

Talking with citizens

The story we tell and the story we hear

Reaching Vulnerable and Marginalised communities

There is a significant need to develop strategies for reaching vulnerable communities. This area will benefit greatly through sharing best practices. We are therefore asking colleagues to submit evidence from their own contexts of best practice of reaching marginalised communities to the Netherlands Ombudsman to support the drafting of a best practice paper.

Target groups

How can we as ombudsinstitutions make sure everybody knows the ombudsman? How can we become so well-known everybody is able to find us. Ultimately you want to be in contact with the people themselves and especially the people that really need us but at the moment seem unable to find us. Our first move was to try to identify the groups we are talking about. Who are they? We commissioned an investigation which focused on two main questions:

1. Which target groups do not know how to find the Ombudsman when they need help?
2. How can the Ombudsman raise its profile among these target groups?

From this research, it became clear that there are five groups that require particular attention from the Ombudsman:

- Young adults
- Migrants and refugees
- Self-employed (entrepreneurs)
- Single/young parents
- Older informal carers/single elderly people

Not our network

The first thing we discovered was that it is near impossible to get in contact with all these people. They lead very different lives, use very different communication channels (if any) and because they are so diverse and large in number, they are very hard to reach directly. But we discovered also that that is not necessary. Many people and organisations are already in contact with these various groups: people and organisations with special networks and the will to help these groups on a non-profit basis. It is those that need to know about the ombudsman. We call them intermediaries and define them as:

People (at executive, tactical or strategic level), organisations or institutions who are in direct contact with citizens and provide them with support in their contact and interaction with authorities.

For example: interest groups, general practitioners, psychologists, legal desks, lawyers. They give advice and represent (vulnerable) citizens. We then decided to make use of these intermediaries, instead of trying to duplicate their work. There were three main reasons for doing so:

1. They know the target group and their problems like no one else.
2. They are often the first point of contact for the target group.
3. This approach saves the target group having to deal with another public authority.

Intermediaries

As our focus is now on the intermediaries our communication and strategies are aimed at them. This system has now been implemented at our institution and we have also rolled out a number of general initiatives to facilitate intermediaries in their contact with our target groups. For example, we have:

- expanded our website with a dedicated section for intermediaries;
- introduced an advice hotline especially for intermediaries;
- developed an online counselling desk to lower the threshold for contact between intermediaries and the Ombudsman.

Online counselling desk

We have set up a digital platform for intermediaries. It is a kind of counselling desk (Raadbaak in Dutch). It is an online resource where intermediaries can receive questions and appeals for help from citizens (so it is not only ombuds topics per se that come up on this platform). It is also a place where intermediaries can ask questions, share tips or identify any structural problems they encounter in their work amongst themselves. They can also talk to other organisations and of course National Ombudsman staff. We share relevant knowledge from our experience that can help intermediaries in their work. And in doing so, we help citizens in trouble more quickly and effectively. This online resource has been a great success and we were very happy to discover that intermediaries are also using the site to ask each other questions. At present more than 450 intermediaries use our platform.

Succes?

Yes, as mentioned, it was and is a success. But that does not mean we solved the puzzle. In order to do that we asked the company that did our first investigations into the identification of the vulnerable groups, to gather feedback on our outreach. What they came up with, was not always evidence of a successful project. I would like to share with you a general overview of the outcomes.

Feedback

Because we are often convinced we are doing the right thing, but it is of the essence that we always take critical look in the mirror and ask ourselves if that is really the case. Think of the peer review which can provide the same kind of important feedback that we so much need as independent organisations.

Three groups

The company approached three groups that were relevant for our outreach:

1. Receivers of aid (so the vulnerable group)
2. Intermediaries (NGO's)
3. Government (in the broadest sense)

They were asked about:

1. when they expected that the ombudsman could help
2. who the ombudsman could help
3. about how the ombudsman could help

4. how contact was maintained
5. how to cooperate with the ombudsman.

Some answers

I will not describe the whole outcome of the survey, but I will give you some of the sometimes quite clear feedback we received on these questions.

Mandate

As is to be expected, a lot of people were not aware of the existence or function of the ombudsinstitution. And in the same line, it is not always clear when the ombudsinstitution can help. The platform in itself forms an important place to share the knowledge about our institution. But a very concrete question was that both receivers of aid and intermediaries wanted clear information about what the ombudsman can and cannot do. This is in itself a challenge, because our mandates are often quite complex. Especially as these are based on laws that use legal jargon. Our mandate for instance is based on a definition of public body. But that definition is complex, even for lawyers. And so it is for many people completely unclear what that means.

Who do we help?

Another point was that people thought we would side with citizens or NGO's against the government or public bodies. In the Netherlands the name ombudsman is neutral but it is not unexpected that people think we will help them against the government. This is even more of a problem when we conclude that the government acted properly. That conclusion sometimes gives people the impression that we are siding with government instead of helping them.

Communication

And this brings me to an important other remark we often heard. How do we talk to people? What language do we use? Are we doing it better than the government we are monitoring? In other words, are we the example that the government should follow? Are our procedures not bureaucratic? Are we easy to reach? Do we act promptly? The answers to all these questions are not always positive. We fail at times as the government does too. So how do you explain that, how do you keep up the proper working methods? This and other questions may be the most difficult to answer.

Quick wins

So it is of great importance that we also note the challenges that we are facing in our work. Especially on this topic where the groups we are dealing with are so hard to reach. So please send us your success stories, but do not refrain from sharing the lessons you learned along the way. I will now close with some quick wins that the investigation brought forward.

1. Do not use private or general numbers so that intermediaries seeking help can call back in a targeted manner
2. Create an overview of types of questions about which intermediaries can or cannot contact the ombudsinstitution
3. Have an automatic reply that the ombudsman will try to respond within X number of days

4. Provide clear information on the mandate of the ombudsman, on the website and at the beginning of a request for help
5. Continue with the intermediaries platform and develop it further.