

## **From Raiffeissen to the participation society. The cooperative thought reinvented in Germany and the Netherlands.**

(‘Majesties’), Frau Dreyer, Herr Barkey, excellencies, ladies & gentlemen..

Two centuries after cooperative thoughts emerged here in Rheinland-Pfalz, and elsewhere in Europe, ideas about self-governance through cooperation and collective action are very much alive again, in Germany and the Netherlands, and elsewhere in Europe. Back in time, Raiffeissen had the intention to provide access to credit and saving facilities for farmers, there where commercial alternatives were not easily available. This alternative third “route”, in between market solutions and state provisions, is more than ever relevant, with free markets and governments reaching their limits in resource governance and the provision of public services.

Already 5 years ago, in his yearly address to the senate and the house of representatives, the Dutch King, launched the term “the participation society”. It has since become a household name in the Netherlands to refer to the reactivation of citizens, in particular in their role as solidary care takers of family and friends. This process of reactivation has been accompanied by a number of legislative measures, amongst others the decentralisation of several public services in health care. This in turn lead to an interesting and above all necessary debate about whom in Dutch society is responsible for the elderly parent, the sickly neighbour, the needy friend. Is it the government –and if so, which government, on which level?- ? Is it possible and ethically acceptable to leave care for beloved ones to the market? Or should we all be caring more ourselves, and can we expect others to do this same for us in the distant future? And if the latter is the case: what should the government do to support citizens in the roles they take up, next to a busy job and a demanding family life? Similar questions arise in other domains, where governments used to take the lead, such as in energy production and distribution, or in infrastructure, but where market partners have not shown sufficient intention to provide durable services, for the common good.

Parallel to this debate on the reactivation of the citizen as an individual, the rapid formation of collectivities of citizens who share responsibilities among them, has often been overlooked. It is my conviction that these collectivities of which we have this morning discussed many fascinating examples, are also, or maybe even more so, a vital part of a participative society. Collectivities have become an essential part of the daily life of many Dutch over the past 15 years. Since 2005, we have seen a rapid increase of collectivities overall, but in particular in care and energy, with over 300 care coops, and over 400 energy coops now in function.

The citizens' collectivity as a unit of solidarity, not based on particular bounds such as religion or social class, is on the move in both the Netherlands and Germany. And given its continuous development and growing immersion in all layers of society, deserves much more attention, from politicians, policy makers and civil servants. One could worry about the risk that new collectivities will create new forms of exclusion. However, we see that many of these collectivities, quite to the contrary of the usual expectations, often decide to invest in the community in which they thrive, also at the benefit of those not directly involved in the collectivity as a member. Investing in the community's social infrastructure is often a natural outcome. This is hopeful for the future, but it also affects our traditional view of the welfare society that has been built in Germany and the Netherlands over the past two centuries. Will public services, following their commercialisation and decentralisation, be left to local communities willing and capable of providing them through new collectivities? Will for example the availability of local sports fields depend on a local energy cooperative with sufficient budget?

Germany and the Netherlands share a forerunners position within Europe in these new developments: although new collectivities still emerge, we can easily say that by now the pioneering phase has passed. One of the signs of this growing maturity is the formation of sector-wide networks, which -in some cases- also form lobby groups towards governments. For the Netherlands we have here among us representatives of both a network of care cooperatives, *Nederlandzorgtvoorelkaar*, or "theNetherlandsCareforEachother". And of Rescoop, a growing European network of more than 1,250 energy cooperatives and over a million European citizens who are active in the energy transition. Connecting collectivities was also the main goal of our meeting this morning.

Besides more cross-sectoral cooperation, we need to strive towards a more explicit connection between the "old" and new coops. With "old" coops, I refer to those that emerged in the 19th and early 20th century, such as for the Netherlands, for example Achmea and FloraHolland, both represented here. And on the one hand, the newer collectivities, that are focussing on new challenges, but basically use the same principles as their "bigger brothers" of the cooperative world. There is much to learn, on both sides. Mutuals and Cooperatives such as Achmea and Floraholland are actively rediscovering their cooperative values, whereas the newer collectivities actually *start* from these values, often with a very active group of members to rely on.

Connecting collectivities and their values, across sectors and countries should, I believe, be one of the priorities of governments of both the Netherlands and Germany in order to support this relatively new, but valuable trend in the whole European community. I sincerely hope that our meeting here, in the presence of

the Dutch King and Queen, the minister-president Frau Dreyer, and so many representatives of both Dutch and German cooperatives may provide a fertile starting point in our search towards more connectivity. I thank you for your attention.