

New legislation for public libraries in the Netherlands & the new role for the Koninklijke Bibliotheek

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Abstract:

A new public library law

Fall 2014 the Dutch Parliament adopted a new public library law: the "Wet stelsel openbare bibliotheken" (Wsob). According to the new law public libraries should give the general public access to information and culture, guided by principles such as independence, credibility, accessibility, pluralism and authenticity. Their concrete tasks are:

- *to make available knowledge and information;*
- *to facilitate learning;*
- *to promote reading and a taste for literature;*
- *to promote art and culture;*
- *to organize social encounters and debate.*

The new law defines the scope of the digital library and arranges its funding.

Keywords: national libraries, public libraries, The Netherlands, Koninklijke Bibliotheek

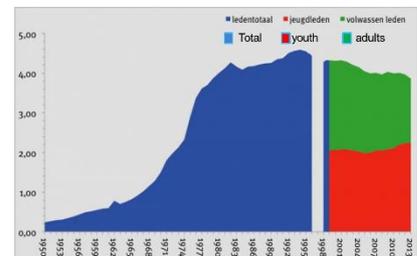
Introduction

The Netherlands has a population of nearly 17 million and is divided into: the central government, provinces and municipalities / local authorities. The responsibility for the implementation of numerous policy domains - welfare, culture, care and also public libraries - has been decentralized towards the local authorities. The provincial authorities fulfill an interim role; in the field of the cultural infrastructure, also for public libraries, among lots of other things. In 1980, there were still approx. 800 municipalities, each with its own public library organization. Municipalities have merged to form bigger municipalities as have the public library organizations, often working for multiple municipalities at the same time. Currently there are 158 public library organizations

working for 393 municipalities. In a number of provinces, the provincial support organizations for public libraries have also merged. There are 9 organizations, three of which operate in 2 provinces. At a national level, the new Library Act has meant that the Netherlands Institute for Public Libraries (SIOB) and (Stichting) bibliotheek.nl have merged, while the KB, the National Library of the Netherlands, will be responsible for national tasks.

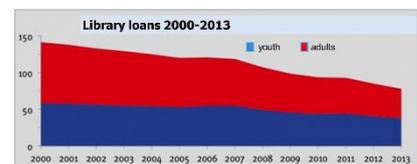
Public libraries in the Netherlands

The number of people who are members of the public libraries decreases. Today, 23% of the Dutch inhabitants is a member of a public library: 4 million.



In the absolute peak year 1994 30% of the population was a member of the public library. Especially the number of adults is decreasing. The number of youth members is growing again.

The amount of library loans decreases even faster than the members of the library. In 1994 180 million books were borrowed, in 2013 less than half; 84 million books were borrowed.



Despite cutbacks, the closely-knit spread of library outlets more or less survives, although the combination of cutbacks and declining visiting numbers mean that outlets are converted into smaller service points, often forming part of a village hall, house of culture or a school.



The world is changing. The advent of the Internet has consequences, also for the libraries. Distribution and communication have fundamentally changed our behavior. The economic crisis has led to serious budget cuts. In the mind of many politicians the lending library has almost ended its life cycle. The public library is expected to fulfil a different, more versatile, broader role.

The Dutch government and the public libraries are looking for new joint principles for the future of the library in a changing society. We need a common view about what the public library is and should do. We need the digital library to be regulated at a national level. Therefore we needed a (new) public library act.

1. The new Library Act - the Public Library Provisions Systems Act (WsoB)

And following a prolonged preliminary process, the 'Public Library Provisions System Act' was adopted on 19 November 2014 '... that it is desirable to update the statutory provisions with regard to the public libraries and to give substance to the national digital library'.



The new law, that is effective as from 1st of January 2015, stems from the need to:

- Integrate the public library system with the services of the Dutch National Library (KB)
- Improve the coherence of the decentralized system
- Tailor the current legal framework for public libraries to the digital age
- Define the core functions of public libraries.

