**Portfolio Review Document: OSIFE in The Netherlands**

OSF’s work on discrimination in the Netherlands started in 2007 with a research and advocacy initiative on Muslims in EU Cities, later known as At Home in Europe (AHiE). In the second half of 2012 the Fund to Counter Xenophobia (Xen Fund) launched its grant-making activities there and in 2013 the European Civil Liberties Program (ECLP) and the European Elections Project (EEP) supported their first projects in the country. OSIFE’s work in the Netherlands came from different angles all with different aims and not with a single strategy and narrative: it was not fully conceived as a coherent portfolio with an underlying strategy. There were, however, some shared and converging assumptions. OSIFE is now striving to align its work in the Netherlands integrating the lessons and experience gained through the work that has been done.

**Why are we in the Netherlands?**

Traditionally perceived as the epitome of European liberalism, Dutch society has changed rapidly in the last two decades. Multiculturalism has been seriously questioned and the Muslim communities have been on the focus of heated debates. High-visibility events have made a contribution to the change in atmosphere: the World Trade Centre attacks were followed pretty closely by the murders of political leader Pym Fortuyn in 2002 and film-maker Theo Van Gogh in 2004 for their anti-Muslim statements; death threats against feminist Parliamentarian and outspoken critic of radical Islam Ayaan Hirsi Ali and her eventual resignation from Parliament in 2006 after admitting to lying on her asylum application provided –ironically – more arguments to anti-migration forces. This climate was reflected both in politics, with the raise of anti-immigration parties, and in much stricter public policies in relation both to migration and to multiculturalism.

It is against this backdrop that the Muslims in EU Cities project chose Amsterdam and Rotterdam as two of its eleven cities for research and advocacy in 2007. The Netherlands, with roughly one million Muslims (6% of its population), made for an appealing test case. The initial intent was to go beyond the inflammatory and divisive national political rhetoric and explore the lived realities of communities with significant Muslim populations to see what policies were working and not working in integrating minority communities. The Netherlands, often a pioneer in social policies, was also chosen for its influence among the Nordic countries and to offer a contrast, half way between British multiculturalism and the French republican model based on assimilation.

When the Fund to Counter Xenophobia was created in 2012 the Netherlands was selected as one of the three focus countries. The rational for choosing it was to oppose the largest and politically most successful manifestation of a new brand of national-populism, represented there by the Party for Freedom (PVV), which does not appeal to conservative family values, but points instead to the threat that Islam poses to sexual and gender rights and liberal Dutch values. The “innovation” of Geert Wilders in the Netherlands is the use of freedom and equality language to pit some groups whose rights have largely been won through long struggles (such as women and LGBT) against other minorities.

After an initial exploration of available funding, NGOs and priority themes, the Xen Fund started identified the following potential niches for OSF action:

* Public education and advocacy to counter structural racism and xenophobic attitudes
* Discrimination against Muslims and Islamophobia
* Hate speech, racism and stereotyping in the old and new media and access to data to counter hate crime and discrimination
* Ethnic profiling and youth-police relations

Two new OSIFE projects started in 2013 and included the Netherlands in their priorities. The European Civil Liberties project included it in its priority countries to help the emergence of a national civil liberties organization or coalition that could be both a stronger national player and part of a new European civil liberties network. The European Elections project included the Netherlands amongst its 5 priority countries because of the polls that predict that PVV will have a very good result in the European Parliament elections, and because it is one of the drivers of anti-European and anti-migration discourse in the EU.

**Seven lessons learnt in our work in the Netherlands**

1. *Hidden intolerance*

The entire world sees the Netherlands as one of the most liberal societies that exist and, to a large extent, the perception is shared by the Dutch themselves. The image is grounded on reality, but it contributes to hiding a serious rise in intolerance towards ‘foreign’ cultures in Dutch society. The RAND Europe study funded by the Xen Fund and OSEPI to analyse long-term trends in intolerance in Western Europe showed that in the Netherlands, as far as ethnic, cultural and religious diversity is concerned, levels of intolerance decreased in the 1990s, followed by an increase after 1999: levels of expressed intolerance in 2008 were higher than in 1990.

Dutch society, compared to other countries with a colonial past, does not seem to have developed an awareness of the continuous effects of a history of slavery and racism on contemporary society. Racism, in particular, tends to be downplayed as a problem, and the Xen Fund has been supporting organizations that fight that complacency. Magenta is one of those organizations: it was in danger of disappearing as its funding sources dwindled, but with our help it could reorganize and continues to play an important role in exposing hate crime and racism. It contributed to ignite the [debate about ‘Black Pete’](http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/voices/black-pete-and-legacy-racism-netherlands), where black Dutch citizens have played a prominent role. A new brand of maturing ethnic minority activism is emerging, less focused on dialogue with authorities and more on challenging the self-perception of the Dutch majority population. They, and others, have the potential to surface issues of racism and intolerance and generate the public debate to address them.

