

5th Asia and Pacific Conference on Reproductive and Sexual Health and Rights

Toespraak, 20 oktober 2009

"It gives me real pleasure to explain today some of the considerations and choices that lie underneath my policy in the Netherlands." Met die woorden begint minister Rouvoet zijn toespraak op 5th Asia and Pacific Conference on Reproductive and Sexual Health and Rights in China.

Your excellencies, distinguished guests, members of the delegations, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me to give this address today, on the occasion of the 15th anniversary of the International Conference on Population and Development.

The People's Republic of China and the Chinese National Population and Family Planning Commission deserve our respect and gratitude for organising this important regional conference.

Sexual and reproductive health and rights are among the Netherlands' policy priorities for international cooperation. The track record of the Netherlands in this field is well known and also in this region there are different examples that enjoy Dutch support. The Dutch government will continue its efforts in this field, for action is still needed.

Today I will not elaborate on the Dutch view on sexual and reproductive health and rights, because I am invited here to talk about our own national youth and family policy. It gives me real pleasure to explain today some of the considerations and choices that lie underneath my policy in the Netherlands. However, the Netherlands is a small country, and I am aware that many of the countries represented here today face far greater challenges. And so, my pleasure is also tempered with modesty.

During my speech I will be addressing a number of topics.

1. Firstly, I shall explore the themes of the ICPD in the context of the United Nations.
2. Secondly, I shall discuss the key issues relating to the situation of young people and families in the Netherlands.
3. Thirdly, I will give you an impression of government policies in the Netherlands; and I will focus specifically on the Dutch approach to strengthening families and their social context.
4. Finally I would like to talk about our Dutch experiences in the context of today's conference.

1. Cairo Agenda.

Ladies and gentlemen,

On 12 October, the General Assembly of the United Nations held a commemorative meeting to mark the 15th anniversary of the International Conference on Population and Development and to discuss the visionary 20-year Programme of Action that came out of it. This is a time for commemoration and well-deserved congratulations, but definitely not a time to sit back. A lot remains to be done.

Fifteen years ago, delegates at the Cairo Conference shifted the population debate away from a top-down approach focusing on population numbers to a bottom-up policy approach focusing on human rights and people's individual needs. The Netherlands considered this paradigm shift an important one: government policies should seek first and foremost to achieve the wellbeing of our women and children, who each have a face and a name, rather than abstract policy goals for an impersonal greater good. For many of us, women and children are the most important people in our lives. Unfortunately, however, they are often the most vulnerable. They need our protection and support.

Family planning and reproductive health continue to pose challenges. If the two MDG 5 targets, 5A on maternal health and mortality and 5B on reproductive health, are not achieved, then the other MDGs will be hard to attain. Investing in MDG5 is smart economics! The subject of today's conference is a priority of the Dutch government's development cooperation policy. Other priorities include reducing gender disparities, enhancing the position of women and preventive care for young people.

I would like to stress that our countries are very different: economically, socially, culturally and in terms of religious beliefs. Our countries and peoples therefore have different needs. I believe that in working on the Cairo agenda and with different communities, a culturally sensitive approach is essential. At the same time, there can be no place for cultural relativism: the bottom line is the universality of international human rights and particularly the rights of women and young people.

So I sincerely hope that you will take home ideas from this conference that will help you to continue your work in your own countries.

Now I would like to share some of the Netherlands experiences concerning youth and family policy.

2. Key issues relating to the situation of young people and families in the Netherlands. Various international studies show that children in the Netherlands lead relatively carefree lives. By their own account, they are among the happiest children in the world. According to research, it can be stated that around 85 per cent of our children are doing well. Of the remaining 15 per cent, 10 per cent are at risk and 5 per cent are facing problems.

The government believes that every child has the right to a safe, healthy childhood in which they can develop their talents, have fun and prepare properly for the future. These are the conditions under which children should grow up, as laid down in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Sadly, not every child in the Netherlands is so fortunate. Some are facing challenges that relate specifically to the modern welfare state, challenges that cannot easily be tackled by government institutions. A broken home, alcohol or drug abuse, domestic violence and social deprivation are all factors which, individually or in combination, can lead to problems for children.

In the general policy programme the present Dutch government has committed itself to improve the conditions in which every child in the Netherlands grows up, regardless of their ethnic or cultural background. Achieving this goal calls for cohesion between professional health care workers, and their involvement in youth policy, and the engagement of parents and social networks.

The latter is a relatively new focus in Dutch policy. To understand this shift, let me briefly explain how Dutch youth health care services are organised. In the Netherlands youth programmes are made up of preventive youth health care, parenting support and social services at local level, and specialised medical care and youth services at regional level. The aim is to provide an unbroken line of preventive care for young people from birth right up to the age of eighteen. This provides a good overview of a child's development and tells us where support is needed most. And where appropriate, recommendations are made to specialised medical and youth care providers and educational institutions. These services are being introduced in new Youth and Family Centres in every municipality. The preventive system for babies and toddlers already reaches a huge number of people; 95 per cent of parents with young children make use of it. The challenge for the new centres is to extend that reach to children in older age groups and their parents, of course.

