



Association of
Netherlands Municipalities

Local Government in The Netherlands



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Table of contents

	Foreword	5
1	The Netherlands: small, but influential	7
2	Central government	13
3	Europe: an extra dimension	21
4	The provinces	25
5	Local government: its structure	27
6	Local government: its work	41
7	Local government: its finances	53
8	The Association of Netherlands Municipalities	57



Foreword

As in many countries, municipalities in the Netherlands are the primary level of government most citizens come into contact with. The municipality is the most visible level of government. Everyone is familiar with their own town or city hall. Everyone has to go there occasionally, despite the rapid development of e-government. The better the municipal government operates, the more effective government as a whole can function. The municipality contributes significantly to the image of public administration. It is the municipality that is increasingly acting as the driving force of policy development.

Dutch municipalities and their representative organisation, the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG), maintain many international contacts in the form of co-operation and partnerships with others. Obviously, information on the mandate, responsibilities and functioning of municipalities in Dutch government is regularly requested. This booklet explains a little of how it all works.





1 The Netherlands: small, but influential

Geographically, the Netherlands is relatively small and densely populated. To the West and North it is bordered by the North Sea, to the East by major industrial neighbour Germany and to the South by Belgium, a country almost as large the Netherlands. The fertile delta of ‘the great rivers’ characterises the physical appearance of the Netherlands. From the south the Maas and Schelde rivers enter the country, from the east the Rhine. These rivers again branch off as they approach the North Sea. Today they represent a busy network of inland shipping routes, a feature that, together with its remarkable access to the sea, allowed the city of Rotterdam in the west to develop into one of the largest ports of the world.

Being in a large and complex river delta area, almost half the country actually physically lies below the level of a high tide. Had there been no dykes or coastal dunes, as was the case in prehistoric times, then half of the country would not exist. This long-term relationship with the ever-threatening water clearly determined the way democracy took root

and gained shape in the Netherlands. The eternal sword of Damocles of the water threat meant that early residents had to combine and work together to defend themselves, which brought the concepts of rights and obligations to the fore. Agreements affected everyone, and had to be kept to protect the country. As early as the 13th century, some of the oldest of Dutch institutions were created for the maintenance of the dykes. In the 19th century they were replaced by the water boards, which still exist.



The coastline in the 10th century



The Netherlands today



The City of Rotterdam

With some 16.5 million residents on approximately 42,000 square kilometres of inland area (that includes 1600 square kilometres of water where nobody lives), the Netherlands is one of the smaller countries in the world. Small however is relative; much larger countries such as Australia and Chile have a similar number of people. In the Netherlands about 485 people live on each square kilometre which makes it one of the world's most densely populated countries. But anyone travelling through the North, East and parts of the South, hardly notices this. The eye and heart enjoy the strange beauty of the flat countryside, with its church spires in the background, and trees, peacefully grazing cows and



ancient farms closer by. The Dutch landscape of rivers and meadows, protected by large banks of clouds, proved a popular theme to many a poet and painter throughout the centuries.

The population: diverse thanks to our history

The Dutch population has always been a melting pot. During the Eighty Years' War (1568-1648), against the occupying power of Spain, for example, many people from differing places in Western Europe sought refuge in the relatively safe North, which was later to become known as 'The Netherlands'. Whoever studies the history of family names will be surprised at the origin of many of them. The Dutch today originate from all of Europe, and indeed farther afield. Back in the 17th century the Netherlands developed into a world economic power primarily because of its physical location, the seafaring, boatbuilding and trading traditions of a coastal nation, and indeed its natural external orientation.

In the light of this history, it can be no coincidence that, directly after World War II, The Netherlands played an active role in founding what today is the European Union. Starting with six members in 1947, this grouping of 27 sovereign states is unique in the world. It collaborates intensively in social and economic fields, and has developed into what is today considered one of the world's economic superpowers. Within the European Union, The Netherlands is a powerful economic player because of sizeable agricultural exports and its knowledge economy, and due to its energetic investment practices across the world, vestiges of its long-held trading traditions.

The establishment of the European Economic Community, as it was then known, led to new migration flows between the six member states. More followed when other European countries joined. Many migrant workers from Spain, Greece and Portugal looking to improve their lives settled in The Netherlands. With Europe's economic power continuing to grow, the 1960s saw many non-European migrants also searching

for a new future. Today, of its 16.5 million inhabitants, some 370,000 come from Turkey, 330,000 from Morocco, and many from former Dutch colonies: over 330,000 from Surinam, 130,000 from the Dutch Antilles and some 40,000 from the South Moluccas, an island group of Indonesia. Since their countries joined the European Union, many Poles, Romanians and Bulgarians have also settled in The Netherlands, permanently or temporarily. All contribute to the national economy. Such migrations have made the Dutch population very multi-coloured. Some large cities today count more than 100 nationalities. And just for the record, many Dutch themselves have for many different reasons moved elsewhere both within and beyond Europe.

The Netherlands has always had a Christian orientation, with significant Jewish and humanistic influences. Nowadays only about half the population are practising Christians or formal members of a church community. Mainly through migration some 950,000 Muslims currently live in The Netherlands as a result of which the mosque has become a familiar cityscape feature.



In light of the widely disparate character of the population, it is no surprise that in some cities the desired integration of minorities is not taking place to everybody's satisfaction. This sometimes results in friction, even conflict which can have a major impact. At the national level, new political parties have emerged, each with their own ideas as to solving this kind of problem.

Another relevant aspect of demographic developments is the growing number of older people. In 2025 more than 21% of the population will be above the age of sixty-five. This ageing population has a number of consequences for local governments. Well educated older people tend to be active in voluntary and social activities. On the other hand, older people usually require more care and support services, which can in part be provided by other older people, in part by family members and in part by the municipality. In addition the municipalities have to ensure that their provision of sporting, recreational and cultural activities also meets the needs of this growing group in the local population.



2 Central government

Capital and governing city

The capital of the Netherlands is Amsterdam – the city that for centuries welcomed the oppressed with open arms, and was always at the heart of Dutch trading, creativity and initiative. Today it is a major North Sea port, EU financial centre and centre of the arts.

The seat of government, however, is The Hague, some 40 km to the south - the result of turbulent events in Dutch history. The Hague has always been the residence of the Head of State. In the 11th and 12th centuries ruling knights, who at the time governed the 'low lands by the sea', used to gather at the so-called Ridderzaal or Knights' Hall in the heart of The Hague. Government and Parliament buildings were later built around the Knights' Hall offering the city of The Hague a unique and characteristic appearance. The buildings stand before a small attractive lake, the so-called Hofvijver, dominated by majestic trees and a never-to-depart herring stall. Can it get any more Dutch than this?



