

MANIFESTO OF CIVIC FOUNDATION



Before you is the first version of ***Civic Foundation's (Stichting Civic) Manifesto***, a document resulting from discussion and reflection amongst Civic Foundation board members, together with our partners and critical friends. For five years, the Civic Foundation has worked to spark a fundamental debate about the dominant perspectives on 'civic integration' and 'integration'. After countless changes within integration policies, we are still left with a policy which excludes, discriminates, and forces people to 'earn' their place in the Netherlands. As Civic Foundation, we see the need to look beyond just making corrections to the existing policy. Instead, through this manifesto, we aim to create a space for a fundamental rethinking of 'civic integration', 'integration' and the skewed image that exists about newcomers in the Netherlands. By exposing these normalised thoughts, we embark on a concerted search for alternatives.

A fundamentally different perspective on 'integration' requires a different language, different concepts, and a different way of thinking and acting. The process of writing this manifesto required us to make deliberate choices in the words we use as Civic Foundation. Every word has an impact, including the words you read in our manifesto. We aim to discuss these words in the coming year.

We will do this by highlighting one of our 10 propositions every month through events, podcasts, articles, etc. By doing so, we aim to facilitate discussion around the propositions and encourage the exchange of thoughts, perspectives, and fundamental ideas on 'civic integration' and 'integration'.

We do not do this alone, but together with all people involved in relevant themes within Dutch society. We invite you to actively engage with us through the website, social media, online and physical events.

Our manifesto is intended as a platform for dialogue and is open to input and change arising from dialogue.

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<https://stichtingcivic.nl/manifest/>

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1. Civic Foundation prefers the term 'Start Policy' instead of 'civic integration (inburgering) policy'

Civic Foundation suggests that a policy which intends to welcome newcomers should be called Start Policy instead of civic integration policy. Choosing a new term for civic integration is a starting point for a much-needed and fundamentally new perspective on the relationship between migration, social policy, and citizenship. Bringing forward this new perspective is the Civic Foundation's main ambition.

Start Policy focuses on the question: 'What needs to be organised publicly so that every newcomer can get a good start on her/his/her life in the Netherlands?'

After a quarter-century of policy changes, the results of Dutch civic integration are still disappointing and damaging. Integration is founded on a mistrust of newcomers, stigmatises newcomers as persons needing to 'integrate' and rests on uniform result obligations. This does not support anyone moving forward and is at odds with European law. To improve this, the current civic integration policy must be abolished and dominant perspectives on integration and inclusion must be broken.

The purpose of this manifesto is to set out the foundations of the Start Policy and explain where it differs from civic integration policy.

2. Start-up policy invests in people from the belief that they will stay.

Many newcomers settle permanently. Therefore, the best and most sustainable policy choice is to unconditionally support newcomers in making a good start.

This does not mean that all newcomers will or should settle permanently in the Netherlands. Nor is that the point. The point is: that policies which invest in newcomers as if they will stay create a win-win situation.

Suppose a newcomer ultimately does not settle, because she/he/they migrate again or return to her country of origin. This is not seen as problematic from the perspective of the Start Policy: the period in the Netherlands then forms a worthy piece within her broader life path.

But, more importantly, suppose the newcomer does eventually stay. The Start Policy has facilitated the newcomer's good start from the very first moment. The newcomer is fully and proactively involved in all relevant domains (e.g. school, work, neighbourhoods). The newcomer is not, practically, and mentally, placed in a waiting situation.

3. Start-up policy is about facilitating a good start for people settling in the Netherlands

A Start policy applies to all newcomers in the period after they arrive in the Netherlands. The purpose of the Start Policy is to better organise this period. No more, no less.

The current civic integration policy suggests that newcomers' stay is still conditional: they must first spend many years meeting all kinds of requirements so that they have gone through a personal transformation which makes it possible to say that they now 'belong'. Newcomers (and with them the officials and teachers involved) spend a lot of time complying with requirements - partly to avoid fines - even when these requirements obviously do not support a good start.

The Start Policy we propose, unlike the current civic integration policy, does not measure and examine whether newcomers are 'sufficiently integrated' as individuals to earn permanent residence rights and citizenship. Start Policy is part of broader public policies that support liberal democratic values, such as equal opportunities and equal citizenship, for all. With this as its objective, Start Policy removes as many barriers as possible rather than creating barriers.

4. The core of the Start Policy is thriving, not disciplining.

Arriving and settling in a new country can be a dynamic and turbulent period in a person's life. The Start Policy aims to support newcomers during this transition, where necessary. This enables newcomers to build a new life as best they can.

This makes the Start Policy substantially different from current civic integration policies that focus on testing whether newcomers have become fit or loyal citizens. Newcomers should adapt and should not be a burden to 'us'. With this reasoning at its foundation, civic integration has become increasingly intensive, expensive, difficult, and punitive. The new civic integration law has no less than nine penalty moments!

The Start Policy treats people with confidence, dignity and respect because of who they are, rather than acting from mistrust and disciplining them into becoming something they should be. The Start Policy does not presume newcomers must overcome assumed or perceived shortcomings. The Start Policy aims to enable newcomers to apply their abilities and talents. It also allows them to realise new capabilities and ambitions.

5. Start Policy takes personal needs, capabilities, and ambitions, which differ from one individual to another, as a starting point

The mistaken idea that civic integration policies should produce 'integrated migrants' leads to integration policies that demand the same from almost all newcomers.