Inevitably, some people avoid contact with the care services. And the majority are concentrated in the most deprived areas of our major cities.

For children who encounter problems in their development to adulthood, there is also a whole range of youth care services available at provincial level. And services are guaranteed at national level for more urgent care – for young people who are mentally ill or have severe learning difficulties, for example.

In recent years the Netherlands has seen an unexpected rise in the number of children requiring professional youth care. And as a result, costs have also risen sharply. Our aim in the next few years is to reduce that number if possible. We want to organise services more efficiently. And we want to step up prevention at local level. This is a crucial part of our policy.

This touches on the philosophy that underpins our policy. Wherever possible, we want to rely on the strength of families and the social networks around them. We want to emphasise that parents and carers bear the primary responsibility for raising, protecting and caring for their children. As far as I'm concerned, a stable family situation is the most important preventive strategy. As you know, research shows that successful preventive strategies and the avoidance of risk factors in the earliest years of a child's life dramatically reduce the chances of problems occurring later in life.

You may wonder why this focus on the family is such an important issue for the current Dutch government. Let me try to give you some idea of the context.

Dutch society has undergone enormous changes in recent decades.

- a. Women are better educated and are having children at a much later age than their mothers;
- b. Employment opportunities for women are improving so that women are now pursuing the careers of their choice;
- c. A variety of social trends, for example the tendency to move house more often and the new requirements, have broken down parents' social networks. This makes them less confident in raising their children.
- d. More children come from broken homes; many are then brought up in a 'new' family;
- e. New socioeconomic risk factors have emerged that can lead families into poverty.

This list is by no means exhaustive. These new developments each have a major impact on family life and on the strength of the family unit. And that, self evidently, has an effect on

children's development and welfare. Not only politicians, but academics, experts and families themselves recognise the truth of this.

3. Main elements of our family policy

That is why our current family policy has five main elements:

a. High average age at which women are having their first child

Due to various social trends, women in the Netherlands have their first child relatively late. The average age in 2008 was 29.4. As the Dutch Council for Public Health and Care has pointed out, the biological clock keeps on ticking, but the social ladder takes no account of that. Training, study, work, career, financial security and housing are all major obstacles in deciding whether or not to have children. What is more, people are insufficiently aware of the medical risks, which start to increase from the age of 30. It is therefore our policy to provide women and men with information about the possible consequences of delayed parenthood. For those who do decide to have children later in life, parenting support is available. That said, the Dutch government does not interfere directly with these very personal decisions. From a human rights perspective it is entirely up to couples themselves to decide when they will have their first child, and whether more will follow. Our policy actively aims to help couples combine working life with raising a family. I will return to this subject later.

b. Child rearing as a social issue

Dutch parents take the responsibility for raising their children seriously, and actively seek out information that will help them. That is an interesting fact. We invest a great deal in educating our children. We assume that this requires special know-how, and train teachers to do the job.

As they grow up, children are taught values and norms. In this connection, I should like to explain that the Netherlands has a system of government-funded private education that enables religious or other groups to establish schools in which they are free to teach young people the values that are important to them. Churches too are free to do so. The state does not dictate the values that are taught. So by offering parenting support via our Youth and Family Centres, we are not seeking to be a 'nanny state'. We fully respect both ideological freedom and pluralism, both essential features of our democratic society. In this way minority groups can rest assured that their rights are being protected. It motivates them and inspires loyalty. And equally, loyalty can also be asked of them. This notion of 'unity in diversity' generates stability in Dutch society.

c. Growing need to combine family life and work

People often have children at the busiest time of their lives, just as they are building their careers or have to care for their own parents. A study by the Dutch Social and Cultural Planning Office has shown that the number of working mothers is increasing, and that this is now widely accepted in the Netherlands, even if the children are very young. The same study showed that the public believe that men could work less in order to devote more time and attention to their children. Dutch policy aims to encourage fathers to share the responsibility for their families and children. The majority of the respondents to the study believed that babies should be cared for by their parents. So day care for babies is a sensitive issue. Toddlers are another matter. More than half of the respondents felt that it was good for a toddler to spend two or three days a week at the day care.

The current government has extended parental leave from 13 to 26 weeks. That applies to both mothers and fathers.

