

Children in poverty in the Netherlands

June 25th 2013

English Summary

Foreword

Under the terms of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children have the right to an adequate standard of living.

When I published the first Children's Rights Monitor in 2012, one of the worrying conclusions was that one in 10 children in the Netherlands was growing up in poverty. Since then, that proportion has even increased, to one in nine. That amounts to no fewer than 377,000 children.

The figures are stark, but it wasn't until the Children in Poverty hotline was set up last February that the real impact of poverty in the Netherlands was first brought home to me. Children (aged 6 to 17) were able to use the website to tell us what it was like to live in poverty. Many expressed concern about matters that children in this country should be able to take for granted: having enough to eat, being properly clothed and living in an adequately heated home. They were often ashamed of their situation. They did not invite their friends into their homes, because they didn't want anyone to see how they lived.

The hotline marked the start of a series of surveys of children in poverty carried out over the last six months. The main aim was to find out how poverty policy takes account of children's right to an adequate standard of living, now that so many children in the Netherlands live in poverty, sometimes on a long-term basis. In the three weeks of its operation, the hotline received over 1,000 responses. Almost 700 of these came from children, the remainder from parents and professionals. A number of in-depth interviews were subsequently held with young people.¹

¹ This report uses the term 'children' when referring to the age group 6 to 17, and 'young people' to refer to the age group 10 to 17.

The poverty policy of a large number of municipalities was also scrutinised, showing considerable differences across the country, along with many good private initiatives run by committed individuals. It was heartening to see how many people seek to help these children. Conversely, it was worrying to establish that the assistance children receive varies according to the municipality in which they live, given that every child has the right to an adequate standard of living.

Children cope with poverty in very different ways. The hotline revealed that some swap clothing, others collect bottles with refundable deposits, while others do odd jobs. I greatly admire the creativity with which children tackle their difficulties. But we must not forget the deep scars that poverty leaves on them. We cannot allow children to suffer in this way in one of the world's most prosperous countries.

One of my recommendations for municipalities is to develop an integrated poverty policy specifically geared to children. Growing up in poverty must not be allowed to mark children for the rest of their lives. We owe it to these children to provide them with better prospects.

Finally, I would like to thank all the children, parents and professionals who took part in the survey. I trust that the recommendations will be adopted with all possible speed, in the interest of our children.

Marc Dullaert

Dutch Ombudsman for Children

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of several loops and a long vertical stroke, positioned to the right of the typed name and title.

Children in poverty in the Netherlands: a summary

In this research report, the condition of poverty is defined as the living conditions of people with a low income. People in poverty live with the social minimum; the income that was set by the national government.

Under article 27 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children have the right to an adequate standard of living. Parents must ensure this to the best of their ability, aided by the state. In 2013, the Dutch Ombudsman for Children and the Verwey-Jonker Institute have set up a number of surveys relating to children in poverty. First, the Children in Poverty hotline was set up for children aged between 6 and 18, so that they could relate their experiences of poverty at home and perhaps suggest ways of improving the situation. Parents, professionals, officials and others involved in poverty issues could also pass on their experiences, raise problems with regard to poverty policy, or highlight effective projects targeting children in poverty.

The hotline attracted a great many respondents. A total of 681 children and 421 adults made use of it. In-depth interviews were also held with 25 young people who had used the website. The responses and interviews are not representative for all children in the Netherlands, but they do give a clear picture of how children experience growing up in poverty and how it affects them.

In another survey, all 408 municipalities in the Netherlands were questioned about their poverty policy with regard to children. A total of 198 municipalities responded, making this survey representative of municipal poverty policy in the Netherlands.

A group of experts was involved in these first parts of the research; they looked at the findings and validated the results.

The last part of the research will start after the summer of 2013. It will focus on the young people involved, the idea being to work with them to develop an approach that enables them to influence municipal poverty policy so that it ties in better with their needs and wishes.

This report consists of three parts. Part one describes the findings of the Children in Poverty hotline and the in-depth interviews with children (aged 6 to 17). Part two describes the hotline findings for adults and part three the results of the quick scan of municipal poverty policy.

Summary of conclusions regarding children in poverty

1. Poverty has a huge impact on children

The children's response shows that the majority of children who live in poverty are confronted with their family's lack of money on a daily basis and find the situation highly upsetting. Some, for instance, do not get a hot meal every day, or new clothes or shoes when they need them. Over half the children who responded go to the food bank or the clothing bank or have experienced the electricity or water being cut off. Many are unable to go on holiday, join a sports club, celebrate their birthdays or go along on school trips, and do not expect the situation to change in the near future.

The children who made use of the hotline were also worried about the way poverty affected their home situation; one in three stated that they worried about this daily. Their concerns mainly had to do with money problems, but extended to issues like being evicted, not having enough to eat, lacking other things or getting deeper into debt. Some of the children experienced physical or mental health problems as a result. Around a quarter of the children interviewed said that they sometimes suffered from headaches, stomach aches or fatigue because they were worried about their situation. Their concerns also extended into the future: at least half the children worried regularly about how their education would be paid for later.