Buildings of the Government and Parliament around the Knights' Hall

When it comes to state organisation, the Netherlands shows two faces. One is the constitutional monarchy saying the Netherlands is a kingdom with a constitution. The other is the face of a decentralised democratic and unitary entity: whereby the central, provincial and municipal governments cooperate to 'organise' society. Each of the three sectors of government has its own responsibilities, with the central government providing unity through legislation and supervision.

Constitutional monarchy

The Netherlands, which for a long time consisted of the southern Netherlands (today's Belgium) and northern Netherlands (today's Netherlands) has been a constitutional monarchy since 1815. Before then it was a republic, though in many different forms. The monarchy fell into the hands of the Oranje Nassau dynasty which in the 16th century, during the Eighty Years' War, was at the cradle of today's national entity. In 1830 the South, today's Belgium, separated and founded its own constitutional monarchy.

The role of the Oranje Nassau House is now laid down in the constitution. This states, inter alia, that the oldest child of the current ruler shall also be successor to the throne, regardless of gender. As head of

state, the monarch has no direct political power. Ministers manage their respective portfolios, giving account to Parliament.

Decentralised unitary state

The roots of the second national feature of government also go far back in time. In previous centuries the Netherlands consisted of a number of smaller states or provinces as they are officially called. These included the States of Holland, Utrecht, Zeeland, Gelderland, Overijssel, Friesland, and Groningen. Representatives of these provinces would regularly meet in The Hague to give account to the States-General and contribute to policy.

In the decentralised unitary state which the Netherlands is today, different tasks are carried out at different levels whereby daily practice involves the three government levels making work agreements. These might cover such tasks as construction of roads, railway lines, houses or general protection and enhancement of the living and working environment. These work agreements ensure municipalities and provinces possess a degree of autonomy. Due to their unique position close to the population, the municipalities over time received an increasingly



Former lodgings of Members of the States of Holland

central position in creating and implementing policy. This is a distinct consequence and prominent feature of the operation of a decentralised unitary state: listen to and then act on what is happening in the heart of society, also when it regards national issues, from the construction of a new railway line to care for the elderly.

To better understand the decentralised unitary state and the municipality's role in this, one needs to look at the working methodology.

Separation of powers

Dutch democracy is based on the so-called Trias Politica: absolute separation of powers. In normal language this basically means that the government governs, the parliament verifies and all judges are independent. Ministers represent executive power, Parliament legislative power and judicial powers are independent. Conflicts of interest are avoided as far as is possible, so for instance, a minister can never simultaneously be member of parliament as he would then be policing himself which is unacceptable. Similar rulings apply at provincial and local levels.

The right to vote

The Netherlands has enjoyed universal suffrage since 1918: every Dutch citizen aged 18 and over has the right to vote for candidates for parliament (the Lower House), provincial councils, the municipal council and since 1979 also for the European Parliament. This takes place according to the proportional representation system: each party gets the number of seats that corresponds to its share of the votes received. The elected representatives in the Lower House, the provincial councils and municipal councils respectively, verify what central government does for 'the people in the country', the Provincial Executive for 'the people in the provinces' and the Municipal Executive for the 'people in the towns'.

National Parliament consists of two houses or chambers: the Upper



House ("Eerste Kamer") and Lower House ("Tweede Kamer"). The Lower House has 150 members who are elected directly by the electorate for a period of four years. The Upper House has 75 members who are elected by the members of the Provincial Councils (representatives of the people in the provinces). While the Lower House has the right to introduce or amend bills and thus basic national legislation, the Upper House mainly focuses on the quality of this legislation and can only pass or reject a bill. Each of the Houses has the right of enquiry: the right to ask any member of government questions either verbally or in writing, and to be heard. Membership of the Lower House is very much a full time job, rewarded

by a – not overly generous – salary. Membership of the Upper House by contrast, is considered something of a part-time though highly responsible activity: most members have other jobs elsewhere.

Coalitions

With proportional representation, and a vocal population, there have always been many parties and the Netherlands has generally had to be governed by coalitions of these parties; no one party ever had an absolute majority. So even though political parties can be large, even the largest after an election has to call upon a second or third party to be able to form a government that can rely on a workable majority in the Lower House. The formation of new governments in this way always involves long and complex negotiations between possible coalition partners on politically sensitive subjects although personal chemistry also plays a part. If, during a government's term of office, the majority reached falls apart for whatever reason, the foundation of the government's democratic power expires forcing the government to resign. Sometimes such a breach is recovered; sometimes not and then new elections follow.

Laws and regulations

Daily political activities include the creation of measures to ensure society is wisely organised and pleasantly liveable. Supported by his or her technical specialists, a minister will devise and introduce a new act to address possible problems of new social developments. Depending on the portfolio, this can vary from new traffic rules to a new tax measure. Once the bill is ready, it is first submitted for advice to the Council of State - one of the most important advisory bodies to the government.

Once this advice has been received, the bill is submitted to the Lower House and a long, precise investigation both orally and in writing takes place, a process that may take many months depending on the subject's



complexity. The Lower House may then amend the bill prior to accepting it. The bill is then submitted to the Upper House for 'reflection'. Usually the Upper house accepts new bills, but exceptional political situations can always occur. The bill now passes into law, and as executive power, the government can now start implementing it. The Lower House, the legislative power, verifies the process continuously. It can intervene at any time.

And then there is the financial picture. The Lower House investigates the government's annual budget which is presented on the third Tuesday of September (the so-called Prinsjesdag or Prince's Day that marks the new parliamentary year and is an old royal tradition). It decides for instance which issues require more money and which do not. The Lower House uses many instruments including the right to information. Any minister withholding crucial information, even if he does this 'accidentally' (officials can make mistakes), commits a politically mortal sin usually requiring resignation.

'A grey area'

Generally speaking, the central government (ministers and parliament) dedicates itself to national issues such as national infrastructure of main

roads and railway lines, public health, education, agriculture, price and incomes policy, defence and international policy and the costs of these and so on.

In many of these policy fields decentralised government bodies usually have little role though this may well be the case with infrastructure and environmental issues for example. More than ever the central government and decentralized government bodies discuss matters together to solve problems.

But there is a grey area. At first sight, the minimal contact between municipalities and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs seems logical; what should Dutch towns have to do with foreign affairs. But times have changed and municipalities today have a growing role in national policy on international co-operation. Precisely because Dutch local governments have carefully studied the question as to how local democracy can be organised, their help and assistance are being called in more frequently around the world. Today there is hardly a country in which Dutch local governments are not active or have not been active leaving a clear and generally favourable mark. This shows how, even in a traditionally national policy area, central and local government are working together intensively and in a supportive and complementary manner.

