

Summary

Decline

This report brings together data on organisations in Dutch civil society. Chapter 2 discusses the general involvement of the population in associational life and voluntary work. It explores the attraction of diverse civil society organisations and how this has changed over the last 25 years. Population surveys suggest that the percentage of Dutch citizens who are not affiliated with any civil society organisations at all has increased during the last decade. This decline has occurred both in ideological and recreational organisations and is now manifesting itself in interest groups. Among those who do regard themselves as part of an organisation there are signs of an increasing concentration on membership only of genuine recreational organisations. Figures drawn from the records kept by these organisations themselves confirm the dominant picture of a sharp slowdown in growth or fragmentation during the 1990s.

As regards voluntary work, the various studies do not produce a uniform picture. Some suggest a clear decline in enthusiasm, while others show no evidence of this. In terms of active participation, youth associations and typical recreational associations (sport, hobby, amateur art) are found to be of particular importance. In contrast to nature conservation or environmental organisations, for example, or trade unions, they have a high proportion of members who are willing to play an active and unpaid role in the organisation.

Indigenous Dutch people are affiliated with civil society organisations considerably more frequently than members of minority groups. The major exception to this finding is membership of religious organisations, which is much higher among Turks and Moroccans, Surinamese and Antilleans in particular. Native Dutch citizens are also more frequently active as volunteers (especially in sports associations). In ideological organisations and interest groups, however, the percentage of volunteers from ethnic minority groups is just as high as among the native population. These findings are based on the SCP's Amenities and Services Utilisation Survey (AVO) for 2003.

Old and new organisations

The reduced ability of traditional organisations such as political parties and the Church to recruit new members does not result from a decline in interest in the core themes with which these organisations are concerned. The decline in their power of attraction probably has more to do with features of their organisational structure and the presence in modern Dutch society of an ever wider range of alternatives in which people can express their interests and affinities. People in the Netherlands today have a rich choice of media, different forms of spirituality and alternative means of political participation. The flipside of this is that the ties with organisations are

becoming increasingly loose, in a relationship that leaves scope for constantly changing contacts, while the organisations themselves increasingly take on the character of 'temporary participation agencies'.

If the successful organisations are placed alongside those that are shedding members, it becomes apparent that a shift is taking place within Dutch civil society from secondary to 'tertiary' organisational forms, in other words from organisations with intensive mutual contacts between the members to organisations in which there are (virtually) no contacts at all. The organisations that have arisen since the second half of the 19th century under the umbrella of 'pillarisation', i.e. the 'vertical' division of Dutch society along ideological, religious and political lines, were largely - like the social movements which began in the 1960s and 1970s - focused on the emancipation of sections of the population (the Protestant poor (*kleine luyden*), Catholics, the working classes, farmers, women, homosexuals). They enabled these groups to demand a role for themselves on the public stage and to participate fully in the democratic society. However, emancipation is gradually fading as a source of inspiration; the relationships with organisations are becoming increasingly functional and anonymous.

Survey of civil society organisations

Current diagnoses focusing on Dutch civil society are mainly based on data collected from the population, usually in the form of opinion surveys. These suggest a greater distance between the public and civil society organisations. This picture is confirmed in a number of respects in chapter 3, which discusses data not obtained from population surveys but from a sample of diverse organisations representing most sectors of Dutch civil society, in which midway through 2003 officers of 75 larger civil society organisations (with a minimum of 50,000 members and/or donors) were interviewed in depth.

These respondents estimate that two-thirds of their memberships comprise passive members or donor-members, and that the relative size of this group has grown in recent decades at the expense of the percentage of active members and volunteers. There are other signs of declining involvement in organisations: lower attendance at meetings or gatherings, weaker identification with the organisation and less enthusiasm for trying to interest others in the organisation. The reduced interest in joint participation also illustrates the greater distance between members themselves. There is also a trend towards professionalisation: two-thirds of organisations have seen an increase in the number of paid officers over the last ten years.

Changes in organisations

The greater distance among the members and potential members/donors, a government that has begun to look more critically at the granting of subsidies, and the wide range of alternatives and variants for engagement and recreation in modern-day society has heightened the competition between organisations in the fight for the

public's attention. It is therefore little wonder that, according to their own reports and compared with a few decades ago, they have begun attaching much more importance to recruiting and holding on to members, spreading the word about their aims to the widest possible audience and ensuring the quality of publicity to non-members. According to the survey of organisational representatives, more attention is being devoted to the publicity aspect; they report that the focus of organisations on the 'outside world' has increased markedly. The most frequent contacts are maintained with the media on the one hand and with representatives of the political system (ministries, political parties, members of parliament, local government agencies) on the other.

