

## **VAC in the Netherlands**

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### **Summary**

After World War II, women from different political and social backgrounds united to try to influence the Dutch government's reconstruction programs. The first VAC (Women's Advisory Committee for Housing and the Environment) and National Board were founded in 1946 and there are now 200 VACs with thousands of volunteers. The National Bureau is financed by the National Government and is responsible for the two-year training of volunteers to assess the quality, safety, and sustainability of housing and residential areas.

The Provincial Government of Zeeland financially supports VAC provincial meetings and special training. Since their work includes monitoring the Government's work on housing, environment, and regional planning, members of the VAC Board are invited to participate in special provincial commissions.

Local or regional VACs ranging from five to 15 members are funded by local authorities and sometimes partners such as housing co-operatives. As non-governmental community organizations, they monitor City plans and work with and advise organizations for tenants and the disabled and elderly as well as police and town-planners. Findings of a safety survey conducted by the VAC in the City of Terneuzen in 1991 prompted the establishment of the WKB (Housing Consumers Bureau) which advises residents on housing, rent, and social security and services.

VACs give women a voice in decision-making and are often stepping stones to political careers. Although it is becoming more difficult to find volunteers with the time to be trained, it is encouraging to see more men becoming involved.

Thank you for the opportunity to address this audience here in Montréal on behalf of the VAC (Women's Advisory Committee for Housing and the Environment) in The Netherlands and the ICW (International Council of Women). The ICW is part of the Huairou Commission, a network of international women's organizations.

Last week I attended, as representative of ICW to UN-Habitat, the First World Urban Forum (WUF) in Nairobi. During the WUF it was clear that a lot of obstacles were defined on the issue of the city and its citizens. Issues like sustainability of the society and safety in the city,

landrights and inheritance rights of women were on the spot. "The Right to the City" and health problems related to housing from HIV/Aids to water and sanitation were tabled on dialogues and parallel events by speakers from all over the world. Also the booklaungh of Safer Cities about Nairobi was part of the UN program.

## History

The problems regarding the quality of life of the inhabitants of the city are not only from this moment. Already in 1928, the famous Dutch architect Mr. J.J.P. Oud stated that:

*Women should be involved into the planning and the design of houses. This is because houses are designed and build by man while the women have to work in the houses. Let's ask them for their ideas about the design; they have the daily practical experience!*

After World War II in 1945 the Dutch government prepared rebuilding programs to reconstruct the destroyed houses and infrastructure. Women from different political and social background came together to try to influence those building programs and the design of the new houses. They organized themselves and in 1946 the first VAC was founded in Rotterdam and later a National Board of VACs was founded in Delft. Also training programs for the VAC volunteers were created with help of architects, townplanners and the Technical University of Delft.

At this moment 200 VACs are active in the Netherlands with thousands of volunteers. In Utrecht the National Buro (*Landelijk Contact van de VAC's*) is the service point that is responsible for the central training courses for all the Dutch VAC volunteers. This buro is financed by the National Government (Ministry VROM).

This is very short the history of the VAC in the Netherlands. Fifty years later (in 1996) during the Habitat II Conference at Istanbul the unique work of the VAC was a Dutch "Best

Practice". I had the honour to present the VAC-Best Practice for the ICW-workshop *The Future of our Next Generation*.

## **Organization and training**

During all that 50 years, women volunteers from different social and political backgrounds used their daily-life-experience. By the two-year VAC-training the volunteers are enabled to make reports of the housing situation, the practical quality of the houses and their living surroundings; the VAC members are supposed to think for the future inhabitants!

## **Methods**

The work of the local VACs is funded by the local authority and sometimes partners like housing co-operatives.

- 1) At provincial level, like the Board of the VACs in Zeeland, the Provincial Government of Zeeland gives financial support. Those funds make it possible to have our provincial meetings and to organize special training, seminars and working visits. Of course monitoring the work of the Provincial Government on the issues of housing, environment and regional planning is part of our work. Therefore members of our board are asked to take place in special provincial commissions.
- 2) At local level, the VACs are residential consumers' organizations. They make an important contribution towards the quality, safety and sustainability of housing and the residential environment. Therefore City plans and Town plans are monitored and clients are advised by the expert volunteers. The number of VAC members varies from 5 to 15 persons per local or regional VAC. These VAC members, as members of an independent organization, consequently are present at political meetings. They work together with tenants' organizations, as well as organizations for disabled people and the elderly, police and town planners.

## **Terneuzen**

In Terneuzen, I am member of the Regional VAC Zeeuws Vlaanderen. In 1991 VAC Terneuzen initiated a social safety survey about a very turbulent part of the city. After the report the local and the provincial government supported the establishment of the WKB (Housing Consumers Buro).

Next week it will be the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the VAC. The Housing Consumers Buro has a board composed of men and women from the VAC and the tenants' organization. The local Housing Co-operation "Clavis" and the City of Terneuzen give their financial support. Inhabitants of Terneuzen can come to get advice about housing, rents, social security and social services. For several years also a policeman was there for consultation. VAC members are present for consulting during office hours twice a week.

## **Obstacles and recommendations**

- 1) The last years it is more and more difficult to find volunteers that like it and have the time to be trained and work for the VAC. Also men, while they also have daily experience as "housemen", are joining some local VAC.
- 2) ICW promotes the role of the women at decision-making level. VACs are often "stepstones" for women to start a political career at local level and beyond. VACs give women a voice at decision-making level!
- 3) Governments at local, regional and national level should be partnering with women's groups at grassroots, regional and national level.
- 4) Women have the experience of the daily life. They combine work and care; they bring children to school and use public transport to go to their jobs down town. So women are experts; use their knowledge!
- 5) Women, at all level, should also take the responsibility and should be enabled by governments to create a better and safer life for themselves and their family and the society where they live in: in the city and at the countryside.