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European Council of National Associations of Independent Schools

Opening address Simon Steen to the ECNAIS Seminar “*How to avoid unification of diversity*” in Vienna, Austria 20-22 November 2014

The Dutch Council for Social Development (Raad voor Maatschappelijke Ontwikkeling – RMO) has published a number of advisory reports in recent years on the conditions for more diversity in society: *Back to basics* (2010); *Stepping back is looking forward* (2013).

In the factsheet “Forms of diversity *Six principles for the social domain*” the RMO translates some of the points made in these publications into six guiding principles, and outlines the tenets for a society in which people work together to solve shared problems:

1. Diversity as the standard for society
2. Organising solidarity in communities
3. Translating ideals into action
4. Letting go means letting in
5. Guarding against homogeneity
6. More constitutional democracy, less welfare state.

You can find the English translation of this factsheet on www.rmo.nl. I will just mention some of the headlines, because by doing so I hope to offer you a broader perspective on the theme of our conference.

- Historically, Dutch society is not organised along the lines of central government steering and policy planning. There is a long tradition of the people doing a great deal for themselves.

A good example is our internationally well known unique system of constitutional freedom of education. Almost 70% of all the Primary and Secondary schools in the Netherlands are independent schools equally funded by the government as the public schools. But (re)creating a society which resolves social issues itself does not happen automatically, and that society will not function unless a number of conditions are met.

- The decision by the government to step back stems from three problems that are manifesting themselves within the welfare state. The most important is: *Growing uniformity. Government finance, with all its procedures and*



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protocols, tenders and top-down control, means that public services ultimately all begin to look alike. They all tend to conform to the requirements of the governmental subsidy framework, rather than staying true to their own chosen mission.

- We are moving from a homogenising public sector towards a heterogenising civil society, towards a situation in which people have a greater say in the organisation of society.
- Civil society generates diversity based on plurality, not equality based on universality.
- Citizens initiatives are preferred because they do something different from what the government can achieve. They tap into and build upon the plurality and diversity in society and the preferences of (groups of) citizens. They have the potential to deliver higher (perceived) quality for those they serve.
- Direct solidarity is ‘individual’, something about which people decide for themselves. It is an expression of commonality with others, stemming from people’s own convictions, not from the government.
- Direct solidarity is the solidarity that arises within *communities*.
- By each making a contribution in their own way, people can learn about the interests and needs of others. The narrow self-interest of the individual is thus broadened to an enlightened self-interest as part of a community and a generic reciprocity.
- Discontent can also be seen as something constructive, as an untapped reservoir of energy in society. The trick is to look beneath the discontent, to distil ideals and future ambitions from it and thus to make use of the energy in society. This can be achieved if social discontent is seen not as an endpoint, but as the starting point for a discussion. Discontent masks more than just people’s concerns; those ideals, motivations, nuances and drives need to be raised from the undercurrent to the mainstream.
- Society will not organise things in the same way as the government. People will do things differently, and will express their own values and choices in civil-society organisations and other associational forms.
- Civil- society organisations have to bend at different times to the frameworks set by the government (financial, legal, qualitative). When the dependence on those frameworks becomes very great, it is difficult for organisations to escape from



the direction set by those frameworks. Many public sectors have become increasingly tied to the state, with the government acting as financier, supervisor and framework-setter. This makes it even more difficult for organisations to make their own voices heard and to stand out from the masses. There is a risk of a situation developing of *survival of the fitting* rather than *survival of the fittest*. It will then not be the organisations that best meet the wishes of their customers or clients that succeed, but those which adapt best to the frameworks set by the financier, inspector or monitor.

- This requires that governments let go of the expectation that civil-society will produce the same things as the government. They will have to shift their focus away from ‘providing’ (zorgen voor) to ‘facilitating’ (zorgen dat). At the same time, it will require that people in society translate their ideals into actions for the public cause. Civil-society organisations, large and small, will have to act from the basis of their self-determined mission and so secure legitimacy from their target group. Alliances with other private actors will then be more logical than a focus on the government.
- There is still a strong preference for and belief in central coordination and planning. There is a tendency to be less trusting of a spontaneous structure which is based on a variety of actors and initiatives. While this spontaneous structure is flexible and adaptable, it is also unpredictable.
- The relationship between market, state and society will remain the subject of debate in the years ahead. The necessary spending cuts of the government will give an added dimension to that debate. At the same time, the prospect of ‘more society’ extends beyond this short-term view. A society marked by diversity needs a form of service delivery in the social domain which reflects that diversity. It is then reasonable to assume that solving shared problems will be less successfully achieved via bureaucratic means than through the development of private forces, both profit-based (businesses) and not-for-profit (civil-society).
- ECNAIS works already for more than 25 years as a Network of private education organisations strongly embedded in the civil society.
- We function as a living knowledge centre for sharing ideas, expertise and experiences about values as the freedom of parental school choice and the freedom of education.



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- Diversity in daily school life is the keyword for us. It is all about respecting differences between mindsets and philosophical, pedagogical or religious ideas as inspiring values for independent schools.
- It is an enormous challenge to unify our common efforts in such a way that speaking with one voice is not being felt as threat for diversity in education but as a stimulus to save and explore diversity also in new forms for the near future.
- This is in short the meaning of the theme of this ECNAIS seminar.
- As always the start was just an initial idea, this time from Beatrice Lukas and I quote her now: *'The seminar should be a contribution to build a visible, tangible network as a beginning to see each other better, which will step by step lead to recognize and to understand each other, which is precondition for peaceful co-existence.'*
- This can vitalize each society as long it is based on what Hans Boutellier, a Dutch professor in Sociology calls 'Lebensbejahung'. His warning is that we should not loose this and he is inspired by Laszlo Barabasi's book *Linked*. Barabasi's, an American with Hungarian roots, famous saying is *Think networks* and he mentions schools in particular.
- Boutellier and in the same way Philip Blond from the English Think-tank ResPublica believes in what they call the development of new forms of bottom-up democracy by bringing together different networks of people who are highly motivated to contribute to the solution of nowadays social problems.
- I believe after I read an interview with him in one on the Dutch daily newspapers on the 6th of January this year that Matthias Strolz was motivated by similar ideas when he decided to change his life and to leave his successful job as management consultant in 2012 from one day to another to start the political party NEOS: Das Neue Osterreich. NEOS came as new political party with almost 5 % of the votes in the Austrian Parliament.
- Mr. Strolz may I invite you to take the floor for your contribution *Cooperation and Competition Parenting Social Innovation*.

I thank you for your attention.