Accordingly, the Dutch government also encourages employers to be family-friendly. Research shows that employers who make provision for parents reap the benefits. More and more Dutch employers now realise that family-friendly policies pay dividends. Employees are motivated, loyal and engaged. They suffer less stress, and take less sick leave. And this gives the company a competitive edge.

d. Separation and divorce

More and more children come from broken homes. Around 30 per cent of children whose parents have separated run into difficulties. Two-thirds of the children receiving specialised youth care services come from broken homes. The main risk factor for children is serious and ongoing conflict between the parents, both before and after they have separated. Problems may also arise in the long term: there is a far greater chance that the children of divorced parents will themselves divorce. We believe that the interests of the child should take greater priority. It helps to invest in skills that can assist parents in either improving their relationship or managing conflict after they separate. We are now investigating what programmes are most appropriate for the Dutch situation.

e. Impact of social exclusion and poverty on children

Poverty in the Netherlands often has a negative impact on the way family members interact and on the development and health of children. Five per cent of families who run into problems have fallen victim to multiple, cumulative risk factors. Unemployment and parents' lack of education are two of the main ones. Poverty is also a risk factor after divorce, and it affects many single-parent families. It is an obstacle to participation in society, and thus increases the risk of isolation. The foundations of life and opportunity are laid down in the first few years of a child's upbringing. The Dutch government helps parents meet children's costs, with child benefit, free school books, tax breaks and so on. We have built up a system of financial support for parents in which income and number of children are the decisive factors. Families are also entitled to a fixed, universal allowance for every child.

In addition to these schemes, we are allocating extra funds to our local authorities for measures aimed at preventing children from social exclusion.

A special issue which I should certainly mention in the context of this ICPD conference is our approach to teenage pregnancies and abortion. While the Netherlands has the lowest number of teenage pregnancies in the Western world, recent research has shown that the incidence of child abuse is slightly higher than we previously thought.

The current Dutch government is investing in preventing unwanted pregnancies by providing sex education. And if a teenage girl does get pregnant, we help her with housing and provide other support so that she can take care of her child if she decides not to have an abortion. The Dutch government believes that every life, even at its earliest stage, should be protected and not ended lightly.

Young people and families in the context of general government policy

All these elements of Dutch youth and families policy tie in with the general development of the Dutch welfare state. Since the 1990s there has been much debate on how societal responsibilities should be divided. The government is seen as responsible for providing

certain services and products, but not for implementing all the various processes. The Netherlands has a tradition of a strong civil society, which reflects the strength of the country's citizens. It also demarcates the role of the State in relation to the freedoms and responsibilities of individuals and communities. Primary social responsibility should rest as far as possible with the individual, at grassroots level, within sports clubs, cultural organisations, churches, etc. But the focus on the individual must not be at the cost of society at large. We must fight the visible trend – which also affects countries in this region – of individuals striving for maximum personal gain, often at the cost of others, without worrying about the wider impact of their actions. Nowadays, our ecological footprints are in the spotlight, and rightly so. But we need to go further, and understand that our actions have a social impact too. We need to live together if our society – in all its many forms – is to survive. The Dutch government programme has therefore taken as its title Working together, living together. It underlines the importance of everyone accepting responsibility and playing as active a role as possible in society. We seek to make our citizens active. Not only in the labour market, but also at home in the village or city where they live.

Over the last few decades, social cohesion in the Netherlands has been diminishing as modernisation and individualisation has taken hold. As a government, we have made it our task to reverse this trend. Social cohesion is vital for a safe, stable, healthy and happy society. In the long term, a society in which individuals or groups claim rights without assuming responsibilities is simply not viable.

As a government we assume that people will act responsibly in the current economic and social climate. Instead of making calculated use of public provision, we trust that they will act in the public interest, which of course is in their own interest too.

Living together, respecting others and acquiring common values starts with the family. The family is the community into which we are born and in which we live unconditionally. And where, ideally, we learn a sense of loving solidarity. Family members support one another. And, for many families, supporting one another has become even more important at this time of global economic crisis.

4. How does this all relate to the theme of this conference?

I have stressed the importance of strengthening the family as a means of nurturing young people and protecting them from problems in the future. I am well aware that poverty, unemployment, disease and social instability often prevent families from giving children the right start in life. Culture, too is a fundamental part of people's lives. And it influences how people and families manage their lives. Culture can have both positive and negative effects on children's development. It can lead to exclusion from education, for example, or to sons being valued more highly than daughters. It can stop parents and grandparents from standing up and challenging female genital mutilation, which damages their daughters and granddaughters for life.

Cultures must be seen in their wider context. They both influence and are influenced by external circumstances. They are never static; people are continuously reshaping them, and this process leads to changes in behavior.

This brings me back to Cairo and the paradigmshift it implied. Cairo embodies a crucial change in focus. Women and men, girls and boys: their well-being is the ultimate goal. The agenda adopted in Cairo continues to be a guide to us all.

I wish you perseverance and success in implementing that agenda.
Thank you for your attention.