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## Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage

[A Study of National Policies](#)

The Netherlands

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# Investing in children:

Breaking the cycle of disadvantage

A Study of National Policies

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**COUNTRY REPORT – THE NETHERLANDS**



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## Summary<sup>1</sup>

The Netherlands scores as one of the countries that consistently performs well with low levels of child poverty. It was even ranked first in the recent UNICEF Report Card 11 on child well-being in rich countries. This can probably be explained because of the combination of an elaborate minimum income scheme and highly specialised provisions for child and family services. However, this has not prevented a recent increase in child poverty levels. The groups most at risk are children in single parent households. The labour market participation of single parents is relatively low and is currently showing the strongest decline compared to the labour market participation of men and women in general. This is one of the reasons why the Netherlands is ranked as a medium risk for child poverty in the calculations of the European Commission.

The policy framework on child or family policy is comprehensive. But formally the Netherlands no (longer)<sup>2</sup> has an explicit centralised coordination unit for child or family policy or integrated policy responsibility. Investing in children is the responsibility of various Ministries. In general, parents, and not children, are the focus of the policy. The Dutch approach cannot be characterised as an integrated policy in the sense that the policies that concern children (poverty, education, youth care, children's rights et cetera) are not integrated in overall set of policy objectives. (Child) poverty and social inclusion are addressed and discussed mainly in terms of policies related to social assistance (including debt-assistance), income provisions and active labour market participation. Even though discussions on for instance the access or quality of youth care, education or childcare also focus on (the effects on) vulnerable groups, these topics are not an integral part of the objectives or debate on combating poverty. The Dutch approach on the other hand represents an integrated policy in the sense that, as has been stated above, a combination of an elaborate minimum income scheme and highly specialised provisions for child and family services, is adequate to address challenges of combating poverty and social exclusion of children in the Netherlands.

Municipalities play a key role in implementing the measures on social assistance (including combating poverty, social participation and debt assistance), child healthcare, universal and preventive youth policy and pre-school and early childhood education, for example.<sup>3</sup> Alongside the national government, the Dutch provinces are responsible for more specialised youth care.

There are several types of regulations dealing with combating poverty through income provisions and social participation (of children). Nearly 90% of municipalities have specific provisions for children (primarily cultural participation and sports activities).<sup>4</sup> In practice, parents receiving social assistance seem to be the main target group of policies on combating poverty. Other new groups or households with poor children,

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<sup>1</sup> Readers should note that the drafting of this report was completed in September 2013 thus it does not include an analysis of data or policy developments that became available after this date.

<sup>2</sup> The current government decided to abolish the previous program Ministry for Youth.

<sup>3</sup> Decentralisation of (financial) responsibilities is used as an instrument to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of policies in the social domain.

<sup>4</sup> Kinderombudsman (2013). *Kinderen in armoede in Nederland*. Report number: KOM4/2013, 25 June 2013.

like for example the working poor, unemployed, people with debt problems<sup>5</sup>, often fall below the radar of the local organisations.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, this approach implies that children from higher-income families who do not participate because of social and cultural factors are not included in policies concerning social exclusion.<sup>7</sup>

#### *Access to adequate resources*

The minimum income scheme provides an acceptable lifestyle for parents and children. This is an elaborate scheme which includes social benefits, social and national insurances, reintegration programmes and provisions for social participation and allowances for low-income households for healthcare and housing. In addition there are also allowances that are child related and compensate for the expenses and extra costs for (low income) families. One of the strengths is that regulations concerning income provisions and combating poverty are organised at the local level as. This gives the opportunity to develop tailor made approaches for local problems. This delegation of responsibility is accompanied by a delegation of control. On the other hand, this results in a reduction in oversight by the national governments and the availability of monitoring the effects of the local policies. Also, the different regulations make the take up of provisions complex and result in an administrative burden for professionals and parents. The key challenges are to effectively diminish the poverty trap, combining affordable childcare services with incentives to increase the labour market participation of especially (single) mothers with young children, to continue to develop an adequate approach to prevent and support people with debt problems and the integration of debt assistance with reintegration programmes.

#### *Access to affordable quality services*

Access to affordable quality services for children or their parents involves a wide range of services. One of the strengths is that most of the services are organised at local level, including the community school as an integral approach to social problems at local level. However, this does not prevent serious issues concerning the quality of services like childcare, pre-school and early childhood education and waiting lists for youth care. Key challenges are the implementation of the new youth care system at municipal level, combining affordable childcare services with incentives to increase the labour market participation of mothers with young children in particular and the quality and effectiveness of the reform plans for pre-school and early childhood education.

#### *Recommendations*

The Netherlands has a relatively strong position with regard to child poverty and the social inclusion of children. The implementation and effectiveness of combating child poverty could be enhanced by a more integrated approach that sets more specific targets and not mainly focuses on income provisions and social participation of children in households receiving social benefits. It is recommended to:

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<sup>5</sup> Debt assistance is a focus point in the (prevention) of poverty. Concerning people with debt problems, municipalities have in recent years invested in the (quality) of their services but the cooperation between the council departments (for instance income provisions (including reintegration), debt assistance, welfare and education) leaves room for improvement.

<sup>6</sup> See Kinderombudsman (2013). Kinderen in armoede in Nederland. Report number: KOM4/2013, 25 June 2013 and Klein, M. van der, Toorn, J. van der, Nederland, T. en Swinnen, H. (2011). *Sterk en samen tegen armoede. Gemeenten en maatschappelijk middenveld in het Europese Jaar ter bestrijding van armoede en sociale uitsluiting*. Utrecht: Verwey-Jonker Instituut.

<sup>7</sup> Higher income households are excluded from the provisions for social participation (of children) as an income threshold is applied. Higher income households therefore are not target groups for policies combating social exclusion.

- Develop a more integrated approach: a more integrated approach is required towards child poverty, social inclusion and children's well-being. Specific targets for the social inclusion of children should be formulated and linked with objectives on access to affordable childcare provisions, tackling educational disadvantages such as early school leaving, pre-school and early school education, and access to and quality of youth care. This approach should also include monitoring of national and local policies and the effects on the social participation and well-being of children.
- To reach out to new groups at risk of poverty. The focus and take up of income provisions (including social participation) primarily relates to the recipients of social assistance. However, partly due to the current economic crisis, there are new groups (e.g. working poor, unemployed, people with debt problems<sup>8</sup>, immigrant women and young mothers) at risk of poverty that are not being reached. We recommend the government to stimulate and facilitate municipalities to include these groups in their policies through enhancing the cooperation at the local authority level.
- Include social and cultural factors in policies related to children's social participation: social participation of children is now primarily addressed through income provisions for low-income households. Social exclusion is also evident among children in higher-income households. To include this group a new approach is required which includes these risk groups and which involves cultural or behavioural changes and not necessarily the removal of financial obstacles.<sup>9</sup>
- Reverse the measure to reduce the child care allowance in order to maintain access to affordable formal childcare services. Develop innovative programmes and incentives to stimulate the labour market participation of mothers (especially those with young children).
- The effects of the upcoming reform of the youth care system should be closely monitored. Special attention should be given to the waiting lists and the quality demands for the services. The new Act foresees in providing municipalities with knowledge. This will be of great importance as are adequate resources to effectively implement the new Act.

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<sup>8</sup> People with debt-problems often receive debt-assistance by their municipality but the cooperation between the council departments (income provisions (including reintegration), welfare, education, debt-assistance) leaves room for improvement. The same applies for other target groups that are mentioned.

<sup>9</sup> The so called city-passes is a tool municipalities can use for this purpose. They are entitled to define their own target groups. Initially there was a limitation on the income threshold (110% of the social minimum) for these city-cards. These cards give people a discount or price deduction for entrance of sports and cultural events (for instance, swimming pools but also theatres and cinemas). Currently there is no limitation and municipalities are free to set their own (on average this is 120% up to 150% of the social minimum).

## 1. Assessment of overall approach and governance<sup>10</sup>

This report contains a description and analysis of the policy development on investing in children in the Netherlands in the context of the Recommendation *on Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage*.<sup>11</sup> This Recommendation sets out a common European Framework for tackling child poverty and social exclusion, promoting child well-being. It sets out guidelines for Member States to “organise and implement policies to address child poverty and social exclusion, promoting children’s well-being, through multi-dimensional strategies”.

### 1.1. Integrated multi-dimensional strategy and synergies

The Netherlands is one of the countries that consistently scores best in OECD rankings for child poverty, with low levels. Calculations by the European Commission (DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion) show that when the main ‘drivers’ of child poverty (impact of social transfers, number of children in jobless households, risk of poverty of children whose parents are working) are taken into consideration, the Netherlands is ranked as medium risk for child poverty, due to the relatively high number of children in jobless households.

