementation officers and company advisors facilitated the process to raise awareness among employers regarding the integration of newcomers. Regardless of policy changes, the multicultural structure was preserved through the institutional make-up. Immigrants, regarded as non-Dutch residents, lived in their own neighborhoods, attending their own schools, meeting at their own cultural centers and sport clubs, and participating in their own social and political institutions. A multicultural society with diverse ethnicities lived happily together in relative isolation from each other. Through the Dutch multicultural model, ethnic and cultural identity were preserved but stayed detached from national Dutch identity.

Current State of Coexistence

At the turn of the 21st century a growing apprehension toward the integration of immigrants emerged within the local politics and media. Columnist Paul Scheffer published an essay entitled Multicultural Drama in a leading Dutch newspaper and started a heated debate around the integration policies of the Netherlands. Scheffer claimed that the majority of the Dutch were looking away while the contours of segregation within education and housing were forming right in front of them.⁸ Issues such as high unemployment rates, low educational achievements, and deficient level of the Dutch language were popular arguments given as consequences of the weak minority policies. The Netherlands became a hotbed of defensive politicians, complaining citizens, and media reporters with a lust for ethnic tensions. On this breeding ground Pim Fortuyn made his entry into the political arena in 2002. Fortuyn, a flamboyant populist and right-wing politician, rose swiftly in the polls of the national elections, voicing the discontent of many Dutch toward immigrants. In 2002, his party, the Lijst Pim Fortuyn (LPF), participated in the

Dutch elections for the first time. Fortuyn and the LPF exploited the fragile situation, depicting Islam as a “backward culture” and claiming that, if legally possible, the Dutch borders should be closed to Muslim immigrants. On May 6, 2002, nine days before the national elections were about to take place, Pim Fortuyn was assassinated. A wave of convulsion engulfed the nation with thousands of citizens parading the streets, protesting against the left-wing and tolerant government that was not able to protect their politicians, but also voicing their discontent toward immigrants, even though Fortuyn’s assassin was a native Dutch citizen. An unstable right-centered government was formed which lasted only ninety days. These politically shaky events merely sped up the process of generating fear and hatred towards immigrants.

The second political murder took place two and a half years later on November 4, 2004. Theo van Gogh, a columnist and presenter, was murdered while biking to work in Amsterdam. At the time of the murder, Van Gogh was collaborating with center-right parliamentarian Ayaan Hirsi Ali directing the movie “Submission” about the inferior position of women in Islam. With his murder by Mohammed Bouyeri, a second-generation Dutch-born citizen of Moroccan descent, the perceived threat of immigrants became a reality. Bouyeri’s Dutch citizenship did not matter; what counted above all was his Moroccan citizenship. Shortly after the murder, ethnic tensions increased. Several mosques throughout the nation were attacked, one Islamic school in Uden was burnt down, and other ethnic riots were reported throughout the country. The integration policies of the predominantly left-wing government of the 1980s and 90s were blamed. The segregation of ethnic minorities was now seen as a hotbed for young Muslims to turn into ‘terrorists,’ framed in the context of the 9/11 aftermath.

While many extensive evaluation and monitoring studies in 2002-2004 showed, to some extent, moderately improved educational and social levels of ethnic minorities in comparison with the early and mid-1990s, politicians and the media neglected these positive evaluations and continued to harden up regarding immigrants. The newly installed right-wing government created the “integration and immigration” minister post, translating the statements of Fortuyn into stricter immigration policies. An integration exam (inburgeringscursus) was introduced for those who entered the country, and for those already living in the Netherlands for years. The government had no intention to subsidize the high fees of participation. Rita Verdonk or “Iron Rita” succeeded the minister post of immigration issues in 2003 and continued along these lines. The coalition agreement of the center-right government confirmed the fear of many Dutch, and focused mainly on shaping and preserving the Dutch national identity

Policies and Initiatives

Currently the tide seems to be turning very slowly toward a successful integration of immigrants in the Netherlands. In 2007 a new Dutch government was installed, and seems determined to bring stability back into the picture. The integration post moved from the Ministry of Justice to the Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning, and Environment (VROM), aiming to create a pleasant living environment, to continue a spatial planning policy, and contribute to sustainable development. The promotion of proportional labor market opportunities is mentioned in the newest integration policy. An educational program has been set up at different universities to train Imams to successfully help to integrate old wave immigrants and newcomers into the society. The educational route offers students ways to connect to the local and national government, and to function as intermediaries between government and minority groups.

Since 2004, Integration Maps and Yearly Integration Reports have been published that track the integration process of first and second generation immigrants over time.⁹ It focuses on the behaviors and social position of ethnic minorities. Integration indicators, such as achievements in education; segregation in housing, school, and work; social contacts; use of health care practices; and criminality identify the successes and failures of the integration policies. Several institutions function as outlets to facilitate the integration process. The Kennisnet Integratiebeleid en Etnische Minderheden (KIEM) was established by the Ministry of Justice to facilitate the knowledge management regarding integration issues. The National Center for Foreigners (NCB) is an active platform offering civil integration projects throughout the country, including language courses, social orientation training, promoting jobs for non-Dutch women in day care, and offering courses on computer technology for job-searching immigrant professionals. Another successful institution is FORUM (the Institute for Multicultural Development), which receives subsidies from the Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning, and Environment for its programs, including a service centre which assists local councils and policymakers with developing and implementing integration policies.

