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## → The Netherlands: EIRO CAR on "SMEs in the crisis: Employment, Industrial Relations and Local Partnership"

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*SMEs are of major importance to the Dutch economy and its employment. As the economic crisis of 2008 onwards once again demonstrated, small and medium sized companies are in particular vulnerable to the economic conjuncture. In cooperation with the social partners, the Dutch government has taken measures to lighten the burden on employers and employees, including SMEs. Some of these measures presume involvement of the social partners, also at local level, where implementation takes place.*

### Questionnaire

The accompanying questionnaire seeks information from national EIRO correspondents on a number of key themes, including:

- general information on the presence and operation of SMEs
- levels of employment in SMEs and any structural changes that have taken place since 2007
- measures that the government has taken to help SMEs to withstand the crisis
- interest representation in SMEs, including any social dialogue initiatives that have taken place, if these exist
- successful cases of local partnership in terms of maintaining employment
- views from the social partners

### Block 1: Please provide general information about the evolution of SMEs in your country, focusing on:

#### Question 1.1: the number of SMEs operating, size class (1-9, 10-49 and 50-249) in absolute numbers and share in the national economy;

Number of SMEs operating, size class (1-9, 10-49 and 50-249) in absolute numbers and share in the national economy

	2006		2007		2008		2009	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<b>1-9</b>	660.045	91%*	688.240	90%	728.795	91%	769.660	91%
<b>10-49</b>	52.645	7%	58.575	7.6%	55.355	7%	59.465	7.6%
<b>50-249</b>	10.975	2%	11.325	2.4%	11.725	2%	12.180	1.4%

\* In figure is share SME in size-classes; below total SMEs as a share in the national economy

2006: SMEs (725.680 SMEs is 81% of national economy)

2007: SMEs (761.320 SMEs is 85% of national economy)

2008: SMEs (797.840 SMEs is 89% of national economy)

2009: SMEs (844.450 SMEs is 93% of national economy)

#### Question 1.2: their estimated share of employment by size class and economic activity (NACE 1 digit);

Employment figures are not available in the Netherlands (CBS).

**Estimated share of employment\* /jobs by size class and economic activity**

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### Related Links

- [Netherlands: country profile](#)

	2006		2007		2008		2009	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1-9	1.331.200	18%	1.001.500	13%	1.035.200	13%		
10-49	1.389.800	19%	1.429.800	19%	1.455.500	19%		
50-100**	551.000	7%	611.700	8%	620.600	8%		

\* Employment figures are not available in NL; these are job figures. Figures over 2009 are not yet available

\*\* Regarding jobs the SME-class 50 tot 250 is not available; standard is 50-100; 100 to 500

**Question 1.3: recent developments in SMEs in those sectors where they have been more affected by the crisis (major restructuring, new technologies, big job losses, etc.);**

In 2009, the hardest hit by the crisis are the sectors catering, temporary work agencies, IT-companies and metal industry. These sectors, the most in need of financial support, did not receive sufficient support (De Jong, Snoei (2009)). One may assume that also the SMEs in these sectors are more than average hit. The number of SMEs requesting financial support has risen in 2009. In 2008 2.760 entrepreneurs have requested financial support to help the company surviving. In 2009 this number has risen to 3.420. In 2009 25% of SMEs were seeking financial support by commercial credit institutions, 45% out of these also succeeded in finding it. (In 2008 this success percentage was higher: 72% was successful, while 20% was seeking support.) The costs were 119.6 million in 2009, compared to 81.1 million in 2008. In half of the cases, the request has been rejected, because the company is seen as no longer viable. Young, small enterprises are less successful in finding support than well established; their own financial capital helps in successfully finding extra finance (Van der Valk, Smit, 2009).

If one compares the present situation of the SME's with the situation in 2005 (the previous study in SMEs) the most prominent development is the growing numbers of self employed, the most vulnerable group among SMEs. In 2010, their numbers have grown by 33% over a 10-year period to 650,000 self-employed. At present, this group (of self-employed) represents 9% of the national workforce. In particular, the group of self-employed paid the price for the crisis with a decline in income of 12%. (*De Volkskrant*, 12-5-2010)

**Question 1.4 types of contractual arrangements used for the workforce: for example, the ratio of standard (open-ended, full time contract) / atypical (long fixed-term, long part-time, temporary agency work) / very atypical (fixed-term contracts of under 6 months, part-time contracts of under 10 hours a week, on call working, work without a contract) per size of enterprises (1-9, 10-49 and 50-249);**

This information is not available on a representative base (at the Central Bureau for Statistics and at the Economic (research) institute for SMEs, EIM). The impression is that in the very small companies the flexible shield has already disappeared, with the standard contract functioning as last resort. In larger SMEs, fixed contracts and flexible work arrangements are widespread. It is unknown whether the crisis intensified its use, but one may expect this.

