

2016

**ANNUAL STATUS REPORT**

**POVERTY, SOCIAL  
EXCLUSION AND  
HUMAN RIGHTS**

NETHERLANDS  
INSTITUTE FOR  

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HUMAN RIGHTS

## **2016 Annual Status Report**

The Annual Status Report of the Netherlands Institute for Human Rights reports on the human rights situation in the Netherlands. The Institute issues recommendations to the government and highlights human rights-related issues in legislation, policy and practice. To access the full report, visit [\*\*www.mensenrechten.nl\*\*](http://www.mensenrechten.nl).



# Foreword

Poverty is the theme of this fifth report on Human Rights in the Netherlands published by the Netherlands Institute for Human Rights. You may be wondering whether this is (still) relevant. After all, the economic crisis is behind us and unemployment is falling. And yet...

Many people and families still live in poverty in the Netherlands, and certainly also in the Caribbean part of our Kingdom. And that involves problems in many areas. Problems that have accumulated over the years and that are not solved the minute you have a new job. Too many people have ended up in a vicious circle. That means that human rights such as the right to housing, education, health and full participation in society have come under pressure. A government which assumes an increasingly smaller role and takes as a starting point that people can look after themselves runs the risk of losing sight of those who can no longer do so properly.

Ending situations of poverty and preventing poverty when people are at risk, is a key task for the government. The Institute is convinced that the government can only be successful in this if a broad strategic vision is developed in which the fulfilment of human rights is a central tenet. This should be done in collaboration with bodies that provide assistance that have clear insight into the problems, advocacy organisations and people in poverty.

With this report the Institute provides for building blocks for such a vision, and is particularly also seeking to provide inspiration.

Adriana van Dooijeweert  
*Chair, Netherlands Institute for Human Rights*

## What is poverty?

The Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) deems poverty to exist if someone does not have the means to access the goods and services which are considered to be the minimum necessity in their society. It concerns people who are unable to achieve a minimum standard of living with their income. The SCP adopts an objective approach: the poverty line does not depend on how people perceive their situation. The 'minimum necessity' is recorded in a list drawn up by Nibud (National Institute for Family Finance Information). Two reference budgets are used to establish poverty.

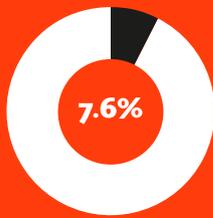
The basic needs budget comprises the minimum expenditure of an independent household on basic items such as food, clothing and accommodation and a number of other expenses which are hard to avoid, such as insurance costs. The second reference budget, the 'not much but adequate' budget, also takes account of the minimum costs of leisure and social participation.

The SCP's most recent figures cover 2014. The number of people below the more generous 'not much but adequate' threshold is now slightly more than 1.2 million (7.6%), with over 810,000 (5.1%) below the basic needs threshold. Within the group of people below the basic needs threshold, the proportion of those in long-term poverty fluctuates between 40% and 50%. In the last measurement year (2012) a total of nearly 800,000 people had insufficient income to meet their basic needs. For over 375,000 people that situation had already lasted for at least three years in a row.

In 2014  
**800,000 PEOPLE  
HAD INSUFFICIENT  
INCOME**

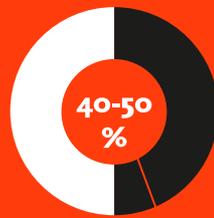
to fund their basic needs

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**'NOT MUCH  
BUT ADEQUATE'  
THRESHOLD**

1,2 million  
poor people



**PROPORTION  
OF PEOPLE  
IN LONG-TERM  
POVERTY**

under the basic  
needs criterion

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For over  
**375,000 PEOPLE**  
that situation lasted at least  
**THREE YEARS  
IN A ROW**



# Summary and conclusions

## Poverty is detrimental for the individual and society

The figures do not lie. Poverty is a problem in the Netherlands. Many people are living in poverty, and a considerable percentage are in long-term poverty. The number of people in poverty has started to decline, but far from everyone is benefiting from this. The thematic chapters in this report show that life in poverty has detrimental consequences for various aspects of the lives of the people affected by it. A number of examples illustrate this.

