

SPEAKING OUT !

YOUTH REPORT ON ALCOHOL USE, YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT & PARTICIPATION

COMPILED BY THE NATIONAL YOUTH COUNCIL OF THE NETHERLANDS

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1. Introduction

On 6 November 2005 the UN General Assembly in New York will review the World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY)¹. The UN adopted this programme in 1995 during the tenth anniversary celebrations of the International Youth Year. The WPAY lists ten priorities: education, employment, hunger and poverty, health, the environment, drugs & alcohol use, delinquency, girls & young women, leisure and participation. Other priorities were added later, namely: globalization, ICT, HIV/AIDS, conflict and intergenerational issues.

The WPAY review is being prepared by the UN youth secretariat. To supplement government reports, youth organizations and young people have been asked to express their own thoughts and opinions on the developments. The secretariat has compiled a special Toolkit for evaluating the priorities.

The National Youth Council of the Netherlands and the International Centre of the Netherlands Institute for Care and Welfare (*Nederlands Instituut voor Zorg & Welzijn / NIZW / IC*) have jointly undertaken to report on developments in the Netherlands. However, due to pressure of time, we decided to select only some of the priorities from the list, paying particular attention to what is important to Dutch youth at this moment in time.

The issues selected for evaluation:

1) Alcohol use

According to recent research, young people in the Netherlands drink a lot of alcohol, more than their peers in other countries. Even though this problem has profound physical and social implications, this is not taken up in governmental policy.

2) Youth unemployment

Following years of economic growth, the younger generation is at risk of becoming the victim of the economic decline in the Netherlands. The youth unemployment figures are rising dramatically. The government is taking all sorts of measures, but the question is whether they are getting through to the youth.

3) Leisure & participation

A lot of attention has been paid nationally and internationally to youth participation in recent years. Is this just a trend or do young people really feel that they are being better listened to? The policy of the Dutch government assigns a key role to encouraging young

¹ The World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond (WPAY)

people to engage in voluntary work. Do young people also see this as a priority?

The National Youth Council has drawn up a questionnaire consisting of open and multiple-choice questions and specific statements on alcohol use, youth unemployment and leisure & participation. This questionnaire, which is appended to this report, was distributed through the channels available to the National Youth Council. We had only a few weeks to do the job. In this brief period over 245 young people filled in the questionnaire and the issues were discussed in three classes of 65 secondary school pupils. This report presents the results of the questionnaire and the discussions. Although based on a random selection, the results are a good reflection of the opinions of Dutch youth.

Though this report was compiled in a very short space of time, it provides a reasonable picture of what young people think of the policy that is developed for their benefit. Some of the opinions may be a bit rough around the edges, but young people in general are perfectly capable of presenting a sharp analysis of the discrepancy between government policy and what happens in everyday life. Hopefully, this report can make a modest contribution to youth priorities at global level. We shall also use the results in national debates.

Utrecht, 14 April 2005

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2. Young people and alcohol use

Alcohol and youth is a hot topic in the Netherlands at the moment with headlines such as 'Alcohol starts at 12 years old' and 'Kids in hut² drink themselves legless' emblazoned across the front pages. The media reports about alcohol use among Dutch youth are anything but positive. Most of the upheaval has been caused by surveys on the drinking habits of young people. A study among European schoolchildren revealed that alcohol use is greatest among Dutch pupils. No less than twenty-five % of Dutch pupils admitted to drinking alcohol more than ten times a month. This makes them front-runners in Europe. Another study – from the start of this year – revealed that two out of three thirteen-year-olds (boys and girls) in the Netherlands have already been introduced to alcohol. Five % of the 12 and 13-year-olds said that this had happened before they were 10, 15 % before they were 11 and one third before they were 12. The trend is that Dutch youth are drinking alcohol at an increasingly earlier age and in very large volumes.

In the Netherlands, youth education on the effects of alcohol has always taken second place to education on the effects of (soft) drugs.

Various initiatives have been launched, such as the *kater komt later* campaign (the hangover comes later) of the NIGZ³. The Alcohol Prevention Foundation (*Stichting Alcohol Preventie*) also runs information services. But it is only recently that alcohol use among the youth has been high on the political agenda. Usually, the effects of alcohol are associated with violence on nights out, rather than the health risks for young people themselves or the impact on their social life.