Different policies and initiatives have been enacted in the turmoil of recent years. WorldConnectors, an active group for cross-sector dialogue, released a statement with prominent Dutch leaders who recommended social cohesion facilitated by the Dutch government.¹⁰ Social participation of any citizen of the Netherlands is considered a vital aspect of citizenship. Therefore, WorldConnectors

recommended that the national and local government should start to support active participation at work, in school, on the street, during sports, culture and arts. The participation of any ethnicity in cross-cultural organizations is a prerequisite for becoming successfully integrated into Dutch society. Some positive initiatives have already taken place, such as the Ma-Jo soccer competition (a soccer game for Moroccans and Jews), exhibitions around the arts and fashion of Morocco, the HappyChaos symposium on the current political and economical climate, and cross-cultural initiatives on websites such as CoolPolitics and Luxvoor.¹¹ These projects help to provide sustainable participation and enrich the lives of individuals. By interacting with agents from different cultures, all citizens can learn from one another, and can actively help immigrants to integrate into society.

The new integration policy has a strong emphasis on understanding and tolerating each other, referring to the integration exams that are now officially obligatory. An immigrant will have to pass 80% of the exam, and a higher level of knowledge of the Dutch language to obtain a visa or passport. With easy-to-navigate websites and helpful toolkits at local municipal offices, the government tries to facilitate the tedious process of becoming a Dutch citizen. The policy promises to diminish the waiting lists for language courses and integration exams. These efforts are now subsidized through loans and gifts. Respect and equality among citizens, and action against discrimination and racism, are strongly promoted. Social cohesion is an important factor in the coalition agreement that should begin to change the current climate into trust, participation, and responsibility, as suggested by WorldConnectors. The integration policy mentions the aim of establishing a Charter of Responsible Citizenship to protect citizens and raise awareness concerning their rights and duties. With the help of public debates, politicians and citizens can interact about the norms and beliefs that their society should be constituted upon.

Complementary Approach

Building more dynamic and inclusive forms of intercultural dialogue can further integration. The local level can start to play an important role in incorporating minorities' interests. Initiatives should be open to anybody who wants to participate, and not be specifically focused on ethnic groups. Authors J. Uitermark, U. Rossi, and H. Van Houtum suggest support for high-quality projects that accommodate ethnic minorities, and have a direct impact on society, instead of structurally providing unconditional funds to homogeneous organizations.¹² They do recognize that this approach is not

sufficient. The government should continue to contribute to the already existing structures of the previous policies to prevent other kinds of institutional exclusion.

All citizens have multifaceted identities that need to be recognized and respected by the government. Citizenship should become an important feature through which one can positively contribute to society. Trust needs to be re-established over time. With a good quality administration and justice system, competent politicians and key leaders, a sense of public responsibility and citizens' knowledge and compliance of the laws and rules, many aspects of the Dutch society can be restored. The concept of citizenship is based on knowledge of history and culture, including that of the ethnic groups that make up the nation. The educational system and public channels can especially contribute to the management of this knowledge.

Conclusion

Several academics, political leaders, and journalists recognize publicly that segregation and a tougher attitude are not a solution to integration problems of immigrants. The absence of enhanced cross-cultural interactions can create an unstable situation in which ethnic violence can erupt. A conflict did not break out with the multicultural approach, but it did lead to a relatively temperamental situation. The new Dutch government is attempting to secure a smooth integration of immigrants into the Dutch society through its comprehensive approach, including the minority policy which addresses the different dimensions of equality, economics, community work, and relations.

The new minority policy is developed to break down built-up tensions between the native Dutch and immigrants. However, problems related to the integration exams (waiting lists, outcomes, engagement, pressure, quality of programs) and complicated bureaucratic procedures can continue to polarize the Dutch society. The new minority policy remains ambiguous on the implementation of the suggested measurements and has a specific mandate only on coping with the waiting list. The way citizenship has to play a larger role is not strongly enough formulated, and will need perhaps more direction from civil society, NGOs, governmental agencies, and other institutions to integrate it into their own work.

Endnotes

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About Coexistence International

Based at Brandeis University since 2005, Coexistence International (CI) is an initiative committed to strengthening the resources available to policymakers, practitioners, researchers, advocates, organizations, and networks promoting coexistence at local, national, and international levels. CI advocates a complementary approach to coexistence work through facilitating connections, learning, reflection, and strategic thinking between those in the coexistence field and those in related areas.

What is Coexistence?

Coexistence describes societies in which diversity is embraced for its positive potential, equality is actively pursued, interdependence between different groups is recognized, and the use of weapons to address conflicts is increasingly obsolete. Coexistence work covers the range of initiatives necessary to ensure that communities and societies can live more equitably and peacefully together.

About the Series

In 2006, more than ninety percent of countries have populations made up of multiple identity groups. This rich diversity, full of promise and possibilities, also presents some of the most common and difficult challenges facing states today. Governments continue to wrestle with coexistence issues such as the dimensions of citizenship, constitutional and political designs that reflect the diversity within state borders, language and minority rights, land management, equality and cultural issues, and democratic participation. Understanding how diverse communities get along peacefully and equitably within a State is critical. If we can understand how some societies address issues of difference in constructive ways, then we might develop a repertoire of policy and programmatic options for countries experiencing inter-group violence or growing tensions.

With this publication series, CI seeks to describe the state of coexistence within different countries, and compare diversity and coexistence policies from countries around the world. CI has made no attempt to assess the implementation or success of such processes, or to endorse any of the initiatives mentioned in the report. We believe, however, that the documentation of the existence and scope of such efforts can contribute to a wider understanding of the variety of approaches for addressing issues of coexistence and intergroup conflict.

Other CI Publications

Complementary Approaches to Coexistence Work

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With this publication series, CI examines where and how certain fields intersect with coexistence work. What challenges and opportunities exist when disciplines work together toward the common goal of a more peaceful, just world? This series illustrates the possibilities of effecting positive coexistence through cooperation among related fields.

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