How do civil society organisations deal with diversity within an assimilationist context?

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How do civil society organisations deal with diversity within an assimilationist context? The case of Rotterdam

Here, Dr Anouk Tersteeg and Dr Gideon Bolt from the Faculty of Geosciences at Utrecht University explain how civil society organisations deal with diversity within an assimilationist context, arguing the case of Rotterdam

Introduction

Dealing with the increasing diversity of the population is a major challenge for urban policy. Whereas most authorities in big diverse cities have a more positive and inclusive approach than their national counterparts, the opposite is true for Rotterdam. In 2002, Rotterdam was the first Dutch city where an anti-immigrant, right-wing populist party won the local elections. The political shift towards the right has influenced the policy discourse on diversity in Rotterdam to a great extent. Rotterdam has moved to an assimilationist framework in which there has been a decline in policy efforts to facilitate positive encounters between ethnic groups. This e-book provides insight into how grassroots organisations deal with diversity within the assimilationist Rotterdam context.

Assimilation, multiculturalism and interculturalism

Cities worldwide are becoming increasingly diverse, particularly as the result of globalisation and migration. This increasing diversification poses challenges for national integration policies as well as urban planning (Pemberton, 2016). The assimilationist approach, viewing the otherness of ethnic communities as temporary, is increasingly problematic now that many large Western cities lack a clear majority group in which one is to assimilate (Crul, 2016). At the same time, there has been a backlash against the multiculturalist approach across Western Europe (Vertovec and Wessendorf, 2010). The (supposed) failure of multiculturalism, combined with

the worries of politicians and voters about the increasing size and diversity of the immigrant population has led to a shift towards assimilationist policies, at least at the national level. This is visible in the adoption of civic integration policies across Europe, which reveals the prioritisation of the national cultural identity at the expense of the recognition of migrants' cultural identity (Joppke, 2007).

Interculturalism can be seen as an alternative for both assimilation and multiculturalism. Advocates of interculturalism argue that it is necessary to move beyond depictions of bounded communities differentiated along ethnic and cultural lines as it leads to essentialising of ethnic differences while overlooking other differentiations on the basis of class, lifestyles, attitudes or activity patterns (Tasan-Kok et al., 2013; Pemberton, 2016). Therefore, a shift is needed from the recognition of collective identities to that of individual competencies. Consequently, mainstreaming is advocated as the best strategy for addressing a hyperdiverse society (Van Breugel et al. 2014). Collett & Petrovic (2014, p.3) describe mainstreaming as "the effort to reach people with a migration background through social programming and policies that also target the general population, rather than through specific immigrant integration policies alone". Mainstreaming implicates that diversity policy is not the responsibility of a single department in a municipality but that diversity-related efforts are integrated into the core services of all administrations in the municipality (Andersen et al., 2014).

National versus local level

The shift to a more assimilationist approach at the national level is not necessarily reproduced at the local level. Due to trends of decentralisation and increasing interactions between urban policy-makers in city networks, it can no longer be assumed that cities merely implement policies that are derived from policy paradigms defined at the national level (Schiller, 2015). City authorities tend to adopt more inclusive forms of integration policies and to employ a more positive discourse towards diversity. Amsterdam, for instance, sees diversity as an asset to the city and (unlike the national government) does not expect its immigrants to adapt to the majority culture (Schiller 2015; Scholten, 2013). Also, other cities like Copenhagen (Andersen et al., 2014), Leeds (Schiller, 2015), London (Raco, 2018) and Zurich (Plüss & Schenkel, 2014) have a more positive approach to diversity than their national governments. On the basis of a comparison of 10 cities in the EU Raco (2018), a clear trend towards a more pragmatic approach to diversity in which positive aspects of difference for competitiveness and social cohesion are stressed is perceived here. Local pragmatism can be related to the fact that it is the cities where the consequences of immigration are most visible. For city authorities, diversity is a given that has to be accommodated. They prefer to focus on coping with concrete issues rather than on delving into ideological debates (Scholten, 2013).

Differences between cities

However, cities are not by definition more open and inclusive than their national governments. Rotterdam is an example of a city where the discourse on integration has been harsher than the national debate. It is the first city in the Netherlands where a right-wing populist party has won the elections. That happened in 2002 after several decades of Labour party rule. Some scholars argue that this electoral shift is related to the (perceived) competition with immigrants at the regional labour market, which is still struggling with declining employment in manufacturing and in the harbour. Amsterdam has about the same proportion of immigrants but populist right parties are much less successful there. In Amsterdam, which has been described by Kloosterman (2014) as a successful "cognitive-cultural" economy, immigrants are economically more complementary to the native workforce. De Grauw & Vermeulen (2016) found that cities with right-leaning governments are more likely to develop more restrictive integration policies than left-leaning governments and Rotterdam is no exception to this general trend.