The surveys and the media coverage have given the Minister of Health cause for concern. As a result, various proposals have been formulated to reduce alcohol use among the youth; for example, by adding 60 eurocents to the price of mixed drinks, like Breezers (alcopops). The tax on beer will rise by over 20 %. At the same time, the Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority will perform more stringent checks on supermarkets, bars and discos to ensure that alcohol is not sold to youngsters under the age of 16. Measures are also being introduced which target parents and educators. Parents have a strong influence on the alcohol use of young teenagers in particular. Over two thirds of 12- and 13-year-olds are served alcohol in their own homes. It is bought by the mother (usually), the father, a brother, sister or another family member. This applies to teenagers who drink regularly as well as those who are allowed an occasional 'taste'. The government has therefore decided to

² Colloquial word in Dutch (keet) used to describe hang out shelters for youngsters

³ .Netherlands Institute for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention

devote more attention to alcohol information campaigns for parents, children and young people. The makers of alcoholic drinks are also being asked to advertise less on television and cinema screens. If they fail to cooperate, the government will pass a law banning alcohol commercials between 6.00 and 21.00 hours.

Clearly, the minister sees the growing consumption of alcohol among young people as a serious problem. But what do the young people think? And what do they think of the proposals to curb their drinking habits? We presented the government's proposals to over 200 teenagers in the NYC survey. The response is reported below.

2.1 A happy time is more important than binge drinking

The government is not only concerned about the early age when young people start drinking but also about the amount they drink when they go out or spend time with friends.

Apparently, 17 % drink more than eight glasses in an evening. And more than 25% say that they need more than ten glasses to get really drunk⁴. One might derive the impression from these figures that teenagers drink for the sake of it. However, further questioning revealed that over half the participants in the Youth Council survey disagreed with the statement: "A party isn't a party without beer or other alcohol". And when asked what they think of teenagers who drink so much that they throw up, over 80% firmly agreed that they must be idiots. Many teenagers do not see alcohol as an essential ingredient for a good time. Friends and good company are more important. It seems that the young people themselves also disapprove of irresponsible drinking; in any case, drinking until you throw up is not 'cool'.

Interestingly, most young people drink in an intimate or domestic setting, not at a specific place with, for example, tapped beer or a licence to serve alcohol. Though most of them drink alcohol in bars, the responses to the questionnaire indicate that the most popular places for drinking – after bars – are the homes of friends or their own homes. The theory that many young people drink in domestic and intimate settings is supported by the fact that, in the past ten years, the number of places where teenagers 'hang out', such as huts, caravans and lofts, and where alcohol is served, have increased considerably⁵. These places serve an important function for teenagers because they give them their own space for meeting friends, enable them to drink cheaply without supervision and allow them to determine the closing times for themselves.

⁴ Figures from the Trimbos Instituut Netherlands, Institute of Mental Health and Addiction

⁵ Research by the Alcohol Prevention Foundation

2.2 Breezers are 'out'

Drinking alcohol was not a goal in itself for the participants in the survey, but just one of the things you can do in the context of an enjoyable evening. But what did they think of the new government proposals to curb the consumption of alcohol?

A mixed response came from those who answered online the question whether young people would drink less if the price of a beer or a Breezer went up by 50%. A look at the average responses suggests that they do not agree with the statement but they do not entirely disagree with it either. A price rise in Germany has already resulted in a steep decline in Breezer consumption among young people. During the class discussions the feelings about this statement were far more explicit. The pupils in the different classes thought it an absurd plan and were adamant that higher taxes on beer and Breezers would have no effect; first, because they themselves had enough money to buy a Breezer or a beer, and were not dependent on their parents or anyone else; and second, because it is no longer hip or cool to drink Breezers anyway. The various teenagers said that they drank spirits more often than 'dumb' Breezers.

The following statement was incorporated in the questionnaire with a view to the minister's proposal to ban alcohol for people under the age of 16: "A ban on alcohol for people under 16 isn't necessary. I am personally responsible enough to decide what I do and do not drink." A majority of the participants agreed with this statement. When asked if such a ban would help curb alcohol use many were sceptical. They pointed out that it is now also against the law to sell alcohol to under-sixteens, but they can still easily buy a crate of beer or other alcohol in the supermarket. Some of them added that it is impossible to check what people drink in their own homes or at the homes of friends. Though most young people consider themselves responsible enough to decide what they do and do not drink, another picture emerged when they were asked if – assuming they were personally accountable for their actions – was it all right to get drunk and act irresponsibly. Many answered this question by saying that most of the responsibility still rested with the parents or whoever served the alcohol in the first place. So, not entirely with the individual who gets drunk. When asked who should educate teenagers on the effects of alcohol, the vast majority said that this was mainly the task of the parents.

