

Fifth Dutch National SDG Report

Sustainable Development in the Netherlands



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A: JOINT INTRODUCTION

Drafted jointly by central government, the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG) representing local and regional government and acting on behalf of the Association of Provincial Authorities (IPO) and the Dutch water authorities, the Confederation of Netherlands Industry and Employers (VNO-NCW), the Royal Association MKB-Nederland and Global Compact Network Netherlands representing the business community and the financial sector, Partos representing civil society, NWO-WOTRO Science for Global Development representing the knowledge institutions and the National Youth Council (NJR) representing youth organisations.

The year in which we celebrated the fifth anniversary of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was also the year in which the world was plunged into a crisis that underscored the need for this global agenda. The coronavirus pandemic exposed our dependence on each other and led to greater inequality. It became apparent which countries, groups and sectors are most vulnerable to shocks. The need to invest in the SDGs thus became even more urgent in 2020, the year in which UN Secretary-General António Guterres launched the Decade of Action: a call for accelerating sustainable solutions to all the world's biggest challenges.

The Netherlands, being well-placed to achieve the SDGs thanks to its widely shared prosperity, has been able to cope relatively well with the pandemic. However, it soon became clear that there are vulnerable groups and sectors in this country, too. Children in disadvantaged families faced exceptional hardship, women working in crucial sectors faced a double workload, people working on flexible contracts, lonely old people and young people were confronted with considerable challenges, while small and new businesses were hit particularly hard. The pandemic has shown us that equal opportunities and decent work cannot be taken for granted. In the Netherlands too, the effects of the pandemic will be felt for some time to come, and an extra effort will be needed to achieve the goals for 2030.

In the rest of the world, the impact of the coronavirus pandemic gives even more cause for concern. Efforts to achieve the SDGs risk suffering a severe setback, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. The World Bank foresees an unprecedented increase in global poverty, and estimates that between 119 million and 124 million people are at risk of falling back into poverty.¹ The pandemic has had a negative impact on the achievement of several SDGs – on the SDG for health and wellbeing

of course, but also on the SDGs for education, gender equality, domestic violence, equal opportunities and better nutrition. At the same time, we must stay focused on major challenges in the fields of climate change and biodiversity. Investing in the SDGs in developing countries benefits not only the people there but also ourselves.

The pandemic has also given us some meaningful experiences. It was encouraging to see that we could work together to change our behaviour very quickly, because we needed to. This gives us hope that we will have the resilience to make the necessary changes in other areas, too. Looking ahead, we need to decide together how we should build back better, focusing on the needs of future generations, while leaving no negative footprint in other countries. A commitment to the SDGs and to widely shared prosperity would equip us better to prevent or contain future crises.

This joint introduction (A) first gives a general outline of how the Netherlands stands according to recently published reports. It then highlights major developments and initiatives from the past year, and concludes by identifying the main opportunities and challenges for the future. The chapters that follow present the reflections of the various sectors and organisations: central government (B), local and regional government (C), the private sector and financial institutions (D), civil society (E), knowledge institutions (F), youth (G) and the Netherlands Institute for Human Rights (H). These provide a lively, many-faceted view of the status of the SDGs in the Netherlands, how we are working to achieve them and, of course, where there is room for improvement.

1. The SDGs in the Netherlands, five years on

At the end of 2020, Dutch central government marked the fifth anniversary of the SDGs by evaluating implementation in the five years from their launch in 2016. The evaluation, which the government shared with the House of Representatives in February 2021, examined progress with the SDGs, relevant policy and central government's direction of action to achieve the SDGs. The evaluation was based on two reports: a discussion paper by Statistics Netherlands (CBS) which examines the Dutch performance on all 169 targets in the light of policy commitments, and an independent evaluation by Transition International with recommendations on ways of strengthening central direction. The main recommendation was to draft a national SDG strategy linking the 2030 Agenda to Dutch

¹ [World Bank](#): 'Updated Estimates of the Impact of COVID-19 on Global Poverty: Looking Back at 2020 and the Outlook for 2021' (11 January 2021).

policy objectives. This would also enable closer monitoring by CBS. Other recommendations focus on strengthening interministerial engagement and more intensive use of the SDGs as an assessment framework in drawing up new policy. The two reports are discussed in more detail below.