Investing in children involves a wide range of policy fields which are the responsibility of various Ministries. In policies relating to children the primary responsibility for the proper functioning of a family lies with the parents and the importance of raising children in a healthy and stimulating environment is recognised. In terms of combating poverty (income and labour market participation) and social participation (sports, culture, computers), this is the responsibility of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment (SZW). Income provisions include child benefits and allowances for childcare.<sup>12</sup> With the exception of the social participation of children, policy combating poverty tends to focus on (poor) parents rather than on the children themselves. Issues directly related to children, for example (access to) education, youth care and social support for youth, are the responsibility of several Ministries, i.e. the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport (VWS) and the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW). Another Ministry involved is the Ministry of Security and Justice (children’s rights, child protection and child abuse) while housing issues are the responsibility of the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations (BZK). For the Minister for Housing and the Central Government Sector, children are not an objective.

The policy framework on child or family policy is comprehensive. But formally the Netherlands no (longer) has an explicit centralised coordination unit for child or family policy or integrated policy responsibility. Municipalities play a key role in implementing measures on social assistance (including combating poverty, social participation and debt assistance), child healthcare, pre-school and early school education and social support (for youth). Decentralisation of (financial) responsibilities is used as a tool to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of policies in the social domain. Amongst other things the economy of scale stimulates a more tailor-made approach and

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<sup>10</sup> Readers should note that the drafting of this report was completed in September 2013 thus it does not include an analysis of data or policy developments that became available after this date.

<sup>11</sup> Available at:

<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2013:059:0005:0016:EN:PDF>

<sup>12</sup> The Ministry of Finance is also involved in these provisions (Dutch Tax Administration: childcare benefit and child-related budget as well as rent and care benefits, for example). In 2011, the policy area of childcare was transferred back from the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment (SZW). In 2006, this policy area was transferred from SZW to OCW.

enhances the cooperation with relevant local stakeholders. Municipalities receive funding from the national authorities. Municipalities are also responsible for universal and preventive youth policy. Along with the national government, the Dutch provinces are responsible for more specialised care (including coordination and aftercare) for youth. In the coming years, the Dutch youth care system will be decentralised and transformed. From 2015, the municipalities will be responsible for all youth care services (prevention, voluntary and compulsory help). The new youth care system is expected to be more efficient, coherent and cost effective.

### **1.1.1. Approach to children's rights and the effective mainstreaming of children's policies and rights**

The Dutch approach cannot be characterised as an integrated policy in the sense that the policies that concern children (poverty, education, youth care, children's rights et cetera) are not integrated in an overall set of policy objectives.<sup>13</sup> Poverty and social inclusion are approached and discussed in terms of policies dealing with social assistance, income provisions and active labour market participation. The guiding principle of the Dutch Government is that work is the best remedy against poverty. And indeed, there is a clear link between inclusion and employment policy as in-work poverty in the Netherlands is relatively low (see also 2.2.2).<sup>14</sup>

Even though discussions on for instance the access to or the quality of youth care, education or childcare also focus on (the effects on) vulnerable groups, these topics are not an integral part of the objectives or debate on combating poverty. In these policy fields (youth care, education et cetera), separate objectives and targets are set, such as reducing the number of early school leavers and access to and the quality of pre-school and early childhood education.

Policy objectives that are part of the Dutch National Reform Plan 2013 (NRP) and focus on diminishing the disadvantaged position of (households with) children aim to:<sup>15</sup>

- Promote the social participation of children in low-income households: bye-law child participation; abolition of the limitation on the income threshold (110% of the social minimum) for the so-called city cards; continuation of additional funds to Sports Boost ('Sportimpuls') and the Youth Sporting Fund ('Jeugdsportfonds');
- Encourage single parents to work: single parents with young children are no longer exempt from the obligation to apply for jobs;
- Balanced income development with attention for the position of minimum income families with children: greater attention (and budget) for families with children, income provisions for households with children.

This overview might not seem promising in terms of investing in children and effectively tackling the problems faced by children. Even though there is no explicit child or family policy, the provision of child and family services is comprehensive and highly specialised. Combined with an elaborate minimum income scheme (see 2.2), this might explain the continued relatively low child poverty rates and indicates that the Dutch approach is adequate to address challenges of combating poverty and social

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<sup>13</sup> The allocation of the responsibilities to municipalities implies that there is no national overview of the policy objectives with regard to child poverty and social inclusion as implemented by municipalities.

<sup>14</sup> The national target of the Netherlands therefore focuses on reducing the number of people in jobless household more specifically by reducing the number by 100,000 by 2020 (NRP 2013).

<sup>15</sup> These objectives are part of the NRP 2013 and SSR of the Netherlands. More information on addressing child poverty and social exclusion in the European Semester is given in chapter 4.

exclusion of children in the Netherlands. Nevertheless, child poverty rates have been rising recently (for more information, see 1.1.3).

#### *Local policy combating poverty focus on low incomes*

The municipalities develop and implement their own policies and define their own target groups. There are several types of regulations relating to income provisions and combating poverty (for more information, see 2.2). The effects of the initiatives and action plans that were carried out and the additional funding that has been made available over the last ten years to promote the social participation of children have turned out to be minimal (see also 2.2).<sup>16</sup> Over the years, more and more activities have been developed for households with children, encouraging the use of income provisions and addressing debt problems (more information on debt-assistance is provided in paragraph 2.2). Around 90% of municipalities have specific provisions for children. Most municipalities focus primarily on cultural participation and sports activities. However, municipalities vary with regard to how they organise the social participation of children and the number of children who can join the activities. Cooperation within municipalities between different policy fields is also often limited.<sup>17</sup> These are some of the conclusions of a study carried out by the Ombudsman for Children.<sup>18</sup> The focus of social participation in terms of combating poverty implies that the focus is on children in low-income households. In practice, it appears that the focus is mainly on those receiving social benefits. Poor children whose parents do not receive social benefits (e.g. working poor, unemployed, people with debt problems<sup>19</sup>, immigrant women and young mothers) fall below the radar of the local organisations.<sup>20</sup>

#### *Social participation does not include social and cultural factors*

The approach to low incomes overlooks the fact that financial reasons are not the only reason for the social exclusion of children.<sup>21</sup> The social participation of children is also determined by social or cultural factors. A monitoring study of the Dutch government policy entitled "Children take part" carried out in 2008 and 2010 shows that also children in households with an income above 120% of the social minimum do not take part in society, the primary reason being that they do not enjoy it. Other reasons are that the activities are not organised locally, nor do their parents participate. The study concludes that (besides the removal of financial obstacles) cultural or behavioural changes will be required to increase the social participation of children. A tool that can

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<sup>16</sup> SCP publication 2011/40, *Kunnen meer kinderen meedoen? Veranderingen in de maatschappelijke deelname van kinderen, 2008 – 2010*, Annette Roest, Den Haag, Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, October 2011.

<sup>17</sup> Klein, M. van der, Toorn, J. van der, Nederland, T. en Swinnen, H. (2011). *Sterk en samen tegen armoede. Gemeenten en maatschappelijk middenveld in het Europese Jaar ter bestrijding van armoede en sociale uitsluiting*. Utrecht: Verwey-Jonker Instituut.

<sup>18</sup> Kinderombudsman (2013). *Kinderen in armoede in Nederland*. Report number: KOM4/2013, 25 June 2013.

<sup>19</sup> People with debt-problems often receive debt-assistance by their municipality but the cooperation between the council departments (income provisions (including reintegration), welfare, education, debt-assistance) leaves room for improvement. The same applies for other target groups that are mentioned.

<sup>20</sup> See Kinderombudsman (2013). *Kinderen in armoede in Nederland*. Report number: KOM4/2013, 25 June 2013 and Klein, M. van der, Toorn, J. van der, Nederland, T. en Swinnen, H. (2011). *Sterk en samen tegen armoede. Gemeenten en maatschappelijk middenveld in het Europese Jaar ter bestrijding van armoede en sociale uitsluiting*. Utrecht: Verwey-Jonker Instituut.

<sup>21</sup> Social participation refers to children who do not take part in sports, culture or other organised leisure time activities or extra non-curricular school activities, out of school activities or activities organised by municipalities, church or mosque.

be used to stimulate the participation of children in households with higher incomes to participate is the so called city-passes.<sup>22</sup>

### 1.1.2. Balance between universal and targeted policies

In general, the Dutch government opts for universal policies and chooses not to formulate policies for specific target groups. However, this does not mean that policies or regulations targeting vulnerable groups like children have not been developed. Examples are categorical assistance for the disabled and the elderly, care allowance for disabled children living at home and early education and providing pre-school and early childhood education to young children with language disadvantages. Over the past few years, there seems to have been a slight shift from universality to more targeted support. Examples are found in (allowances for) childcare (see 2.1) and regulations relating to social participation (see 2.2). The government announcement that greater attention will be devoted to the working poor, families with children and elderly people with a low income might be a sign of policies with a more targeted approach to combating policies.