Other examples of fields in which central and decentralised government intensively work together include security policy (such as disaster relief), education, and the national policy of decentralisation including reduction of the massive socio-economic pressures on the highly urbanised western agglomeration known as the Randstad. The stimulus to move industrial activity, homes and people requires intelligent, balanced and well-considered policy. Natural beauty is essential to the living and working environment in a densely populated country and requires careful protection. Simultaneously, good conditions must be created for economic development.



3 Europe: an extra dimension

To address major cross-border challenges such as economic development, environmental protection, poverty reduction and refugee policy international cooperation is becoming increasingly important. And this of course is one of the principles of the European Union and driving spirit behind European integration.

The administrative organisation of the Netherlands involves the operations at three levels of government . Today European integration has advanced to such extent that one actually speaks now of four levels of government. Besides the national, provincial and local government the European Union is seen as the new level of super-government. Europe is no longer 'abroad'.

Legislation

Much of the legislation created by 'Europe' must either be implemented by municipalities or inevitably affects the way municipalities work. Examples of this legislation may include tenders, state assistance, free



trade, the environment, employment policy, social absorption, information technology, culture, public health, youth policy and tourism. The legislation on air quality for instance has a strong influence on the urban planning process.

In these cases European law takes precedence, which means that European law prevails over national, regional and local rules. Municipalities must therefore observe European rules. In the Netherlands the project 'Europe-proof municipalities' has commenced. A manual has been written which allows municipalities to check if their rules and regulations are in line with the European legislation. Increasingly on a municipal level, investments are made in building up the European legislative knowledge bank to ensure all legislation and regulations are applied correctly and effectively.

Subsidies

Europe may be best known for the subsidies that 'come' from Brussels. In many areas the European Commission is making it possible to initiate

projects with the help of European subsidies. The allocation of most European subsidies is done by the member states themselves, but the European Commission also has a number of independent subsidy sources. In this case there is a direct relationship between the Commission and the subsidy applicant. The municipalities themselves are responsible for the application for and handling of the relevant subsidies.

The largest part of subsidy monies comes from the so-called structural funds. In the period 2007-2013 this will amount to 1.9 billion euro for the Netherlands. This may not be much in proportion to the total municipal budget, but in absolute figures it is still significant. In first instance the subsidies can be considered a supplement to existing revenues, but more important, they allow initiatives and projects that otherwise may not have been possible.

Exchanging experiences

One of the European Commission's main instruments to give shape to the European integration process at municipal level is to facilitate the exchanging of experiences. With the help of various subsidy flows, municipalities are given the opportunity to share experiences with municipalities in other member states. This stimulates contacts and the learning process in searching for common solutions to common problems.

Municipalities in Brussels

As a result of the increasing influence of Brussels on municipalities, they have become more active in Brussels. Formally, the municipalities have the possibility to give advice on European proposals via the Committee of the Regions. This Committee of the Regions consists of chosen representatives from European local and regional governments, and it is compulsory that the European Commission requests advice in a number of areas. The European Parliament and the Council of Ministers can also ask the committee for advice.



Many national associations of local and regional governments, including VNG, have an office in Brussels and work collectively, via the Council of European Municipalities and Regions, on promoting interests on the European level.

In a number of the member states, among which the Netherlands, decentralised government bodies are increasingly becoming involved in the preparation of national positions in the European arena. A greater involvement of decentralised government in the European policy-making process does not only result in improving the quality of policy but also in increasing the legitimacy of that policy.



4 The provinces

There are 12 Dutch provinces, different in size and population. The Province of Utrecht is geographically the smallest, while Flevoland has the smallest population, though it is growing fast. The special thing about Flevoland is that it consists almost entirely of land recovered from the waters of the IJsselmeer, a large inland lake that used to be a small inland sea.

Provincial authority rests with the Provincial Council, directly elected every four years and the legislative authority in the province. The size of the Provincial Council depends on the population. The most densely populated province South Holland, has 55 Council members, Flevoland has 39.

The Provincial Executives, in number ranging from 4 to 8, are responsible for preparing and implementing the decisions and orders of the Provincial Councils. They are also responsible for implementing central government decisions, insofar as these fall within the duties of the province.

The central government appoints a Queen's Commissioner for each province who chairs the Provincial Council and Provincial Executive. He plays a role in the selection process of mayors (refer to pages 29/30).

Provinces carry out tasks that lie somewhere between the tasks of central government and local government. These are derived from the policy of central government, typically involving traffic and (public) transport, environment, public housing, and always in the supralocal sense, such as the preparing of regional plans. The provinces are responsible for financially supervising municipalities and water boards.

The budget of provincial government in the Netherlands is but one-tenth of the budget municipalities have at their disposal. Provincial staffing is also much smaller: about 13,000 officials in provincial government; 185,000 in municipal government and 116,000 in central government.



5 Local government: its structure

The Netherlands is divided into over 400 municipalities. This number used to be higher, but because over the course of time, some areas of policy and service required a greater administrative-organisational strength, neighbouring municipalities merged. This is actually a gently ongoing process that has not yet come to a halt. The largest municipality is Amsterdam with almost 750,000 inhabitants. Schiermonnikoog, one of the islands along the north coast of the Netherlands, is the smallest with barely 1,000 inhabitants. In principle all municipalities have the same tasks though due to their size, the large municipalities require a different approach to the way their work is done than in the smaller municipalities. Amsterdam for example has 28,000 public officials; Schiermonnikoog has but 20.

Elections

The municipal council is elected every four years. The same process applies to local and national politics. Local political parties conduct an election campaign with a programme and list of candidates. In addition

to local chapters of national political parties, purely local parties may participate though these are not present on the national political scene. The subjects and themes of discussion in the election campaign are obviously mainly of local interest: a sports hall, a ring road, location of new house building, reception and integration of asylum seekers, employment questions, local environmental issues or the level of local taxes. A municipality's work covers wide ground! The election result then determines the composition of the council and subsequently which coalition will form the local 'government' or executive. Negotiations for the new municipal executive are generally led by the winner of the elections. The various factions sometimes appoint a so-called 'informateur' who investigates which coalitions are feasible and which are politically viable.

Municipal councils

Just as in national democracy, the people's representation carries the power. In the municipality this is the municipal council and the size of the municipal council depends on the size of the municipality: the maximum is 45 seats (big cities) and the minimum is 7 seats as in the smallest municipalities (such as Schiermonnikoog). Council members receive payment for their work and expenses. The amounts depend on the size of the municipality.

The municipal council supervises the municipal executive, questions, criticises and attacks where necessary and desirable. And if the municipal executive does not do what – the majority of – the council wants, then the council can send the entire municipal executive or an individual alderman home. However, not the Mayor, as he or she is appointed by the crown. Sometimes a mayor may resign when it appears that the majority of the municipal council has lost its confidence in them. But these are exceptional situations.