1.1 CBS discussion paper: implementation of the SDGs in the Netherlands from 2016 to 2020

This discussion paper² is based on data from the CBS SDG dashboard and a central government review of existing policy that contributes to achieving each of the 169 targets of the SDG agenda. In the discussion paper, CBS compares the policy review with existing data on SDG indicators. This was a significant step forward in comparing commitments to the SDGs with progress made to date. The study is not a policy evaluation and does not examine the effects of policy, but uses factual information to give a comprehensive overview of where the Netherlands stands. The review shows that while the Netherlands has policies relevant to all 169 targets, they have yet to be translated into consistent national policy objectives. In some fields, several ministries are responsible for policy. This fragmentation may lead to lack of focus on certain targets and lack of apparent cohesion.

Compared to the annual Monitor of Wellbeing & SDGs, the discussion paper provides more detailed information since it carries out measurements for each of the 169 targets. Like the Monitor, the discussion paper looks at positive and negative trends on indicators and the Netherlands' position relative to other EU countries. It draws no conclusions as to whether the Netherlands will achieve the goals by 2030, but indicates whether we are moving in the right direction. The study concludes that the most positive trends are found for the indicators for SDGs 5, 6, 7 and 8. Several of the indicators for SDGs 3, 10, 14 and 15 show a trend away from achievement of the goals. Looking at the Netherlands' position relative to other EU countries, we can see that the Netherlands is now moving towards achievement of SDGs 7 and 13 in particular, but still lags behind in the EU rankings. Moreover, behind the summarising conclusions there is considerable variation. In the field of poverty, for example, the picture is mixed, with a number of positive trends – e.g. declining child poverty – alongside negative trends, like the widening poverty gap and more families living in long-term poverty. In relation to SDG 5 (gender equality), most indicators show a positive trend, but progress on the indicator for women in senior management positions has

stagnated.³ What is more, a positive trend does not mean that the goal has been achieved: on average, women in the Netherlands still earn 14.3% less than men.

1.2 Transition International report

This report⁴ which was drawn up by the consultancy firm Transition International is an independent evaluation of central direction of SDG implementation in the Netherlands. The report examines the effectiveness of the model chosen for managing implementation of the SDGs as described in the 2016 Plan of Action,⁵ with a low-level coordinating role for the Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, a National Coordinator (with team) and an interministerial working group with policy officers from the most relevant ministries. It concludes that civil society actors and the government have divergent ambitions in relation to the SDGs. The lack of a clear, overarching government commitment to the SDGs is experienced as a problem in speeding up implementation. According to the evaluators, the SDGs are still too often regarded as an agenda for developing countries, so that interministerial ownership falls short. The lack of a clear commitment to the SDGs also makes it difficult to free up capacity within central government. The report therefore advises central government to develop a national SDG strategy with broad support and goals tailored to the Dutch situation. The current caretaker government recognises that the 2016 Plan of Action prescribes a moderate degree of central direction of SDG implementation, but leaves any decision on tighter direction to the next government. The report also concludes that assigning responsibility for national coordination of the SDGs to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has proved to be less effective, and advocates assigning this task to a ministry whose primary responsibility is for domestic affairs.

² [Statistics Netherlands \(CBS\) Discussion Paper: Vijf jaar implementatie SDG's in Nederland: 2016-2020 \(Implementation of the SDGs in the Netherlands from 2016 to 2020\)](#), Statistics Netherlands, 15 February 2021 (in Dutch).

³ For this reason, the government has decided to adopt all the recommendations put forward by the Social and Economic Council (SER) in its advisory report [Diversity in the Boardroom: Time to Accelerate](#). See the [Letter to Parliament](#) of 7 February 2020 containing the government's response to this report (in Dutch).

⁴ [Meer Ambitie: Evaluatie over de aansturing nationale SDG uitvoering \(More Ambition: Evaluation of Central Direction of SDG Implementation in the Netherlands\)](#) (annex to the [Letter to the House of Representatives](#) of 15 February 2021) (in Dutch).

⁵ [Plan of Action](#) for implementing the Sustainable Development Goals, 30 September 2016 (in Dutch).

2. The Netherlands' performance: international comparative studies

Various progress reports are published each year. They include the CBS Monitor of Wellbeing & SDGs, the SDSN/Bertelsmann Sustainable Development Report, with the SDG Index and Dashboards, and the SDSN/IEEP Europe Sustainable Development Report, with the European SDG Index. These reports enable a comparison of countries' performance. However, it should be noted that no single country is on track to fully achieve the SDGs by 2030. A brief summary of these reports is given below.