2. Growing up in a poor family isolates children

It's important for children to be part of a group, to do the same things as their peers. Being poor means that there isn't enough money for shared activities that most children take for granted, like celebrating birthdays, going to the cinema or going shopping with their friends. Almost two thirds of the children in the group surveyed cannot take part in sporting or cultural activities, mainly because membership of the clubs that organise such activities is prohibitively expensive. In addition, some of them are reluctant to invite their friends over to their house. If children cannot join in their peers' activities, they eventually become socially isolated.

Children from poor homes also feel different because their parents can't afford to buy them clothing or other items that reflect the latest fashion. It's upsetting for them if they are belittled or bullied as a result.

At home, too, the children report tension and stress due to money problems. Two thirds said that lack of money or being in debt caused parental rows. Yet despite the tension, their parents hardly ever discussed their financial problems.

3. Poverty is still a huge taboo in the Netherlands

Not only is there little discussion of family poverty between children and parents, children tend not to discuss this subject with anyone else, either. It is not something they want to talk about openly with their friends. At school, even between best friends, poverty is a taboo subject.

Yet children want more attention to be paid to this issue. In fact, their main tip for other young people was to talk about it, as they believe that this makes it easier to deal with the situation.

4. Children are inventive in tackling their difficulties

Children all deal with poverty in their own way. Some have jobs in their spare time or try to save up their pocket money. They suggest all kinds of ways of saving money, for instance by swapping clothes, doing odd jobs for people or collecting bottles with returnable deposits. They also mention plenty of ways of doing nice things that don't cost money, like having a birthday sleepover, or dropping in on grandparents at dinnertime. The young people who were interviewed were all extremely price conscious, and critical of attitudes about what are seen as the necessities of life.

Summarised conclusions from the responses of adults and professionals regarding poverty

1. Poor families need help and support

Adult respondents believe that parents should be offered more support and help. As also emerges from the children's responses, poverty causes stress and mental health problems among parents. In addition to assistance geared to their financial situation (help with debt problems and advice on how to budget), families should also be assisted and given guidance with regard to child-rearing.

2. The help children in poverty receive depends on the municipality in which they live

The main conclusion of parents and professionals responding to the website is that the position of children in poverty varies according to the municipality in which they live and

grow up. Much of the support and assistance provided to families comes from private initiatives, like food or clothing banks, or organisations seeking to foster social participation by children. Families appreciate this assistance, but it is not available in all municipalities. In addition, municipalities each have their individual poverty policy, and are not always active in informing families about the assistance for which they qualify.

3. Schools take insufficient account of poverty when requesting parental contributions

Many primary and secondary schools are insufficiently aware that some parents simply cannot afford the contributions expected of them (even when these are compulsory). As a consequence, children may be excluded. The respondents indicate that education should be affordable, and that parents should not be expected to pay all kinds of extra costs.

Summarised conclusions from the responses of municipalities regarding policy on child poverty

1. Measures for poor children lack overall vision and objectives

The findings of the quick scan of municipalities and the more extensive interviews with 30 municipalities show that, in general, poverty policy is aimed at promoting social participation through financial support. It mainly targets people on benefits, despite the fact that financial difficulties are not confined to this group. Groups like the self-employed, the unemployed and people with debts are also finding it increasingly hard to cope. Many municipalities are insufficiently aware of these groups and their children.

In addition, municipalities lack the statutory powers needed to support these new groups adequately and amend poverty policy. Under the present system, they receive a budget from central government to assist those whose income is below 110% of the guaranteed minimum income.

Through their general poverty policy, municipalities indirectly seek to support children by giving financial assistance to families and single parents with children. In municipalities without specific schemes for children, there is only a limited focus on the situation of this group. Municipalities are insufficiently aware of the problems these children experience and the factors that prevent them from growing up healthy and developing to the full. As a result, they are not taking enough targeted measures to adequately support children in poverty.

The vast majority of municipalities (88.4%) has specific schemes for children, for instance supporting their participation in sport, culture and educational activities. Municipalities focused mainly on these children's participation in cultural and sporting activities: 93% and 92% respectively. This is explicit policy in only two of the municipalities surveyed. The other municipalities have not drawn up any policy objectives to measure the impact of these schemes.

2. Municipalities differ strongly in terms of measures targeting children in poverty

Measures targeting children are spread across various policy fields, including policy on poverty, youth, education, sport and health. One thing municipalities have in common is their focus on supporting children's social participation. Enabling children to join in their peers' activities emerged as the main focus of measures in many interviews with municipalities.