### 1.1.3. Impact of the crisis

#### *Child poverty, single-parent families and other groups at risk of poverty*<sup>23</sup>

While nearly 8% of the total population in 2011 belonged to the group on a low income, this was true for 11% of minors. In 2011, 371,000 children were at risk of poverty, 55,000 more than in the previous year. The number of children living in poverty is expected to rise further in 2012 and to remain relatively stable in 2013. Currently groups with an increased risk of poverty are single parents with minor children.<sup>24</sup> A quarter of the children living in a single-parent household are poor compared to 8% of children living with both parents. Other groups at risk of poverty and who may also be responsible for caring for children are non-western immigrants, households receiving social assistance as their main source of income, and the self-employed (for more information, see 2.2.2).

#### *Municipal policies combating poverty*

The Ombudsman for children concludes<sup>25</sup> that even though municipalities are facing cuts in their budgets for the social domain and major decentralisation operations (youth policy and (parts of) long term care), most municipalities will continue or improve their support for low income households and specifically households with children and single-parent households. In response to the negative effects of the crisis on children at risk of poverty, the national government has provided municipalities and voluntary organisations with extra (structural) financial support for policy on poverty (for more detailed information about the extra budgets, see 2.2.2). Our State Secretary for Social Affairs and Employment strongly advises municipalities to invest in the participation of children and to identify debt problems at an early stage in order to prevent problems from multiplying. She said that children must be able to develop and explore their potential and fully participate in society.

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<sup>22</sup> Initially there was a limitation on the income threshold (110% of the social minimum) for these city-cards. These cards give people with lower incomes a discount or price deduction for entrance of sports and cultural events (for instance, swimming pools but also theatres and cinemas). Currently there is no limitation and municipalities are free to set their own (on average this is 120% up to 150% of the social minimum).

<sup>23</sup> Source: Statistics Netherlands (CBS) and The Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) in their biennial publication on poverty (Armoedesignalement 2012).

<sup>24</sup> CBS and SCP distinguish a couple of groups that have an increased risk of poverty (the share of households with an income below the low income threshold has increased).

<sup>25</sup> Kinderombudsman (2013). *Kinderen in armoede in Nederland*. Report number: KOM4/2013, 25 June 2013.

### *Labour market participation of parents and take up of childcare (allowances)*

The labour market participation of men and women was fairly stable in 2011 and 2012. The impact of the crisis started to be felt in the first quarter of 2013. During that quarter, the labour market participation of mothers with young children decreased from 71.5% to 70.4%.<sup>26</sup> Within this group, the labour market participation of single mothers shows the strongest decline, from 63 to 60.9%. Eligibility for childcare allowances is related to work. Unemployed parents are not entitled to an allowance. Levels of labour market participation among parents therefore affect the take-up of childcare allowances. The number of children whose parents receive childcare allowances fell by 4% in 2012 compared to 2011.

## **1.2. Involvement of stakeholders and children**

There are several independent bodies that monitor (policies on) the well-being of children and/or give advice, disseminate good examples, etc. These organisations are presented in chapter 3. Here we present the stakeholders involved in policies on combating child poverty.

Municipalities are responsible for the implementation of policies to combat poverty. Representatives of municipalities are organised in collaborating municipalities (such as VNG, Divosa and the four and thirty-two largest municipalities (G4 and G32)). At regional level, this is the Association of Provincial Authorities. In the field of in-debt and social banking, the main stakeholder is a branch organisation called NVVK (a network of around 90 organisations that includes municipalities as well as social banks). Other stakeholders are the Social Alliance (a network of around 60 organisations engaged in combating poverty and social exclusion) and social organisations, for example a Foundation called 'Leergeld', Sports Boost ('Sportimpuls') and the Youth Sporting Fund ('Jeugdsportfonds'). These social organisations provide support to children and families so that they can participate in sports and other activities. Foodbank Netherlands also operates at regional and local levels and is actively involved in national debates on poverty. The State Secretaries of Social Affairs and Economic Affairs together have facilitated cooperation between the private sector in the food chain and foodbanks in order to tackle food waste and food deprivation simultaneously.

### *Client and children's participation*

In the Netherlands, the interests of social welfare recipients are represented by local and national client councils. The National Client Council (LCR) is an interlocutor of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment for new work and income policy development. One of the recommendations on investing in children is to put in place mechanisms that promote children's participation in decision-making that affects their lives. It is unclear if the LCR involves children's participation in its activities. Municipalities consult relevant stakeholders, children's views and experiences are represented through these organisations. Youth participation at municipal level is not very extensive. The number of municipalities where children participate in policy process related to combating poverty is very limited (4.6%).<sup>27</sup> The Ombudsman for children reports that municipalities do not know how to involve them in the process. He advises them to organise meetings with children to identify their needs and to see whether the existing support reflects their needs.

One of the tasks of the Ombudsman for Children is to consult children about issues that concern them, such as education, youth care, childcare and child poverty. By

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<sup>26</sup> The labour market participation of fathers with young children fell from 93.2% to 91.2%.

<sup>27</sup> Kinderombudsman (2013). *Kinderen in armoede in Nederland*. Report number: KOM4/2013, 25 June 2013.

doing so, the voice of children is integrated in the advice he gives to Parliament. The Dutch National Youth Council's mission (DNYC, in Dutch NJR) is to support youth organisations operating at (inter)national level and to give advice on issues concerning youth policy. Furthermore Collaborating Youth Councils (Samenwerkende Jongerenraden Nederland (SJN) give advice and support local initiatives (including local Youth Councils) on children's participation.

### 1.3. Evidence-based approaches and evaluation of impact of policies

In general, changes in the system are systematically evaluated. More specific policies are often evaluated but have an ad hoc character. There are several monitors in the social domain and poverty (see also 2.2.3). These monitors tend to present the situation with regard to poverty but not the impact of (changes in) policies on poverty rates. A recent example of a monitoring study<sup>28</sup> on child poverty which includes an evaluation is a study of the Dutch policy programme (2008 – 2009) 'Children take part!'.<sup>29</sup> SCP also carried out in-depth studies on what causes child poverty and the long-term effects of child poverty. At the moment of writing this report (August 2013), the Work and Income Inspectorate<sup>30</sup> is studying how municipalities address and implement the new measurement that obliges them to incorporate social participation of children in policy regulations. Municipalities also monitor and evaluate their minimum income policies. This data is not centralised or available at national level. I am not aware of evidence-based approaches in the field of combating poverty. The focus is more on organising seminars and disseminating good examples. In general, experimental research in the Netherlands is limited. There is no tradition for this type of research in the social domain. One of the explanations for not conducting evidence-based research on poverty policies is that the notion of poverty is relative and the experiences differ per municipality. Hence the effectiveness of measures depends on a multitude of factors such as access to relevant facilities, form of coordination, level of social cohesion, interventions by other stakeholders et cetera.

### 1.4. Recommendations

The Netherlands has a relatively strong position with regard to child poverty and the social inclusion of children. The implementation and effectiveness of combating child poverty could be enhanced by a more integrated approach that sets more specific targets and not mainly focuses on income provisions and social participation of children in households receiving social benefits. It is recommended to:

- Develop a more integrated approach towards child poverty, social inclusion and children's well-being. Specific targets for children's social inclusion should be formulated and linked to objectives on access to affordable childcare provisions, addressing educational disadvantages such as early school leaving, pre-school and early school education, and access to and quality of youth care. This approach should also include monitoring of national and local policies and the effects on the social participation and well-being of children.
- Reach out to new groups at risk of poverty. The focus of and take-up of income provisions (including social participation) are primarily on social assistance

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<sup>28</sup> Roest, A. (2011). *Kunnen meer kinderen meedoen?. Veranderingen in de maatschappelijke deelname van kinderen, 2008 – 2010*. Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, The Hague, October 2011.

<sup>29</sup> Under this policy, Dutch municipalities received additional funding in 2008 and 2009 to enable more (poor) children to participate in various activities in their free time.

<sup>30</sup> This inspectorate exercises supervision of the Employee Insurance Agency (UWV), the Social Insurance Bank (SVB) and the implementation of ministerial regulations concerning work and income by municipal social services.

recipients. Partly as a result of the crisis, there are new groups (e.g. working poor, unemployed, people with debt problems<sup>31</sup>, immigrant women and young mothers) at risk of poverty that are not reached. We recommend the government to stimulate and facilitate municipalities to include these groups in their policies through enhancing the cooperation at the local authority level.

