

The Dutch Evaluatorenennetwerk

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Evaluation Practice in the Netherlands

The Netherlands have a relatively robust evaluation infrastructure. Elements of this include – at the level of the national government – a legal obligation to evaluate policies periodically; there is an obligatory ‘policy review’ by which each policy item in the budgets should be reviewed every few years; a review clause is included in many laws; and parliament regularly calls for evaluations in order to discuss specific policy issues. At province and municipality level, local/regional audit offices are established by law; they usually focus on the results of local policies. Furthermore, in the Netherlands there are a large number of research institutes and private agencies which have the expertise to deliver independent evaluations of a decent quality.

On the other hand, a homogeneous professional group of evaluators does not exist. There is no specific training for evaluators; and evaluation skills are only a small part of various study programs such as public administration and sociology. Nor are there any professional standards for evaluators.

Also, for some years there have been concerns about the quality and use of policy evaluations. Thus, the Dutch board of audit found in a number of studies that, despite the legal obligation to do so, not all policies are evaluated, in most evaluations the effectiveness of policies remains unclear and also the use of evaluations not always provides reason for optimism.

Vide and the Evaluatorenennetwerk

Within this context, the Evaluatorenennetwerk was founded five years ago. Given the context – a well-developed assessment infrastructure and a heterogeneous group of evaluators – a light organizational structure has been chosen: a network which is

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freely accessible and which connects about two hundred evaluators and other interested parties. They participate in meetings on evaluation and/or show their interest in other form, for example by joining the LinkedIn group ‘Leren van evalueren’. Especially staff of the national authorities are members of the Evaluatorenennetwerk: employees of departments, planning offices, the board of audit, and research institutes. To a lesser extent evaluators are connected who work for municipalities, counties, universities and regional boards of audit.

The network is an organizational part of Vide. Vide is the Dutch association of professionals in the field of monitoring, inspection, enforcement and evaluation. Vide thus has the role of the Dutch Evaluation Society. Vide is an organization of and for people who either as individuals or professionals get in touch with colleagues via the association. Vide aims to be the driving force behind the professional development of its members and to contribute to the continuous improvement of monitoring, inspection, enforcement actions and evaluations. That way, its intention is to contribute to a well-functioning government and society.

In line with this philosophy of Vide, and given the already highly institutionalized evaluation infrastructure, the focus of the work of the Evaluatorenennetwerk lies on exchange of knowledge and getting into contact within the profession.

The costs for the functioning of the Evaluatorenennetwerk are minimal. There is a web page set up within the Vide website (<https://www.videnet.nl/evaluatorenennetwerk>) and the Evaluatorenennetwerk is represented in the editing of ‘Beleidsonderzoek Online’, a Dutch public administration online journal which publishes articles on policy research and evaluation (<http://www.beleidsonderzoekonline.nl/>).

Activities and Methods of the Evaluatorenennetwerk

Annually, four to six meetings are organized concerning the three main subjects of the Evaluatorenennetwerk: use and usefulness of evaluations, evaluation methods and evaluation infrastructure. Meetings are organized by a working group of six people. Most members of this group are employed by governmental organizations. One of them is also a board member of Vide. Usually, during these meetings one or more invited speakers give presentations on a specific topic from the three main subjects named above and enter into a discussion with the participants.

Examples of events include:

- A meeting on a successful evaluation program in the healthcare sector (Programma Doelmatigheid (‘Program Effectiveness’) conducted by ZonMw). This program is almost unique in the Netherlands because it was implemented about fifteen years ago and is still working. This is a good reason to learn and to discuss why this program still exists after all these years: What are its success factors and what are important favorable conditions?
- A meeting on the central government mandatory instrument ‘beleidsdoorlichtingen’ (policy reviews). Given the criticisms of this evaluation instrument, central questions with regard to the functioning of the policy reviews were raised.

What is working well, what could be better? And how could it get better? Should we switch to another system or should we look for improvements within the current framework?

- A meeting on Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA). Central questions in this meeting were what QCA exactly means, what QCA precisely offers evaluators and clients, and which challenges for evaluators and clients might arise by the application of QCA.

These are just three examples of meetings, but together they offer a good insight into the topics addressed by the Evaluatorenennetwerk. On average, the meetings are attended by 20 to 50 people; the composition of the respective groups depends to a great extent on the specific issues.

European Evaluation Society

In September 2016, the biennial conference of the European Evaluation Society took place in Maastricht (Netherlands). This was a good opportunity for the Evaluatorenennetwerk to present itself and Vide to the European evaluation community. Therefore, the network had prepared some sessions on evaluation issues in the Netherlands to get into conversation with other national evaluation societies. In our opinion, there are many reasons to perpetuate and tighten the ties that already exist through EES and the Network of European Evaluation Societies (NESE). As evaluators in different countries, we all have to face similar challenges. Thus, the EES conference in September 2016 provided a good platform to learn from each other.