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**On average, people with a low income and a lower level of education live for seven years less and have 19 years less in a state of health which is perceived as good. 2.5 million people in the Netherlands have great difficulty with reading, writing and/or arithmetic. Many of them are in long-term poverty. Many people in paid work are still below the poverty line. The number of working people in poverty has increased substantially. The number of homeless people has increased substantially over the past six years. It is difficult to present the precise number, but it certainly involves more than 30,000 people, including young people. 18% of all tenants struggle to pay their rent and the most basic living costs every month. In the Caribbean Netherlands many people have great difficulty making ends meet.**

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Poverty can in principle affect anyone, for example as a result of a big drop of income through job loss, a bankruptcy, divorce or serious debt. People can also end up in poverty through discrimination in the labour market or health problems which lead to high

expenditure on healthcare. Various groups of people run a structurally greater risk of poverty. These include people on social welfare, single-parent families with young children, people with a disability and non-Western migrants. Research shows that for many people it is very difficult to get out of poverty. Poverty and human rights are closely related. People can end up in poverty because their human rights are insufficiently safeguarded, but poverty can also lead to insufficient protection of human rights. People in poverty can end up in a vicious circle of powerlessness, stigmatisation, discrimination, exclusion and material deprivation.

Poverty and the associated social inequality also have consequences for society as a whole. This has been found to particularly be the case when people's problems accumulate. If people have the feeling that they cannot participate and are not part of society (anymore) that can lead to social discontent and loss of confidence in institutions such as the government, the rule of law and parliament.

## Poverty is a human rights issue

The problems outlined relate to human rights. The fact that large groups of people live in long-term poverty points to shortcomings in safeguarding the right to an adequate standard of living. The right to an adequate standard of living and protection from poverty and social exclusion, the right to health, the right to education, the right to work and the right to housing are fundamental human rights. Within these areas there are problems with participation, autonomy, equality and legal protection. A life in poverty and exclusion can affect human dignity. This urgently requires a new and different policy. An approach within which human rights play a central role provides for building blocks.

Such an approach emphasises for policymakers, professionals and people in poverty that this issue involves basic human rights.

### **Guaranteeing human rights helps to reduce the consequences of poverty and to prevent poverty**

The protection and promotion of the rights of people living in poverty can reduce the detrimental consequences which poverty has on their life. And the protection of human rights can help prevent people from ending up in poverty. For example, measures which remove the obstacles to participation by people in poverty can counter their social exclusion. Income-supporting measures which ensure that people can pay their rent and can focus on their future help to improve their health and increase their opportunities in the labour market. Practical measures to improve health offer a health benefit and also encourage social participation and access to the labour market.

Guaranteeing the right to education for children from poor families can contribute to a future without poverty for them.

### **An approach in which human rights play a central role**

The need for an approach in which human rights play a central role is at least threefold. Human rights are all-encompassing, and therefore offer a basis for an integrated approach to the interrelated problems of people living in poverty. The human rights framework offers guidance for the content of policy and the process by which that policy is formulated, for the implementation and for the monitoring and evaluation. Secondly, working from the recognition of the rights of the people living in poverty, identifying the government's associated obligations and formulating them in practical terms is a significantly different approach than just working from peoples' needs. It contributes to participation by and empowerment of the people affected by the policy. Thirdly, human rights offer clarity in formulating policy and balancing interests in concrete situations.

## **Human rights and combating poverty and social exclusion**

Many human rights are relevant in combating poverty and social exclusion. A number of human rights has been examined in more detail in this report in order to initiate the discussion about an approach to poverty in which human rights play a central role. The first part of the report discusses a number of principles which form the basis of human rights. The second part examines a number of rights in more detail in order to clarify the link with poverty. The most important findings are given below.

### **Dignity and social security**

A long-term lack of financial resources can be a problem in itself in terms of human rights. It can impact on the right to an adequate standard of living. When necessary the government must provide income support in order to prevent people from having to live below the minimum subsistence level.

### **Protection of the rights of people in a vulnerable situation**

The rights of people in vulnerable situations require extra protection. Various groups have long been identified as being 'vulnerable' to ending up or remaining in poverty, such as single-parent families with young children and non-Western migrants. The phenomenon of 'working people in poverty', such as the self-employed and small business owners, is relatively new. Specific attention is also required for people with a disability or chronic illness, the elderly, children and homeless people. If budget cuts are necessary, these should not affect the most vulnerable people disproportionately. In a situation of economic recovery, the improvement of their situation must be given a high priority.