The Rotterdam approach

Whereas many cities have a more positive approach to diversity than their national governments (Raco, 2018), the opposite applies to Rotterdam. Until 2002, Rotterdam had a cross-cutting diversity policy called

The Multi-Coloured City. The policy was based on a multiculturalist discourse. Diversity was defined along socio-cultural lines and it was seen as a quality and a matter that concerns all citizens (groups) and employers in the city. In 2001, Rotterdam openly celebrated cultural diversity as a European Capital of Culture. This approach came to an abrupt end in 2002 when, after decades of rule by the Labour Party, the populist party Liveable Rotterdam (Leefbaar Rotterdam) came to power. In line with national discourses on diversity at that time, the party aimed to achieve socio-cultural assimilation of newcomers, particularly Muslims. Ethnic and religious differences were framed as a safety threat for the city. Liveable Rotterdam gave voice to existing discontent among a significant part of the population. The Labour Party governed the city again between 2006 and 2014 but the kind of diversity policies which were in place prior to 2002 were not re-introduced. Most governmental policy actors we talked to explained that diversity is often understood as a problem that the city needs to cope with. Even though the city – particularly in its citizenship and integration policy – tries to frame diversity as a quality, for instance, by talking about 'talent development' and the city's '174 nationalities', policies often pay more attention to potential negative effects of diversity, such as social tensions, economic competition and socio-economic exclusion, rather than on extending positive developments.

Several non-governmental interviewees discussed how – when diversity is seen as a quality in policy – governmental, as well as non-governmental policy-makers mainly portray it as an economic benefit. Whereas an intercultural approach advocates the importance of dialogue and interaction and concomitantly, the creation of meeting opportunities, this is hardly seen as a task of the municipality.

The city does not have an articulated diversity policy and the municipal budget for the governance of diversity is relatively low. Moreover, diversity in policy is more often understood as a problem rather than as an asset or opportunity. Although policy actors value the fact that mainstream policy does not differentiate between groups – and, thus, also does not stigmatise –, they argue that it runs the risk of overlooking the specific needs of vulnerable social groups. Indeed, mainstreaming as implemented in Rotterdam does not seem to be a diversity-sensitive approach at all, which is in stark contrast to cities like Toronto and London, where policy-makers are much more aware of the specific needs of diverse groups and where there is a much stronger consensus that the personnel of the municipality and other organisations should be representative of the population of the city (Ahmadi & Tasan-Kok, 2014; Raco, 2018).

Mainstreaming in Rotterdam seems to be a euphemism for budget cuts on diversity policies. While mainstreaming fits, in theory, very well with an interculturalist agenda, policies in Rotterdam hold an underlying assimilationist discourse: the policies are aimed at all Rotterdammers but an extra effort is asked from residents with a foreign background and those belonging to, what the municipality calls in its integration policy 'the slow city', to catch up with the mainstream which policy portrays as the existing residents of the 'fast city'. Several policy actors have expressed their disappointment about the absence of a discussion on how to deal with complex social diversity and speak of a 'taboo,' which should be understood in light of discourse shifts on the matter of diversity in Rotterdam and in national policies from pluralism and integrationism at the end of the 1990s to economic and cultural assimilation today.

The approach of grass-roots initiatives

The approach of grass-roots initiatives in Rotterdam fits more in the intercultural approach. Firstly, many local initiatives examined deliberately build upon diversity to achieve their goals: the initiatives aim at fostering social cohesion by enabling positive exchanges between diverse people; they aim at increasing social mobility by generating a flywheel effect, that is, participants educate one another; and to stimulate entrepreneurship, the initiatives use diversity as a selling point or as a strategy to raise social capital. Secondly, while national and urban policies promote a mainstream approach, in which policies are meant to target all citizens in the municipality rather than specific groups, local initiatives acknowledge and cater to the diverse characteristics of participants. Thirdly, in contrast with urban policy, local initiatives use a broad definition of diversity and mostly see diversity as a social and economic quality or opportunity.