In 2004, over half the commercials for alcoholic drinks were aired before 9 p.m., when many children and youngsters are watching TV. To prevent young people from seeing too many alcohol commercials, a proposal was submitted that advertisements for alcoholic drinks be

vetted beforehand and subjected to limitations for radio, TV and cinemas. The questionnaire therefore asked the respondents to explain whether alcohol commercials influenced their alcohol use. The answers varied widely. Some said they were not influenced by alcohol commercials because, for example, they scarcely or never drink. Though they found some of the advertisements good, they wouldn't make them drink more. Another group answered with a categorical 'no', because they decide for themselves what they enjoy; in the words of one of them: "No, you drink what you enjoy and not because of the image that hangs around the product. Most of the time, you don't even know what kind of beer you're drinking when you go out." Other participants were not so sure: "A lot of people don't think so, but the atmosphere of an advertisement does determine whether a drink is 'cool'. Like Martini. You can feel a bit of the atmosphere of the commercial (sensual Italian) when you say: give me a Martini." The other large group said they would not drink more because of a commercial but if they saw a commercial for a new product that they hadn't yet tasted, they would try it out sooner.

2.3 How active are the information efforts?

The proposed measures to curb drinking among young people do not appear to be making much of an impression. One thing that did clearly emerge from the survey is that young people accord parents an important role in providing information and taking responsibility for the drinking habits of their children. However, parents are not always the best authority in this respect, given that two-thirds of the 12- and 13-year-olds are offered alcohol in a family setting. The survey therefore tried to find out what other channels exist through which young people get information, and whether the young people themselves know where to get information on the effects of alcohol.

The most obvious place for educating young people on the effects of alcohol is the school. When asked if secondary schools provided information on alcohol use, only 50% of the respondents said 'yes'. Further questioning during the class discussions revealed that the subject of alcohol is only marginally addressed – sometimes briefly in the biology curriculum or, previously, during a 'care' lesson. One social studies teacher said that alcohol does feature as a minor theme in one of the textbooks, but she often did not have time to deal with it. It seems that young people who want more information about the effects of alcohol are left to their own devices. A majority of the respondents agreed with the questionnaire statement that the possible effects of alcohol consumption should be clearly displayed on the labels. This indicates that young people are certainly not averse to information. One striking detail is

that the respondents regarded the Internet as the primary source of more information on the subject. Most of them said they would first perform a 'google' search and see which sites came up in the results. Though most of them know how to find information, the question remains, of course, whether they visit these sites of their own accord and, if so, does it enhance their knowledge on the effects of alcohol. To effectively educate young people on the subject, it would be more sensible to offer information actively and to make more use of peer information.

3. Youth unemployment

Recently, youth unemployment has increased in the Netherlands for the first time in years. The statistics do not give cause for optimism. At the start of 2005, 13.8 % of Dutch youth were unemployed; this figure is twice as high as the average unemployment rate for the entire population (6.66%).

Some experts see similarities between present and past growth in youth unemployment. Twenty years ago, youth unemployment also rose steeply in the Netherlands with the result that many young people could not flow into the job market and had to spend a long time in subsidized jobs or on benefit. Though the present situation is not entirely comparable with the crisis in the 1980s, the Dutch government is still deeply concerned. Young people are always first to feel the effects of economic decline. This generation is no exception. This is largely because many of them have temporary employment contracts, which are less likely to be renewed in a poor economic climate. To make matters worse, there are also fewer job vacancies. This situation does not make it easier for school-leavers to find a job (even with excellent grades). Ironically, though the economy is in a poor state and jobs are thin on the ground, young people will be needed more than ever in the future because the baby-boomers – a large group of the population born in the 1950s and 1960s – will be retiring after 2010. This group is so large that, when the time comes, the non-working population will expand to such an extent that it will exceed the working population. Forecasters say that around this time people aged between twenty and fifty will have to work long and hard to support all these pensioners.

The fact that one in ten of Dutch youth is now out of a job, while they will be so desperately needed in the future, has made the government draw up an action plan. The Ministries of Education and Social Affairs & Employment have come together and set two objectives: first, the youth unemployment figures during this period of government (2003 – 2007) must not more than double the figure for total unemployment. Second, each unemployed young person must be (back) in a job or attending a training course within six months in order to prevent long-term unemployment. The Dutch government hopes that this strategy will keep young people 'fit' and 'in condition' for the job market.

A Youth Unemployment Task Force has been formed to realize these objectives. Part of the action plan is to create 40,000 extra jobs for people up to the age of 23. The government also wants to improve the throughflow of unemployed youth to ensure that they do have a job

or are following a training course within the fore-mentioned six-month period. Various instruments have been devised for this purpose.

A special tax arrangement has been introduced to encourage businesses to employ young people. It enables employers to take on unemployed youth and have them retrained until they get a start qualification⁶. Meantime, various businesses – also in the SMB sector (small, medium enterprises) – have promised to create a total of 20,000 youth jobs. These will be special jobs where young people can gain work experience for periods ranging from three to twelve months (while retaining benefit).