The organisations surveyed here report that they more frequently engage in lobbying political decision-makers and seeking to influence political opinion. They generally do not appear to take their external democratic role any less seriously than in the past. According to their own reports, there is also no reason for concern regarding their internal democracy. Although the officers interviewed report that initiatives are increasingly developed at the top of their organisation, most of them also state that those at the top generally have a better awareness of the feelings at grassroots level, and that the memberships have gained a greater influence on the policy of the organisation.

A more in-depth impression of the changes that have taken place in Dutch civil society in recent decades was derived from a comparison of organisations that have seen strong growth in the number of members/donors and organisations facing shrinking memberships. Judging from the characteristics of the former, there are no signs of a trend towards reduced importance of civil society as a springboard to social participation. The success of the growing organisations in that civil society also appears not to be accompanied by a dominant trend towards fragmentation of the internal democracy of organisations. Likewise, the function of civil society organisations as democratic training grounds or as vehicles for voicing the needs that are felt in the population does not appear to be under threat.

Secondary and tertiary organisations

As stated in chapter 1, the literature on the importance of mutual social contacts between members of organisations, and thus on the difference between secondary and 'tertiary' organisations, contains a number of robust statements. In the view of Putnam (and other authors of the neo-Tocquevillian school), such horizontal relationships are a crucial link in the chain which runs from the ideas and ambitions of citizens, via participation in associations, to the amount of social capital in a society and its democratic functioning. The comparison made in chapter 3 between secondary and 'tertiary' organisations produces conclusions which consistently appear to be in line with Putnam's findings. As regards the aspects that are the core focus of this study, the degree to which members/donors maintain mutual social

contacts is a clear distinguishing criterion, and generally more so than the growth of the organisation.

Favourable conditions for promoting social participation, the development of civic skills and democratic competence are to be found more in the secondary organisations than in organisational forms where personal contacts between members/donors are absent or virtually absent. These secondary organisations recruit a relatively much higher proportion of members and volunteers and motivate their members relatively more frequently to play an active role within the organisation. Organisations such as these not only have a more democratic internal structure, but also more frequently attach importance to promoting emancipation and training of their members.

This is in no way intended to suggest that the social engagement is lower among members of 'tertiary' organisations. What it does suggest is that these organisations have largely outsourced their social and ideological ambitions to skilled professionals who are expected to promote those ambitions. The two types of organisations thus appear to meet differing needs. Harassed, well-educated double-earners will place different demands on civil society organisations in the busiest period of their family cycle than, for example, low-skilled unemployed people or older persons who since retiring have found they are able to begin investing time in social activities again on a regular basis.

Concluding considerations

Secondary and tertiary organisations present a different picture from the point of view of social cohesion, participation and democracy. 'Tertiary' organisations are by definition characterised by fewer face-to-face contacts. This does not mean that there are no mutual contacts or channels of communication between members, for example in the form of Internet contacts, with organisations providing a chat box or promoting an exchange of ideas via their own website. To what extent contacts of this kind compensate for the traditional personal contacts or create a different perception of participation remains an open question at present.

'Tertiary' organisations are considered to possess less binding social capital, though this does not necessarily apply for their members. It merely suggests that those members do not develop that capital (primarily) via the organisation. Earlier research suggests that participation in civil society organisations does not generate major effects at individual level. As indicated in chapter 2, the importance given within people's daily lives to their participation in secondary organisations should not be overestimated. In terms of time investment, at least, this participation - even by active members - generally accounts for only a small part of the total available time budget. Not only associational life, but also education, the work environment, family life, the media and informal contacts offer all manner of democratic socialisation opportunities and a means of developing the civic skills which are such a highly prized asset of traditional associational life.

Another comment that needs to be made about the difference between 'tertiary' and secondary organisations is that the former probably tend more towards oligarchy, but that on the other hand a high degree of binding social capital is often created by the 'in-crowd mentality' and the high barriers that are thrown up against outsiders. In the heyday of the 'pillarisation' of Dutch society, a rich associational life and strong sense of 'in-group' solidarity was accompanied by sporadic journeys between the different islands of the 'ideological archipelago'. Modern 'tertiary' organisations often appear to have a more open character than many secondary organisations and to be more accessible to people of differing backgrounds and views.

In day-to-day practice, the civil society fulfils a wide range of functions. Both from the perspective of promoting social participation and in terms of the level of democracy in society or the contribution to social capital, the organisations studied here sometimes displayed wide differences. Society as a whole would appear to stand to gain most from a pluralistic civil society in which the strengths of certain types of organisations can offer compensation for the weaknesses of others.