The Xen Fund supported several projects which aimed to bring expose discrimination in Dutch society, focusing particularly on the youth, both for the potential for longer term impact and because of worrying [evidence](http://pub.uni-bielefeld.de/luur/download?func=downloadFile&recordOId=2018626&fileOId=2269239) of increasing intolerance in the 16-21 age group. Projects like Friend & Foe have shown the value of focusing on some groups where intolerance is becoming the norm, in this case young people living in rural areas. Humanity in Action Netherlands, another grantee, focused on young leaders (20-30) and used the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery to touch upon sensitive issues. Their work has interesting spillover effects, such as the creation by two of their fellows of [Redmond Radio](http://redmondamsterdam.wordpress.com/home/radio-show/) (a successful weekly program about racism, sexism, classism, ableism, and transphobia), or the [Martin Luther King day](http://www.debalie.nl/agenda/programma/martin-luther-king-day/e_9420723/p_11176605/) debate event, attended mostly by a minority audience that normally does not attend this kind of seminars.

1. *Islamophobia and the use of liberal values to discriminate*

Islamophobia is not exclusively or characteristically Dutch, but in the Netherlands it has played a central role as a driver for intolerance. Unfamiliar as a concept in society and public discourse, the first work conducted and supported by OSIFE around Islamophobia has aimed to break the wall of denial. AHiE’s studies ‘Muslims in Amsterdam’ and ‘Muslims in Rotterdam’ have been important contributions, in particular at the local level. The Netherlands has a healthy tradition of fighting anti-Semitism, and the same techniques used to record and monitor anti-Semitism have been used for anti-Muslim attitudes. The Anne Frank House conducted a [study](http://www.annefrank.org/ImageVaultFiles/id_15780/cf_21/RapportPanteiaJuli13.PDF) with our support showing that, in relation to a similar study done ten years ago, expressions and incidences of anti-Semitism in high schools had decreased, whereas Islamophobic and homophobic expressions and incidences has risen. And two more grantees, a minority-led NGO in Rotterdam called SPIOR, and **‘**Meldpunt Discriminatie regio Amsterdam’, have received support from the Xen Fund and AHiE to reveal the depth of Islamophobia.

A particularly Dutch phenomenon is the depiction of Islam as a threat to the social liberal values in issues such as gender equality or sexual orientation. This is a worrying trend, as it creates artificial tensions between open society values, it tries to pitch groups against each other in the defence of their rights, and it seriously worsens the situation of those suffering double discrimination (such as Muslim women or Muslim gays). Our grant-making has until now been more focused on exposing Islamophobia than on countering this trend, but we are convinced that in the future our work should shift to this second priority. One positive example is Al Nisa’s project ‘[Do you know me?’](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KSVs5gWet1Q), which aimed to offer a new image of Muslim women and contributed to disproving stereotypes by introducing Dutch society to a strong, successful, educated, ‘integrated’ and engaged Dutch Muslim woman. This is definitely an area of work where we want to insist further.

1. *Unpacking fears*

Supporting the voices and the rights of the minorities may not be enough if we do not understand the drivers of xenophobic attitudes in the majority. Hence, acknowledging the role populist parties play in fostering intolerant attitudes across Europe, and particularly in the Netherlands, OSEPI and the Xen Fund supported a British think-tank, Counterpoint, to research about the [‘reluctant radicals’](http://counterpoint.uk.com/projects/reluctant-radicals-2/) (the non-radical supporters of populist parties) in western Europe. For the Netherlands, Counterpoint’s research reveals that intolerant attitudes are rooted in nostalgia for a particular Dutch version of consensus politics, combined with disdain for the current political elite and an unresolved attitude towards minorities. It shows that Geert Wilders has been able to capitalise on antagonism towards foreigners, but also on cultural and other fears.

AHiE is currently finalising in Amsterdam one of their ‘Engaging Marginalised Majority Populations’ studies, researching the situation and the grievances of marginalized white working class communities. Already AHiE is considering ways to expand successful municipal campaigns such as “We Amsterdammers”, which focused on minority integration, to white working class communities. It is essential that we learn to separate the illegitimate expressions of racism and xenophobia from legitimate concerns and anxieties in both majority and minority populations. The data that we are gathering in the Netherlands are important, in particular as we will be able to compare them with other countries in western and northern Europe. There is, however, not much in our existing work in the Netherlands that shows us how to address the fears that lay behind some intolerant attitudes: this remains as a challenge for our future work, and one which is central to OSIFE’s mission.

1. *Ethnic profiling – an opportunity*

Ethnic profiling, as an expression of racial discrimination, was an issue Dutch civil society, politicians and police were largely unfamiliar with. Until recently, the situation in the Netherlands was characterised by a populist anti-immigration, racist and tough-on-crime public discourse, and no government or police recognition of the problem. As part of ongoing cooperation with OSJI in Europe on the issue, the Xen Fund has supported several Dutch NGOs, thus leveraging the technical assistance work done in the country by OSJI since 2010, and contributing to launch the debate on ethnic profiling and youth-police relations. Together with OSJI and the Youth Initiative, AHiE worked on a pilot project called ‘My City Real World’ which proposed alternative police/youth relations to counter ethnic profiling dynamics in the city of Gouda.

