

INTRODUCTION

In this thesis one possible answer to the question:

“How can opportunities for Young people be activated in regions with shrinking population?” will be given by presenting an example of a good practice project:

Zachte G¹-creative energie uit Limburg. This project developed from a need to promote active participation of young people in society, especially in shrinking society of Limburg region in the south of the Netherlands. It aims to bring young people together in a “virtual” environment where they can exercise their artistic aspirations. Moreover, after virtual network is established, physical meetings are set up in order to reinforce the network. Zachte G encourages young people to express their views through art and ensures space and audience where that voice can be heard.

Zachte G is a regional project: It is a platform where young people from Limburg are given a voice to express themselves and raise and tackle relevant issues in society: such as challenging demographic situation in the region, position and opportunities for young people and issues in the society in general. This way,

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Zachte G-creative energie uit Limburg in Duch is translated into Soft G-creative energy from Limburg.

“Soft G” refers to the way G is pronounced in Limburg (as opposed to hard G from the North of the Netherlands). Pronunciation of G (“Zachte G”) is seen as a part of Limburg’s identity. For the purpose of this piece name “Zachte G” will be used.

young people's opportunities to actively participate in this shrinking society are promoted and encouraged.

Arts as means of empowerment and well being is taking larger role in the society. Zachte G project has proven to be an important tool for discussion for young people in the region. It goes beyond work of artists and provides arena where creativity and innovation can be exercised. This is particularly important having in mind demographic developments in the region: shrinking population, ageing and less younger people. Promoting artistic expression not only improves the image of the region, but also encourages young people to stay in the region.

South Limburg, especially with it's east part, Parkstad, is seen as a pioneer when it comes to demographic developments. It is relevant to mention that, while other shrinking regions in the Netherlands are rural, Parkstad is only urbanised area that is shrinking. This makes it unique and, also, requires unique responses to the situation. This area is shrinking faster than the rest of the country and response to this is sought by the local politicians. However, attention is often given to the, what is seen as, fields most affected by shrinking: education, housing, municipality finances, stagnating economy, etc. Zachte G recognises the need to see how shrinking influences social and cultural aspects of society and to respond to the developments in a creative manner. It is an example of approach

involving arts aimed to broadening the discussion around shrinkage. Aims are to relate modern and urban culture to the theme of shrinkage and, by making use of the ICT technology, reach broader audience.

The project highlights different ways decision makers could deal with shrinking population. It is already supported by provincial government who recognizes the importance of this project for activation of young people in the region and increase of the opportunities for their participation in civil society.

This piece will first give overview of the region and demographic situation. Next scientific background will be followed by detailed description of the project. Main conclusions will be summarised in the last part.