- Include social and cultural factors on policies concerning children's social participation: the social participation of children is now primarily addressed through income provisions for households with low incomes. Social exclusion also occurs among children in households with higher incomes. A new approach is needed that includes these risk groups which requires cultural or behavioural changes and not necessarily the removal of financial obstacles.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> People with debt-problems often receive debt-assistance by their municipality but the cooperation between the council departments (income provisions (including reintegration), welfare, education, debt-assistance) leaves room for improvement. The same applies for other target groups that are mentioned.

<sup>32</sup> The so called city-passes is a tool municipalities can use for this purpose.

## 2. Access to adequate resources

### 2.1. Policies to support parents' participation in the labour market

Traditionally, both the full-time and part-time employment of women in the Netherlands is relatively low compared to other Western countries. More men also work part time than in other countries. Single parents have even lower rates of employment. This is because of an emphasis on parents (i.e. mothers) caring for children themselves. In line with the EU 2020 targets, the Netherlands set targets to increase labour market participation in general. On 11 April 2013, the government and the social partners agreed on a package of measures to stimulate the economy and improve the operation of the labour market, aimed at giving the greatest number of people a fair chance of finding work and achieving economic independence.

The existing measures include several measures on tax credits<sup>33</sup> to ensure that work 'pays'. These measures are aimed at reducing the poverty trap. They do not specifically focus on households with children (parents), but aim to stimulate labour market participation in general. Special attention is paid to promoting the labour market participation of women, for example the phase-out of the double tax credit (a tax credit for social assistance recipients with an employed partner).

Another way to stimulate the participation of women is through the Dutch Childcare Act (2005). This Act provides for the financing of formal childcare and maintains quality and supervision standards for all childcare services (more information on childcare is given in 3.1). In 2012, childcare expenditure was cut by 800 million Euros by reducing the amount paid and tightening eligibility for the childcare subsidy to parents in employment and for some specific groups of families, such as families where a parent has a chronic illness or a child has high social-medical needs. The government also introduced stricter rules to stem the rising costs of this system. Public spending on childcare tripled from 1 billion euros in 2005 to more than 3 billion euros in 2010. The childcare allowance is now linked to the number of hours worked by the parent with the least work, and the maximum hourly rates have been frozen. A reduction in the allowance for the first child has also been introduced, while parents with high incomes are no longer entitled to receive childcare allowance for their first child. The use of proportional adjustment for the parental contribution is aimed at sparing the lowest income groups. In recent years, the demand for childcare has fallen considerably.<sup>34</sup> And there are still indications of disproportional use by high-income families. However, the Government does not feel that the cutbacks have had a negative effect on the labour market participation of mothers in particular. An ex-post analysis of the reform showed that it had a moderate impact on labour supply. It is generally believed that public expenditure on childcare in recent years has only had a minor impact on the labour market participation of mothers and almost no impact on the labour market participation of mothers with low qualifications. This line of thought is not shared by all stakeholders. The debate on affordable childcare and labour market participation still continues every time new monitor reports are published.

The Coalition Agreement also includes an agreement to reform and introduce savings in the system of schemes for children (the number of child-related budgets will be

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<sup>33</sup> The maximum amount of the working person's tax credit has increased. The general tax credit will be increased and in future will be related to income, so that people with a low income will benefit financially. The double tax credit in the reference minimum wage will be reduced more slowly between 2014 and 2017. This is a temporary measure to sustain the purchasing power of people on a minimum income.

<sup>34</sup> And last year, in 2012, the take up of childcare services fell by 10%. The number of children in childcare fell by 4% in 2012 and the number of hours per child decreased by 6%.

reduced to four). The aim is to simplify the system, increase labour participation and provide income support for those who need it most. It also aims to reduce the poverty trap for single mothers receiving social assistance. Two schemes will be designed to promote labour participation (the income-dependent combination tax credit and the childcare allowance). The two other schemes, together, are designed to provide income support (the General Child Benefit Act and the Child Allowance Act), see for more information 2.2. To summarise, while single parents could previously make use of twelve schemes, this will be reduced to just four schemes: child benefit (kinderbijslag), child-related budget (kindgebonden budget), childcare allowance (kinderopvangtoeslag) and the combination tax deduction (combinatiekorting). The government expects the reforms of the child-related schemes to be enacted in legislation by July 2014 at the latest.

Municipalities are responsible for tailor-made reintegration programmes under the Social Assistance Act. Over the last decade, there have been many changes in policy related to the employment of single parents. Since 2004, policies have seemed to be indecisive and (depending on the government in place) have moved back and forth on the issue of whether single parents should take up paid work. Until recently, single parents with young children were not motivated to (re-)enter the labour market because they were exempt from the duty to participate in reintegration programmes. However, they were obliged to follow a training course so that they would be ready to enter the labour market as soon as the youngest child reached the age of five. Now single parents are no longer exempt as a specific group. Parents who participate in reintegration programmes can receive an allowance for the take up of childcare.

#### *Maternity leave and parental leave*

Investing in children also means that barriers to having children (in combination with work) are diminished. The government introduced paid maternity leave for a period of 16 weeks on full pay. There is a maximum limit on payment. There is also a Maternity Benefit Scheme for the Self-Employed. Any payment for parental leave is not a statutory entitlement, but part of a collective agreement. In general, the take up is greater by highly qualified and highly paid women than other women. Also the take up of fathers who take parental leave is higher in the public sector than in other sectors.

## **2.2. Policies to provide adequate living standards**

The Dutch minimum income scheme can be considered an integrated approach. This scheme not only determines the conditions and levels of social benefits but also includes assistance for exceptional expenses, reintegration facilities and subsidised work. Social benefits and social and national insurances are all aimed at providing a minimum acceptable lifestyle in the Netherlands. Social assistance exists for people of working age and who are considered to be capable to work (WWB) but also exists for self-employed (Bbz), partially disabled (IOAW/IOAZ) and disabled (young) people who have no or little working experience (Wajong). Furthermore, working people who become ill, unemployed or disabled can claim social insurance benefits.

Labour market participation is considered key to preventing poverty and social exclusion. Dutch strategies therefore focus on increasing employment and employability. In general, the parents, rather than the children, are the focus of the policy design of the minimum income scheme and combating poverty.

Social security in the Netherlands is governed by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment (SZW). With regard to combating poverty, the government is responsible

for general benefit levels, the implementation of national integration policies and enforcing social benefit Acts<sup>35</sup>.

The government has delegated the implementation of the WWB and related regulations to local authorities, the municipalities, based on shared administration. Municipal responsibility includes the provision of tailor-made benefits, support for people entitled to a supplementary benefit and support for people trying to regain their financial independence. How a municipality provides support is laid down in regulations with accompanying policy rules. They are given government funding for this purpose. The municipalities develop and implement their own policies and define their own target groups. There are several types of regulations concerning income provisions and combating poverty, (only) one of which aims to reduce the costs of the social participation of children (its target group are households with children who attend school):

- long-term extra allowance: people whose income falls below the assistance level for a longer period of time and who have few or no assets can receive a long-term supplement;
- special social assistance: assistance for exceptional expenses, for example a refrigerator or glasses;
- categorical assistance for the disabled and the elderly: assistance for expenses resulting from a chronic disability or old age, for example extra heating costs and medication;
- collective healthcare insurance and collective additional healthcare insurance: discount on insurance costs offered by social security administrations;
- participation in sports, culture and education: assistance to promote participation, for example membership of a sports club or educational courses;
- discounts on municipal taxes, for example sewerage charges and waste levy.

Over the past decade, the initiatives and action plans that were implemented and the additional financial resources that were made available to promote the social participation of children have not had a structural character. They were implemented to stimulate municipalities to increase the number of children participating in sports and cultural activities and to ensure that children in low-income families directly benefited from allowances for memberships of sport clubs and the distribution of musical instruments or computers. The effect of these measures turned out to be minimal.<sup>36</sup> To stimulate municipalities to actively promote the social participation of children, a new temporary measure was implemented in 2012. This meant that municipalities had to record their special social assistance measures for the social participation of children in policy regulations. The effects of this measurement will be evaluated after two years, followed by a decision on whether or not to continue this municipal obligation. At the moment of writing this report (August 2013), the Work and Income Inspectorate<sup>37</sup> is studying how municipalities are addressing and implementing the new measurement. The Ombudsman for Children recently published a study on children in poverty in the Netherlands (June 2013). He recommended that

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<sup>35</sup> The Work and Social Assistance Act (WWB), special social assistance, social assistance self-employed, Disablement Assistance Act for Disabled Young Persons (Wajong) and Sheltered Employment Act (wsw).

<sup>36</sup> SCP publication 2011/40, *Kunnen meer kinderen meedoen? Veranderingen in de maatschappelijke deelname van kinderen, 2008 – 2010*, Annette Roest, Den Haag, Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, October 2011.

