

The Experience Of The Dutch Cyclists Union

Twenty-five years Dutch Cyclists Union (Fietzersbond)

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Introduction

Ladies and gentlemen,

At the moment the Netherlands present themselves in Germany at the EXPO 2000 with the slogan: Holland creates space for new ideas. I was there. And I was surprised. I could neither find the word fiets nor a picture or a shot of a bicycle or cyclist in the Dutch presentation at the EXPO 2000.

So, you are right to be here, and not at the EXPO 2000.

Here in Amsterdam, with Velo Mondial 2000, the Fietzersbond, the Dutch Cyclists Union, creates space for new ideas around an old, but still fantastic idea: moving by bike!

We, the Dutch Cyclists Union, started 25 years ago. Let me tell you something about our history and our strategy. In my presentation of the Fietzersbond I will switch between the past and the present, which will give you an impression of what we did and what we do. There are three periods in the history of the Fietzersbond: the seventies, the eighties and the nineties

The Seventies

In the first period, in the seventies, the union succeeded in putting the bicycle on the agenda of the Dutch society and politics.

Between 1960 and 1975 the use of the bicycle in the Netherlands (TDBMP, 28v) declined very much. At the end of the seventies cycling began to increase again. Is the rediscovery of the bicycle due to the activities of the Dutch Cyclists Union? The founding of the Dutch Cyclists Union in 1975 and its activities, actions and demonstrations indeed had a positive effect. The decline of bicycle use was caused by mass motorization and by the process of urbanization and by scores of social, spatial and economic developments. (TDBMP, 29) The Dutch Cyclists Union drew the attention of the society and the politicians to the negative effects of mass motorization: pollution, noise and danger. We showed that providing more and more facilities for cars means that there will be more and more victims of mass motorization. Together with other Non Governmental Organisations we stressed, again and again, that pedestrians, children and of course cyclists became more and more the victims of the pollution, noise and danger effected by mass motorization.

On the other hand we began to draw the attention of the society and the politicians to solutions by showing how you can get better facilities for cyclists. We tried to put the bicycle back on the agenda. We contributed very much to the rediscovery of the bicycle. In a short article about the milestones of the last twenty-five years in our magazine Vogelvrije Fietser you can read about four examples of our actions in the seventies: We demonstrated for more space and facilities to park bicycles at the railroad stations. We started a group bike and train that succeeded in getting better conditions for travelling by train in combination with cycling. We claimed to reduce the maximum speed for all traffic in the cities from 50 km/h to 30 km/h. And we fought for more right of way situations for cyclists.

In short: In the first period, in the seventies, we put the bicycle on the agenda by drawing the attention to the negative effects of mass motorization and by showing possibilities to improve the facilities and conditions for cyclists. Few people believed in the potential of the bicycle as a solution for traffic problems and therefore we had to choose actions and mass demonstrations to force the politicians and the officials at least to listen to the voice of the Dutch cyclists, to listen to the Dutch Cyclists Union.

The Second Period: The Eighties

In the second period, the eighties, more and more politicians, officials and local governments realized that better facilities for cyclists are important to face the negative effects of more and more mass motorization. In this period the Dutch Cyclists Union became more and more an expert in traffic problems. The experience of the cyclists in the Netherlands was bundled in local groups; many active members, volunteers, guaranteed that the professional staff of the union knew what was going on in the street. In the Dutch Cyclists Union the know-how about all the little and the big problems of cyclists is bundled. And the volunteers and staff of the union are daily busy to show how to solve the problems. On the local level active members try to change the policy of the local government. On the national level the professional staff tries to influence the national government, the members of parliament and the officials. In the eighties staff and active members became respectable so-called *ervaringsdeskundigen* that means: experts by experience. Not only did we put issues on the agendas of the government and authorities; we also communicated our experience, our expertise and know how to the officials and politicians. So the eighties became a period of action and consultation, action and talking, action and participation in projects.

Let me tell you something else about our strategy: If you read articles about the Netherlands in international magazines you can often read something about the Poldermodel. Maybe you know that the Dutch are good at turning those areas into land where the sea reigned in past times: the new land you call polder, a unique Dutch word. The Poldermodel means: the Dutch model, the common Dutch way to solve political and social problems: focus on win-win-situations, accept that there will remain differences of opinion, and accept and respect that all parties will try to get a better result for themselves in the future. Why fight any longer when you can do a good deal by talking now? Why fight any longer when it costs a lot of money and will bring no new results at this moment? The Dutch Cyclists Union operates within that Dutch political and social climate, the Poldermodel, that has its roots in the eighties.