### **Respect for autonomy**

People's autonomy must be the starting point when formulating, implementing and monitoring policy. Freedom of choice and decision-making is not the same as assuming that people can look after themselves. It may actually be necessary to assist people who cannot get out of poverty on their own.

### **Equality and equal enjoyment of rights**

Inequality and discrimination can be both a cause and consequence of poverty. Social inequality can lead to a reduction in confidence in the legal system and institutions such as parliament and the government. If inequality occurs in various areas at the same time, such as differences in socio-economic status, education and health, that can lead to social discontent and unrest.

Discrimination on the ground of economic status or grounds related to poverty is not permitted. Equal enjoyment of rights requires – amongst other things – that barriers that impede the exercise of rights be identified and removed. This would include paying attention to literacy and digital skills. In addition, there is a need to prevent people in poverty from being disadvantaged by a stigmatising attitude on the part of institutions or other citizens.

### **Participation and empowerment**

For poverty to be tackled effectively, it is crucial that people in poverty and advocacy groups be involved in formulating, implementing and monitoring policy. This may require extra effort in order to reach people and genuinely involve them. Only then it is possible to combat poverty in a way that shares responsibility between central government, local government and the person concerned.

### **Protection of rights**

Effective protection of rights requires that the individual can hold the government to account. This requires an awareness of human rights. Equally, professionals involved in combating poverty should have the necessary human rights expertise. The government also needs to do everything it can to make the relevant information accessible to people in poverty proactively and timely. Anyone who considers that their human rights have been breached must be able to have access to an effective remedy.

### **Health**

Living in poverty impacts on health. A lack of money can lead to an unhealthy eating pattern, living in an unhealthy environment or foregoing healthcare. A lack of financial resources also means for many people that they largely focus on their life in the short term. Many people in poverty have poor literacy skills and therefore find it harder to access information about a healthy lifestyle. More effort is required in terms of preventative healthcare and for the factors that influence health, such as an adequate standard of living, adequate housing and good education. The measures must be specifically tailored to the situation of people living in poverty or who run a risk of ending up in poverty.

### **Education**

Some 2.5 million people in the Netherlands have poor literacy skills. Many of them are in long-term poverty, have problems with their health and are less socially and politically engaged. Poor literacy skills can have negative consequences for the ability to get out of poverty. Although primary and secondary education are free in principle, many schools ask for extra contributions for activities organised by the school.

If parents do not pay the contribution, this can result in the child being excluded from participation. There are also schools that ask parents to make contributions to improve the quality of education. That can influence the choice of schools, and lead to children from rich families receiving a better education than children from poorer families. If children have parents with lower education or come from areas with poor opportunities, schools more often recommend that they pursue a lower level of secondary education. Differences in opportunities within education have long-term consequences. It can result in parents' poverty being passed on to their children. Education is important to getting out of poverty, and crucial for the realisation of many other human rights.

### **Employment**

Although work is still important to acquire an income, having paid work is not a guarantee of not ending up in poverty or being able to get out of poverty. 'Working people in poverty' include small business owners, farmers, people with a poorly paid part-time job and a rapidly growing number of flexi-workers who are employed or self-employed. People with a low education level and a flexible employment contract in particular have a greater risk of ending up in poverty. For that group in particular, a flexible contract is not a free choice. Risk factors which can influence access to a job with an adequate wage, job security and favourable working conditions include a low level of education, a job in a sector with high competition, and discrimination. At the bottom end of the labour market there is also a greater risk of exploitation (e.g. by illegal employment agencies).

Life in long-term poverty can impede access to work, for example because it means that people have a more limited network or cannot afford refresher training or retraining.

### **Housing**

There is a lack of social housing and housing which is matched well to the needs of different groups, such as the elderly and people with a disability. Further, many people cannot afford housing costs. This can lead to poverty and homelessness. There are a large number of homeless people, particularly if one adopts a broader definition which also includes people living in unsafe or inadequate accommodation. There are various problems with providing shelter for people who are homeless. Due to various circumstances – such as the economic crisis and the cuts to mental healthcare – more people need shelter. However, moving on is problematic for quite a number of people. Many people who need shelter require support, for example because of mental health issues or addiction. There is insufficient accommodation to meet such needs.