<sup>37</sup> This inspectorate supervises the Employee Insurance Agency (UWV), the Social Insurance Bank (SVB) and the implementation of ministerial regulations concerning work and income by municipal social services.

municipalities should focus more on children growing up in poverty by investing more in the social, mental and physical development of children. He advised the introduction of so-called children's packages. These packages are given to the children and not to the parents<sup>38</sup> and should include basic needs and vouchers for winter and summer clothes, swimming lessons, transport tickets or memberships for sport clubs, for example. Our state secretary supported this advice and shortly after the study was published, announced that 26 municipalities plan to introduce a children's package.

Debt-assistance is another focus point in the (prevention) of poverty. Municipalities have in recent years invested in the (quality) of their services. The Debt Assistance Act was implemented on 1 July 2012. This Act obliges municipalities to draw up policy plans and to provide their residents with assistance, and sets a limit on the waiting lists.<sup>39</sup>

Apart from municipality regulations, low income household can make use of allowances for rent, healthcare and tax credits for income tax and premium national insurance.

The income provisions described above are part of the policies aimed at combating poverty. Children may indirectly benefit, but they are not the target group. There are also child-related allowances and compensation for the expenses and extra costs for (low income) families. These include General Child Benefit Act, the Child-related budget, care allowance for disabled children and allowances for the expenses related to education.

### 2.2.1. Child-related allowances

#### *General Child Benefit Act (De Algemene Kinderbijslagwet AKW)*

The General Child Benefit Act (AKW) offers parents an allowance for the expenses of caring for children up to the age of 18. The amount of the benefit depends on the age of the child. Depending on whether the child is living at home or not, any income from work earned by the child and (in some cases) the amount of the maintenance contribution, a child may count as one or two child-benefit children. Parents are automatically sent the application forms.

#### *Child-related budget*

In 2008 the government converted the child tax credit into a childcare allowance to give extra support to families on low and middle incomes alongside their existing child benefit. In 2009 this allowance was converted into the child-related budget.

The child-related budget (De Wet Kindgebonden Budget (WKB)) is an allowance from the government for the expenses of families earning an income up to a certain level. Parents of children up to 18 years of age may be eligible for the child-related budget. This depends on their income. The number of children younger than 18 is also taken into account. The more children, the higher the child-related budget may be. A family with an income of up to € 28,897 receives the maximum child-related budget. Once the family income exceeds € 28,897, the child-related budget is gradually reduced. Parents who fulfil the conditions do not have to make an application. *In 2010 the child-related budget was extended to include an educational expenses allowance.* This applies to children aged between 12 and 16.

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<sup>38</sup> Parents with a net income below 120% of the social minimum income.

<sup>39</sup> The Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, together with relevant partners and stakeholders has set up a program to support municipalities with the implementation of this (new) task. The portal [www.effectieveschuldhulp.nl](http://www.effectieveschuldhulp.nl) provides various tools, exchange of knowledge and good practices and a newsletter. It also contains initiatives and examples that specifically focus on children.

### *Care allowance for disabled children living at home (TOG)*

The Care allowance for disabled children (aged between 3 and 18) living at home (TOG) provides extra financial support to parents with severely disabled children living at home who require a great deal of care from the parents. To be eligible for the TOG benefit, you need an indication under the Exceptional Medical Expenses Act (AWBZ) of at least ten hours a week. The allowance is € 215.80 per quarter. You pay no tax on this amount, nor does the allowance affect the child benefit. Extra allowance is available for households in which the partner with the lowest income has an annual income of a maximum of 4,734 euros.

### **2.2.2. Child poverty, impact of the crisis and policy response**

#### *Child poverty, single-parent families and other groups at risk of poverty<sup>40</sup>*

While nearly 8% of the total population in 2011 belonged to the low income group, this was true for 11% of the minor children. The poverty risk among children aged 12-17 years is lower than in the younger group. Of those children who grow up in a situation of poverty, 93% will no longer live in poverty in the future.<sup>41</sup> In 2011, 371,000 minor children were at risk of poverty, 55,000 more than in the previous year. However, this figure is still much lower than at the beginning of the century, when almost 490,000 minor children grew up in a low-income household. The number of children living in poverty is expected to rise further in 2012 and is expected to remain roughly stable in 2013.

Several international studies identify two factors as being strongly related to child poverty: single parent status and parental employment. Also in the Netherlands, the overrepresentation of children is largely the result of the high risk of poverty for single-parent families. In 2011, 28% of single-parent families were below the low income threshold. This is 3 percentage points higher than in 2010 and marks an abrupt end to the declining trend of the previous years. Consequently, a quarter of the children who live in a single-parent household are poor compared to 8% of children living with both their parents.

One in three poor children (133,000) are of non-Western origin and, as in the adult population, this group are at much greater risk of poverty (25%). This applies even more for children of Moroccan origin, for whom the risk of poverty is 30%.

Poverty is also relatively common among children living in large families: the poverty risk for a child living with both parents and at least two underage siblings is 13%; in a single-parent family it is 50%.

As a corollary to this, the poverty risk for children in families on social assistance benefit is very high: out of the 161,000 children whose parents receive social assistance benefit, 87,000 (54%) are poor. The risk of poverty declines greatly if the parents work: 5% of children whose parents are in paid employment are poor, rising to 13% if their parents are self-employed. Yet over 70% of poor children have parents who work. As the Dutch working labour force numbers more than 7 million persons, even these relatively low poverty risk rates produce large numbers of poor children.

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<sup>40</sup> Source: Statistics Netherlands (CBS) and The Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) in their biennial publication on poverty (Armoedesignalement 2012).

<sup>41</sup> Social and Cultural Planning Office 'Predestined to deprivation?'.

### *Purchasing power of social economic groups*

In recent years, the decline in the purchasing power of households below the low income threshold<sup>42</sup> has been slightly smaller than for households with more financial means but the decline is still very substantial (-2.4%). In general, households with children are less severely affected. But as mentioned above, single parents with minor children is the main group with an increased risk of poverty.<sup>43</sup> Other groups at risk of poverty and which may also be responsible for caring for children are non-western immigrants, households receiving social assistance as their main source of income and the self-employed. The self-employed have been severely disadvantaged by the economic crisis. The most important cause in this regard is having low work intensity.

### *Take-up of debt assistance and food banks*

The negative effect of the crisis in terms of social inclusion also becomes apparent in the growing number of households in need of debt assistance. In 2012 it was reported that for the first time there are more people with out-of-work income in need of debt assistance than people on social benefits. The impact of the crisis also becomes clear with the growing take-up of provisions like the food bank. Approximately 700,000 households currently use this provision.

### *Municipal policies combating poverty and national resources*

The Ombudsman for children (see also 1.2) recently published a study on children in poverty in the Netherlands (June 2013).<sup>44</sup> Part of the study focuses on municipal policy with regard to income provisions for households with children and single parents. It concludes that despite the fact that municipalities are facing cuts in their budgets for the social domain and major decentralisation operations (youth policy and (parts of) long term care), most municipalities will remain or improve their support for low income households and specifically households with children and single-parent households. They intend to improve tailor-made provisions, an integral approach and cooperation with organisations at a local level. Their focus will also be on activating poor people to support themselves and each other.

In response to the negative effects of the crisis on children at risk of poverty, the national government has provided municipalities and voluntary organisation with extra financial support for policy on poverty. The government recently announced that it would not only provide extra money for policy on poverty in 2014 and 2015, but also for 2013 (20 million euros). In 2014 the government will intensify its policy on poverty with 80 million euros and from 2015 structurally with 100 million euros. Greater attention will be devoted to the working poor, families with children and elderly people with a low income. Our State Secretary for Social Affairs and Employment strongly advises municipalities to invest in the participation of children and detect debt problems at an early stage in order to prevent problems from increasing. She stated

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<sup>42</sup> In the Netherlands, three different indicators are used to determine the number of households in poverty: the low income threshold, the 'basic need' criterion (budget-related indicator) and the 'modest, but adequate' variant (budget-related indicator). The point of departure of the low income threshold is that people who rely on social assistance or the state old age pension are part of the low income group. They have to use income facilities such as rent allowance to rise to the threshold or above. The level of the benefits is considered to be high enough to achieve a minimum acceptable lifestyle. The low income threshold is derived from the social assistance benefit level in 1979, when the purchasing power was at its height for people on social assistance. For later years, the threshold was indexed in line with price inflation. The threshold is set for a single person. For multiple-person households, the norm amounts are determined using equivalence factors.

<sup>43</sup> CBS and SCP identify a couple of groups with an increased risk of poverty (the share of households with an income below the low income threshold has increased).