Closer to the citizen

In 2002 important changes were introduced. For instance, the responsibilities of the municipal council and municipal executive have been further separated, among others by no longer having aldermen be part of the municipal council. The council now also has its own secretariat with greater power of decision over its own agenda. Furthermore, the council enjoys greater opportunities to conduct its own research. The changes introduced resulted from the desire to have debates conducted closer to the local level of society. To be more precise: councillors should be seen more outside the city hall than inside it to create better contact between local officials and citizens 'on the spot' .

Another aspect is that in many municipalities the inspecting role of the council (as people's representative) has been intensified by creating an audit office. Sometimes members are councillors only; sometimes a combination exists of councillors and members who are not on the municipal council; and sometimes the audit office consists only of people who are not in the council. In some cases this last variant has resulted in creating an institute involving more municipalities and professional researchers.

The mayor's position has become more complicated: despite the separation of council and executive the mayor has remained both chairman of the municipal council and chairman of the executive. As tailpiece of a long and careful procedure, the mayor is still formally appointed by the Crown. This means that the minister of the Interior (or the cabinet, in case of large municipalities) appoints him but that the appointment only becomes valid once the head of state too has formally given their approval. The essential thing is that in this procedure the position of the municipal council has become much stronger. The procedure begins with preparing a profile approved by the council. The council then appoints a confidential committee to manage the selection

process. Applicants express their interest to the Queen's Commissioner in the province of the municipality concerned. In deliberation with the council, the Queen's Commissioner selects the candidates to have interviews with the confidential committee. Eventually, the committee recommends two candidates to the council. The resolution of the municipal council is public and is submitted for approval to the Minister of the Interior for a final decision. The advice of the municipal council has become increasingly important and with the recommendation being public, it is hard to ignore it. In today's practice the council's recommendation is almost always adopted. In principle the possibility exists to have citizens express their opinions about a recommendation by referendum. This is hardly ever used although municipal councils increasingly seek their citizens' opinion about the requested profile of a new mayor. The appointment of a mayor is for a period of 6 years. This period can be extended after consultation with the chairmen of the factions on the municipal council.

The municipal council typically consists of groups or factions of elected representatives of political parties. There are coalition groups that support the municipal executive because they helped to create it. There are opposition groups that have differences of principle and battle the municipal executive. This creates debate in which choices are argued, reposted, voted on and positions adopted as a result of a vote. This all comes down to finding the right words and convincing arguments. This is politics at the local level.

The municipal council creates committees of members to monitor the various policy areas. The alderman responsible for a particular area of interest must give account of his policy position to the committee, after which the committee decides if the subject will be handled in a plenary meeting. Committee meetings are public. To involve citizens in local politics as much as possible, municipalities offer citizens the opportunity to speak at committee meetings. They can then voice their opinions on



matters up for discussion. Several municipalities have introduced new forms for participation, in order to encourage the involvement of citizens. Sometimes hearings are organised, for example in a district where old homes need to be demolished to make way for new and better homes, but which may also be more expensive than the old ones. Such problems are discussed in the hearings, so that the municipal council has done its homework when it comes down to decision making.

More active participation

The Netherlands has a long tradition of consultation and co-operation between government bodies, citizens and civil society organisations. 'Equilibrium' and 'consensus' in this country of minorities are crucial components of political culture. This applies in particular to that administrative structure that is most familiar to and approachable for citizens - the municipality.

Participation is important here. Particularly in such an important field as urban planning people have the legal right to object. Legally defined procedures have to be followed to judge such objections. One drawback is that projects involving long procedures often suffer long

delays even though from the onset it may be clear that the real objections are not strong.

To avoid long winded legal procedures, public administration is increasingly making use of the possibility to involve citizens at earlier stages in the planning process. Interactive decision making, as this process is called, has taken flight in Dutch local administration. An investment at the start of administrative processes can lead to much greater involvement from citizens and companies directly concerned by the issue at stake. This has the benefit that the local knowledge and feelings of citizens can be used in policy making and it stimulates all kinds of public private partnerships.

For some time the referendum has been popular in Dutch municipalities. Voters are given the opportunity to form a judgement on a particular decision. This serves as a recommendation to the municipal administration and is not formally enforceable. Sometimes a certain (small) number of citizens has the right to request the holding of a referendum on a particular question. Municipalities pass a byelaw (formal obligation) to provide a legal basis for such a referendum. Critics say that referendums impair representative democracy, others consider it a supplement to the democratic process.

Another favourable development that reduces distance between citizens and the political machine is that municipalities actively involve consumers in evaluating government 'products'. Consumer panels, a form of ongoing research into the work of the municipal organisation, are increasingly important.

The Netherlands is in fact constantly seeking its own special version of the 'Civil Society', in which citizens, their organisations, and government bear joint responsibility for the public domain. Municipalities play a crucial role in this, often as a director of the development process.

But like everywhere else in the world, it is not possible to please everyone all the time. People who in spite of all the care exercised still feel they have been sold short or handled unjustly, can go to court. And here – also at the local level – the Trias Politica plays a role: judges are independent and they pass an independent judgement on any submitted complaint.

The Mayor

The mayor is the chairman of the municipal council and also chairman of the municipal executive. The mayor is the man or woman who from their position above the various parties, and always together with the municipal secretary, makes sure that decision making is respectable, correct and proper. The political game itself is left to the aldermen and the municipal council. The modern mayor is a manager above all. He is assisted by the municipal secretary who is responsible for the functioning of the public body. The mayor as municipal manager primarily ensures that the political process of decision making occurs without problems. He encourages, enthuses, stimulates. But because he is also the head of the police, he also bears responsibility for the public order, for example



by deciding if a football match with the risk of serious disturbances can be played in the municipality. And exactly when during the day. He also decides whether public demonstrations are permitted, even though freedom of speech is a citizen's constitutional right, and on the use of police during social unrest, etc. The mayor has to account for all such actions to the council afterwards.

The mayor is also head of the fire brigade, which gives him a decisive vote in the event of disaster relief and in security policy in general. Citizens often see their mayor as the ultimate ombudsman or woman. The mayor is always the figurehead of the municipality.

The Alderman

In addition to the mayor, the alderman is often also a well-known local administrator. The number of aldermen in a council varies from 2 in the smallest municipalities to 7 in the larger municipalities. In smaller municipalities aldermen may also have another job. The mayor then has the largest portfolio. In municipalities with over 18,000 inhabitants the aldermen work full time and are paid accordingly. During the formation of the municipal executive the coalition parties agree on the division of the portfolio of the different aldermen. Aldermen have a more political profile than the mayor and tend to be politically bound to a programme.

