

# NETHERLANDS

## GOING LOCAL WITH OPEN GOVERNMENT



The Netherlands submitted its letter of intent to join the OGP in September 2011 and the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations presented a draft Action Plan to the OGP Steering Committee in April 2012. This Plan was written without any formal consultation with or inputs from civil society.

*'As time was very short and there was pressure to deliver the Plan, we decided to present a draft and start the consultation process thereafter. We included all the things we were already doing and planning to do with respect to open government. The new initiative certainly prompted us to aim higher.'*

Mirjam Kalverda, a policy-maker in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, explains. The presentation of the draft Action Plan coincided with preparations for a bill to amend the country's Freedom of Information

Act. 'We had already planned the consultation process for this bill, so it made sense to finish this and then have broader consultations on open government. We also expected the political and public debate on the amendment to yield input for the Action Plan.'

Since then the pace of change within the Dutch political arena has been rapid. A new cabinet was installed after the government fell, the Ministry of the Interior was reorganised, and several new players were appointed to key positions. The financial squeeze has become more palpable and cuts in funding have started to impact public services.

### THE VOICE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

While government was in a state of flux and thus pre-occupied, civil society was not aware of the fledgling OGP process. 'My connection with the initiative

was not through the Netherlands but via INESC, an organisation we work with in Brazil,' recalls Marjan Delzenne of the Centre for Budget Monitoring and Citizen Engagement. 'I was quite surprised to learn in Brasilia that the government had submitted a draft Action Plan. I tried to find out who was responsible, but it wasn't easy.' Knowledge of the OGP was scant and it was not a topic of debate within Dutch civil society. Lex Slaghuis of Hack the Government notes that neither government nor civil society was making a noise about the OGP. 'It's important that we tell the public that we belong to an international club of 50-odd countries that is committed to making government more open, transparent and accessible for citizens. But in Holland we missed that story.'

While that may have been the case, open government principles are not new to the Netherlands and much

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has been happening with regard to open data, citizen participation and making government more transparent and accountable. The country has a strong foundation of small community-based and volunteer-run organisations that work with municipalities and neighbourhoods on very local issues affecting citizens. While this is positive, 'no one is taking the lead and the information is not systemised,' says Lex. In a society with a strong and long track record of making information more accessible and available to its citizens, where many 'checks and balances' are already in place, government is challenged by the lack of a network of organisations working on governance issues at the national level. 'Unlike in many other countries, in the Netherlands not a lot of people are worrying about making government more open, and they are exerting very little pressure in our direction,' Mirjam adds.

#### A NEW VISION FOR OPEN GOVERNMENT

Since September 2012, the Ministry of Internal Affairs has used the development of the OGP National Action Plan as a platform for its consultations to formulate and refine its long-term vision on open government. October was declared 'Open Government Month'. A two-pronged approach was taken to publicising the cause. The Ministry organised its own events in different parts of the country and government officials attended events organised by others on themes related to open government. The meetings, seminars and workshops attracted specialist journalists, judicial experts, open-data specialists, scientists, students and local civil society organisations, and served to inform people about the short-term future of the OGP and the Action Plan over the next two years. Says Mirjam,

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*'Our main purpose was to listen. We wanted to learn what people who are interested in the subject of open government find important and we wanted to hear their thoughts on setting the agenda for the future.'*

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The government actively sought to hear from citizens who were 'not activists' or the 'usual suspects'. The chosen approach was to organise a panel discussion with a random sample of citizens, inviting them to speak about their expectations of open government. It was concluded that citizens want to communicate more openly with government and that they want information to be more forthcoming and easily accessible, especially with regard to things in their immediate and close surroundings. 'We found that there is a lot of energy and interest among citizens and they want government to be more transparent. For us, the challenge is how to

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With the absence of a national OGP steering committee or forum in which these exchanges can take place with government, the role of civil society to date has been to participate and provide inputs and suggestions. 'Those engaged with government have a good relationship with the officials. However, this has not been a process of co-creation,' explains Mirjam.

In early March 2013, the document was shared with a broad-based constituency during a 'boot camp' attended by government officials (60%) and civil society (40%). The aim was to discuss the draft vision of open government and to further define the three main pillars of the OGP Action Plan: transparency, responsiveness and increasing access to information.

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*'The civil servants were very enthusiastic about open government, which is positive for the spread of its values and principles. Civil society, however, was very much in the background.'*

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reflects Marjan. A key conclusion was that while a vision is important, most change is going to come about by starting projects, learning from them and sharing good practice, and most of this action will take place at a local level. The impact on services of the financial cutbacks remains unclear at this juncture.

The final draft of the vision document and the Action Plan were posted for comments on government websites and the government's Facebook page. In May the Action Plan will be circulated within government departments so that the actions

and commitments can be fleshed out, and it will be finalised in June 2013. The Ministry of the Interior plans to set up an Inspiration Group comprising government officials and members of civil society. This will enable the participants 'to join in our thinking process and it will keep everyone inspired and abreast of developments.' The role of civil society in monitoring the implementation of the Action Plan has yet to be decided.