According to the new law public libraries should give the general public access to information and culture, guided by principles such as independence, credibility, accessibility, pluralism and authenticity. Their concrete tasks are:

- to make available knowledge and information;
- to facilitate learning;
- to promote reading and a taste for literature;
- to promote art and culture;
- to organize social encounters and debate.

Public libraries must be more than the lending library they were mostly. Ultimately a library has been chosen with a community purpose. Libraries, with the municipality as contracting authority, must implement all functions; not per branch, but as a library organization as a whole.

The new law defines the roles of the various players within the national network. The library provisions at a national, provincial and municipal level form the participants of the public library system:

- KB – National Library of the Netherlands
- Provincial supporting institutes
- Local public libraries

The network of Dutch libraries works closely together and features the following components:

- the national library catalogue including the entire range of all public libraries
- Inter-library lending traffic
- A joint collection plan
- Nationwide digital infrastructure and a digital collection
- A national library card – harmonization of membership records / coordination of general terms and conditions for the use of the library
- Service provision to education

2. The role of KB (National Library of the Netherlands) for the public library system

The new law defines the roles of the various players within the national network and gives the Royal Library (KB), in addition to its traditional role to collect and preserve all Dutch publications, a central role in: managing the public library system, improving the coherence, efficiency and effectiveness of the public library system; running the Dutch digital public library; and implementing the policy for the visually handicapped. The allocation of funds to the KB by the minister of Education, Culture and Science will be based on an overall strategic 4-years plan, to be specified on a yearly bases.

Managing the public library system involves national programs, such as, in the field of Reading programs and illiteracy, ‘Kunst van lezen’ / ‘the Art of Reading’; special library services for the print disabled, and it concerns a research program into the value of the library, an innovation program, knowledge sharing and professional development at a national level and a collection plan. Every four years, the KB writes a joint collection plan for the participants to the network. The objective of the collection plan is to create coherence between the physical and digital collections of the public library system. It offers a framework for the composition and management of the collection by means of a provision. The KB adopts the joint collection plan in agreement with the representatives of the local libraries and provincial support institutions.

The KB is responsible for the National Digital Library:

- Developing and managing the digital infrastructure;
- Managing the digital collection, providing it with a context and harmonizing it with the collection of digital publications of the KB;
- Drawing up regulations for accessing the digital collection;
- Reaching the different target groups;
- Collaborating with other public providers of digital publications.

The Digital infrastructure for the public library system contains:

- WAAS: the basis of the national digital infrastructure is formed by the joint website infrastructure. Through WAAS = Website As A Service – the national and local websites form a unity;
- National Catalogue (collection of the Netherlands): The (local) library website offers every civilian access to the national catalogue, the complete joint physical and digital collections (joint range). Whereas outlets / libraries, offer an up-to-date collection geared to the target group, the catalogue offers a complete range. Up to 20% of all items borrowed have been ordered via the Internet;
- Purchase of digital works: Funds from all municipalities have been made available for the purchase of content for the joint digital library. The KB procurement committee is made up by members of the Netherlands Public Library Association. The digital library will offer e-books, e-music audiobooks, databanks, articles and content for education, all accessible by the same catalogue. It features a single copy, multi user model for e-books that has been very successful, also due to the Holiday app by which both library patrons and non-patrons can download and stream e-books, be it recent or older ones. Since the launch in January 2014 more than 10.000 e-book titles became available for the public libraries. The national E-book library can be accessed by all members of all public libraries. Since the new range, libraries have been successful in conquering a prominent position. The scope does not yet commensurate with the old lending figures, yet does offer perspective for a fundamental role of libraries – and its 4 million users – in the distribution channels of E-books, within a literate society. In the first year, 1 million E-books were borrowed via the E-book platform.

It is a challenge to merge the digital library of the public library system with the national digital library, which is under development with the National Library of the Netherlands and its partners in a key role. The KB’s policy plan ‘2015-2018: the power of the network¹’, describes the objectives and steps to implement this.

¹ <https://www.kb.nl/sites/default/files/docs/strategicplan-2015-2018.pdf>