The main organization for job mediation in the Netherlands is the Centre for Work and Income (*Centrum voor Werk en Inkomen / CWI*). The CWI gets eight million euros a year to organize short-term activities, such as job application training and individual counselling projects, especially for young people who have personal difficulties finding employment. The CWI is also the organization where job-seekers apply for unemployment benefit or social security.

Another initiative designed to help young people find employment is the ‘job passport’. A lot of youngsters leave school with no certificates, so they have no basic qualifications. Their competencies and talents are not recorded ‘on paper’, so their position on the labour market is weaker than it should be. The job passport is based on competencies gained elsewhere: besides specifying any training courses it describes the experience and talents of the holder, such as the ability to work in a team, creativity, technical skills etc.

These initiatives sum up the spearheads in the action plan. It is, at any rate, obvious that the Dutch government sees rising youth unemployment as a major problem, but how does the Dutch youth rate its own chances on the labour market? What would they do if they were unemployed and how do they see their own future? These are some of the questions we put to them.

3.1 Dutch employers don’t want to invest in young people

The Dutch government assumes that youth unemployment is determined by the economic climate in the country. In other words, if the economy is in decline, the number of young people without a job will increase and if the economy picks up more young people will find

⁶ A start qualification in the business community usually enables the young person to gain a good position as a starting tradesman/woman on the labour market.

employment. The Dutch economy is not performing well at present, so the aim of the action plan is to keep Dutch youth 'in condition' so that they can be effectively deployed when things start to improve and, in the near future, when the baby-boomers retire. Most young people find this a strange sort of logic. They are vitally important for the future, but the employers are doing nothing right now to prepare them for this. Many young people feel that very few employers are prepared to take them on without experience. They prefer to 'play it safe' and engage 'older' people who do have experience. The only way to persuade employers to hire young people is via pressure from the Youth Unemployment Task Force. The Youth Council survey revealed that over 71% of the questionnaire respondents said that employers do not want to invest in young people, even though it is the young people who will have to take care of them when they retire. The participants in the class discussions were then asked if young people were actually prepared to support this future group of pensioners. It was noticeable that, for a great many pupils, it did not go without saying that they would later bear responsibility for this large group of needy elderly people, either financially or physically. One remarked that she did actually consider looking after her own parents, but they rest would have to sort things out for themselves.

It appears that young people not only apply the concept of self-sufficiency to the elderly but to themselves as well. When asked whether the government should find a job for them if they could not find one for themselves, half said 'yes' while the other half said 'no'. It also became clear during the class discussions that dependence on parents or the state was regarded as negative. It seems therefore that young people set great store by financial independence; after all, you are capable of deciding for yourself what you do with your own salary. Besides being a source of extra money, a job outside school is a sort of status symbol. Seventy-five % of the survey participants had a job alongside school.

The participants expected a high level of self-sufficiency both from themselves and the elderly, but how did they rate the chances of their peers from ethnic groups? Do they have more trouble finding jobs than non-ethnic youngsters? The Youth Unemployment Task Force does not have a specific policy for young people from ethnic groups. The task force appreciates that youth unemployment is a multi-coloured problem, but does not want to make it an ethnic problem at the moment. A large majority of the respondents who filled in the questionnaire said that ethnic young people have more trouble finding jobs than their non-ethnic counterparts. The class discussions revealed that the job chances of ethnic young people are usually rated lower if, for example, their language or knowledge is not up to scratch. They did not believe that ethnic young people have less chance of a job because of their name or skin colour

3.2 CWI? Never heard of it

Another question in the survey related to preparation for the labour market. One of the spearheads of Dutch government policy is to prevent large swathes of pupils from leaving school without certificates. This figure currently stands at 40,000. In poor economic climates – as at present – employers are far more critical when selecting from the candidates and are more likely to choose people who have completed their education. Eighty % of the young people who are currently in education believe that their curriculum is preparing them for type of work they want to do. Seventy-five % believe that the practical skills taught at school give them a better chance of a job than theory alone. Vocational curricula lead to more employment possibilities after leaving school than theory-based curricula. The preparation in vocational curricula ranges from job application training to student placements.

So, a large contingent firmly believes that their current education programme is giving them the right skills to win a place in the labour market. We were, however, curious as to what they would do if they could not find a job right away after leaving school and what resources they would use in their search for employment. We were struck by the fact that they had, at any rate, not become cynical through all the gloomy reports about their chances on the labour market and the rising youth unemployment. Fifty-two % of those who filled in the questionnaire said that they would still first apply for jobs advertised on the Internet or in the newspapers. They did not see this as hopeless. Though most of them said that they would first turn to the Internet to find a job, the next step was to inquire in their own network and ask friends and acquaintances about possible employment. The fact that a large group said they would visit or phone a potential employer indicates that they are neither too lazy nor too bashful to try to make direct contact to get a job. Temping agencies were also seen as useful intermediaries in a job hunt. These results suggest that young people value direct and low-threshold communication when job-hunting. After all, they were prepared to use their own network for this purpose and to approach potential employers directly.