<sup>44</sup> Kinderombudsman (2013). *Kinderen in armoede in Nederland*. Report number: KOM4/2013, 25 June 2013.

that children must be able to develop and explore their potential and fully participate in society. Some of the additional funds for the poverty policy will go to Sports Boost (‘Sportimpuls’) and the Youth Sporting Fund (‘Jeugdsportfonds’), two programmes that provide subsidies to encourage participation in sport, particularly among children from low-income households. Voluntary organisations like Humanitas and Churches will also receive additional funds. Even though our government is taking serious (extra) austerity measures, our state secretary intends to retain extra budget to tackle policy and debt assistance in the coming years.

### **2.2.3. Monitoring social security, poverty and social inclusion**

In the Netherlands, the two main organisations that provide information on the indicators across the three pillars are Statistics Netherlands (CBS), Economic Policy Analysis (CPB) and the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP). CBS provides up-to-date data on social security. This includes a quarterly labour market memorandum drawn up for the Dutch parliament, which reports on the developments in the number of people in unemployment and social security schemes, labour participation and participation in reintegration. The SZW ministry defines what information is collected. Furthermore there are several publicly financed monitors that report periodically on the effects of poverty and social exclusion. For example, Statistics Netherlands (CBS) and the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) jointly publish a poverty monitor (every other year). There are no structural reports on child poverty. However, last year’s report did include a chapter on child poverty. Developments in the number of households with significant debts are also monitored. These monitors present the state of affairs on poverty but not the impact of (changes in) policies on poverty rates.

In general, changes in the system are systematically evaluated. More specific policies are often evaluated but have an ad hoc character. Municipalities also monitor and evaluate their minimum income policies. This data is not centralised or available at national level.

### **2.3. Key challenges, strengths and weaknesses and policy improvements and recommendations**

The minimum income scheme provides an acceptable lifestyle for parents and children. This is an elaborate scheme which includes social benefits, social and national insurances, reintegration programmes and provisions for social participation and allowances for low-income households for healthcare and housing. In addition, there are child-related allowances that compensate for the expenses and extra costs for (low income) families. One of the strengths is that regulations concerning income provisions and combating poverty are organised at local level. This provides an opportunity to develop tailor-made approaches to local problems. On the other hand, this implies a lack of knowledge at national level. The different regulations also make the take-up of provisions a complex and administrative burden for professionals and parents. The recommendations given in chapter 1 are all in place. In addition, the key challenges are to effectively diminish the poverty trap, combining affordable childcare services with incentives to increase the labour market participation of especially mothers with young children. We recommend to reverse the measure to reduce the child care allowance in order to maintain access to affordable formal childcare services. We do not have a ready made recommendation to what incentive(s) would be effectively increase the labour market participation of mothers (with) young children but would like to invite the Netherlands to develop innovative programmes that not only involves employers and child care services but also the mothers and children and schools. Another challenge is to prevent the number of households with problematic debts increases. We recommend, in line with the policy of our current State Secretary of Social Affairs and Employment, to continue to stimulate

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municipalities to develop an adequate approach to prevent and support people with debt problems and the integration of debt assistance with reintegration programmes.

## 3. Access to affordable quality services

### 3.1. Monitoring children

There are several independent organisations and monitors that collect relevant information on children's well-being.

The Netherlands has one monitor that contains information on all aspects of the well-being of youth (0 – 25 years old). The Ministries of Health, Welfare and Sport (VWS), Education, Culture and Science (OCW), Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment (SZW) and the Ministry of Security and Justice commissioned the (development of) the monitor to Statistics Netherlands (CBS). The monitor consists of existing reports and databases and has its own website (<http://jeugdmonitor.cbs.nl/nl-NL/menu/home/default.htm>). It presents indicators of the following domains: youth and families, health and well-being, education, employment and safety and justice. The monitor also contains regional and municipal information. The monitor provides information and is not an instrument that evaluates or researches the impact of policies on the well-being of youth.

Other examples of child monitors are the Childcare monitor (CBS), Monitor *brede schoolaanpak*, pre-school and early school education monitor, reports by the National Register of Childcare and Playgroups (DUO). Developments in the number of early school leavers are also monitored. The CPB completed an ex-post analysis of the effects of childcare allowances on labour market participation.

The Netherlands Youth Institute (Dutch: Nederlands Jeugdinstituut) is the Dutch national institute for compiling, verifying and disseminating knowledge on children and youth matters, such as child abuse, youth work, youth care and parenting support in the Netherlands. Its main aim is to improve the development of children and young people by strengthening the quality and effectiveness of the services rendered to them and their parents ([www.nji.nl](http://www.nji.nl)). The institute carries out a wide range of projects and monitors the effects, such as The Triple P-Positive Parenting Programme, RAAK - prevention of child abuse, Alert 4 you (extra support from youth care experts for children with special needs attending children's day care, their parents as well as the day care staff) and develops various guidelines for professionals in the Dutch youth sector. The institute also acts as the Dutch member of the Eurodesk network, the main provider of information on European policies, mobility opportunities for young people and funding for professionals working with young people.

The Joint Inspectorate for Youth (in Dutch Samenwerkend Toezicht Jeugd) is a partnership of five inspectorates in the Netherlands that aims to oversee the broad range of services available to children and families. It examines how the various youth services and the Youth and Family Centres cooperate to solve the problems faced and created by young people. And it examines how these problems can be prevented. Examples of these problems are poverty, child abuse, obesity, youth criminality and addiction. Its basis is the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The partnership, which conducts joint inspections, includes the Healthcare Inspectorate, the Inspectorate of Education, the Inspectorate for Youth Care, the Inspectorate of Security and Justice, and the Social Affairs and Employment Inspectorate (SZW Inspectorate). State Secretary for Health, Welfare and Sport is the responsible State Secretary.

The Netherlands installed an Ombudsman for children on 1 April 2011. This institute operates at a national level. It keeps a critical eye and gives advice on government operations, defends children's rights, studies complaints by children, disseminates information on children's rights and is responsible for monitoring children's rights. In

2012 it published the first Children's rights monitor in the Netherlands. It also recently published a study on children in poverty in the Netherlands (June 2013).

Another organisation worth mentioning is the Dutch NGO Coalition for Children's Rights. In April 2012 it presented an independent NGO report 'Children's Rights in the Netherlands 2008-2012'. The NGO report is divided into eight chapters: Children's Rights and Social Developments; Family Situation and Alternative Care; Disabled Children, Elementary Healthcare and Poverty; Education, Public Space and Spare Time; Special Protection Measures; Children's Rights in International Cooperation; Trafficking, Child Prostitution and Pornography; Children in Armed Conflicts.

The Dutch National Youth Council's mission (DNYC, in Dutch NJR) presented a report on behalf of the Dutch youth on the rights of children to the UN Committee on the Rights on the Child during the pre-session concerning the report of the Netherlands.

Defence for Children also advises on issues concerning youth policy. For example, it was asked by the Ministers of VWS and Safety and Justice to give its response to the Youth Care Act.

Governmental advisory bodies that also might report on issues concerning children are the Education Council, the Health Council, the Council for Social Development (In Dutch Raad voor Maatschappelijke Ontwikkeling (RMO)), the Social and Economic Council (SER) and the Council for Child Protection, Federation of Shelters (Federatie Opvang).

### **3.2. Early childhood education and care**

#### *Early childhood education*

The Dutch education system has limited educational facilities for children under school entry age. Pre-school and early childhood education (VVE) focuses on children aged 2.5 to 5 who are at risk of developing an educational disadvantage. Most Dutch children enter primary school in the year they turn 4.

Since 2010, municipalities are required to offer pre-school and early childhood education to all young children with language disadvantages. Day-care centres and playgroups provide pre-school provisions to children before they go to primary school, while primary schools provide early childhood education. Local health services determine which children belong to the target group (the criteria are set by the municipalities). On a yearly basis, the scheme sets out to reach 45,000 children. The main indicator used is the parents' education level. The Opportunities for Development through Quality and Education (Wet OKE), which came into effect on 1 August 2010, laid down the basic conditions to ensure that the quality of provisions was provided for. Supervision of the quality is the task of the Municipal Health Service and the Education Inspectorate. There are plans to reform the system into one pre-education scheme. At the end of August 2013, the Inspectorate of Education published a very critical and detailed study on the quality of VVE services. It concluded that the quality of half of the locations researched was insufficient. The Minister has so far concluded that extra resources will not be the solution. There will be an extensive debate in the coming months.

#### *Childcare*

There are three types of childcare: institutionalised day-care for 0 to 4 year olds; out-of-school care for 4 to 12 year olds and "child minders" for 0 to 12 year olds (including family members). Institutionalised early childcare is jointly financed by the national government, employers and parents. Playgroups for 2½ to 4 year olds are financed by the local government. The childcare subsidy is payable to working parents irrespective of the type of care they choose, including in-home care.