It could be argued that local initiatives compensate for the assimilationist policies and the budget cuts of the municipality. They create opportunities for encounters and can reach vulnerable groups. Without disregarding the positive impacts that local initiatives have, we fear that this conclusion would be much too optimistic. It is not realistic to expect that they solve all the problems that are not addressed by the government. The national and city governments in the Netherlands are carrying out large budget cuts on the funding of local initiatives, particularly those that primarily aim at social cohesion or that target a specific social group. Partly because of this, most local initiatives experience budget shortages. The nature of local initiatives (as facilities for low-income groups), makes it hard for them to attract alternative funders. An interviewee argues about Another Chance, an institution for criminal youths in Rotterdam with multiple problems: "what private parties would have an interest in helping 'the drain' of Rotterdam?" (Research Director of The Far Mountains Foundation). Local initiatives compete with one another for short-term municipal subsidy schemes as municipal budgets for local initiatives are increasingly limited. This competition and the absence of structural funding cause a loss of social and financial capital.

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governing urban diversity

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Further reading:
https://dspace.library.uu.nl/bitstream/handle/1874/356997/Tersteeg.pdf?sequence...

Places with purpose: Reinvigorating Britain's town and city centres

Cllr Peter Box, Leader of Wakefield Council and Chair, Key Cities Group explains how Britain's town and city centres face significant challenges in redefining their purpose for local residents, visitors and businesses

Following a decade of overall economic downturn, shifting consumer patterns and technological advancements, Britain's town centres face significant challenges in redefining their purpose for local residents, visitors and businesses. Coupled with ongoing uncertainty around the impact of Brexit, our town and cities are now at a pivotal stage of their evolution.

As a group, Key Cities has a vital role to play in ensuring that the voices of Britain's towns and cities are heard. We achieve this by developing the agenda and policy asks for governments on behalf of our members – a diverse range of 24 medium-sized cities across the UK.

This mission was central to our recent research report: 'The Future of our City and Town Centres'. The report focuses on the challenges and opportunities faced by our mid-size cities and township. Partnership and collaboration are at the core of our strategy, and the report includes a blueprint with best practice examples of how we are responding to these challenges.

Whilst many of Britain's larger cities have had a diverse mix of uses within their centres, many of the key cities developed to primarily serve local residents working in industry. Many of these industries have since reduced their scale or disappeared entirely in today's service-driven landscape. The shift in this trend has left a chasm in many of Britain's medium-sized cities, and they are left with no easily distinguishable assets.

This, alongside the fact that city and town centres across the UK are all impacted by the ever-changing retail, housing and leisure industries, means that we must develop innovative approaches that seek to use centres in a diverse way that delivers prosperity for local residents and businesses.

Innovation within the retail industry

The retail industry is one sector where economic and consumer-spending habits are having the greatest impact. Whilst retail spend in the UK grew by 4.7% to £366 billion in 2017, online-only sales rose by 15.9% during the period, compared with a disproportionate 2.3% for bricks and mortar sales, according to the latest ONS figures. With the prominence of online retailers continuing to grow, the threat to falling in-store sales is ever-present.

"Although our towns and cities face considerable challenges in their centres, it is not all doom and gloom. Collectively, we must remind ourselves that our centres primarily exist for people, through the provision of societal and economic benefits for all."

The industry must consider how advancements in technology and innovation can transform existing processes and improve the overall experience for the customer and increase productivity rates at the same time. This can take many forms, through exploring the use of apps and in-store Wi-Fi, mobile payments and blockchain technology within the supply and logistics industry.

However, the future success of our town and city centres extends beyond the retail industry. In

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Cllr Peter Box, Chair of Key Cities

compiling our Town Centres research, we published the findings of our survey aimed at key cities residents to ascertain what their perceptions and priorities for the future of town centres were.

Increasing connectivity

When asked about infrastructure, perhaps unsurprisingly, the majority of respondents cited initiatives with a digital dimension. Popular answers included electric vehicle charging points, improvements to mobile network coverage and signposting way findings – including via digital tools. In this regard, the task for our centres is to embrace digital transformation and emerging technologies by ensuring that the supporting infrastructure is in place.

Britain's diverse housing landscape

The housing market across the UK continues to paint a diverse picture, which is especially true for Key Cities. Despite overall housing numbers across member cities increasing steadily over recent years, the majority of city centre housing falls at the extreme ends of a spectrum. Either accommodation becomes unaffordable due to high land values in centres or, the abundance of low-quality housing dictated by housing benefit decreases the incentives to improve housing standards. In responding to this parity, we must ensure that engagement between local authorities, planning organisations and central government occurs, with the objective of providing housing that meets the diverse needs of local residents and communities.

"As a group, Key Cities has a vital role to play in ensuring that the voices of Britain's towns and cities are heard. We achieve this by developing the agenda and policy asks for governments on behalf of our members – a diverse range of 24 medium-sized cities across the UK."