The Netherlands has chosen a different path to most other countries; one whereby the consultations for one process have fed into the broader OGP and open government agenda and whereby its Action Plan is very much focused on the central level and is complemented by activities at the local level. Government has been keen to connect with these local initiatives, as exemplified by a budget monitoring and citizen participation project in a

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neighbourhood of Amsterdam. 'At the start financial transparency was not an issue for the majority of civil servants and politicians. It was also very hard to access the financial figures' says Marjan. After 10 months of research and asking different questions, local government has become very enthusiastic about the project and they have started to open up more financial data.

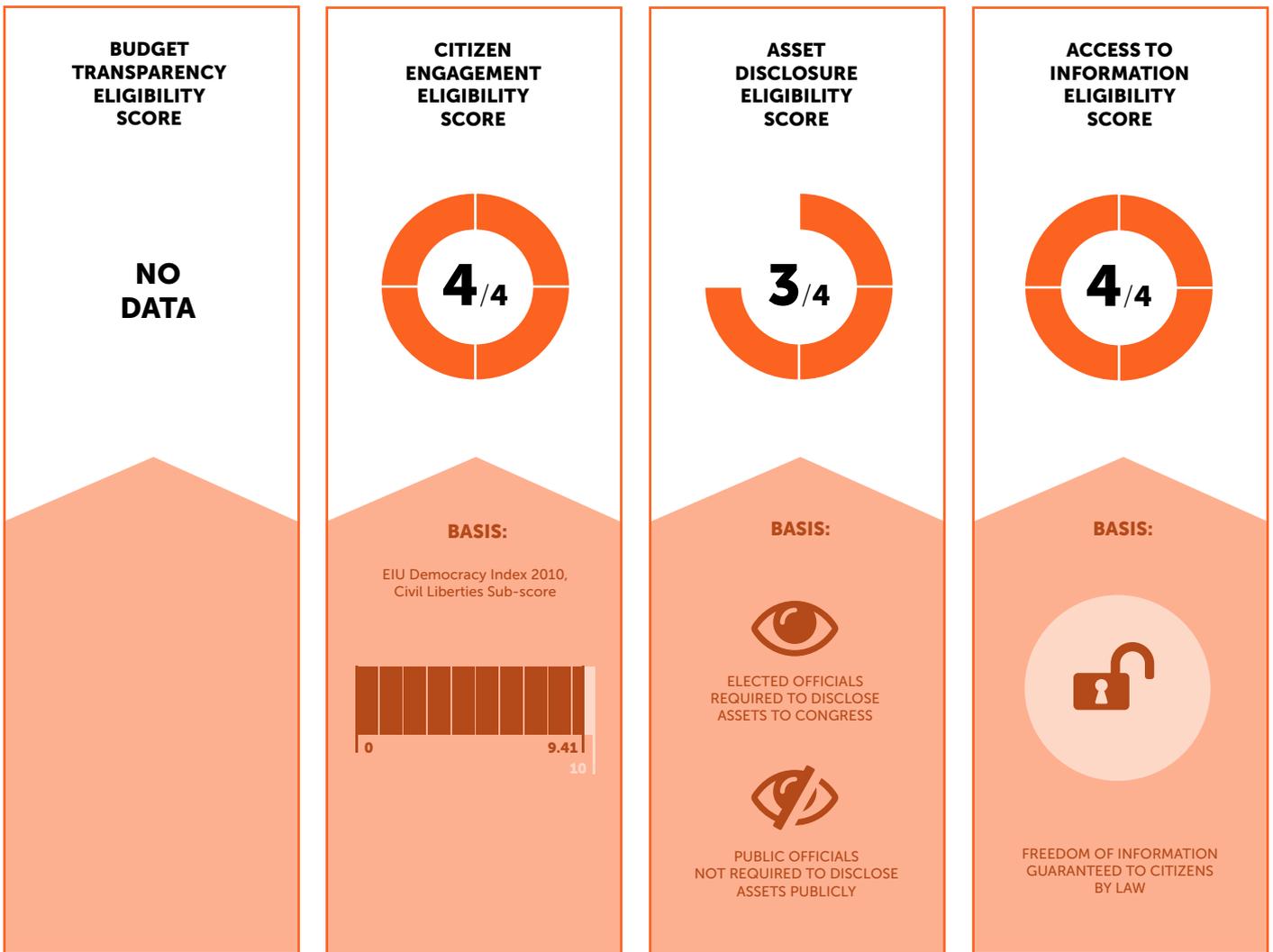
🔗 For more information or to get in touch with one of the people interviewed, please e-mail [nvaart@hivos.nl](mailto:nvaart@hivos.nl).

OGP MEMBER SINCE:  
April 2012

CURRENT STAGE:  
1st Action Plan

OGP SITE:  
<https://data.overheid.nl/openoverheid>

# NETHERLANDS OGP ELIGIBILITY DATASHEET



**TOTAL OGP ELIGIBILITY SCORE: 11/12**