**Question 1.5: the type of work organisation that is common in SMEs. This could include working patterns, shift work, flexible working, remote working, and could also look at whether subcontracting is a widespread practice. The information should be provided per size class and in comparison with companies having more than 249 employees. Differences between economic activities should be taken into account.**

Information on remote working or subcontracting in SMEs is not available. Regulated by law are the (annual) working hours for full-time employees, thus including SMEs. There is a standard statutory provision and a more flexible regulation set through agreement between the social partners, thus including SMEs. The working hours on an annual basis are legally regulated working hours. On a weekly base the social partners may agree on a more flexible regulation, in particular of interest for SMEs.

**Questions 1.6: How far are SMEs involved in networks of enterprises? Please provide information by size of company and sector as far as possible.**

This information is not available.

**Block 2: Has your government undertaken any targeted measures to help SMEs to weather the crisis?**

The Ministries for Finance, Economic affairs and Social affairs and Employment have taken measures independently and in collaboration. Most of the measures in 2009 have been directed at providing financial leeway and bringing financial rest to companies as a continual cash-flow is essential to SMEs. In answering the questions (Block 2) on government measures, we distinguish measures,

which have a generic aim and/or target group of companies/employers (1). In addition to targeting, the questionnaire asks information on accessibility (2), and actually taken-up rates by SMEs (3). When available the answers offer this information, but consultation at the CBS, at EIM and at the Ministry of Social affairs proved that on the whole this information on a representative base is not available. The impression reported – in newspapers, by the Minister – is: big companies have been profiting more than SMEs.

In reaction to the questionnaire's focus points (end Block 2) we add here: more in general, size classes of SMEs, sectoral and other demarcations were not explicitly used, so are not mentioned in the measures summed up below.

If yes, which ones:

- financial measures (access to credit/loans, provision of direct subsidies/credits)

The government took measures to provide more accessibility of the credit facilities. It offered more room for the postponement of pay and lowered the tax burden for SMEs. The government also offered possibilities to spread in the books debit losses in the annual account over a three-year period (the so-called carry back measure). It also took measures to help companies to collect bills within normal terms.

In addition, the government established the crisis and recovery law, directed at shortening procedures so infrastructural projects could start faster (these measures are in particular of interest for the construction industry), a sector where many small subcontractors operate. Furthermore, the measure on scrap yard-cars, rewarding buying new cars, was introduced to stimulate automobile selling.

- commercial opportunities (help with finding new markets, help with export)

The government took more financial responsibility (a surety) for activities/export abroad, because financial market parties became more cautious. The government also financially supported the development in sustainability, for example by investing extra in the development of the electric car and in construction and energy.

- Support through consultants or other help

The government took no measures in supporting consultants or other help.

- simplification of administrative processes (i.e.: cutting red tape, simplification of hiring and dismissal rules)

The government established measures to reduce the administrative burden further, planning to shrink 'red tape' by 25%. Besides this generic aim, the government took additional action in relation to the crisis. For example, the law on Flexicurity was further broadened: the ruling on 3 fixed term work contracts was enlarged to 4 contracts.

- supporting job creation, (for instance, through reducing labour taxes)

The government has established the reduction of working hours scheme in 2008 and again in 2009. This temporarily scheme will (to avoid mass redundancies) offer companies in difficulties the option of rendering their employees unemployed for a maximum of half their working hours and for a period of no more than 15 months. Since benefits amount to 70% of the salary level, employees would have to forfeit 15% of their overall salary. To increase their mobility refresher training programmes were introduced and the role mobility centres had to play was intensified.

[\(NLO9010491\)](#)

Furthermore, the government developed a measure aimed at temporarily lending out knowledge workers, working in small companies to public and private knowledge institutions.

- enabling temporary reductions in staff levels or in the overall working time of the workforce (temporary short-time working), eg through financial subsidy

See above supporting job creation and Block 4, case 1: The reduction of working hours scheme

- support for training

The government has introduced refresher training programme to increase mobility and the role mobility centres had to play was intensified. The Ministry of Social affairs and Employment has introduced a few new training measures (read: opportunities), for example a kind of employability bonus for choosing training in a new profession.

(See also Block 4, case 1 and 2.)