The municipal executive always meets on Tuesdays. In addition to the mayor and aldermen, the municipal secretary always attends and sometimes also the head of communication as strategic communications advisor to the executive. These are closed meetings. Afterwards the mayor, an alderman or spokesperson (in the larger municipalities) may give a press conference to the (local and regional) media.

Since the dualisation (separation of responsibilities of the municipal executive and municipal council) the position of the alderman has changed

strongly. In many places aldermen have been brought in from outside the council. There is a greater degree of professionalisation, but also a greater distance from the council. The current system is more sensitive to crisis, measured according to the growth of the number of administrators that has to step down prematurely. The position of alderman is a mix of management, administration and political leadership. Increasing attention is paid to schooling and training.

Public officials

The more than 400 municipalities in the Netherlands employ a total of some 185,000 public officials (also called public servants or civil servants). They assist, support and implement the daily management of the municipality and the municipal executive. They formulate recommendations, devise solutions to what are sometimes difficult issues, and sometimes consult with their colleagues at provincial or national level on what needs to be done. But they do not play the game of politics. They only serve as support.

The municipal organisation has sectors and divisions. Depending on such things as the size of the municipality, these may be broader or more specialist. The departments each have their own head, but the top position above all public officials is the municipal secretary. Just like all municipal officials he (or she) is appointed and not elected because he does not have a political function. He advises the municipal executive and heads the body of public officials. He participates in the weekly meetings of the executive. He also co-signs decrees, because he is in charge of implementation.

Public officials are employed by the municipality. In collective labour agreements the public officials trade unions make agreements with the municipal employer on salaries, pensions, leave, right to training and education, and a whole range of secondary employment conditions.

Administrative instruments

A municipal authority can only act if the correct administrative instruments are available. Dutch municipalities have a whole range of these. Municipal councils, for instance, act as local legislators. They can issue orders laying down byelaws in certain areas, which every member of the public must observe. Every municipality has its own general local byelaws, tax orders and building code.

Another important instrument are the zoning plans, in which the council defines where construction activities may or may not take place, where manufacturing industry and other commercial activities should be located, where green areas need to be protected, and so on. The main lines are set by the provincial regional plan which the municipality implements at the local level.

Licensing is another policy instrument and numerous acts refer the public to their local municipal executive for licences or permits for such things as building, weekly markets, a community or district festivity, a



Deregulation

All societies need regulations to balance the many and sometimes opposing interests of different groups, and also to realize policy objectives. However, the central government and municipalities in the Netherlands, have witnessed an enormous increase in the number of regulations in recent decades, partly as a result of new administrative tasks and government responsibilities. This growing number of regulations has created unnecessary bureaucracy with a negative impact on the effectiveness of policy and on the legitimacy of public administration. Citizens expect efficient service delivery. To maintain the trust of citizens, it is important to eliminate unnecessary or unnecessarily complicated regulations. Central government and the VNG have therefore entered into a joint project to reduce the administrative burden on citizens and companies at the national and the local level, and to improve service delivery.

new store and so on. Municipal executives can also apply policy by attaching specific conditions to licenses. And instead of licenses, they may also grant exemptions, for instance to statutory shop closing hours.

Money is also an important means of encouraging and guiding certain types of public activity. Most municipalities for instance have subsidy orders defining the activities of and institutions eligible for grants. These typically involve activities relating to culture, welfare and recreation. Another instrument is to be seen in the fast growing phenomenon of the public-private-partnership or PPP, a financial arrangement in which government and generally local business interests work together to create something of benefit to all and which the municipality may never have been able to finance on its own. Such projects can be vital to a municipality's socio-economic progress.

Naturally, an extremely important instrument of policy is the municipal

budget. It is there that the council determines what amounts will be allocated to which activities and services. This is naturally paralleled by the amounts levied from the public by taxation.

Co-operation between municipalities

Local administration is often called 'the most flexible sphere of government'. Since the establishment of the administrative system in the national constitution of 1848 the number of municipalities has gradually decreased. Back then there were around 1200 municipalities, by around 1989 there were still over 700 municipalities, in 2007 the number was 443. The causes of this increase in scale were technology, economies of scale and further decentralisation of tasks to the municipal level. In addition to the natural scale increases municipalities co-operate in the execution of their administrative tasks. A separate legal instrument exists for this in the form of the Joint Regulations Act. The current wording of the Act dates back to 1985 though it originates from the period directly after World War II.

Municipalities work together in different areas and for different reasons. Currently there are some 800 municipal arrangements and over 1200 'other co-operative arrangements'. The importance of co-operating with each other is also shown in the fact that around 10% of municipal expenses are spent through such co-operative arrangements. The law does not only allow for co-operation between municipalities, but also between municipalities and other government bodies, such as water boards. A familiar example of the latter form of co-operation is the levying of taxes via a joint body. Practical examples of co-operation between municipalities can be found in the areas of public health and waste processing. But the social services can also be organised as a co-operative body. And over past years there has been increasing co-operation in the form of shared services such as joint administration, ICT, and purchasing.



In 1993 the organisation and administration of the police has also been regionalised. Mayors play a large role here. Ensuring safety and security, however, is not an issue for the police alone. Many other organisations have a role to play. In 2008, legal arrangements will be finalised to formalise the coordination role of municipalities in matters of security (fire-fighting services, disaster relief, but also crime prevention etc.). Municipalities will then have a legal basis for bringing together the relevant partners and promoting their cooperation when needed.

Municipalities also work together to direct the spotlight to their own interests. In the first place this is the VNG organisation. Additionally, there is increasing co-operation between various categories of municipalities. This can be based on upscaling and specific characteristics. So is there a separate joint initiative for the four largest cities in the Netherlands: Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht - an informal co-operation in which administrators from these big cities can take joint action towards central government and sometimes also parliament. This

concerns specific urban problems and the solutions desired. Municipalities with over 100,000 inhabitants also have a form of co-operation. Both 'groups' speak to each other regularly.

Lastly, there are individual networks of groups of smaller municipalities. The medium-sized municipalities (around 50,000 inhabitants) have their own forms of co-operation, just as the smallest municipalities. One example of a joint organisation of municipalities with specific characteristics is the Association of the Dutch River municipalities that are all confronted with the same (regularly occurring and ferocious) challenges of river flooding.



6 Local government: its work

The city hall is the place where citizens' rights and obligations meet those of the municipality. At the city hall citizens can collect new passports, register births, marriages or deaths, apply for construction permits, consult the municipality's plans and subsidy possibilities, and so on.