But you can imagine that not every member of the union has the same opinion about the question when we have to start and to stop actions and when we have to start talking to reach our goals and when we have to leave the table where we try to make our deals. In my opinion this is a question of strategy of course, not of ideology. But there are of course some risks for a union that is an actor in such a climate as we have had in the Netherlands for about 15 or 20 years. The first risk: If you are not strong and professional enough you cannot play your role well; you invest much time and money in talking, but you will not reach enough results by that talking if you are too weak; if you are too weak you do not sit at the tables where the deals are made. And your time and money is spent on talking, so you do not have enough time and money to organize actions and attract the attention of the press. You become weaker and weaker, because less and less people know that you are there.

There is a second risk of acting within a Poldermodel, if you do both things: organize actions and talk: you will have a permanent internal discussion in your own organisation that can cost very much energy, time and money. If you are wise you give space to this discussion to learn which balance you need. You need the right balance between action and talking to be effective in your mission in the Dutch climate, but you also need the right balance to prevent that the union splits up into two parties or to prevent that too many members quit because of the strategy of the union.

In my opinion the Dutch Cyclists Union is strong enough to operate in the present Dutch climate where deals are made by searching for win-win-situations for different interests and interest groups – without stopping to try to get a much better result in the future for yourself.

And I think the board and the staff of the Dutch Cyclists Union are on the right way by keeping in touch with our members in order to signal early enough if there is a substantial problem about our strategy.

I said that we are strong enough. But to stay strong enough we have to grow. So, our ambition is to have 50.000 members in the year 2004. We need more members for two things especially: We must guarantee that we have ears, eyes and brains all over the country in every city to watch what is going on in the streets and to do all the work on the local level. We need enough active members. And our policy is to be an independent union with an independent financial basis, in my opinion that must be more than 50% of the budget. We need that to prevent that we have too

much trouble in case we get less money from the national and other authorities.

Back to the history of the Fietsersbond, back to the eighties. Did we succeed in our mission to improve the facilities for cyclists already in the eighties? Yes, we did. Of course, nobody can simply claim alone the realizing of more and better facilities. You know, success has many fathers and mothers. But I am sure that we were an important factor in that period. Only one simple fact about the results (based on: The Dutch Bicycle Masterplan, Description and evaluation in an historical context, Ministry of Transport, Public Works and Water Management, March 1999):

Within 10 years the length of bicycle paths increased from 9300 km to 16100 km. A 73% increase. And there is no doubt that this increase contributed to the revival of bicycle use since the mid-1970s. And that is an important fact, also for the strategy of the Dutch Cyclists Union: We do not primarily focus on stimulating people to use the bike. We focus primarily on stimulating politicians, authorities, officials etc. to create more and better facilities to cycle. More and better facilities to cycle will increase bicycle use. Simply asking people to use their bicycle more often is an ineffective action.

The Third Period: The Nineties

In the eighties the activities of the Dutch Cyclists Union contributed a lot to a very good project of the Ministry of Transport: the Masterplan Fiets . The fact that the National Government started a big programme for the time of five years changed the role of the Dutch Cyclists Union in its relationship to the ministry. There was suddenly the chance to pay attention to many problems of cyclists and to start many good and different projects at the same time. The Ministers of Transport recognized that it is a good thing that there is a union for cyclists which can be consulted and which they allowed to participate in processes to solve problems. Therefore they gave us money to improve our organisation and especially to improve the professional assistance of the local groups by our national office. The ministers knew that a stronger Fietsersbond can do a good job: stimulate a good bicycle policy and good solutions by communicating in a professional way the bundled know-how, experience and expertise of the Dutch cyclists.

Now, after the end of the Masterplan Fiets, our role is to continue with that but also to work hard to keep the attention of the national government, especially the Ministry of Transport, focused on the bicycle and the problems of cyclists. And we have to do that on the regional and local level, too. You can imagine that we are now in a period of much goodwill on the side of politicians and officials but that it is very important and often difficult to stimulate and check public plans and programmes that are supposed to improve facilities for cycling.

Let me finish with three successes in the late nineties: 460 million guilders will be spent during the next years to improve the parking facilities for bicycles at about 350 railroad stations in the Netherlands. Last year the traffic rules changed in a way we had asked for 25 years ago: The small motorcycles that were allowed to ride on all bicycle paths have to ride on the car lanes in the cities now. Many cities have already changed the situation in this direction. And the Minister of Traffic, Mrs. Netelenbos, also decided this year to give right of way to the cyclists that come from the right hand. At this point it is our experience here in the Netherlands that it can take 25 years of organizing actions and talking to change a bad traffic rule that is a heritage of the dark days of World War II.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is great to have you here in Holland for a few days with all your experience and expertise and to learn from you. I hope that all together we will succeed in improving the facilities to cycle all over the world. I am happy that the Fietsersbond took the initiative for this Velo Mondial 2000 to create space for new ideas around an old, but still fantastic idea: moving by bike. Thank you for your attention!