**Block 3: Please provide information on recent developments of social dialogue in SMEs, taking into account the employee representation arrangements in SMEs in**

**your country.**

**Question 3.1. Please detail the evolution / recent developments in social dialogue with regard to SMEs and their employees (new agreements, new interest organisations and employee representations, etc.). Also, specify the relevant social partners.**

In recent years, the social dialogue has become focussed on how to tackle the consequences of the economic crisis. New agreements emerged, involving the social partners and the government. New agreements between the social partners were reached on wage moderation (March 2009), a new approach to young unemployed, the part time unemployment scheme and more (enforced) training for the unemployed. (See for further policy measures: block 2: the government.) All of these agreements are of interest to SMEs, in particular the agreed level of pay and the part time unemployment scheme.

New interest organisations were not established, with the exception of the Platform for self employed, who gained a seat in the Social and Economic Council, the SER ([NL100 4019I](#)).

The relevant partners in the social dialogue with regard to SMEs are: on union side FNV Bondgenoten (sector Commerce); FNV Bouw (Construction) and FNV Self employed too are involved; the unions have a prominent role in labour relations in SMEs.

On employer side, MKB-Nederland also has a prominent role in labour relations in SMEs.

Furthermore, the Association of Retail Companies, HBD, and the Council for Dutch Retailers, RND, have a role to play in the retail branch. (See [NL0910049Q](#))

**Question 3.2: Please list any particular actions or initiatives that social partners have taken to support SMEs in the crisis or initiatives coming from the social dialogue.**

The union federations directed at concluding agreements on *employment* in the context of collective bargaining. For SMEs up to 100 employees this is a complicated matter. Therefore, agreements have been concluded at *branch level*, for example on training facilities for unemployed. Arrangements had to be flexible and temporarily, so SMEs had the time to adjust. Employers are being offered more leeway, and flexibility in working hours was for example accomplished by agreements on the reservoir of days-off employees had gathered over the years. Note that companies who are using the reduction of working hours scheme, have to pay the benefits back in case employees are fired in the end. (These issues are much easier to accomplish in larger companies, according to FNV-respondent Mrs Van Duijn.)

**Question 3.3 What proportion of SMEs are members of employers' organisations, and has this proportion changed since 2006?**

Two third of all SMEs are member of a business or interest organization. The most important motivation for membership is sharing knowledge and relations, and interest representation. In the sectors transport and communication 83% is organized, in the sector construction, commercial services the organization density is 51% (Rijt-Veltman, 2010). The overall situation has not changed since 2006 (See [NL0910049Q](#)).

**Question 3.4 What is the level of union membership in SMEs, and how has this changed since 2006? and what are the sectors of relative union strength and weakness?**

Union membership in SMEs has risen since 2006. In 2005, it was around 15%. In 2010, it has been estimated that union membership has risen to 20%. This is still rather low, the average national union density being 27%. This growth can be ascribed to the rise of the numbers of self employed. Of this group 40 to 50% is organized via a union (in FNV Bondgenoten or in FNV Construction Self Employed). (See [NL0901029Q](#).)

**Question 3.5 Please report on the existence and type of employee representation at company level, broken down by firm size.**

There has been no change in the laws on representative structures (with respect to SMEs). Every enterprise with 50 or more employees has to establish a *works council*. In enterprises with 10 to 50 employees a 'mini' works council may be established, but this is mandatory when the majority of employees express the wish to have such a council. In enterprises with fewer than 10 employees it is the employer who chooses whether a mini works council should be established. In SMEs employing 10 to 50 employees without a (mini) works council, the employer has to organise a meeting of employees every six months. In case of restructuring he has to ask this meeting for advice. In 2008 15% of the companies (establishments) with 10 to 50 employees had established a works council, 14% had a 'mini' works council and 47% held twice a year a meeting with the employees. (Visee, Mevissen 2009)

The European Company Survey 2009 underlines these results. Around 27% of the companies with 10 to 49 employees have established a works council. In companies with 50 to 249 employees, where the councils are obligatory, the figure has increased: more than 80% has established a works council (European Company Survey 2009, see table below)

Trade union organization is independent of firm-size, it is the fundamental democratic right to organize. Health and Safety is organised at company level in larger companies; I assume for SMEs it is organised at branch level.

**Incidence of different types of employee representation by firm-size, in percent.**

Type of representation	Size	Yes	No	DK	Total
Trade union	10 to 19	5	95	0	100
	20 to 49	4	95	1	100
	50 to 249	14	83	3	100
	250 plus	11	87	2	100
Works council	10 to 19	16	84	0	100
	20 to 49	45	55	0	100
	50 to 249	80	20	0	100
	250 plus	91	9	0	100
Health and Safety representative or committee	10 to 19	52	48	0	100
	20 to 49	58	42	0	100
	50 to 249	76	23	1	100
	250 plus	80	20	0	100

Source: European Company Survey, units of observation are single unit entities.