2013 saw noticeable changes in the Dutch landscape. Thanks to the combined impacts of Xen Fund’s grantees, OSJI technical expertise, operational work and the positive example of Gouda, ethnic profiling started to be recognized as a problematic reality in the Netherlands. OSJI launched a report written together with Amnesty International Netherlands about the practice of ethnic profiling in the country, followed by the release of a short [video by Doetank](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LvHXrfYiRGk) (a Xen Fund grantee) showing ethnic profiling by the police, which quickly went viral. This joint effort sparked a great deal of [media attention](http://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2013/10/29/donkere-jongens-vaker-aangehouden-doetank-klaagt-discriminatie-politie-aan/) and public debate which now needs to be sustained in order to bring effective results.

There is now official government and police recognition of ethnic profiling and an emerging civil society voice on the issue. This renewed momentum around ethnic profiling includes recognition of the problem by senior officers within the national police and key police forces of Amsterdam and the Hague, a debate in parliament with a number of parliamentarians keen to address the issue, and the launching of a formal investigation into ethnic profiling by the Ministry of Security and Justice. An increasing number of civil society organisations started to be interested in ethnic profiling and actively supporting work on it. We now hope to seize this moment with a two-year grant to Amnesty, a European Civil Liberties Project grant to the Dutch Section of the Commission of Jurists for strategic litigation, and an advocacy push to see if it is possible that the Dutch presidency of the EU in 2016 pushes the issue to the pan-European agenda.

1. *Operating in an environment with other donors*

The Netherlands has a number of private donors, including some deeply involved in human rights issues. However, very few of them even consider funding specific projects relating to racial discrimination and xenophobia in the country. Ethnic profiling, in particular, is a subject no private funder has engaged with. Due to austerity measures, and the recent focus on a mainstreamed or even assimilationist approach (instead of a multicultural focus on supporting specific minority groups), the Dutch government is decreasing or terminating its funding to several actors that it traditionally supported. This means, for example, that the Alliance of the National Consultation on Ethnic Minorities (LOM), which is the overarching organisation for eight minority representation organisations, will lose both public funding and its status of statutory dialogue partner with the national government. There is no way that OSIFE, with the limited amounts it can devote to the Netherlands, can match up the decrease in public funding. A dialogue with local funders – who often have looked to Africa and other parts of the world, neglecting the local scene – is thus a must to mobilise the necessary resources to fight the increase in intolerance in the Netherlands.

1. *A European benchmark*

Operating in the Netherlands has advantages and disadvantages. In the experience of AHiE in the country, it was never easy to engage Dutch policymakers. National research, thinking and debate on issues such as migration are sophisticated and lively, and there is no strong incentive to seek foreign models, let alone advice. The impact of AHiE researches, for instance, has been modest compared to that in other countries. At the same time, the overwhelming majority of Dutch society adheres to the main principles of open society, and when discrimination, abuses or intolerance are exposed, many groups are ready to react. Most politicians and citizens do want to keep their country tolerant and open, and they want to remain a global benchmark for openness and integration. In the Netherlands, naming and shaming, and appealing to open society values can have a much stronger impact that in southern and eastern Europe, or even than in neighbouring France and Britain.

Additionally, AHiE has noticed how the Netherlands are valued across Europe, including some like Finland or Norway, as a credible and advanced model in social issues. This is why a xenophobic drive in the Netherlands is very dangerous, as it may normalise negative trends in ways that, for example, Britain (seen as somewhat exceptional in many ways) or Austria, both countries experiencing national populist surges, could not do. But this is also a reason to push for advances in the Netherlands and its cities in areas such as ethnic profiling, because Dutch politicians could then become effective and credible advocates for better policies at EU level and present a model to other countries.

1. *An integrated OSIFE strategy for the Netherlands*

OSIFE’s work in the Netherlands is not a unitary portfolio. Most of it has been focusing either on research (AHiE) or on largely exploratory work (Xen Fund), and it is still too early to draw any conclusions of the European Civil Liberties work there, let alone about the grants made for the European Elections. However, the involvement there has allowed us to identify some promising avenues for advancement, based on the lessons drawn above. The focus on surfacing some issues that were ignored because of the image of an almost naturally tolerant society has been useful, in particular in exposing Islamophobia and the problem of ethnic profiling. The next phase will be one of more targeted strategies and of entering into time-bound initiatives that can achieve changes that are relevant beyond the Dutch borders.

The Netherlands face difficulties that are or will probably soon become relevant to other societies: the balance between freedom of speech and religious discrimination; the tensions between social liberalism and a multicultural society; the nostalgia for a simpler, more homogeneous and more secure past; the will to enjoy some effects of globalisation and integration (like free trade and travel) without others (like labour mobility). Due to the size of the country’s economy, OSIFE will only remain a very modest actor there, so it needs to choose its targets very selectively. But, if we make a good selection, the Netherlands present an opportunity to engage with some of the central issues to OSIFE’s mission with some chance of tangible results and of starting to turn the tide at European level.