The Dutch Childcare Act of 2005 aimed to increase the participation of women in the workforce (for more information, see 2.1), the accessibility of childcare nationally and competition between childcare providers, using the market to reduce fees.<sup>45</sup> The Act provides for the financing of formal childcare and maintains quality and supervision standards for all childcare services. A Covenant of Quality Childcare was also introduced by the municipal health services. This involves annual monitoring of the child/staff ratio, housing, parent participation, safety, health and quality of personnel. Nevertheless, the quality of childcare services is still subject to debate. Extra resources have been made available for different organisations to improve and monitor the quality of childcare provisions. In 2012, for example, a subsidy was given to Bureau Kwaliteit Kinderopvang (BKK) and the Branch Organisation of Childcare Organisations (Branche organisatie Kinderopvang). A Covenant of Quality Childcare was introduced by the municipal health services, which involves annual monitoring of the child/staff ratio, housing, parent participation, safety, health and quality of personnel.

### 3.3. Enhance family support and the quality of alternative care

Municipalities are responsible for universal and preventive youth policy and aim to stimulate the cooperation between the different universal services. Universal services include youth work, childcare and regular schools.<sup>46</sup> These services aim to facilitate the normal development of children and to prevent minor problems of children and families turning into major problems (NJI, 2012).

Municipalities are also responsible for preventive youth policy, for example child healthcare, general social work, parenting support and the Youth and Family Centres. Legally, parenting support is partly an obligation of the health service (e.g. the family clinics) and falls under the new Social Support Act. Since 2011, all municipalities have had a Centre for Youth and Family. These centres provide advice on raising children and, when necessary, guide parents and children into other areas of the youth care system. Over 85% of the municipalities now have a form of youth and family centre (Netherlands Youth Institute 2012). The preventive services aim to detect problems and to intervene at an early stage, to coordinate support and to refer children and families to the provincial youth care services.

Together with the national government, the Dutch provinces are responsible for more specialised care (including coordination and aftercare) for youth such as provincial youth care services, youth mental healthcare services and child protection services.

The Youth Care Act 2005 is the legal framework for care services for young people and their families. The Act's aim is to ensure that better care is available to young people and their parents (the clients in the youth care process) and to strengthen their position at the centre of the system. The Act was evaluated in 2009. Some of the conclusions were very negative; there was still a lack of integrated service provision and long waiting lists with clients claiming that the process was too long and confusing. One of the bottlenecks turned out to be the funding stream. In the coming years, the Dutch youth care system will be decentralised and transformed. From 2015, the municipalities will be responsible for all youth care services (prevention, voluntary and compulsory help). The new youth care system is expected to be more efficient, coherent and cost effective. The new Act is designed to set out "national quality

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<sup>45</sup> In 2009 a study on the (effects of) free-market operation concludes that the match between supply and demand had improved and waiting lists were reduced even with an increase of the take up of child care (see Berkhout, A., P.E.F. Poel, L. Heuts and M. Gemmeke (2009). *Marktwerving in de kinderopvang*. Amsterdam, Regioplan 2009.

<sup>46</sup> These universal services are funded by a variety of agencies.

demands for the service rendered to children, youth and parents”. The Act would also emphasise “enabling youth to participate in a civil society” and link with a broad range of decentralising measures in the areas of special healthcare, employment and education. Another aspect of the new Act is the intention to actively involve both parents and children. To facilitate the implementation, a transition bureau and transition agenda have been set up to provide municipalities with information and room to experiment with (innovative) approaches. There are concerns that municipalities do not have enough time, knowledge or resources to effectively implement the new Act.

### **3.4. Education system’s capacity to break the cycle of disadvantage**

In general, one can conclude that the quality and results of the Dutch education system are at a high level.<sup>47</sup> Groups at risk of inequality are children from a migrant background and children with special needs due to disabilities and disorders. The Ombudsman for Children states that high(er) priority should also be given to children who do not attend school and children in closed youth care (under the judicial system).

#### *Overview Dutch education system (source: Ministry OCW)*

Pre-school and early childhood education focuses on children aged 2.5 to 5 who are at risk of developing an educational disadvantage.

Primary education lasts eight years. Pupils who require specialised care and support are accommodated at special (primary and secondary) schools.

Children are usually 12 when they enter secondary education. This sector offers three levels: pre-vocational secondary education (VMBO), general secondary education (HAVO) and pre-university education (VWO). In addition, pupils have the option of transferring to elementary vocational training (PRO) or secondary special education (VSO). After special (primary) education, the majority of pupils transfer to VMBO or PRO.

#### *Special needs*

Pupils with specific disabilities and disorders may enrol in special schools or special secondary schools, or attend classes at mainstream schools with personal funding awarded to children with special educational needs. In 2014, a new system will be introduced which obliges community schools to provide places for children who need special support. Schools will have to find solutions and make agreements at the regional level. The new system will be introduced together with financial cutbacks. There are concerns that these measures will have a negative effect on the support for pupils with special needs and that their rights are not guaranteed. The main stakeholders have launched a website with information on the new Act and good examples <http://www.passendonderwijs.nl/>

#### *Training aids and expenses*

School books and other training aids are freely available for children who attend primary or secondary school. For some forms of secondary education, other arrangements, allowances, are made.

#### *Care and Advice Teams*

Schools are often the first place where children with problems are identified. When an educator suspects that a child needs professional help, he or she can contact a Care and Advice team in which the internal supervisor often works with a school social

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<sup>47</sup> See Scheerens, Luyten and Van Ravens (2011). *Visies op onderwijskwaliteit met illustratieve gegevens over de kwaliteit van het Nederlandse primair en secundair onderwijs*. Universiteit Twente.

worker and a school nurse. For more complex problems, there is a cross-school Special Needs Advisory Team (ZAT). These teams, consisting of teachers, youth care professionals, social workers, police and (depending on the situation) other professionals, try to address these problems at an early stage. Every school is obliged to have a Care and Advice team. In primary education and MBO, other important partners include the regional expertise centres (REC-4) and youth-GGZ. Depending on the problems, other institutions, such as MEE (support organisation for the disabled), HALT and the school advisory services, also join the ZAT case consultations.

#### *Early school leavers*

One of the government's priorities is to reduce the number of early school leavers, since young people who leave education with a basic qualification are more active in the labour market and less often unemployed. The proportion of early school leavers has already been sharply reduced from 15.5% in 2000 to 8.8% in 2012. The measures taken in the Netherlands to reduce the school dropout rate are primarily aimed at preventing young people from leaving school without any basic qualifications. The government is devoting special attention to the dropout rate from technical vocational courses as part of more wide-ranging measures being taken to strengthen technical vocational education in the context of the Technology Pact. The emphasis on reducing the number of early school leavers in MBO education is reflected in closer monitoring of the results of measures at extra meetings between officials of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and directors of MBO schools. The current policy to reduce the number of early school leavers will be continued in 2013 and contains comprehensive policy to prevent absenteeism, voluntary long-term performance agreements, regional coordination, and the notification and registration of early school leavers. For arranging alternative places for them in education, the regions receive funds to set up programmes to prevent children from dropping out of school.

### **3.5. Improve the responsiveness of health systems to the needs of disadvantaged children**

The local health service delivers a specific health service system for children aged between 0 and 19 years. It monitors children's development, provides vaccinations, screening, information and advice, and refers to more specialised health services when necessary.<sup>48</sup> Until the age of 19, children are entitled to regular check-ups and screenings. The local health service includes family clinics and primary and secondary school healthcare.

Under the new Health Insurance Act (Zorgverzekeringswet (ZvW)) introduced in 2006, all residents of the Netherlands are obliged to take out health insurance. Health insurance for children up to 18 is free. The insurers are obliged to accept every resident in their area of activity. The health insurance comprises a standard package of essential healthcare. Everybody aged 18 and older must pay a nominal premium to the healthcare insurer. With regard to low incomes, the government contributes to the costs of healthcare insurance in the form of a healthcare allowance. In addition, it is possible to take out supplementary healthcare insurances on an individual basis. The Netherlands has elaborate reform plans for the system of long-term care. The challenge for the Dutch government is to control the costs of long-term care, whilst ensuring that these services remain accessible to all groups in Dutch society. Examples are the limitation of personal healthcare budget, higher personal contributions (income related) and the transference of intramural to outpatient care. It is still unclear whether or how this will affect the well-being and access to care for children with physical or mental disabilities.

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<sup>48</sup> The local health service also has specific tasks such as introducing programmes for alcohol and drug abuse prevention.

Access to high quality services does not guarantee that there is no 'inequality' in children's health. Recently a study was published by Statistics Netherlands<sup>49</sup> showing that children living in low income households are more often overweight (19% vs 11%) and visit the general practitioner more often (69% vs 64%) than children in higher-income households. On the other hand, they tend not to visit a dentist or physiotherapist so frequently. Nevertheless, the children themselves generally feel that they are in good health.