**Block 4: Please provide general information on local partnership in your country and describe two cases of SME local partnerships with a social dialogue aspect aimed at maintaining employment levels or supporting job creation during the crisis. These could include cases of sectoral, regional or local networks with other SMEs, or partnerships with public institutions, research and development bodies and social partner organisations. Please note that the focus should be on the social dialogue aspects of local partnerships.**

**Question 4.1: Background information: Before describing the cases, please briefly provide information about the importance of local partnerships in your country: What are the main characteristics? Are they new developments because of the crisis? If so explain the goals and what the new patterns are. Are SMEs normally involved in local partnerships? And are social partners usually involved?**

Local partnership is accepted and even stimulated, as it is seen as a successful way to implement policies. The economic crisis may have stimulated this partnership even further. SMEs are in local partnerships normally represented by the social partners.

The two cases I will describe are the measure collective part time unemployment and the measure youth unemployment. Both measures are legal, national rulings, but have to be implemented locally. In this implementation process, the social partners are involved, in making proposals and being in charge of supervision. Involvement and responsibility of the social partners in social policy is normal in Dutch labour relations, but one could argue that the crisis made parties even more committed. SMEs are used to take responsibility; they are also used to being requested to take up their responsibility in social problems (for example regards unemployment among youngsters and among ethnic minorities).

**Question 4.2: Describe two case studies of SMEs local partnerships aimed at maintaining employment levels or job creation during the crisis, focusing on the social dialogue aspect and the involvement of the social partners.**

The cases selected should include the involvement of social partners unilaterally or social dialogue. Please try to answer – where possible – each of the bullet points separately.

#### Case 1

1. The reduction of working hours scheme

In order to avoid mass redundancies, the reduction of working hours scheme has been established in 2008 and again in 2009. The government will offer companies in difficulties the option of rendering their employees unemployed for a maximum of half their working hours and for a period of no more than 15 months. Since benefits amount to 70% of the salary level, employees would have to forfeit 15% of their overall salary. To increase their mobility refresher training programmes were introduced and the role mobility centres had to play was intensified. The union federations had to

initiate the request for the reduction of working hours, the local UWV had to approve, and the unions had to approve the training plan and supervise the training. To increase their mobility refresher training programmes were introduced and the role mobility centres had to play was intensified. In these centres government and social partners played a role ([NL09010491](#)).

- Region, sector, types of companies involved, company size:

National, all types of companies involved.

- Period of initial establishment of the partnership:

The measures started in 2008 (under a different name)

- Actors involved in the local partnership:

Authorities (Ministry of Social affairs), social partners, unions and regards SMEs the different branch organisations

- What was the trigger for the specific action?

Mass redundancies

- Which specific actions have been taken to maintain employment levels/support job creation during the crisis.

The government had offered companies in difficulties the option of rendering their employees unemployed for a maximum of half their working hours and for a period of no more than 15 months.

- What was the role of the social partners or social dialogue?

The role of the social partners was initiating and supervising the implementation. The social partners tabled the problem and then had to enforce the measures.

- To what extent has the initiative proven to be successful?

Due to this scheme unemployment figures remained relatively low in 2009; in December around 400.000 unemployed were registered. This is 110.000 more than in December 2008. Figures specified for SMEs do not exist (CBS/Ministry of Social affairs). ([NL09010491](#))

- Which governmental/social partner support measures/general policies deemed to be successful and crucial for the outcome?

Crucial for the outcome of the scheme, is the financial support of the government, the development in the economy and the co-operation of the social partners, in particular the employers, who are in the end responsible for employment.

## Case two

The cases selected should include the involvement of social partners unilaterally or social dialogue. Please try to answer – where possible – each of the bullet points separately.

- Type of measure – heading for the case

### 1. Local labour pool

- Region, sector, types of companies involved, company size.

Province of Brabant, Middlesouth of the Netherlands, more sectors (automotive, paper processing), SMEs. (Brabants Dagblad, 19-5- 2009)

- Period of initial establishment of the partnership

It was a never fully established initiative of the employer association, re-activated during the recent crisis, 2008 onwards.

- Actors involved in the local partnership

Employers (150 members of employer association RIVU, Rietvelden/De Vutter; of these 150 75% were interested in the pool); in the newspaper, the Brabands Dagblad, the co-operation of two companies in the local area for companies has been reported.)

- What was the trigger for the specific action?

