



WORLDCONNECTORS THE ROUND TABLE FOR PEOPLE AND THE PLANET

Statement on the Connection of Civilisations

A Practice of Connecting Identities

9 September 2008

I. Preamble

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This statement has been developed by members of the Worldconnectors thematic working group on the Connection of Civilisations and incorporates the discussion conducted by the Round Table of Worldconnectors on 27 June 2008. After the inclusion of special input from James Kennedy (professor University of Amsterdam), Domenica Ghidai Bhidu (The Hague Process on Asylum and Migration), Dennis de Jong (Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Karen van Oudenhoven-van der Zee (professor University of Groningen), Michael Slaby (Earth Charter International Coordinator), the document has been finalised and is now ready for translation into Dutch and wide distribution throughout the Netherlands.

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The statement 'Connection of Civilisations' builds upon previous thematic documents and dialogue regarding 'Migration and Development' and 'Global Human Security'. - The key difference is that in this statement we focus on the Netherlands. In so-doing we hope to link our efforts to the aims and themes of the UN Alliance of Civilizations.

The Worldconnectors feel the need to respond to the topical debate in the Netherlands over the question of how to tackle the 'multicultural drama' and/or overcome the 'culture of fear' that exists in Dutch attitudes towards migrants and refugees. How can we counter the rising spectre of exclusion and polarisation? These questions are relevant to all of us and our efforts are aimed at the development of an open society with a positive sense of belonging for all citizens, irrelevant of their status or background.

A Practice of Connecting Identities

I. PREAMBLE

We aim to connect

We, the Worldconnectors, a Dutch Round Table for People and the Planet inspired by the Earth Charter, call for the respect of fundamental freedoms and the promotion of opportunities for all. We believe in the dignity of all human beings in all their diversity. The Earth Charter stresses the importance of harmonising diversity with unity, the exercise of freedom with the common good, short-term objectives with long-term goals. Each individual, family unit, organisation, and community has a vital role to play. The Charter particularly highlights the rights of minorities and women to participate in all aspects of economic, political, civil, social, and cultural life as full and equal partners. We strongly believe women have a key role to play in harmonising diversity with unity in society, and in building bridges within families and communities.

We strongly support the call to action and pledge to commit and re-double our efforts in the next seven years to realise the Millennium Development Goals by the year 2015.

The Worldconnectors believe people connect rather than clash. The clash of civilisations – in all its manifestations – emphasises conflicts emerging along the fault lines of culture and religion. We however, see much value in emphasizing good practices and connections between peoples of differing cultures and religions. We are convinced that emphasising connection is a way forward towards harmonising diversity with unity. Thus, under difficult circumstances, people should aim to connect rather than succumb to clashing. In order to realise this aim, the basic rights of freedom, equality and recognition, as outlined in the Earth Charter, need to be guaranteed. At the same time, we are highly aware of the difficulties involved in realising these principles.

We encourage creating space to ensure the connection of identities on local, national and transnational levels. This would create a sense of belonging for all who have links with Dutch society as both engaged Dutch citizens and carriers of a ‘new global citizenship’. Such an identity would encompass the multilayered coexistence of cultural, ethnic, class-based and religious diversities situated in interacting local, national and transnational spaces.

II. OPERATIVE

Challenges to connection in the Netherlands

1. Dutch society has recently revealed both its strengths and its struggles with cultural diversity. Dutch citizens at times may feel ill at ease with the current changes in society engendered by the relatively large groups of people, from different places around the world, who have come to settle in the Netherlands. These newcomers themselves may, at times, share this anxiety.

At the same time, the Dutch draw from different cultures, and – due to globalisation – will continue to do so. While taking into account negative sentiments and attitudes towards diversity, there are great opportunities to deal positively with cultural and other diversities.

2. We have identified three main causes for the current struggle within Dutch society. Firstly, different ‘ways of life’ within Dutch society seem to ‘clash’: there seem to be tensions between on the one side Dutch people of different generations, and on the other, the migrants, their children and grandchildren. Social problems thus become ethnic problems, creating a caustic atmosphere. Migrants often feel discriminated against by Dutch society. A substantial number of people feel that, for example, Islam is a threat to Dutch identity and society. There

is a tendency to think in binary categories – ‘us vs. them’, ‘Dutch vs. non-Dutch’ – in which identities and loyalties are mutually exclusive. There is a lack of knowledge about the ‘other’, which leads to a fear of the unknown. The refusal to ‘connect’ reduces the oxygen required for a culture of intercultural participation in Dutch society, practising a connecting identity to be proud of; proud of its diversity.

3. The second cause is the deep-seated individualisation of Dutch society. This leads to citizens demanding more than they are willing to offer, and investing too little in the community. Many citizens are unwilling to take their share in fulfilling responsibilities to sustain societal institutions. A large group of citizens is dissatisfied with government and politics. And civil society institutions have difficulties in involving all groups in Dutch society in their mission. This has resulted in the erosion of the resilience of public culture and public institutions. People claim their freedom of speech without acknowledging the responsibilities such freedom calls for.