Creating places with purpose

Although our towns and cities face considerable challenges in their centres, it is not all doom and gloom. Collectively, we must remind ourselves that our centres primarily exist for people, through the provision of societal and economic benefits for all. For any response to be successful, we must ensure that the vision for our towns and cities is borne out of the needs of its custodians. We must also provide incentives for visitors to make a return visit, by providing them with a positive and enriching experience in our centres.

Through our combined expertise and template for town and city centres to follow, Key Cities are primed to support policymakers and local authorities to ensure that the appropriate funding and initiatives are in place to ensure that city and town centres evolve for the better.

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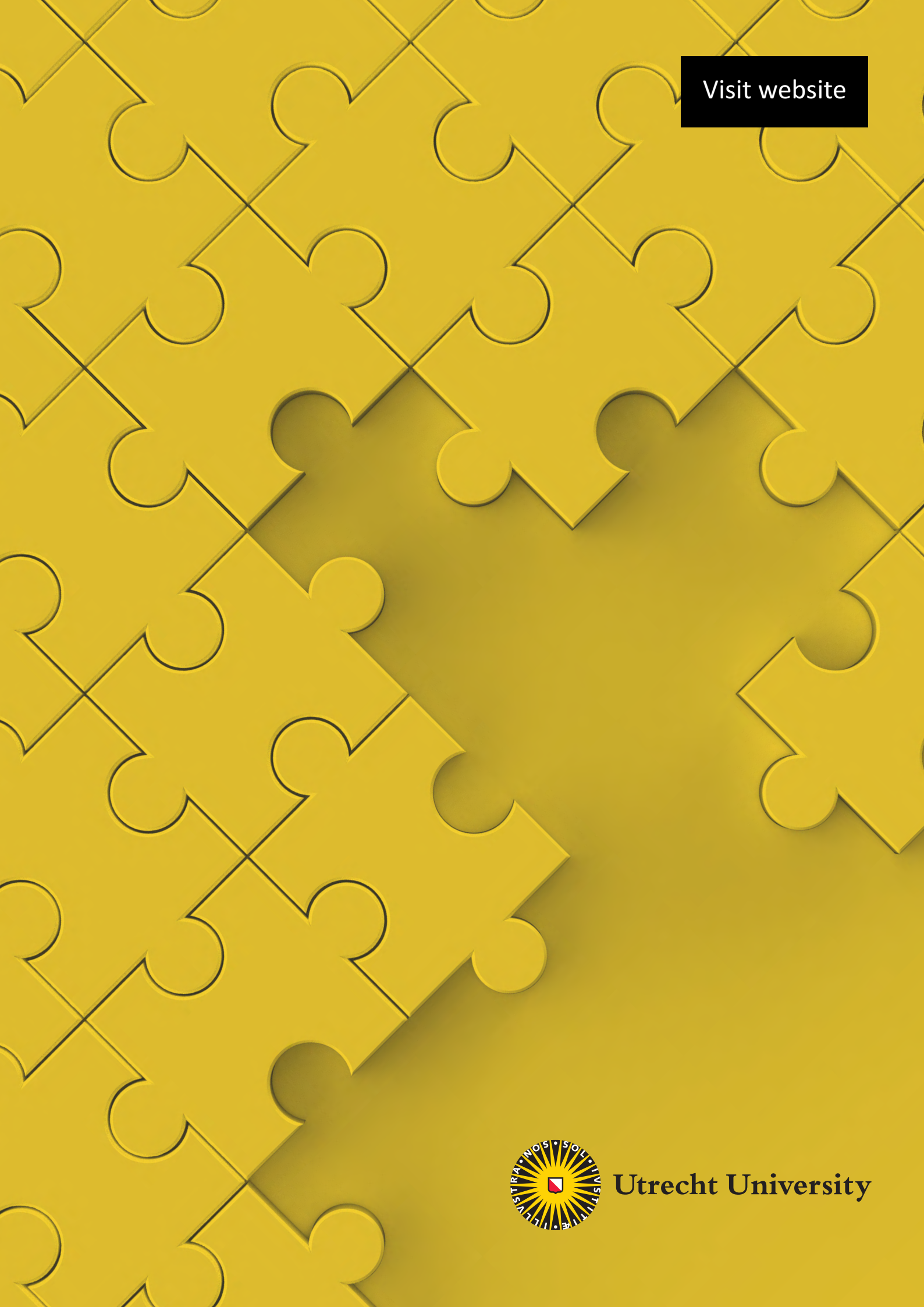
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