Only 3.21 % said that they would approach the CWI for help in finding a job. It was clear from the responses that many young people do not know exactly what the CWI does: “I think that the CWI checks up on how often you apply for a job to see whether you are eligible for benefit,” and “The name sounds familiar. The CWI is where you can go to if you’re looking for a job. But I don’t know what they do exactly or what the difference is between the CWI and an temping agency.” Other responses indicated that young people do not know what the CWI is, or they associate it with the place where you can apply for benefit. Only a few knew that it could help you if you were looking for a job.

The questionnaire results lead to the conclusion that young people have a poor idea of the tools offered by the Dutch government to combat youth unemployment. Further, a large group of young people are unfamiliar with the government's labour mediation organization (CWI), even though this organization gets a large annual budget to help young people get a good start on the labour market through education and training. The campaign to combat youth unemployment is directed mainly at employers. The facilities that are available for the young people themselves are less out in the open. To improve the success of the action plan for youth unemployment it would be sensible – from the perspective of the young people themselves – if the government's labour mediation service were to profile itself as low-threshold and youth-friendly.

4. Leisure & participation

*“... Young people just hang aimlessly around street corners or spend hours on end swapping text messages with their mates, if they aren't gaming on their play stations. They often go off the rails, they have no norms or values and scarcely any respect for their elders, they are spoiled rotten and expect everything on a plate...”*⁷ This more or less sums up the prejudices against ‘today's youth’. It all sounds so familiar. One recurrent discussion topic nowadays is whether ‘today's youth’ are as politically and socially engaged as their predecessors in the 1960s, who were trying so hard to change the world. Complaints that young people are lazy, materialistic and indifferent to society may simply be a veiled indication that adults do not understand what makes ‘today's youth’ tick.

Prejudices like these prompted the Youth Council to ask the young people themselves what they do in their spare time. There were two central themes: voluntary work and participation. First, we wanted to know what young people do in their spare time and – more specifically – what they think of voluntary work. Recently the Dutch government has been paying more attention to the concept of ‘voluntary work’. The government maintains that society can only truly exist if people assume responsibility for themselves and act on it. So, this government believes that the Netherlands should invest in social ties, in caring for the sick and elderly in their surroundings and, above all, in voluntary work. Volunteers are the cement in society. Recently, to get young people involved in voluntary work while still at school the government even commissioned research into the possibilities of introducing a Social Year. All of this stems from the idea that youth participation is necessary to keep the voluntary sector healthy. For, the maxim of ‘teach them while they're young’ applies here as well. In other words, the government takes the view that people who have actively participated in clubs or other organizations in their youth are more likely to do voluntary work as adults.

The Dutch government wants young people to become actively committed to society in the expectation that such commitment will continue in later life. But just how far is the government inviting Dutch youth to participate in discussions and decisions that they themselves find important? According to the ministry responsible for youth policy, young people are entitled to express their views on issues that affect them. Surely this must then apply to youth policy. The ministry says that youth participation is more than just talking about a meeting place in the neighbourhood. The youth must be able to exert a fundamental influence on what is realized and decided for them. The second theme that the Youth Council presented in the survey related to whether young people actually feel they are taken

seriously. For example, what are the local authorities doing to promote youth participation? What are they doing to find out how young people experience things? This topic will be discussed in the next section.

4.1 I always thought that voluntary work was pushing pensioners around in wheelchairs

Young people lead busy lives. As mentioned earlier in the section on youth unemployment, 75% of the survey participants had an after-school or weekend job to supplement their pocket money. This leaves less time for voluntary work. Earlier research also revealed that voluntary organizations are facing a decline in interest in voluntary work among the youth. But is it correct to assume that the reason for this is a busy life? The Youth Council therefore presented the following statement: "I have no spare time because of school and my job." Over half disagreed. It seems that most young people feel that school and work leave them enough time for other things.

Perhaps voluntary work is unpopular among the youth because it has a boring image and therefore cannot compete with paid work, friends and going out. The class discussions appeared to confirm the theory of a boring image. One of the participants thought that voluntary work consisted of pushing pensioners around in wheelchairs. When it was explained that you could also be a volunteer at your sport club, many responded with surprise, and it transpired that more of them were doing voluntary work than they had first thought.

Despite the many complaints that the youth are not enthusiastic about voluntary work, one of the most striking findings of the survey was that many young people do not reject voluntary work out of hand. Fifty-five % disagreed with the statement: "Voluntary work is a waste of my time." This result can be interpreted as a hopeful sign. Even though young people are not dying to throw themselves *en masse* into voluntary work, would it not still be sensible for the social organizations to get together and revamp their image?