4. Finally, one can observe a ‘value consistency gap’. Values have become an important theme in the current debate. Cultural groups often judge others by their own standards. At the same time, many fail to live up to their own values. For instance, some liberals criticise Muslims for denying freedom and equality to women and apostates, but all too often deny these same rights to Muslims. Similarly, some Muslims reproach non-Muslims for not treating them respectfully, yet at the same time they fail to treat the people they reproach respectfully. Rather than unifying or uplifting people, discussion seems to create distance between peoples and communities, which in turn leads to feelings of cynicism, distrust, isolation and fear.

5. Under the influence of globalisation, old grounds for connection have changed. Traditional communities are under strain. Getting to know other people takes a deliberate effort. Greater mobility sometimes comes at the cost of lessened ability to ‘root’. Neighbours have become strangers and vice versa. Connecting with others in the work place is not as simple as it used to be: instead of the old concept of lifelong employment, many people nowadays choose self employment, free lance work, or ‘hop’ from one position to another.

6. The Netherlands is faced with scattered international communities, some of which are conservative, frozen in their identity, and feeling threatened. Such communities often glorify the past and their own religion – even when their homecountry has developed internationalised beyond those traditional limits.. At the same time scattered communities can be instrumental in connecting with the homeland and beyond. Recent changes in Dutch society have made many people scared, bitter and xenophobic; both within traditional Dutch social groups and within communities of new Dutch. The feeling of fear and bitterness is real and cannot (and should not) be ignored. Connection is the most effective weapon against fear for all things strange and unknown. The unknown must become known.

Conditions for connection

Participation

Crucial to the connection of all people residing in the Netherlands is *participation*. All citizens, both migrants and indigenous Dutch, must be allowed and encouraged to participate in all aspects of Dutch society. Participation must take place on the basis of the talents, qualities and achievements of migrants and the indigenous Dutch. Dare to show the excellence that is present. Participation should not be a mere phase in a process of (forced) assimilation. Participation can only have a long-term effect when citizens feel part of the society they are participating in, as different but equal individuals who have the right to cultural difference and who have been accorded the space to develop their own cultural identity.

Recognition

Participation in itself does not inevitably lead to connection and growth. In order to grow and to connect with others we need recognition of qualities and achievements. In this regard, the openness of the public space is a

crucial condition. In a society where the democratic structure (law) and culture (life style) are balanced, citizens protect and experience the public space as an open and free space which enables them to make their choices, with regard to their cultural and religious identity. This freedom of public space means people should feel free to both criticise and hold on to their cultural and religious background. Individuals should feel the public space is open enough to shape and reshape their identities. This is only possible if their identities are not fully defined by others, particularly by actors who take a dominant position in the public space. Finally, learning about the other's culture through focussing on solely negative aspects should be discouraged. Exploration of one's own cultural heritage is key to recognising that of the other.

Respect and dignity

Respect and dignity are key values that help us towards connection. However, mutuality is called for – even when facing cultural practices that seem strange or ill fitting. Otherwise groups will not peacefully co-exist. Part of the old Dutch system of pillarisation (*verzuiling*) was something called 'disciplined indifference', where differences within other groups in society were tolerated. It seems that with the diminishing of 'verzuiling', the Dutch society has lost to a certain extent this capacity for tolerance. This also relates to the need each individual has for safe spaces where one is not always judged by the standards of others and where one is allowed to experiment and sometimes make mistakes. The boundaries – where tolerance must make way for injunction – are defined very specifically by the law and in general by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Emancipation of women

Equality also applies to the relationship between men and women. Women have at least the same potential as men in connecting cultures, and hence should actively be offered the opportunity to do so. This can only occur if they actively participate in social and professional life. It is particularly important for Muslim women that both their direct (religious) social environment and Dutch society at large provide them sufficient space to develop and find their own balance between traditional values and modern society. Women might be key role models in bridging gaps between tradition and modernity.

Emancipation of youth

In a similar vein, young people have at least the same potential as older people in connecting cultures but have much less influence. Therefore, it is important that the younger generation actively participates in the shaping of society and that they are given the space to do so by the older generation.

Striving towards notions of communality

Polarisation and radicalisation are often signs that people feel their cultural identity is threatened. This applies equally to the receiving society and migrant communities. Striving towards common notions of connection besides openness and respect are the main instruments to counter polarisation. Only when the space of otherness within the boundaries of the nation state of minorities is recognised, are those minorities capable of partaking in all aspects of the society. The key to avoiding tensions in a society based on identity is *participation and recognition of difference*.

Towards a shared space of connection

We have identified three ways to contribute to the solution of tensions in Dutch society, thereby furthering our aim of connecting people.

First, we need to emphasize a shared identity that connects people and creates a sense of belonging for all Dutch people. Such an identity should: (i) promote the shared values of liberty, equality and recognition, (ii) accommodate diversity and (iii) be inspirational. Within this identity it is important to acknowledge that each individual and member of a community has in fact a multiple identity, the result of a wide array of experiences,

cultural influences and determinants. The identity of connection should be based on core shared values and not merely on ethnically defined origins and practices. These attempts at establishing connections would have to be made by various groups in society. The new Dutch nationals will need to partly recognise the cultural patterns of their new country and make them their own; the 'indigenous' Dutch will need to accept a new definition of Dutch national identity that will encompass the cultural diversity existing in the Netherlands.

