

# The *poldermodel* in economics, social studies and history classes in the Netherlands

**Age of students:** 16 to 17 years old

In the Netherlands, the *poldermodel* (consensus decision-making) is part of the curricula for both economics and social studies. It is based on the process of reaching consensus within a group through social dialogue. This concept was integrated into lessons on the Dutch system of decision making, the history and structure of the various organizations in the *poldermodel* and the relationship between employers and employees. Addressed in the context of living heritage, the *poldermodel* also helped strengthen students' capacity to formulate arguments. New active pedagogies were introduced, such as role-playing, making learning even more interesting and engaging for students.

# Learning objectives

**The poldermodel was integrated in the subjects of economics, social studies and history, in a cycle of lessons that used a holistic approach aimed at:**

- ▶ Learning about the ways to organize an economy;
- ▶ Learning about the Dutch system of decision making and the history and structure of the various organizations in the *poldermodel*;
- ▶ Learning about the history of relations between employees and employers;

- ▶ Enhancing students' knowledge of minimum wage in an economy (simulation topic);
- ▶ Learning how to formulate arguments based on different perspectives in an economic context.

**Objectives related to the ICH element:**

- ▶ Learning what intangible heritage is and why the poldermodel falls within this definition.

# Preparation

**Description of the ICH element and the way it is practised today:**

*Poldering* is at the heart of how decisions are made in the Netherlands. It is a process by which different parties with varying interests come to an agreement through social dialogue. This decision-making process is a cultural characteristic that affects various aspects of society and is not limited to politics. Whether at the family kitchen table or the highest levels of government, decisions are made by consensus.

It is believed that *poldering* as a decision-making model has its roots in the Middle Ages, originally referring to the maintenance of the polders (land reclaimed from the sea). Without unanimous agreement about the shared responsibility for the maintenance of the dikes and pumping stations, the polders would have been flooded and everyone would have suffered. In its contemporary version, the *poldermodel* represents a consensus-based economic and social policy characterised by tripartite cooperation between employers' organisations, labour unions and the government.

**Linkages between the ICH element and the school subject:**

The *poldermodel* is part of the economics and social studies curricula, but had never been contextualized as living heritage. *Poldering* was thus introduced as a living heritage practice to raise awareness about the relevance of ICH at large. The concept of the *poldermodel* was then contextualized within contemporary socio-political systems in the Netherlands and elsewhere.

**Involvement of learners in the preparation of the activity:**

Since these activities were carried out at a special secondary education school for children with an autism spectrum disorder, the teacher was fully responsible for the preparation process. Nevertheless, students took an active role in implementing the project: they researched the meaning of living heritage online and found examples of ICH practices from around the world – students particularly enjoyed the UNESCO tool **Dive into living heritage**. In addition, they prepared their role for the simulation of the *poldermodel* during a classroom activity.

# Description of the activity

The project integrating living heritage in school-based learning consisted of five theoretical lessons, two home assignments and a simulation.

The five lessons (of one hour each) were used to provide theoretical background including an introduction to ICH, a brief history of the term *poldermodel*, an introduction to the Social and Economic Council of the Netherlands (SER) and the history of trade unions and employers' organizations. After the introductory theoretical lessons, a case study was presented to help students prepare for the simulation.

The information was collected from different resources: a course book, documents from the SER, newspaper articles, a study done by professor and

author Maarten Keune and by an interviewing an expert who works as a secretary at the SER.

The students received two assignments: one to conduct online research to complement the theoretical knowledge acquired in the classroom (by looking at examples of living heritage from different parts of the world) and another to prepare their role for the *poldermodel* simulation in the classroom. The role-play exercise took two-and-a-half hours and focussed on debating the topic of the minimum wage.

For teachers, approximately 30 hours were needed to design and prepare the learning materials for the lessons with living heritage.

## Learning outcomes

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As a school for students with an autism spectrum disorder, it is not common to use projects as a teaching method. Nevertheless, the school is currently developing this approach and the integration of ICH into economics with the *poldermodel* exercise was one step in testing it.

The project was successful in meeting the learning objectives and engaging students. The pupils especially appreciated the simulation of the *poldermodel* during the classroom activity, as they were able to actively take part in the learning process. They also mentioned that they enjoyed exploring the [Dive into living heritage](#) tool to discover ICH practices from around the world and discuss them in the classroom.

The economics teacher stated that he is interested in continuing to teach with living heritage by introducing new elements such as the knowledge related to windmill construction, operation, production and exchange. Living heritage was able to provide context and meaning to the school subjects in which it was integrated.



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