Since citizens often have to deal in person with their municipality, a completely new city hall architectural style has developed. The new style values transparency, visibility, openness and involvement. So lots of glass is used, desk staff are very customer-friendly, there are reading tables, and free coffee is often served. In short in the Netherlands, the city hall is a place where citizens are helped to feel at home. A city hall may accommodate a cultural centre, or the local library. In Amsterdam the Stopera combines the opera theatre and city hall in the same building. Another elegant and attractive example is the town hall of Hellendoorn which includes a cultural centre, a public library and a tourist information office. But in all the town or city halls, modern or more traditional, much work has to be done behind the desks and in the working areas behind glass, day after day.



The town hall of the Municipality of Hellendoorn, with its diamond-shaped wedding hall

Better services

Municipal services are offered in many ways and at many different places: sometimes simply at a desk in a town hall but sometimes through a written procedure, for instance when applying for a permit. Good service is only possible if the service quality is good and the person behind the desk is also good - a dedicated and honest employee. Citizens are also clients and rightly expect their local government to perform to their satisfaction; just as is the case with their banks, insurance companies and bookstores.

Different quality-improving instruments exist. And citizens and business can play a role here. The most obvious way is by creating service standards which can be seen as the ideal 'framework of quality' within which municipalities seek to perform. A basic principle here is that the

better the service and the better it is adapted to what matters to citizens, the more citizens will trust their government. Local government, however, also has the monopoly on services which citizens are not only not interested in, but often dislike. Examples include tax payment, and observance of all the rules and conditions before one may open a shop. It is important to have very well trained professionals who also have good 'people' qualities to provide these services in all fairness, making sure the services are offered on time and that the municipality does not charge unreasonable prices.

In the Netherlands, the VNG and its member municipalities seek to improve service constantly. The one-stop-shop has been introduced in many places. Citizens no longer need to go to different departments or counters; the one-stop-shop gives access to all the information, support, forms and procedures needed. In this regard the Internet is also providing wonderful new possibilities.

For some years now, the national Ministry of the Interior has been investing best efforts to create quality charters – documents which set out the rights and obligations of citizens as buyers and the government as supplier. As of 2007 over 100 municipalities were operating with these charters. They are contributing effectively to citizen satisfaction levels.

Physical planning

Municipalities have a major role in physical planning. This area is an example of how governments conduct joint policy by virtue of their many different responsibilities. With the Netherlands being so densely populated, each square meter of land is important and tends to be given a specific purpose. Central government decides on land use in general terms (where main through roads and railway lines pass, which green areas should be protected); the provincial government translates these

guidelines into a regional context. Then the municipality translates these sensitively into local policy eventually reserving ground area for these purposes. The municipality thus produces a zoning plan which can involve everything from modest activities such as the construction of a shop to major projects such as the construction of new industrial premises or extension of an arterial road. Municipalities must create zoning plans for their entire domain and update these regularly.

This process sometimes involves private land owners having to cede their property for the general interest and for this they receive compensation in the form of a reasonable financial settlement or new land elsewhere. Of course they can always object. The decision processes around this often require careful deliberation and are eventually evaluated by the people's representatives: Parliament at the national level, the provincial council at the provincial level and the municipal council at the local level. Not surprisingly, agreeing large-scale plans such as a railway line, might take years. But the basic idea is to do justice to as all parties involved within the existing legal frameworks. Ultimately, parties may go to court and if the court decides in their favour, plans may be reviewed.

Physical planning is an important field for municipalities as it confronts people's independence to build, live and do business. It may involve micro-decisions such as converting a garage into an office or changes that go beyond the interest of an individual municipality such as the placing of windmills for electricity generation along municipal boundaries. In a country where space is precious, balancing the many interests is critical and the role of the municipality as referee is crucial. It means creative solutions. Saving an attractive feature such as a picturesque lake may require rerouting a new highway. The construction of the remarkable freight-only Betuwe rail line between the port of Rotterdam and the German hinterland was only possible by creative compensation with new natural areas.

Public housing

Another major task Dutch municipalities face is public housing. Municipalities construction permits do not only ensure construction activities take place in the right places and in accordance with zoning plans, but also that the houses built meet the strict safety standards such as those for fire safety and avoidance of noise pollution. The money required for a house building project of this nature results from a complicated cost allocation process between national, provincial and local government. Matters are always reviewed carefully by people's representatives.

The Netherlands has a complex and well structured system of housing construction. Of the 7 million houses in The Netherlands in 2006, 46 % were rented houses and 54 % owner-occupied. In 2006, the percentage of rented houses was highest in Amsterdam and Rotterdam, with 79% and 70 % respectively, compared with a figure as low as 14-20 % in a number of small municipalities. Low cost 'public' rented housing is usually built by housing corporations. These are intended for people on relatively low incomes and are allocated on the basis of carefully monitored regulations.

In an ancient country like the Netherlands there are many town centres with old buildings designated as protected architectural monuments,





many naturally regularly requiring renovation. This can be expensive and renovation costs are usually supported in the national budget. Monies required for these types of project are also distributed as fairly as possible always with the general interest in mind and always under the supervisory eye of the people's representatives.

As elsewhere in the world many districts in big cities are seeing changing demographics; the arrival of new ethnic groupings and other population changes that sometimes give rise to socio-economic pressures. One of the major tasks of national and local government (the provincial government plays a less immediate role here), is to create a new and better living and working climate by supporting the renovation of what are mostly old homes in these areas. The benefits accrue to all citizens.

Transport

A third important task of municipalities is to ensure that local roads, however small, contribute to the effective flow of traffic. This includes pedestrians and cyclists, often the most vulnerable in today's car-dominated world. The national government is responsible for the motorways,

the provincial government for provincial roads and local government for local roads. And all in the broadest sense of the word, even the smallest footpaths and cycle paths come within the municipality's area of responsibility.

Municipalities must also ensure appropriate local parking for everything from trucks and cars to wheelchairs and bicycles. Most Dutch municipalities have built fine car and bicycle parks, often operated as public-private partnerships. These are generally near railway or bus stations to encourage car users to leave their cars behind and use public transport to get to work or travel further. Municipalities play an essential role here.

The environment

Liveability depends strongly on the quality and cleanliness of the air, water and soil, a major challenge in many urban areas of the world today. The Dutch municipality is also a key player here; it is close to the citizen who wants to breathe, drink and live in a clean environment. The European Union has had strong influence here; much national legislation on the environment has been affected by European legislation, which is why environmental legislation in many EU member states is very similar. Also at the local level.

Because the living environment is so vulnerable, the system of building permits is linked to a system of environmental permits. The one cannot exist without the other. But this 'keep our country clean' policy goes further. Almost all municipalities operate a system of separate household and business waste collection: glass, paper, organic waste, demolition waste, and metal scrap are all collected separately. This 'separation at source' reduces costs of handling and offers possibilities for recycling.

Municipalities and provinces carefully check that environmental and building permits issued are also complied with. Parties that violate

agreements can receive heavy fines and in extreme cases a company can be shut down. Those that do not comply are made to feel the consequences.

Waste: a luxury problem

Municipalities have different tasks in the field of waste processing. They are firstly responsible for the local regulations that are based on the national Environmental Management Act. Municipalities can apply their own policy, for example rules for separating waste. Here the municipality asks its citizens to dispose of waste in different containers – mainly glass, paper and organic waste (food and garden residues). For glass and paper, municipalities typically place bottle banks and paper containers in strategic locations which makes it easier for the public to use them, and then subsequently to recycle the waste. Nationally, of all glass waste, 80% is separated. For ‘green waste’ many municipalities issue (generally free-of-charge) special green wheeled containers which are emptied weekly from outside people’s homes.

The municipality is also waste collection manager. Its waste management tasks typically cover financial management, contracts and monitoring and benchmarking. Municipalities may charge for the costs of waste collection and processing in the form of a levy, though revenues must be used exclusively for this purpose and may not exceed actual costs.

In a small country, waste collection and processing are crucial. The health and quality of public spaces and people are served by good organisation of waste processing. It is also something that is closely linked to national environmental policy. Municipalities have great influence here and it is an area where citizens traditionally watch each other closely. Much has been achieved by environmental education. It is of course not easy in a prosperous country where there is much consumed

and much thrown away. Consider the following statistics: in 2006 each Dutch citizen disposed of 636kg of waste in total; 10 times the figure for Indonesia and 20 times the figure for Sri Lanka and Ghana (countries where the largest share is organic waste that is actively reused.)

But waste also means trade. Some waste is valuable and can be profitably sold, which makes managing the total waste chain even more complex. Waste collection, processing and storage are activities where the government operates together with market parties. Over the past decade many municipalities have sold off their own waste-processing operations to a regional organisation, or the activities have been taken over by commercial companies (which may or may not be owned by the government).

A special form of waste collection in the Netherlands is the 'civil amenity street' or milieustraat - a supplementary service to regular waste collection. It is a site set up 'out of town' for separated waste collection (paper, glass, organic, demolition, wood, electrical, etc.). Citizens bring their waste themselves and for the most part can dispose of it without charge. The site layout is such that entry and exit flow smoothly. There are waste containers per waste type. Domestic chemical waste such as paint residues, small batteries and such like can also be handed in. There are strict rules and careful supervision.

Social services

Perhaps the heaviest and most time consuming task for municipalities is 'social services'. These include all the many facilities created for the (temporarily) unemployed, or those who for whatever reason have been deprived of a regular income. In the Netherlands no-one without an income will be left to 'the mercy of the gods' by the government – this solidarity has a long history and is a policy made possible by the economic wealth of the country. The government has constructed a safety

net to provide relief and care. However, various strict conditions must be met to qualify for these arrangements.

As the municipality is the government institution closest to the citizen it also plays a decisive role in this area. It knows citizens and is generally able to judge if someone is entitled to benefit. Support varies from providing money to helping find employment. The disabled receive special attention. Special (or 'sheltered') workshops exist where they can work. And there are financial support arrangements to encourage employers to employ disabled people on a full or part time basis. Numerous other mediating bodies are involved in managing these tasks, but the primary role lies with the municipality.

As mentioned in chapter 1, there is a clear ageing of the Dutch population. Current policy is geared to allowing people to live independently, or at least in their own home environment, for as long as possible. Obviously this depends on them being able to access different forms of care and support. Depending on their specific situation, this can range from adaptations to the home or special medical appliances, to home help service or specially adapted transport. Local governments play a central role in providing these facilities and services.

Education

Education in the Netherlands is organised nationally and the government, at central and local levels, together with teachers and parents bear final responsibility. Education is an inalienable right to all citizens in the Netherlands and parents are broadly free to choose where a child goes. Furthermore, everyone who can meet the strict legal requirements can establish a school. In the Netherlands you will find public education in the form of municipal schools and education linked to a particular religious belief, in the form of Christian schools and universities, Islamic and humanist educational institutes, for example, and other specialist schools. The government finances all these forms of education in the same way – something that is anchored in the constitution. The man-

agement of a school is responsible (within the framework of national legislation) for education content and the physical facilities. So the Netherlands does not have 'state education'.

Culture

Another important social task of the Dutch municipality is to ensure appropriate cultural facilities. They typically help finance theatres, art exhibitions and museums. Local cultural life is strongly dependent on this government support: national, provincial and local. One eye-catching example is the local library. In the Netherlands there are some 350 libraries (not including mobile libraries for remote villages and smaller municipalities) offering some 33 million books for loan to citizens. In recent years libraries in particular have undergone a huge transformation with the arrival of the new media such as Internet. The local library on a typical day (especially in the big cities) has large numbers of people



making use of the services and sometimes hypermodern facilities, including internet cafés. The library has thus become an important component in the image of the municipality.

Welfare

Yet another major task for the municipality is general welfare including helping sports and social clubs and other local initiatives such as day care centres for children to realise their objectives. The many minorities in the Netherlands have stimulated municipalities to develop welfare initiatives to help new arrivals find and keep their place in Dutch society. Municipalities are free to decide how they give shape and meaning to this policy.

Co-operation

It is clear that municipalities cannot organise such an enormous number of tasks all by themselves. This is one reason why over recent years municipalities have entered into all kinds of co-operative ventures with neighbouring municipalities. Co-operation has proved to offer great improvements in the quality of the facilities and services offered and has been effective in holding costs relatively low. (See also page 38)



7 Local government: its finances

A frequently asked question is how all this is financed. The total budget of all Dutch municipalities combined today amounts to almost 50 billion euros, a vast sum to cover the local autonomous tasks and those undertaken as a result of national decision-making.

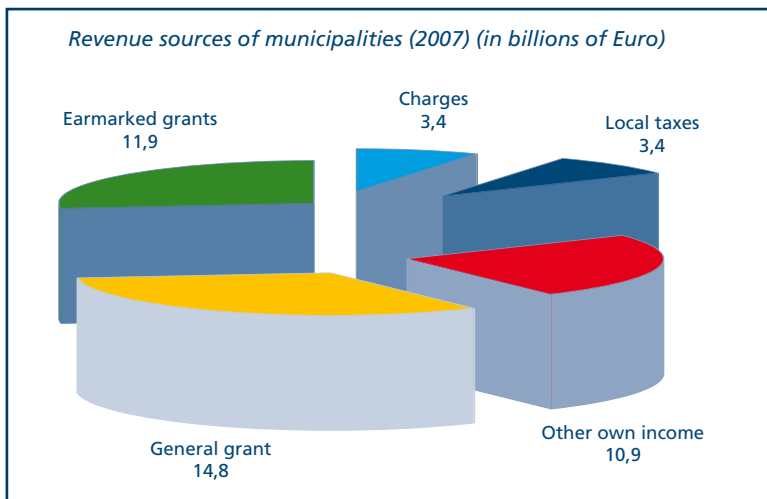
In general, the financing is organised in such a way that for the execution of tasks resulting from national policy, municipalities are compensated for the majority of the costs by contributions from national funds. Two major forms can be distinguished here: ear-marked funds and the General Grant.

Ear-marked funds cover the costs made by municipalities in areas such as social services, primary education, and urban regeneration. The municipal council cannot reallocate these funds, which represent around 27% of the municipal income. That is: 27% on average, as the amount and percentage varies greatly from one municipality to another, depending on the level of social need in a particular municipality.



The General Grant, like the ear-marked funds, comes from central government. On average the general grant represents 33% of the municipal income. In this case, however, the municipal council is free to decide on its precise allocation. The General Grant is meant to create the conditions for an equal level of services with an equal level of local taxes and charges for all municipalities. This works with a weighted allocation system based largely on the number of inhabitants, the number of houses, whether a municipality is a service centre for the region or not, and the physical size of the municipality concerned. In addition there is a very refined set of allocation criteria, around 60 in total, that in accordance with the municipality's character, ensures that each municipality receives what it deserves and needs.

Sometimes this system alone is insufficient, because a municipality might have to bear additional costs, due to factors beyond its influence. In a low-lying country like the Netherlands, some municipalities, for example, may need to invest extra funds in simply keeping dry. In such



exceptional circumstances a municipality can generally put in a temporary request for additional financing from the General Grant.

Apart from the transfers from central government, the municipalities have a limited number of own sources of income. These are the levying of taxes on property, dog ownership, tourists, land, as well as administrative fees and charges. Together, these cover 16% of the municipal income. Taxes can be used for anything the council wishes, administrative fees and charges can only be used to cover the costs of the service they are linked to and the municipality is not allowed to make a profit on these services.

The final 25% of municipal income comes from various sources, mainly income from municipal property, but also from European subsidies for example.

Municipal budget

The annual budget debate in the municipal council is one of the political highlights of the year. This is when decisions are made as to what to spend the 'freely disposable' component of the budget on. If a deficit

threatens, then the council is responsible for deciding where cutbacks will be made. Conversely, if there is likely to be a surplus the municipal council may either decide to add this money to the reserves for possible hard times or investments in the future, or it may decide to spend it on something more immediate.



8 The Association of Netherlands Municipalities

As shown above Dutch municipalities are financially dependent on national government and any change in national legislation can impact upon municipality financing. For this reason among many others, almost a century ago (1912) the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (or VNG in Dutch) was founded in The Hague, city of national government. Today all municipalities are voluntary members. VNG's offices are within a short walk of the Binnenhof, location of national parliament and the offices of most key ministers and government executives. It means the Association is close by and can easily follow all movements of national politics as far as these affect member municipalities.

The VNG is thus the most important lobby instrument for Dutch municipalities to national government. VNG promotes all members' interests, sometimes down to the smallest details. Nothing escapes its attention. Government and parliament know well that no legislation can be passed without the municipalities voicing their opinions through the VNG.

Inter-administrative co-operation

The Netherlands has a long tradition as decentralised unitary state. For centuries there has been tension between central, and regional or local authority. An extra dimension is the tension between the rich western province of Holland (where the central authority is based and long the heart of the national economy) and the more rural areas of the North, East and South.

In the constitution of 1848 the administrative system which the Netherlands still possesses was laid down in broad lines. The three layers of national, provincial and municipal government were incorporated here and a provision was included for the regional water boards. The key factor in relations between the three levels of government is a clear division of responsibilities. Each is part of a larger whole yet acts with a certain degree of independence. In individual laws the powers, tasks and organisation of municipalities and provinces are elaborated.

Co-operation between the authorities has always been a delicate political affair that has differed over time. In the past efforts to organise these relations by administrative agreement have been made. Agreements have been made on financing, the setting out of municipal and provincial authorities, participation in forming and implementing national government policy and the way in which conflict situations are dealt with.

In order to create a basis for productive inter-administrative co-operation, an agreement was made, in 2004, to create a Code for Inter-administrative Relations. This Code 'arranges' as it were mutual relations and can be seen as a milestone in national administrative relations. The primary goal has been for administrators and officials from all administrative layers to contribute to optimal relations between government and its citizens. Administrators and officials support government

processes that enable citizens to take care of themselves where necessary. The Code is based on three principles: problem-oriented working, a clear division of responsibilities and tasks, and administrative freedom for decentralised governments.

In many fields there is separate consultation between national government and the municipalities. Here the VNG forms an important link. Via its Board and advisory committees, VNG consults directly with the various government departments. Municipal executives play an important role in the delegations and negotiations.

But the VNG is more than just a promoter of municipal interests. Because it knows exactly what is going on at the centre of government in The Hague, it can offer its members advice on all kinds of topical policy themes. The VNG has various committees manned by municipal representatives, and in which ideas on all these themes are extensively discussed. Additionally, the VNG organises symposia, study conferences, workshops and numerous other activities, to inform members and offer a platform for exchanging knowledge and experience. Through such activities the association creates member loyalty and creates a pleasant and flourishing association climate.

As part of international co-operation the VNG is active in many ways. It manages the secretariat of the Dutch delegation in the Committee of the Regions (European Union, refer to chapter 3) and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe. The VNG is an active member of such institutions as the European representative organisation of local governments, the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) and the world organisation of local governments, United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG). Over the years much support has been given to newly formed, and yet inexperienced, national associations of municipalities in a variety of countries. As in other policy fields, the VNG facilitates and supports the international co-operation

activities of its members. Dutch municipalities maintain hundreds of international partnerships covering all continents, and many VNG members are active in international networks and campaigns on important global issues.



VNG International

VNG International, the International Cooperation Agency of the Association of Netherlands Municipalities, was founded to support the professional capacity building of local governments and their associations, as well as local government training institutes and decentralisation task forces, both in developing countries and in countries in transition. Working with a large group of local government experts with broad international experience, VNG International supports decentralisation processes and facilitates decentralised cooperation. Since the early 1990s VNG International has managed programmes supporting international municipal co-operation funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and now also manages VNG's Service Bureau Europe, which assists municipalities from the Netherlands and other EU countries in accessing European subsidies and in forming knowledge networks. VNG International has project offices in various countries and two daughter companies: MEPCO and CMRA. MEPCO is a joint venture of VNG International and the Union of Towns and Municipalities in the Czech Republic, and CMRA was set up in close cooperation with the South African Local Government Association.

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