Like more and more adults, young people do not do voluntary work out of religious or ideological convictions, but because it fits in with their individual preferences. These preferences could easily change after a few years. Most young people want to experience as many different things as possible. It would therefore be unrealistic to expect them to remain

⁷ Stichting Maatschappelijk Ondernemen

committed to the same club or organization all their lives. What is more, some activities are more popular than others. It is easier to find young people willing to invest time in 'cooler' areas of voluntary work such as Amnesty International or cultural festivals.⁸ Social organizations that want to harness the will and potential of the youth would be well advised to tune in more to youth culture.

4.2 My local authority has installed one bench

The idea that young people are actually prepared to work for specific goals and are not just materialistic and lazy was confirmed by the strong response to the question: "Young people have a reputation for being lazy, materialistic and indifferent to society. Do you recognize yourself or your friends in this image?" The vast majority answered 'no'. Many admitted that they do have more money and that they like owning luxury goods, but that does not mean they are not interested in the world around them. One of the questionnaire respondents said: "...sometimes I try to think up solutions for these things, and I can actually apply them on a small scale. On a larger scale it is a bit more difficult getting politicians out of their ivory tower..." Another written response said that the government scarcely involves young people in anything. These remarks seem totally at odds with the youth policy of the Dutch government, which states that young people are entitled to express their views on issues that concern them and that they should be able to exert a fundamental influence on what is realized and decided for them. The statement "My opinion as a young person is taken seriously" did not get a wholehearted positive response. On average, half the respondents agreed while the other half disagreed. The vast majority rejected the suggestion in the questionnaire that you need to be well-educated to participate in discussions and decisions on youth issues.

The latest developments in voluntary work are characterized by ever-increasing decentralization; what this boils down to is that it is largely up to the local authorities to flesh out and stimulate voluntary work. As a large part of the youth policy is also determined by local authorities, the National Youth Council wanted to find out about locally organized activities and whether they reflected the needs of the youth. A small majority responded to the statement: "There are enough things for young people to do in my municipality" by saying that they did not feel that this was the case. When asked if they could give an example of an activity that their municipality organized especially for the youth and whether it appealed to them, a somewhat sketchy picture emerged. Now and then mentioned was made of a

⁸ Verwey-Jonker Institute research into social issues.

community centre or club house that organizes activities, but there was not much more variation in the answers. One third could not even think of an example. The saddest response was: "There's nothing at all. There is one bench but it's only an excuse for sending everybody away from other places. When I look at other municipalities I see a lot of special places where you can meet up, some even have a roof or a windbreaker, but not here." Many young people say that they really enjoy the (music) festivals organized by their municipality, adding that these are not meant specifically for the youth but a far broader audience. It was clear from various responses that local authorities do not always know what young people like. For example, the survey revealed that art and culture activities are hardly ever geared to the youth. In recent years a lot of cash and energy have been invested in youth policy in the Netherlands, but the survey participants do not appear to have benefited from it.

Besides enjoying festivals, many young people find it very important to have their own place where they can skateboard or hang out. As these wishes appear to be meeting with very little response from the different municipalities, the Youth Council asked the following questions: "Suppose you wanted a special place for the youth in your neighbourhood. Who would you approach?" Interestingly, most of them – 32 % – said they would go to the local Youth Council. In the Netherlands there are local and provincial youth councils as well as the National Youth Council. These councils consist entirely of young people and aim to voice the ideas and opinions of young people in the municipality or the province. They tell local councillors and officials what young people think about specific issues and provide support and guidance for young people who want to start up local initiatives. Though a large %age of the respondents said they would go to the local youth council for assistance, 30% said they have no idea where to go.

It may generally be concluded that Dutch youth are prepared to contribute actively to society. However, they have their own ideas about how and why. The activities offered by the various social organizations and local authorities are out of sync with the interests of the current younger generation. Young people want to try out as many different things as possible under flexible conditions; they want varied activities that they can enjoy. Initiative needs to come from two sides to get young people interested in voluntary work and to encourage them to participate and join in the decision-making. Local authorities and social organizations need to work harder to find out what young people see as important and where their interests lie. On the other hand, the young people can do more by coming up with exciting ideas to inspire all these stuffy organizations and local authorities.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

It is still customary to formulate youth policy without first finding out what young people themselves think. This survey again confirmed the existence of a wide discrepancy between how young people see specific issues and what the policymakers think they need. The participants in this survey have therefore made a valuable contribution by expressing their opinions on alcohol use among young people, youth unemployment and leisure & participation. We used the survey to test government policy on certain WPAY priority issues against the thoughts of young people. The conclusions and recommendations are summarized below.

