

External portfolio review ‘OSIFE in The Netherlands’

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**Reasons for selecting the portfolio**

Despite that fact that OSIFE was only established just over a year ago, two of its constituent programs have established a body of work in the Netherlands that could be reviewed. The research and advocacy initiative on Muslims in EU Cities of At Home in Europe (AHiE) goes back to 2007 and the Fund to Counter Xenophobia (Xen Fund) became active in the Netherlands in 2012. The following year, OSIFE’s grant making efforts were complemented through the European Civil Liberties Program and the European Elections Project.

One of the reasons OSIFE decided to focus its first portfolio review on its work in the Netherlands is because it demonstrates that the erosion of open society values can happen anywhere and in a very short space of time. It shows that no country is safe from intolerance, not even a country once famed for its tolerance, and that even in, or perhaps especially in, a small, wealthy country with a large presence of NGOs, OSF can effectively play the role of a catalyst for coordinated civil society efforts that can have great impact.

OSIFE’s work in the Netherlands exemplifies some of the best and the worst of OSF, which makes it an interesting topic for a portfolio review. The best includes our ability to respond rapidly to worrying trends and events, such as the rise in Islamophobia following the murders of Pim Fortyun and Theo van Gogh, and supporting more hard hitting activities including litigation and policy advocacy that many other funders will not support. The worst is exemplified in having multiple programs active in one place working in silos rather than in concert. Entering a new place with our own agenda and hoping it will be taken up by local actors can represent both the best and worst of how OSF operates, depending on the finer details of how partnerships and ownership are established.

**Key questions**

The portfolio review focused almost exclusively on dissecting past work and assumptions, trying to glean lessons about what factors contributed to success or failure. A number of questions focused specifically on OSIFE’s work on ethnic profiling: Why had this work been successful? Had it succeeded because of ways that were planned or accidental? Why was work on other issues less successful? Turning to OSIFE’s grant-making efforts in the Netherlands more generally, which elements of the portfolio were encouraging and which were disappointing were analyzed. The question was raised which grants had led to disappointments and what OSIFE identifies as missed opportunities. A number of questions were also put forward on the research published by AHiE: What did OSIFE aim to achieve with its publications? What were the reactions to the publications and what was the follow up? Moreover, when discussing why OSIFE became active in the Netherlands it was asked if in hindsight this was the right choice. Also, how had OSIFE been perceived and treated by other donors and actors in the field?

**Staff responses**

*The reasons behind engagement in the Netherlands*

The Netherlands can be characterized by both positive and negative elements. Rather than intolerance, Dutch people seem to be moving from indifference to ‘selective tolerance,’ in particular when using the rights of women and LGBTI communities to limit the rights of Muslims. While Euroscepticism is much more visible than in the past, only a small minority of the Dutch population is really against the EU. Overall, it is positive that debate is finally taking place about these important issues, particularly about its relationship with the European Union – something which had never really happened. However, while the Netherlands no longer seems to have the ambition to play a leading role in the world, symbolically it is still an important country which is often perceived as a trendsetter. Moreover, it was pointed out that a large part of Dutch society, which holds very much a rights respecting culture, might still be moved to react when confronted by evidence-based information. While the Netherlands may currently be swinging in the wrong direction, OSIFE feels its investment there can make a change in this regard. OSIFE staff was of the opinion that the choice of engaging in the Netherlands was the right one and that grant making in the country should continue.

*Relationship with local stakeholders*

The grant-making efforts of OSIFE were largely met with positive reactions, with the exception of the Oranje Fonds, which was not very receptive to engaging with OSIFE. While some collaboration with local donors has taken place, many Dutch foundations focus particularly on the international level, however, limiting the possibilities for co-funding. AHiE, on the other hand, was initially perceived more as an outsider when they started to focus their research and advocacy efforts on the Netherlands. By now they are perceived as a legitimate player, however, and their research has even been picked up in other countries, like Luxembourg, which was a pleasant surprise.

*Highlights and disappointments of the portfolio*

The success of the work on ethnic profiling was attributed to the way in which the Xen Fund had been able to build on the work done by the Justice Initiative, which had already been doing advocacy work with progressive police officers (through a pilot project testing a good practice in Gouda, in collaboration with the Youth Initiative and AHiE) and had built up a strong relationship with Amnesty International Netherlands, which it had given one small grant in 2009. Another important factor was the coordinated release of a video by Doetank documenting ethnic profiling by police and a publication of a joint report by Amnesty and the Justice Initiative.

While it was a positive surprise that the Dutch authorities picked up on the work on ethnic profiling, a problem which they were reluctant to acknowledge in the past, it was a disappointment to see that the local authorities in Amsterdam and Rotterdam did not really follow up on the research done by AHiE. It was suggested that this difference may have been caused by the fact that the work on ethnic profiling was locally owned, whereas the reports by AHiE, despite being done in collaboration with local actors, were perceived as work by an outside organization.

*Lessons learned*

Over time OSIFE has obtained a better understanding of the local context, which has led to the scaling up of certain elements of its initial portfolio on the Netherlands. For example, given the strong policy environment and the large amount of research already being done, AHiE has moved away from doing large research in so many cities, refining its focus. OSIFE has, moreover, learned to look at the Netherlands with a wider lens, engaging in action that goes beyond tolerance and discrimination, particularly through its work on elections and around civil liberties.

**Decisions**

* OSIFE will try to help reenergize a more ambitious agenda, shaping trends in the Netherlands that can have wider resonance, and engage in a creative way in issues like Islamophobia;
* OSIFE will seize the renewed momentum around ethnic profiling for further grant-making, strategic litigation and advocacy work on the issue;
* When the Black Pete debate will come up again around November OSIFE will be ready to respond and use the momentum of the debate around this Dutch tradition to generate public debate on broader discrimination issues;
* OSIFE will engage more with local donors and other stakeholders to explore further ways of collaboration and Mabel van Oranje will help re-start the relationship with Oranje Fonds;
* OSIFE will keep on reflecting on unexpected opportunities, successes or failures within the portfolio.

**Next steps and proposed follow-up**

There was some discussion about whether OSIFE’s work in the Netherlands constituted support to the field of non-discrimination where our engagement would be long-term and not have fixed objectives or a concept, seeking to take advantage of opportunities or respond to threats with clear time-limited boundaries. Given OSIFE’s limited resources and mandate covering all 28 EU Member States, the former would simply not be feasible. As an alternative, OSIFE will define criteria against which to measure success or defeat. Initial proposals for these criteria include:

1. Having local actors with the commitment and tools to act as effective “antibodies” to fight illiberal tendencies;
2. Certain political issues being perceived as ‘inescapable’ in the political debate;
3. The promotion of the availability of more local resources for the promotion of open society values and strengthening the fundraising skills of local organizations.

The outcome of the European Parliament elections in May 2014 and how well the PVV, the populist party of Geert Wilders, does will help to determine OSIFE’s next steps in the Netherlands. All of OSIFE’s programs active in the country, both the established ones like AHiE and the Xen Fund and new projects such as the European Civil Liberties Project and the European Elections Project, will regroup and define a clearer and more coordinated strategy for the future.