### **The Caribbean Netherlands**

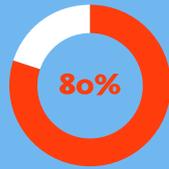
Many people in the Caribbean Netherlands have difficulties making ends meet. No minimum subsistence level has yet been calculated for the three islands. Work is no guarantee of an income that is sufficient to meet basic needs. In addition, it is very difficult to find work in the small and complex labour market, particularly for certain groups such as people with a disability. The quality of education has improved in recent years, but continues to require attention.

For example, the nature and quality of education does not match well with employers' demands. Many people living in poverty in the Caribbean Netherlands have health problems. Obesity is a common issue. Few preventative measures have been taken to counter this so far. It has also been found that there is a link between the large number of people living in poverty and the widespread occurrence of violence against children. Many people on the islands do not have the means to obtain good housing. Insufficient suitable accommodation is available for people with a disability. In addition, many homes are in a poor condition. ■

**PEOPLE WHO EXPERIENCE POVERTY**

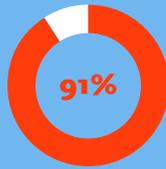


**Dignity**



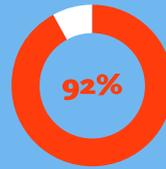
Experience impact of poverty on sense of **dignity**

**Autonomy**



Experience impact of poverty on their freedom of **choice**

**Participation**



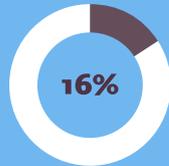
Experience impact of poverty on their **activities**

PERCEPTION STUDY

# Poverty

**Dignity  
Autonomy  
Participation**

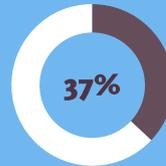
**PEOPLE WITH A LOW INCOME**



Are **ashamed** of how they live

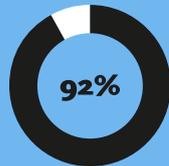


Have the feeling that they are **not asked about anything**

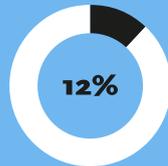


Participate in **activities frequently**

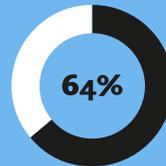
**THE GENERAL POPULATION IN THE NETHERLANDS**



Feel that there is **no need** to be **ashamed** of poverty



Have the feeling that they are **not asked about anything**



Participate in **activities frequently**



SOURCE Perception study into poverty in the Netherlands. Conducted by GfK on behalf of the Netherlands Institute for Human Rights.



# Recommendations

- 1 Develop a strategic policy for combating poverty and social exclusion in which human rights play a central role. Involve advocacy organisations for people living in poverty.**
  - 2 Develop a national programme to combat poverty and social exclusion on the basis of the strategic pupils. Collaborate with local governments, advocacy organisations and people in poverty. Pay attention to the various human rights and principles within the programme.**
- A Adequate standard of living**
- I Guarantee the right to an adequate standard of living through income-supporting measures.*
  - II Ensure that the procedure for income support is simple and that information is easily accessible for people in poverty.*
- B Health**
- I Focus more on preventative healthcare, and take steps which are specifically tailored to the situation of people in poverty.*
  - II Approach people in poverty proactively, and give them an active role in finding solutions to financial and health problems.*
  - III Guarantee that a lack of financial resources does not form an impediment to access to an adequate level of healthcare.*
  - IV Guarantee the accessibility of information about health care and health.*

- C Education**
- I Ensure that students with parents with lower education or parents in poverty have the same opportunities within education as pupils with more highly educated or rich parents.*
  - II Ensure that financial considerations do not restrict the freedom of choice within education.*
  - III Combat poor literacy amongst adults.*
- D Employment**
- I Strengthen and protect the labour market position of low-skilled and/or flexible employees.*
  - II Encourage employment agencies and employers to invest in additional training or on-the-job training.*
  - III Combat discrimination in access to the labour market.*
  - IV Offer adequate protection against exploitation in employment, with particular attention for people in a vulnerable position in the labour market.*
- E Housing**
- I Guarantee the availability of sufficient rented homes, including for people with specific needs and requirements.*
  - II Guarantee the financial accessibility of rented homes.*
  - III Investigate the causes of homelessness and take steps to eradicate them.*
  - IV Guarantee that everyone in an emergency situation has access to shelter.*