Recent research has shown that Dutch youth drink exceptionally large volumes of alcohol. This is not, however, experienced as a problem by the youth themselves or the parents. Drinking alcohol at a young age is to a large extent socially acceptable to many youngsters and parents. This social acceptance is evident from the fact that parents and educators invest very little energy in apprising children at a young age of the effects of alcohol. The young people say that an increase in the price of alcoholic drinks would not make them drink less. If the price of one type of drink goes up, they will switch to something else. It would be better to combat alcohol use among young people by organizing active information campaigns geared not only to the youth, but to parents and educators as well. Particular attention should be paid to more peer education in the form of, say, projects on Dutch camping sites in the summer.

One in ten young people is currently unemployed in the Netherlands. The Dutch government sees this as a huge problem and has developed an active policy to address it. The results of the survey clearly show that this policy is directed more at employers than the young people. In addition, in the implementation of the policy an important role is assigned to the government's job-mediation services (CWI's). However, these services are more or less unknown to the young people. To make more of a success of the policy to combat youth unemployment – also from the perspective of the youth – the government's job-mediation services should profile themselves as low-threshold organizations and work on a more youth-friendly image. This would enable them to widen their reach and give a larger group of youngsters the opportunity to use the facilities available to them.

For leisure & participation the themes of voluntary work and the role of the local authority were used as a starting point to ascertain whether young people are prepared to actively contribute to society. Again, the gap between youth and policymakers came to the fore.

Young people are certainly prepared to do their bit, but have totally different ideas about how. Local authorities and social organizations should make more of an effort to find out what is important and interesting to young people. On the other hand, the young people could take more action by coming up with exciting ideas to inspire the social organizations and the local authorities. There is, incidentally, nothing new about this information. Various initiatives for more flexible voluntary work have already been started up in the Netherlands. However, the response from the youth indicates that they have barely got through to the intended target group.

We hope that this limited evaluation can assist in the further development of global youth policy. We realize that these topics have been studied in a Dutch context, where issues such as hunger and poverty scarcely play a role, let alone conflict and war. Even so, the topics we have chosen concern young people all over the world. It would be advisable, when framing youth policy, to take more account of the everyday lives of the youth.

Appendix: Questionnaire

General introduction and personal details

Questionnaire: "What do the youth in the Netherlands think about alcohol use among young people, youth unemployment, and leisure & participation?"

The National Youth Council strongly believes that young people should be actively involved in issues that concern them. We know that young people have their own opinions and ideas. This is why we have compiled this questionnaire.

This questionnaire will take about 15 minutes of your time.

Name*

E-mail address*

Age

Gender

Educational level

1. VMBO (lower secondary education)
2. HAVO (higher secondary education)
3. VWO (pre-academic secondary education)
4. ROC (secondary vocational education)
5. HBO (college of further education)
6. WO (university)

* You only need to fill in these details if you want to be included in the lottery for the gift voucher.

Ten years ago the 191 member countries of the United Nations entered a whole series of agreements to improve the situation of the youth. These agreements are recorded in the World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY). By 'Youth' the UN means people aged between 15 and 25. The issues include education, employment, poverty and HIV/AIDS. This year, the member nations are meeting again at the UN to find out what has become of these agreements. Information is being collected from all countries to assist them in their task.

The National Youth Council wants to provide the UN with information regarding the situation of Dutch youth. We decided not to deal with all the topics, preferring to choose a few that are important to youth in the Netherlands, namely: alcohol use, youth unemployment, leisure & participation.

By filling in this questionnaire you can make sure that Dutch youth makes their voice heard at the United Nations in New York!

One name will be selected at random from the completed questionnaires. He/she may choose between a film, book or record voucher.

Thank you for filling in this questionnaire!

Information for the people who compiled the questionnaire and converted it into digital format: the questionnaire deals with three main topics, which are addressed in three types of question.

6 Statements: the respondent indicates agreement/disagreement on a scale of 1-5.

2 Multiple choice questions: the respondent may click on a maximum of 2 answers.

2 Open questions.

Alcohol use

At the beginning of March a Dutch newspaper ran the headline: 'Young teenagers drink too much'. A survey had revealed that one in seven thirteen-year-olds drinks an average of six glasses of alcohol a week. Mixed drinks and beer are especially popular among under-sixteens. Another survey revealed that Dutch young people can consume alcohol at an alarming rate: if you compare the drinking habits of Dutch youth with the drinking habits of youth from other European countries, the Dutch rank among the top four.