Many municipalities promote participation in sport, culture and social activities at school by means of various schemes. But how and how many children these actually enable to participate differs greatly. Some municipalities have open-ended schemes from which all children can benefit, but in others, only a limited number can benefit due to financial restrictions and political priorities.

3. Lack of joined-up approach to improving the situation of children in poverty

The surveys show that responsibility for supporting children in poverty is divided between various municipal departments. It is crucial that they work together to devise an integrated approach, but as yet this is insufficiently the case. Up to now, contacts tend to be established on an individual basis. With regard to external cooperation, a number of municipalities work well with local organisations at the level of implementation. Making optimal use of the expertise possessed by these organisations can be extremely valuable in enhancing policy. At the moment, these contacts tend to be overly focused on locating target groups and exchanging information.

4. Few municipalities know whether children in poverty actually benefit from the schemes intended to assist them

Municipalities carry out little (if any) monitoring to establish whether schemes are in fact benefiting the poor families for whom they are designed. As a result they are inadequately informed about the take-up of these schemes, and whether money given to parents actually benefits their children.

Municipalities also differ in the extent to which they promote use of schemes. Some publicise them very effectively through written and digital media, while others are less active in this respect.

5. Children do not have enough say in the design and implementation of policy targeting them

One of the main findings of the surveys is that children only have a say in policy in a small minority of municipalities (4.6%). It has emerged that municipalities do not know how to tackle this issue, and lack the instruments to give shape to policy participation by children in poverty.

Recommendations by the Dutch Ombudsman for Children

1. It is imperative that municipalities develop a poverty policy specifically geared to children, given that one in nine children lives in poverty.

Such policy should have a direct effect on children in poverty, i.e. ensure that assistance is directly provided to children whose standard of living is inadequate for their physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development. Only a few municipalities specifically target children in their poverty policy. All municipalities should pursue an integrated youth policy based on an overarching vision on children in poverty. At present, municipalities mainly focus on the social participation of these children, through schemes fostering involvement in sporting and cultural activities. Municipalities are accordingly recommended to focus actively on meeting the other basic needs of this group.

a) Develop an integrated approach to poverty among children.

Responsibility for dealing with children in poverty is shared by different municipal departments. The various areas in which children need support should be joined up. This involves combining not only financial support and debt prevention but also enhanced participation, educational opportunities and health. Specific attention should be devoted to children who have been living below the poverty level for over two years. At present, poverty policy focuses too strongly on people on benefits, despite the fact that the new poor include categories like the self-employed. These people's children, too, need to be included in poverty policy.

b) Improve access to schemes and make it easy to submit an application.

Many parents and children do not know how to make use of available schemes. Information on how to apply for them must be simplified. Schemes should be made available for all children, without imposing a maximum per municipality or per scheme.

Municipalities are recommended to work together with civil society organisations and schools so as to reach children affected by poverty. In doing so, they should communicate clearly about schemes.

c) Involve children early on when designing schemes.

Make it possible for children and young people to have a say in the schemes that are designed for them, so as to obtain a better insight into their needs and the extent to which existing schemes tie in with those needs. Many municipalities are theoretically willing to do so, but few actually put this into practice. Use should be made of best practices, tried and tested methods, and tools for policy participation by the young.

2. Municipalities are recommended to put together a children's package whose components directly benefit children themselves. This would be extended to children in homes with incomes under 120% of the guaranteed minimum income.

Municipalities should at least provide children directly with the following child package components. Children from moderately poor families would qualify for such a package (see the 2012 Children's Rights Monitor). The package should at least contain the basic necessities, supplemented with extras to enable children to participate socially, including vouchers for basic needs like a set of winter clothing and summer clothing and, say, the swimming lessons necessary to obtain a basic swimming diploma, a library card valid until the age of 18, access to local public transport and participation in a weekly recreational, sporting or cultural activity.

The package would be made available to children living in a home whose disposable income was less than 120% of the guaranteed minimum income for households.

3. A joined-up approach needs to be adopted for children in poverty. The Dutch Ombudsman for Children calls on municipalities to adapt their policy accordingly, in partnership with civil society organisations.

A joint approach needs to be adopted within municipalities to improve the situation of children in poverty, with assured political, official and public support. Various parties should

be involved, including local providers of help to children in poverty, at both policy and implementation level. Partners should work closely together to ensure a complete and appropriate package of assistance.

4. Central and municipal authorities should monitor poverty policy targeting children.

National and local policy on achieving an adequate standard of living for children needs to be surveyed annually, and its reach and impact need to be monitored.

5. In the light of its obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, central government should make targeted efforts to urge municipalities to take the necessary steps and call them to account when they fail to do so.

The Netherlands has signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child. As a result it must ensure that it assures children's right to an adequate standard of living. Given this responsibility, and the fact that poverty policy has largely been decentralised, it is up to central government to call municipalities to account regarding their duty to provide children locally with an adequate standard of living.