

SUMMARY

Towards an evaluation of covenants for antillean at-risk youngsters 2005-2008

Since the second half of the 1980s the Netherlands has faced the problem of Antillean youngsters with a very low level of education, insufficient command of Dutch, no fixed abode, a high proportion of teenage mothers and one-parent families, unemployment, debts and criminal behaviour. The problems are found mainly in the 'Antillean municipalities' where two-thirds of Antilleans in the Netherlands live. In summer 2005 the Minister for Immigration Affairs and Integration and 21 Antillean municipalities agreed covenants aimed at improving the position of Antillean youth considerably. Under these covenants central government and the municipal authorities commit to promoting stable lives for these young people in the 2005-8 period. They include targets for reducing premature school-leaving, unemployment and crime.

The municipalities are implementing projects related to these targets and have a large degree of freedom to develop an approach geared to the local situation. Central government and the local authorities are each bearing half of the cost. Each authority is implementing an average of six projects under the covenants, totalling 123 projects in the 21 municipalities. To a large extent these are interventions that form part of a broader policy, or are applied to other target groups as well, and are now being deployed specifically for Antillean at-risk youngsters with ring-fenced funding. The majority of the projects can be described as primary or secondary prevention aimed at improving life in the broad sense, strengthening ties with family, education or work: this is expected to have a beneficial effect on criminal behaviour.

The covenants lay down that the targets and activities are to be evaluated biennially. The Ministry of Justice's Research and Documentation Centre has asked Regioplan Beleidsonderzoek to put forward a design for the evaluation. This should comprise three interconnected parts, a plan evaluation, a process evaluation and an effect evaluation. The Ministry's aspiration is for the methodological quality of the effect evaluation of the covenants to be as high as possible.

There are two worthwhile approaches to designing the evaluation, both of which would in principle make for conclusions on the covenants that are sound and relevant to policy.

The first approach entails evaluating the *projects* developed and implemented under the covenants, focusing on the question of which projects are effective in improving the position of Antillean at-risk youngsters, what the characteristics of these projects are, and what contribution they make to reducing premature school-leaving, youth unemployment and youth crime in this group. This evaluation is only meaningful if it is applied to projects that meet certain criteria (measurable targets, mechanisms set out in explicit terms, targets that are feasible within the subsidy period, a sufficient number of participants, availability of a control group). Suitable projects would need to be selected on the basis of a plan evaluation.

The second approach focuses on the *municipalities*, examining what the covenants have set in motion and under what conditions they make the best contribution to reducing the problems of Antillean at-risk youngsters. This approach has two variants, based on the *quality* of the projects in each municipality and the *contents of the policy* on projects respectively.

The variant based on the *quality* of the project plans tests the hypothesis that this has a major influence on the results of the policy. Local authorities that devise and implement good projects have evidently done a good analysis of the target group's situation and the amenity structure, properly ascertained where additional work is needed, and have developed appropriate projects. We can thus expect them to produce good results—better than in municipalities where less good projects have been thought up. It is also worthwhile to try to ascertain whether covenants are a good way of reducing the target group's problems. This can be achieved by comparing Antillean municipalities with good-quality projects with municipalities that have not entered into a covenant. The plan evaluation needs to establish whether there is sufficient differentiation in the quality of the project plans and whether this can be measured reliably, thus making this variant feasible.

The *contents of the policy* variant is based on an initial, provisional appraisal of the project plans, which suggests that the covenants can be characterized as a stepping-up of policy through primary or secondary prevention projects aimed at strengthening at-risk youngsters' ties with Dutch society and reducing the gulf between them and institutions. If this initial appraisal is confirmed by further research (a plan evaluation), we can test the hypothesis that local policy entailing stepping up primary and secondary prevention for Antillean at-risk youngsters, aimed at strengthening their ties with society, results in improving the position of this group as regards premature school-leaving, unemployment and criminal behaviour.

The three variants have the following advantages and disadvantages:

	Strong points	Weak points
Evaluation of projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • specific knowledge • applicable to other groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • uncertainty as to suitable projects • not all projects are included in the evaluation • relationship between conclusions and covenant is unclear
Quality of projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • evaluation includes all projects and municipalities • conclusions on covenant that are relevant to policy • conclusions on subsidy schemes that are relevant to policy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • abstract approach • measuring quality is relatively expensive • no conclusions on specific projects or interventions • risk of not producing a useful result • effects of changes in policy in the meantime
Policy on projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • focus on policy • Antillean youngsters and organisations are involved • may produce conclusions that are relevant to policy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • risk of there being no suitable municipalities • no conclusions on specific interventions • not all municipalities included • risks of not producing useful results • uncertainty as to control group • changes in policy in the meantime

The disadvantages and uncertainties cannot be eliminated until at the very least a plan evaluation has been carried out. This will need to answer the following questions:

- What are the projects' target groups, targets and mechanisms?
- What is the quality of the project plans?
- What 'common denominators' can be identified in the project plans?

The evaluation will entail a literature review, study of documentation and interviews.

How the evaluation process should then proceed needs to be decided on the basis of the plan evaluation. This need not involve selecting one variant exclusively. If it is decided to combine more than one variant (e.g. evaluation based on the quality of the project plans and evaluation of selected projects), the disadvantages of one may be offset by advantages of the other.