Second, to reach and maintain connections between civilisations, we need to have a strong moral foundation, in which the following values might be highlighted;

One should practice **humility and modesty**. This means that we acknowledge our own fallibility in thought and action and do not claim the moral high ground over others. An important condition to connect is to be able to step aside and to listen. Listening is a vital part of communication. Then you create common space where individuals can interact, without having to compromise their own cherished beliefs.

We should treat others with **respect and dignity**. This implies we have to show the other we recognise him or her as a person of equal value as ourselves, with the capacity of reasoning and moral action. We stress in this regard, the necessity to be **consistent and fair** in our values. Consistency guarantees application of principles indiscriminately. Being fair entails that one may never demand more from others than from oneself. Both are crucial in conveying the message of equality and sincerity towards the other in respect to our values.

Thirdly, the **dynamics and energy of the scattered communities** must be viewed as a positive contribution. It takes energy for members of various cultures and communities to maintain ties with the destination country as well as their country of origin or third countries. The term 'Diaspora' is sometimes perceived as stressing the otherness of members of different cultures and communities; we would rather highlight the connecting abilities of scattered communities thereby emphasising their efforts and gains towards inclusive thinking and action. Members of scattered communities should primarily be seen as true 'citizens of the world'. The multilateral ties they maintain prove beneficial to migrants, their countries of origin and home countries. Allowing and supporting the maintenance of such ties leads to the opening up of societies in all countries concerned. These 'dynamics and energy of scattered communities' is a much unappreciated source of positive influence and achievement.

Fields of connection

Connecting civilisations should be a practice, not just a theory. Different sectors of society can be geared towards the goal of making connections.

The Family

Although difficult to see with the public eye, what happens within and between families is crucial for connecting people. Culture is transmitted (and shaped) to a large degree within the family. Hence, it is important that children have access to both male and female role models in their (extended) family that show them how they can be as participating and connecting citizens. Furthermore, gender and generational equality cannot be achieved without changes in family patterns. Many issues that obstruct connection, such as arranged marriages, a lack of women in influential positions and under-participating youth, originate to a large degree in the family.

Civil Society

Civil society is the place where members of a community voluntarily connect. It is essential that Dutch civil society opens up for all. Participation is vital here also. After all, civil society is the place where members of the community work together to shape and reshape the collective space according to new needs, new insights, new experiences and new possibilities. Besides non-governmental organisations specifically geared towards societal change, such as unions, women groups, environmentalist groups, etcetera, cultural organisations and sports organisations are also a vital part of civil society and need opening up towards the new Dutch, thus facilitating the establishment of new connections.

Education

Connecting people from different cultural or religious backgrounds should be a normal part of our educational system and curricula, from an early age onwards. Teaching these skills is as important as teaching academic knowledge. It is important to note that this is only viable if both students and teachers of schools reflect society in terms of culture, social class and gender. It should be clear in all aspects of education that performance is decisive and cultural background a positive contributing factor instead of an impediment.

Employment

Participation in the workplace is crucial. In the Netherlands we face many job vacancies. These can be filled by persons coming from groups of low labour participation. Encouraging inclusion of these persons in society is key. Diversity is an asset. Equal opportunity within the job market is essential, and a very practical and visible manifestation of equality. This means ensuring that discrimination in the workplace is unlawful. It also means ensuring that people, when they enter the job market, have optimal social and intellectual capital. Children should be stimulated, through their parents and schools, to choose an education fitting their talents rather than their social or cultural background. Furthermore, we should ensure that everybody is prepared for job-related responsibilities.

Media

The role of the media in developing an inclusive Dutch society is indisputable. The representation of different cultural, ethnic or religious groups in the media is essential to the forward progression of diversity-inclusive thinking in the Netherlands. Apart from this, the critical attitude of the media should in fact encourage people to denounce their presumptions, and stimulate a new way of thinking. Democracy needs critical minds that are not led by viewer ratings but who are instead free to counter the dominant discourse. The media have an important role to play in transmitting positive and diverse voices. Media, public administration and the public need to develop sensitivity, and other forms of media literacy, with regard to the new challenges arising from the culture of mass media and new media. Recourse to new types of media, such as weblogs, should be made more visible as a means to create a diverse profile of peoples of different cultures.

Finally

We as Worldconnectors, invite all those who reside in the Kingdom of the Netherlands to join the many already existing efforts and practices to connect people, to try to live according to the above mentioned values, and to take part in concrete steps to promote an inclusive society of connected people. The more we are connected, the more we realise that we, as citizens of different countries, share the experience of poverty, oppression and alienation, which can only be countered by a unified global effort toward responsible action. More than anything, making a connection with others can be (and often is) a source of joy and celebration. We identify ourselves with the hope expressed in the concluding sentences of the Earth Charter:

“Let ours be a time remembered for the awakening of a new reverence for life, the firm resolve to achieve sustainability, the quickening of the struggle for justice, and the joyful celebration of life.”