

Summary

Growing older in the Netherlands

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The number of frail older persons in the Netherlands is increasing. A growing number of older people are living independently in the community with less support from professionals. The neighbourhood in which they live is therefore becoming increasingly important for their quality of life. The relationship between older people and their residential environment is the main focus of the magazine 'Growing older in the Netherlands' ('Oud worden in Nederland'). In this magazine the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) and the Platform31 research organisation illustrate the importance of neighbourhoods and villages for community-dwelling older persons from a variety of perspectives. It contains a mix of research-based articles and accounts from neighbourhoods in the cities of Rotterdam and Nieuwegein and the village of Zwiggelte, in the Province of Drenthe.

Million frail older persons in 2030

One in ten people in the Netherlands are currently aged over 65, and this is projected to rise to one in four by 2050. Increasing age goes hand in hand with increasing frailty; a quarter of people aged over 65 are regarded as frail, and half those aged over 80. Although the age at which older persons become frail is likely to continue rising, this still means that the number of frail older persons is set to increase from 700,000 in 2010 to over a million in 2030. In terms of migration background and lifestyle, this group is likely to be even more diverse than today's older population.

Wide diversity

The impact of the residential setting on older persons' lives differs from neighbourhood to neighbourhood and from person to person. The compact, lively inner-city district of Oude Westen in Rotterdam differs in every respect from the empty, rural and relatively prosperous village of Zwiggelte in Midden-Drenthe, with its farms surrounded by extensive meadowland. The winding, traffic-calmed residential areas and anonymous flats in Batau in Nieuwegein form yet another totally different world. In every residential setting, people strive to carve out a good life for themselves and their loved ones as they grow older. The only marked difference is in the way they relate to their neighbourhood and to each other. There is also wide diversity between residents of the same neighbourhood – not surprisingly in the multicultural Rotterdam, but even in the rural setting of Zwiggelte, where the 'real' native residents have little time for the newfangled ideas introduced by newcomers.

Own efforts

Dutch government policy today expects people to do a great deal for themselves, both in shaping their own lives and in organising solutions for the problems of others. Examples of this can be found in each of the neighbourhoods studied here: vital older persons who carry on valiantly when health issues arise or when they lose their partner. Or enterprising older persons who do everything they can to help the more frail older members of their family, village or neighbourhood. In Zwiggelte, the independence envisaged by the government was found to be part of the local

culture, and many older residents also actively supported the village credo 'With each other, for each other'. In Rotterdam, older persons were active as volunteers in the municipal programme to combat loneliness, 'For each other', while in Nieuwegein we spoke to vital older persons who were thinking a long way ahead about how they would like to organise their old age. All these examples are entirely in line with the policy ideals of the 'participation society'.

Frailty

Not every kind of frailty can be overcome by people's own efforts. Frailty in very old age often involves physical decline, but also includes social and financial aspects. For example, people who have lost touch with their children, because of family arguments or distance, lose an important source of solace, help and advice. Frailty is also exacerbated by poverty, as the respondents in the Oude Westen neighbourhood in Rotterdam confirmed. Older residents there, often less affluent and with a migration background, can generally rely on informal care provided by their family, but their small, poorly accessible homes and limited resources put great pressure on the relationship between them and their informal carers. When older persons become frail, day-to-day contacts in the local neighbourhood can also become difficult. Accepting help can also be at odds with the desire to be independent, the wish not to be a burden to others and the need for privacy.

Local customisation

The World Health Organisation regards a neighbourhood as age-friendly if it enables older people to lead an active life. This requires a setting which is both physically and socially accessible. The accounts from the three neighbourhoods in our study illustrate that residents have different expectations of their neighbourhood in different contexts. For the residents from Rotterdam, Nieuwegein and Zwiggelte, their own neighbourhood is their frame of reference. Most of them would not want to live anywhere else; this is the place they have chosen to live or have ended up living and where they have subsequently built their lives. It is illustrative here that older residents of Zwiggelte regard themselves as fortunate to have access to the shops in the larger village of Westerbork, even though these are much further away from where they live than in many other places in the Netherlands.

As people age, the environment in which they live can become a problem. For people with disabilities, for example, their home, the physical setting and the distance to amenities and services can restrict their freedom of movement. Informal networks often also become less accessible, whereas they are an important source of help and contact for older persons living independently. There are wide differences between the locations studied here in both the physical barriers that thwart older persons and the organisation of local informal networks. In all cases the key is 'local customisation', and that is by no means provided only by policymakers and professionals: the involvement of residents themselves makes a major contribution to ensuring that the residential environment meets what (older) residents want and need.

Growing older in own environment not a new ideal

Present Dutch government policy is aimed at enabling older persons to continue living at home for longer. However, the idea that this is a recent development, driven mainly by financial considerations, is inaccurate. While it is true that many residential institutions were built in the post-war welfare state, this was never seen as the most desirable solution. As long ago as the 1960s, policymakers observed that many older people had little enthusiasm for giving up their own home and independence in exchange for an 'abnormal existence' in an 'old people's home', and the percentage of older persons living in institutions has been declining since the 1970s. Nonetheless, the Netherlands still has the highest proportion of older persons living in institutions in Europe.