Even the new Civic Integration Act, although it promises to be customised, has the ambition that as many newcomers as possible meet standardised requirements. But these requirements are insultingly easy and belittling for some, while for others they lead to many problems and stress.

The Start Policy completely abandons this approach. It offers all newcomers the opportunity to chart their own path and supports where necessary. Whether and where support is needed varies from person to person. Above all, policies that welcome newcomers should not undermine a good start!

For example: if someone wants to do a certain course where Dutch is the language of instruction, language education must be made accessible. But if someone already knows English very well and wants to start working immediately in a field in which he or she has experience, that should also be possible. In that case, compulsory language education or other requirements should not stand in the way.

Newcomers are a diverse group. The Start Policy considers the specific needs, capacities, ambitions and starting positions of newcomers. If a newcomer needs to rest and 'land' for a while first, the start-up policy also offers room for this.

6. Start Policy doesn't work with 'earned citizenship'

The Start Policy sets no conditions for obtaining permanent residence or citizenship. It separates itself from the idea that citizenship must be earned. Permanent rights and citizenship are not privileges for the best among us, but a basic democratic right for people based on their dignity and presence in society.

The Netherlands is a democracy characterised by diversity, diversity in socio-economic positions, political orientations, religious views, ethnic backgrounds, educational orientation, family life, career, et cetera. It is impossible to make a list of conditions a person must meet to be considered an 'integrated migrant' who has become a 'true Dutchman'. There is no such thing as THE Dutchman.

Moreover, the idea of earned citizenship for migrants contributes to social hierarchies among Dutch citizens. Dutch citizens without a migration background are never called to account for their integration; they never have to prove they are true Dutch citizens. Citizens with migration backgrounds often must do this. They must prove to be appropriate, desirable, and useful to society.

7. Start Policy is not based on hospitality but on democratic equality

On an institutional level, the arrival of newcomers should not be understood as welcoming people to 'our home' in the Netherlands. Hospitality is not the foundation of the Start Policy, because hospitality is also not the basis of relations between citizens in a democratic country.

Of course, on a more personal level, a desirable characteristic of hospitality is that it encourages kindness, respect, and generosity. Hospitality can be warm and preferable to hostility. But hospitality at the institutional level creates, by definition, unequal relationships between recipients and guests. Guests are somewhere temporary, must be accommodating and grateful, and do not obtain an equal voice in house rules. Hospitality always has something paternalistic about it.

The Start Policy is a public policy that promotes democratic equality. It is not a form of generosity or charity. It applies to newcomers, and it stems from what we owe each other from a democratic perspective. Newcomers who settle become part of the Dutch political and social community. The Start Policy facilitates a good start for them and thus equal citizenship and participation for all.

8. Current perspectives on 'integration' and 'civic integration policy' are discriminatory

The Start Policy applies equally to all newcomers, without categorising them or operating from cultural assumptions.

The current civic integration policy relies on ideas of 'the other' and individuals who are seen as inherently different from 'us'. The civic integration policy identifies groups of migrants who are assumed to be distant from us in terms of their norms and values, culture and way of life. They are identified as having to go through an integration process to bridge this gap. These hierarchies are deeply rooted in the history of the Netherlands and Europe and create ethnic stereotyping, racism, discrimination and the reproduction of inequality and exclusion mechanisms.

It is also discriminatory that certain groups are exempted from civic integration while others are required to do so. It orders groups and individuals based on their 'cultural distance' from an extremely homogeneous idea of 'us'. That certain groups are categorised as more problematic based on their origin, religion or gender is discrimination.

9. The ambition is for everyone, newcomer or not, to be equipped for life in the Netherlands

Current civic integration policy treats newcomers as a special group in Dutch society, who have to go through a separate (and strictly monitored and sanctioned) integration and civic integration process. This differential treatment creates a rift between 'society' and the 'non-integrated' who are allegedly outside society. This is at odds with promoting equality.

Good support and information provision are of course of great importance. This applies to everyone in the Netherlands, newcomer or not. For newcomers, certain issues, for example around entering the labour market or dealing with the Tax Administration, are currently labelled as integration issues.

Civic Foundation argues that the concept of 'integration' has no added value in better understanding these issues. Everyone goes through transitional moments during her/his/their lives - moves, education, family expansions, et cetera. The government's role is to put policies in place which ensure that people can navigate these moments. That is what the Start Policy aims to be.

10. Society is never finished

Many integration debates consider the multicultural society to have failed. Migration is thus seen as a threat to the perfect society. In this image, integration and civic integration policies would protect society from these disruptive aspects from the outside.

This is a false picture. All the characteristics, traits and challenges that may be present among newcomers also occur among Dutch citizens. Take the example of language (because it gets such emphasis in today's civic integration). About 2.5 million Dutch people have difficulties in reading, writing and/or arithmetic. These low-literate citizens are indeed 'real citizens' and belong to society. This shows that citizenship by newcomers is not something which can or should be 'earned' by meeting a certain language requirement.

Many people in the Netherlands would be better positioned to achieve their life goals if they had the opportunities to improve their language and literacy levels. If the government genuinely wants to invest in this, a wide range of government programmes are possible. Examples include forms of public education for children as well as adult education for internal EU migrants and newcomers.

The government should therefore have a vision for language policy. Language policy can certainly be a part of a supportive Start Policy. Language learning alone has nothing to do with 'belonging' or not.

A good start is of course much broader than language. The core is: society is never finished, and everyone belongs.