The threat of job losses, unemployment and the loss of employees with specific knowledge or skills.

- Which specific actions have been taken to maintain employment levels/support job creation during the crisis.

Employees were lent out from one company to another.

- What was the role of the social partners or social dialogue?

Employers in that certain area of companies re-activated the older initiative (via BV Maakbaar, a company, which helps to solve bottlenecks in the labour market.

- To what extent has the initiative proven to be successful?

In 2008 there were many redundancies and some vacancies; thus there many cases of 'matching' to be accomplished. One employee of BV Maakbaar, Mrs Miriam Cremers, matched employees of different companies. Presently, there are much less redundancies, the crisis is felt less at this level, according to Mrs Cremers. Furthermore, the local authorities did not change their policies, so investments in favour of BV Maakbaar have not been made. Vacancies and redundancies are still being reported at BV Maakbaar and this information is send to all member companies. At present BV Maakbaar is writing a tender for the Ministry of Social Affairs, trying to make the labour (matching) pool into a structural provision. The unions, which always have been positive about this employer initiative, are now more involved in the initiative, as it is a requirement of the tender.

- Which governmental/social partner support measures/general policies deemed to be successful and crucial for the outcome?

The government initially wanted to help the activating company (BV Maakbaar, a company that helps to solve bottlenecks in the labour market) with a subsidy of 80.000 euro, but finally the local authorities did not support the initiative. Then the employer association Rivu made the money accessible, but not on a structural base.

- Add any other relevant information you find interesting for the success of the case

This is an exceptionable case. Labour pools are rare in the Netherlands. Even in this case, politics and thus the local authorities have chosen to (financially) fund their own activities at the local authorities, the local employment services and the mobility centre.

### **Block 5: What are the main views of the social partners in your country regarding the functioning of SMEs in your country, the particular issues they face, the main employment and organisational trends in SMEs and the measures available to help them to weather the crisis.**

According to the employee representative of FNV Bondgenoten, Mrs Inge van Duijn, SMEs are extremely vulnerable in the economic crisis. The small companies do not have a flexible shield of workers, so they are directly hid in the core, the workers with a standard contract. The work has to be done whether there are two or 20 costumers, so one cannot decide to skip a part of the activities. If one is faced with redundancies, it is the core knowledge that is being lost. Mrs van Duijn sees this as a huge problem for SMEs, in particular since youngsters are growing up with the idea that their knowledge is superfluous.

The SME employer representative of MKB-Nederland, Mr Mario van Mierlo, fully underlines this analysis of the labour market and its problems for SMEs. Furthermore, he stresses the importance of some new government measures to support SMEs financially. These measures are directed at reducing the administrative burden (red tape), but also include stimulation of a continual cash flow. Banks are to unresponsive in advancing money, commissioners are careless in paying and SMEs are not always getting a fair chance regards acquiring new projects.

### **Commentary by national correspondents**

SMEs are of major importance to the Dutch economy and its employment; more than 90% of the companies is a SME company and around 45% of the jobs is found here. As the economic crisis of 2008 onwards once again demonstrated, small and medium sized companies are in particular vulnerable to the economic conjuncture. The social partner organizations on both employee and employer side are relatively weak, although the growth of self employed slightly changed this situation.

Hardest hit in 2009 were the sectors catering, temporary work agencies, IT-companies and metal industry. These sectors, the hardest in need of financial support, received hardly any. One may assume that the SMEs in these sectors are also hit. In cooperation with the social partners and often at the initiative of unions and employer organizations, the Dutch government has taken measures to lighten the burden on employers and employees. Measures such as the reduction of working hours scheme were not particularly directed at SMEs. The measures presume a large scale involvement of the social partners, also at local level, where implementation takes place. (In this SME case study this mainly relates to training and trainee facilities, finally aimed at job creation.)



The measures primarily directed at SMEs are dominated by extending credit facilities. As financial market parties became more cautious, the Ministry of Finance took more financial responsibility (a surety) for export activities and it provided more financial credit facilities. The Ministry offered more room for the postponement of pay and lowered the tax burden on SMEs. Measures have been taken to further reduce the administrative burden on SMEs, planning to shrink ‘red tape’ by 25%. These measures underline the continuing concern government and social partners feel for the position of SMEs and the self employed in the continuing economic crisis.

## Respondents

Mrs M. Cremers (BV Maakbaar, 's Hertogenbosch)

Mrs I. van Duijn (union FNV Bondgenoten)

Mr M. van Mierlo (employer association MKB-Nederland)

Mr J. Geelhoed (Ministry of Economic affairs)

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