### **3.6. Adequate housing and living environment**

Promoting the availability of adequate housing is a task of the government. This includes the availability of affordable rented accommodation and owner-occupied homes for those on relatively low incomes. The Netherlands has a large rental sector of which social housing takes up a large proportion of the housing stock. Most social housing is owned by housing associations. These have to act on a commercial basis, but are required to use their profits to meet general housing needs, i.e. to house anyone who is unable to find suitable housing themselves. Low-income households can take advantage of allowances for rent by the tax authorities. It has been reported that an increasing proportion of groups such as lower income families and single people live in the rental sector. I do not have any information about children and housing issues. However, poor children are more likely to live in rented accommodation than their more well-off peers. I have no indications about children living in poor housing situations.

### **3.7. Key challenges, strengths and weaknesses and recommendations**

Access to affordable quality services for children or their parents includes a wide range of services. One of the strengths is that most of the services are organised at local level, including the community school as an integral approach to social problems at local level. This makes it possible to develop tailor-made approaches for local problems. However, this does not prevent serious issues concerning the quality of services like childcare, pre-school and early childhood education and waiting lists for youth care. Key challenges are the implementation of the new youth care system at a municipal level, combining affordable childcare services with incentives to increase the labour market participation of especially mothers with young children and the quality and effectiveness of the reform plans for pre-school and early childhood education. We recommend that the effects of the upcoming reform of the youth care system should be closely monitored. Special attention should be given to the waiting lists and the quality demands for the services. The new Act foresees in providing municipalities with knowledge. This will be of great importance as are adequate resources to effectively implement the new Act.

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<sup>49</sup> <http://www.cbs.nl/nl-NL/menu/themas/gezondheid-welzijn/publicaties/artikelen/archief/2013/2013-3874-wm.htm>

## 4. Addressing child poverty and social exclusion in the European Semester

Last year, Eurochild published a report analysing the 2012 National Reform Programmes and the National Social Reports in terms of child poverty and well-being.<sup>50</sup> The description and assessment of the Dutch contribution is adequate and still current. To summarise, the NRP fails to focus specifically on child poverty and social inclusion, whilst no specific targets are set concerning children. The general approach to poverty and social inclusion is narrow and not underpinned by children's rights. Insofar as poverty and social exclusion are addressed, the focus is primarily on increasing (parent's) access to the labour market. One (small) highlight in this year's NRP is that additional financial resources are being made available to combat poverty. In addition, greater attention will be devoted to the most vulnerable groups including households with children. The NRP refers to the fact that it will implement measures to ensure access to a high level of assistance for groups at risk. It does not explain what it means by that, for example which forms of assistance is meant (in the Dutch version the word used refers to services in the field of well-being) or which groups at risk are identified.

The target that is set on tackling educational disadvantage (early school leaving) is not specifically linked and not integrated into an overall national strategy to address child poverty and social exclusion and to promote children's well-being. The general recommendations made in Eurochild's report all apply to the Dutch NRP.

To conclude, the results that are described in the previous chapters show the commitment in the Netherlands to combat (child) poverty and social exclusion on a national level (in which municipalities play a key role). This is however not reflected in specific targets concerning (child) poverty and social inclusion in the EU semester (NRP). To achieve the EU 2020 targets the guiding principle of the Dutch government is that work is the best remedy against (child) poverty.<sup>51</sup> It, therefore, did set a target on the number of jobless households.<sup>52</sup> This guiding principle forms an important obstacle for fully integrating the Recommendation on investing in children in the NRP. There are however other points that could be used to stimulate the Netherlands to be more explicitly about its commitment to invest in the well-being of children in its NRP. One way would be to link households with children at risk of poverty with a target on jobless households with children, in particular for single parent households without jobs. This should or could also be translated into specific targets for the labour market participation of women and particular single parents. The Netherlands would then be obliged to highlight what measures are taken to stimulate the active participation of single parents (other than the measure that single parents with young children who receive social assistance no longer obtain exemption for applying for jobs). This combined with the municipal's obligation to invest in the social participation of children could be a first step towards the integration of the Recommendation into the NRP.

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<sup>50</sup> Eurochild. *Report July 2012. The 2012 National Reform Programmes (NRP) and the National Social Reports (NSR) from a child poverty and well-being perspective* ([http://www.eurochild.org/en/news/details/index.html?tx\\_ttnews\[tt\\_news\]=6043&tx\\_ttnews\[backPid\]=204&cHash=25afad4a93d15970e9e2b041e6fa0083](http://www.eurochild.org/en/news/details/index.html?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=6043&tx_ttnews[backPid]=204&cHash=25afad4a93d15970e9e2b041e6fa0083))

<sup>51</sup> And indeed, there is a clear link between inclusion and employment policy as in-work poverty in the Netherlands is relatively low (see also 2.2.2).

<sup>52</sup> The national target focuses on reducing the number of people in jobless household by 100,000 by 2020 (NRP 2013). The number of households is currently going in the opposite direction (+60.000 between 2010 and 2011).

## 5. EU financial instruments

### *Youth in Action Programme*

The Netherlands Youth Institute acts as the Dutch national agency for the Youth in Action Programme, which funds and supports European projects for young people. The Youth in Action programme funds and supports European projects for young people aged between 13 and 30. The programme aims to develop a sense of responsibility, initiative, concern for others, civic participation and active involvement among young people at local, national and European level. The programme also helps improve support systems for youth activities. Youth in Action is financed by the European Commission. In 2013, 79 projects received a subsidy totalling 1.5 million euros.<sup>53</sup>

### *Agentschap SZW*

The Agentschap SZW manages subsidies relating to socio-economic policy, in particular work and income policy and European subsidies like the European Social Fund (ESF). One of the spearheads of the Netherlands concerns education for children with a mental or physical disability who cannot attend mainstream education. ESF financially supports schools for vocational training and secondary special education. These schools prepare students for a job by coaching them towards the regular labour market, by advanced training at MBO-1 level (senior secondary vocational education - level 1) or to apprenticeship training. In 2011, 139 out of 245 schools received a subsidy. The total amount of subsidy in 2011 amounted to nearly 24 million euros. Between 2007 and 2011, a total amount of 150.4 million euros was allocated. In a midterm report (2007 – 2010), it was reported that 38,748 pupils had been coached towards regular labour market. A third of the pupils had completed the coaching programme. Approximately half of them started secondary vocational education (MBO-1 or BBL) and a third started working in a regular job. Of the pupils with a regular job, around 70% were still working after six months.  
<http://www.agentschapszw.nl/nieuws/economische-groei-versterken-voortgang-esf-programma-2007--2013>

### *Activities European Year against Poverty*

'Temporary European Year subsidy combating Poverty and Social Exclusion': local activities aiming to enforce local participation policies. Central themes: stimulate cooperation between local organisations and municipalities to combat long-term poverty and social exclusion, debt assistance and take-up of income provisions. In 2010, seven projects received in total 300,000 euros to address poverty at a local level. Descriptions of the projects can be found on the website:  
<http://www.agentschapszw.nl/subsidies/bestrijding-armoede-en-sociale-uitsluiting>

### *EU School Fruit Scheme*

The EU School Fruit Scheme was evaluated and discussed in the School Fruit Steering Group. It was concluded that the impact of the EU school fruit scheme could be increased by lengthening the school fruit period. A period of 10 weeks was not long enough to embed the scheme in the structure of school activities. Also 10 weeks were too short to plan the scheme efficiently and sustainably. The new strategy is targeted at allowing schools to commit to the EU school fruit programme for one year. This will involve 20 weeks of support by supplying free school fruit followed by a further 20 weeks of school fruit where the parents or school take care of funding themselves. This can be done by subscribing to fruit deliveries from a supplier or by having parents give their children fruit to take to school (the 'bring-your-own' model). The beneficiaries of this scheme are the primary school children who receive the free fruit. They receive the fruit from the school, which acts as an intermediary. The scheme

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<sup>53</sup> <http://www.youthinaction.nl/eCache/DEF/1/49/140.html>

supplements existing programmes 'Smaaklessen' and 'SchoolGruiten' that are funded by the national authorities.

The Netherlands does not participate in the Aid for Most Deprived Persons (FEAD) programme.

ESF financially supports schools for vocational training and secondary special education by coaching them towards the regular labour market. The transition from school to work however not only requires (employee's) skills but also skills to be self-reliant and able to actively participate in society. These are skills that those students often miss. The involvement of the youth themselves, their family and professionals is often seen as a key element for a successful transition from school to work. We would like to suggest to use a broader perspective in the ESF programmes on the role and goals of schools in coaching (vulnerable) students towards regular labour market and integrate into the programme the elements mentioned above.