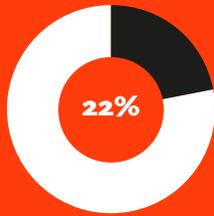
- F** The Caribbean Netherlands
- I Calculate the social security level on the basis of the local costs of living.*
  - II Address the consequences of youth poverty in an integrated way, and ensure that the parties involved work together better.*
  - III Take structural preventative measures in order to break out of the negative spiral of poverty and poor health.*
  - IV Invest in good and affordable housing.*

**3 Implementation and monitoring of the programme to tackle poverty**

- A** Ensure that the advocacy organisations and the people in poverty themselves are also involved in the implementation and monitoring of the policy. Pay particular attention to the involvement of persons with poor literacy skills. Ensure that they receive the information that is relevant to them in a form that is accessible to them.
- B** Ensure the collection of sufficiently disaggregated data in order to allow evaluation of policy, particularly the consequences for vulnerable groups.

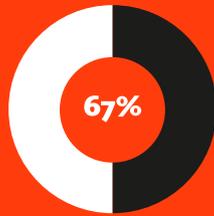
Without a basic qualification  
**PEOPLE ARE MORE  
THAN TWICE AS LIKELY  
TO BE UNEMPLOYED**

and run an increased risk  
of long-term poverty



**LONG-TERM  
UNEMPLOYED**

1/5 aged  
between  
55 and 65



**STRUGGLE  
TO MAKE ENDS MEET**

Over half are  
single parents

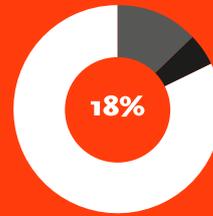
Amongst the low-skilled, in 2015 there were over

**TWO MILLION  
WORKING PEOPLE  
AND JOB SEEKERS**

Low-skilled workers are one and a half times  
more likely to be unemployed than average

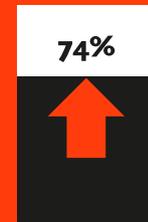
In 2016  
**THE AVERAGE RENT  
WAS 525 EURO  
PER MONTH**

in the social rental sector



**AT RISK OF  
NOT BEING ABLE  
TO PAY RENT**

1/5 of tenants  
in 2015



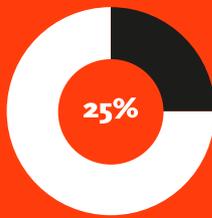
**INCREASE IN  
HOMELESSNESS**

2009 - 2015  
from 18,000  
to **31,000**

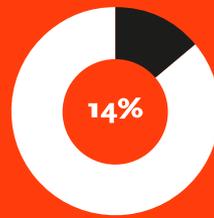
In 2015 there were  
**384,000 HOUSEHOLDS  
AT RISK OF  
NOT BEING ABLE  
TO PAY RENT**

With lower incomes and education  
**PEOPLE LIVE 7 YEARS  
LESS AND EVEN HAVE  
19 YEARS LESS**

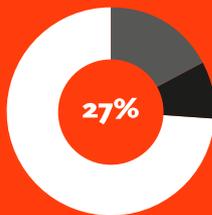
in a state of health which is perceived  
as good than highly educated people



**NO USE OF CARE  
PROVIDED BY  
MUNICIPALITIES**  
because the  
individual financial  
contribution  
is too high

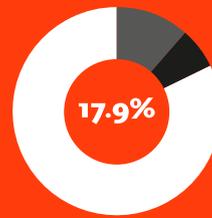


**FOREGO  
HEALTHCARE**  
Do not undergo  
necessary treatment  
that falls within  
the health insurance  
personal excess



**DO NOT FOLLOW UP  
GP'S REFERRAL**  
In 2008 this figure  
was 18%

In the Netherlands  
**2.5 MILLION PEOPLE  
HAVE GREAT DIFFICULTY  
WITH READING,  
WRITING AND/OR  
ARITHMETIC**



**LANGUAGE DEFICIENCY  
AMONGST 15 YEAR OLDS**  
2003 - 2015  
from 11.5 %  
to **17.9 %**



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Any questions can be sent by e-mail, or call on weekdays between 10.00 a.m. and 4.00 p.m.

Layout: Ontwerpwerk

Printer: Drukkerij van Deventer

May 2017