The Dutch Minister of Health is deeply concerned about this situation and has proposed raising the price of beer, breezers and other mixed drinks in the belief that this will curb alcohol use among young people. Another plan is to ban alcohol commercials in the early evening and to completely prohibit alcohol use for people under the age of 16.

1. Statements on alcohol use

- If the price of a beer or a breezer goes up by 50% I will drink less alcohol.
- A party isn't a party without beer or other alcohol.
- A ban on alcohol for people under 16 isn't necessary. I am personally responsible enough to decide what I do and do not drink.
- I think that teenagers who drink so much alcohol that they have to throw up are idiots.
- The possible effects of alcohol should be clearly displayed on the labels.
- I am/was given information on the effects of alcohol at secondary school.

Multiple choice questions on alcohol use

(You may click a maximum of 2 answers for each question.)

2. Who do you think is responsible for educating you on the effects of alcohol?

1. Your parents
2. The brewery
3. The government
4. Your friends
5. School
6. Someone else, who?

3. Where do you yourself drink alcohol?

1. At your parents' home
2. In bars
3. At friends' homes
4. Sport canteen
5. Youth club/centre
6. School parties
7. I don't drink alcohol

Open questions about alcohol

4. Do alcohol commercials/advertisements influence your drinking habits? Explain:

5. Do you know where you can find more information about alcohol use and its effects? Explain:

Youth unemployment

Have you ever applied for a (part-time) job and thought: this would be really great and I think I can do it; then you are rejected because you haven't got enough experience. How on earth can you get experience if non-one will employ you?

This is a well-known situation. A lot of employers still seem to prefer people with experience. This is one reason why youth unemployment is rising so fast – much faster than unemployment in general. At the moment, one out of every ten people between the age of 16 and 23 does not have a job. The government has decided to tackle this problem by developing a programme to combat youth unemployment. Each unemployed young person must have a job or be following a training course within six months. The government intends to realize this aim by creating 40,000 jobs for people up to the age of 23. Information is provided about this scheme via TV programmes. But the government also wants to reduce the number of rules so that policymakers and employers can create jobs for young people more easily.

6. Statements on youth unemployment

- I think that my educational programme is preparing me well for the work that I want to do later.
- If I can't find a job it's up to the government to get me one.
- Learning practical skills at school gives me a better chance of a job than learning theory alone.
- I think that youth from ethnic groups have more trouble finding jobs than youth from non-ethnic groups.
- Employers won't invest in young people even though we will have to support them when they retire.
- There's no point in applying for jobs advertised in the newspapers or on the Internet. You get a job through personal contacts.

Multiple choice questions on youth unemployment
(You may click a maximum of 2 answers for each question.)

7. Are you combining school/studies with a job at the moment?

1. I already have a proper job
2. I do not have a job
3. I am following a study/work programme
4. I do voluntary work
5. In the hotel/restaurant trade
6. A newspaper round
7. Baby-sitting
8. In the supermarket
9. Something else

8. If you were now looking for a job, how would you approach it?

1. Ask people I know
2. Approach the CWI
3. Approach an employment agency
4. Look in the newspapers
5. Search the Internet
6. More than the above, namely.....
7. Others

Open questions about youth unemployment

9. How does the school prepare you for the labour market? Explain:

10. If you are unemployed you need to report to the Centre for Work and Income. Do you know what this is? And do you know what it can do for you? Explain:

Leisure & participation

You hear a lot of older people complaining nowadays about 'today's youth'. All they do is sit behind the computer, chat endlessly on their mobile, go out, and go on holiday. Personal development doesn't interest them at all and they feel nothing for investing in their future. But is that true? Maybe there are enough young people with their own action plan, only nobody listens to them. Or they live in a municipality where no activities are organized for young people – only bingo nights for pensioners.

11. Statements about youth unemployment

- I have no spare time because of school and my job.
- Voluntary work is a waste of my time.
- My opinion as a young person is taken seriously.
- There are enough things for young people to do in my municipality.
- You need to have a higher level of education to join in discussions and decisions on youth issues.

- Art and culture events are not directed at young people.

Multiple choice questions on leisure time & participation
(You may click a maximum of 2 answers for each question.)

12. I have a part-time job to pay for

1. my mobile phone
2. going out
3. my moped or scooter
4. holidays
5. clothes
6. art and culture
7. other

13. Suppose you wanted a special place where young people in your neighbourhood could get together. Who would you approach?

1. A youth worker
2. The mayor
3. A councillor
4. A local authority official
5. A teacher
6. The local youth council
7. Other
8. No idea

Open questions on leisure & participation

14. Can you give an example of activities that your municipality organizes specially for the youth. Do these activities appeal to you? Or do you have other suggestions/ideas:

15. Young people have an image of being lazy, materialistic and indifferent to society. Do you recognize yourself or your friends in this image? Give examples: