

**"Holland and the World
at the Dawn of 2009"
Report of a Listening Post
held in January**



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

In this part of the Listening Post participants were invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experience in their various social roles, be those in work, unemployed, or retired; as members of religious, political, neighbourhood or voluntary or leisure organisations, or as members of families and communities. This part was largely concerned with what might be called, 'the stuff of people's everyday lives', that relating to the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.

Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

The aim of part 2 was to collectively identify the major themes of Part 1. Among the themes brought back by each of the smaller sub-groups, three predominant clusters emerged:

- 1. Loss of Contact** – The participants talk about a lack of contact with their children to discuss matters about which they hold a different opinion and/or moments where they act differently. They observe among their children an ignorance regarding money, the future, their career perspective and consumption. They lack security in their contacts with others. The requirements female participants set themselves regarding their jobs, children, school, partner make them lose their peace of mind and a relaxed contact with others. They lack a norm to base themselves on to decide when enough is enough: sufficient consumption, making enough working hours, paying enough attention to the children, going at the right pace. They lack role models who can represent this norm.
- 2. 'Values and Norms'** – The values and norms in society refer to work and consumption. People focus on different cultures and notice how simplicity, sufficient time, moderate consumption make up better conditions for desiring durability and meaningful contacts. In this context the crisis is mentioned as a possibility to experience the importance of 'old' values again.
- 3. Powerlessness** – A lot of attention is paid to the theme of 'influence.' The participants observe in themselves an increasing insight into the way society works. At the same time they feel powerless to change the circumstances. They mention an addiction to consumption; numbness and they notice a lack of personal courage. They feel faced by an environment that is too big and powerful and fighting it is hopeless. Individual influence seems to be limited here and there

appear to be no groups available they can join to fight for a cause that is worthwhile.

Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In this part of the Listening Post the participants collectively try and name, based on the information from part 1 and part 2, the currently underlying conscious or subconscious dynamics of what goes on in the world and to come to hypotheses in relation to what is happening right now. At this point the participants are more involved in what you could call 'the internal world'. On the one hand their collective ideas and thoughts determine how they experience the external reality and on the other hand they determine their actions towards that external world.

Analysis and Hypothesis 1

Analysis: Many participants deeply feel the pain that is caused by the lack of 'ordinary,' 'real' and 'natural' contact. One person voices this feeling as follows: "I want it to be only natural that there is someone to share a story with, that there is a place where I belong." They realize that they have made choices and have themselves to blame for letting good contacts slip as a result. "When you have children, a job, contacts that take time just perish. You tend to use many contacts in a functional way only." "We are so independent from one another, we do not borrow anything from one another and you cannot visit a friend unless you make an appointment." Someone says to "mourn this loss." The participants are disappointed in the contact with the children. A contact in which boundaries can be set to excessive consumerist behaviour, but also a contact during which you can pass on 'wisdom.' Others argue that parents are too demanding of their children and that children want to be left alone. "Just take a look at all the things parents want to do with their children. There is an abundance of parental care. At a dizzy speed children are dragged from one activity to the next, sitting in the child's seat with hollow eyes. They are only too happy when they can " 'just,' 'pointlessly' send SMS-messages or surf the Internet for a while."

Talking about need, loss and mourning evokes reactions: "Crisis is also hope;" "we should not be such pessimists, since so many things are done well"; "think of all the things that are possible in this time and age: technological provisions to make contact through the computer, to travel and to visit people from different cultures and to talk to them;" "I see people everywhere who are positive, who think about matters which we discuss today and who take action." A threat seems to exert from the description of gloomy thoughts and feelings. One participant says that he does not worry about this: "I remain in my powerlessness. I want to feel it and I will not go mad."

Hypothesis: The lack of meaningful contacts with significant other people, children, friends and family creates feelings of need, mourning and disappointment. These feelings possible lead to making high demands on contact with younger generations. Taking time to reflect one's own responsibility and to investigate the 'gloomy' thoughts and feelings is also pressurized in a cultural environment that considers it a threat and/or weakness. It can create a gap between so-called 'winners' and 'losers.' Whenever there is room for reflection, a more positive orientation towards the future and initiatives of cooperation arise.

Analysis and Hypothesis 2

Analysis: The values and norms that the participants come across in society, do not seem to correspond with their needs. They have a negative view on the western values and norms, driven by economic principles, forcing everything in life to move fast, due to which we have an abundance of products and information. We no longer respect the elderly, we have no time to have tea with the children or to listen to friends telling a story. One participant says: “I had someone visiting from the States who started talking about a coffee shop concept where they had to work fast. The very thought wore me out. I just want to have a quiet chat without being rushed to drink my coffee.” Someone else notices “the disappearance of a New Year’s Eve ritual in a small Dutch village. This ritual was used to settle disputes at the end of the year.”

The participants long for simplicity, authenticity and respect for passivity, rather than these 'western' values. In relation to this one participant made the following observation: “Since I have less money for me and my family to live on due to the economic circumstances, I have come to realize that I can be content with a lot less. It does not take much to make you happy. As I have to set priorities, I come into contact with my values. It has made me more at ease and less frightened in a increasingly uncertain future.” They draw hope from movements that aim for durability ('cradle to cradle').

They feel that commerce tries to manipulate the social values under the flag of service to the consumer. They also suspect manipulation in the reports from the war zones by the media and the government, which leads to powerlessness, cynicism, alienation and apathy.

Hypothesis: Society has gradually started to function in accordance with western economic principles. The values and norms created by these principles are not sufficiently felt to be humane. When people cannot create and live by their own values and norms, cynicism, alienation and apathy arise next to feelings of paranoia and/or suspicions of manipulation.

Analysis and Hypothesis 3

Analysis: Time and again the question arises whether we still have any influence within our society to establish more humane values and norms. What options are open to the individual? Should you join groups that aim for your values? Do they still exist? Perhaps the forces around us are too powerful. Basically, there seems to be little confidence in one's own possibilities. They call it an addiction to prosperity. “It is hard to stay close to yourself in order to find out what it is you want. You are continuously seduced to focus your attention on efficiency and effectiveness.”

People threaten to become detached from society. “I feel getting old; the new generation is not passionate about the profession. I have lost track.” It is also about fear and courage. “Fear to give up my indolent life,” someone says. Help does not seem to be immediately on hand. They are ambivalent towards the possibilities for younger generations. The group aged 28-35 has been burdened with considerable responsibilities in companies whereas the group following the baby boomers hardly holds any positions in management boards. Those that are on boards, are mainly in it for the money.

One of the participants wonders if an addiction to consumption, lack of courage, pessimism, are the role model we have handed to our children. “To what extent have we

withdrawn from the social environment and have focused on work and consumption? Now we heavily criticize the new generations, their lack of passion to defend our values.” We ourselves create the space in which commerce and the government seize the power to interfere in our happiness through products and spending power trends. It evokes strong reactions. “We still have a duty to fulfill and there is still something we can do.” For instance, being aware of one’s actions in the context of durability, talking to people from different cultures, sharing tools, offering hospitality and offering a home to others.

Hypothesis: Experiencing a limited influence as citizens in observing and establishing more humane values and norms in society, leads to pessimism, cynicism, dependency and distancing oneself from that same society. Commerce and the government gradually fill the social vacuum by means of their products and rules promoting dependency. Reflection on these processes seems vital for developing a participating citizenship and supplying a sound role model for next generations. We can expect a lot from initiatives on a small and personal scale.

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