2.1 Statistics Netherlands: 2021 Monitor of Wellbeing & SDGs

Each year, Statistics Netherlands (CBS) publishes its Monitor of Wellbeing & SDGs, which reports on progress with the SDGs.⁶ Like this report, the Monitor is published on Accountability Day. Although data for 2020 is not yet available on every indicator, the Monitor provides an initial overview of the figures for 2020, the year of the coronavirus pandemic. We see high scores in particular for SDG 4 (education), SDG 5 (gender equality), SDG 9 (sustainable industrialisation component), SDG 11 (living environment component), SDG 13 (climate action) and SDG 17 (partnerships). At least half of the indicators for these SDGs show a positive trend, so we are moving towards achievement of these particular goals. For SDGs 1 (no poverty), 2 (zero hunger), 6 (clean water and sanitation), 7 (affordable and clean energy), 8 (decent work and economic growth), and 9 (sustainable industrialisation component), we see many positive trends and few negative trends. Like last year, the goals on which the Netherlands scores less well are, in particular, SDG 16 (strong institutions), SDG 15 (life on land), SDG 11 (housing component), SDG 9 (infrastructure and transport component) and SDG 3 (health and wellbeing). The score for SDG 10 (inequality and social cohesion component) has improved noticeably compared to the previous year, though financial viability remains fragile. In relation to poverty (SDG 1), there has been a slight improvement since last year. However, the number of families in long-term poverty has risen again. Compared to the rest of Europe, the Netherlands still achieves high scores on efforts to reduce poverty and inequality. With regard to SDG 3 (health and wellbeing), we see little change from last year, though negative trends have reversed slightly and perceived health has improved.

2.2 SDSN/Bertelsmann: Sustainable Development Report 2020

Each year, the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) and the Bertelsmann Stiftung publish the *Sustainable Development Report*, with the SDG Index and Dashboards.⁷

This report gives countries scores on various indicators, the average being the overall score for the SDG in question. Scores range from 0 (worst) to 100 (best). A score of 100 is the best possible score, and means that a country is on track to achieve the SDG. According to the 2020 report, which examined the performance of 166 countries, the Netherlands achieved an index score of 80.4, putting it 9th in the world rankings for the second year in a row. The Scandinavian countries, with Sweden in the lead, traditionally head the rankings. The report shows that the Netherlands achieved a score of 100 for SDG 1. This means that with its current policies the Netherlands will succeed in eliminating poverty by 2030. The Netherlands achieved high scores for SDG 3, SDG 4, SDG 9, SDG 10 and SDG 11. In addition, many positive trends can be identified in relation to SDG 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions), for example, for press freedom and the number of people who feel safe walking alone at night in the city or area where they live. According to this report, the main challenges for the Netherlands are related to SDG 2 due to, for instance, the increasing number of people who are overweight, SDG 12 due to high consumption rates, SDG 13 due to energy-related CO₂ emissions, SDG 14 due to marine pollution and fish caught from overexploited or collapsed fish stocks, and SDG 17 due to high financial secrecy and corporate tax haven scores: this relates in particular to target 17.14 on policy coherence, which calls on countries to reduce their negative footprint elsewhere in the world. The SDG Index report also ranks countries on the basis of spillover effects on other countries. The Netherlands scores badly, coming in 159th out of 166 countries. These scores may differ from the scores in, for example, the CBS Monitor, due to the use of different indicators.

2.3 SDSN and IEEP: Europe Sustainable Development Report 2020

Besides the world rankings, SDSN also publishes the Europe Sustainable Development Report, complete with a European SDG Index, in collaboration with the Institute for European Environmental Policy (IEEP). The data set for the European report is more detailed than the data available for the worldwide report. The two reports also use different indicators, so that the Netherlands occupies a different position in the European report than in the worldwide report. In the European report, the Netherlands comes 14th, with an index score of 71.66. In 2019, the Netherlands

⁶ [The Monitor of Well-being & SDGs](#), 19 May 2021.

⁷ [Sustainable Development Report](#) (SDSN): Sustainable Development Goals and Covid-19, 30 June 2020.

came in seventh, with a score of 71.8. However, the drop does not mean that the Netherlands performed much worse on the SDGs than a year ago, because the indicators and methodology have been revised. Moreover, the analysis took four more countries on board, three of which – Iceland, Switzerland and Norway – ended ahead of the Netherlands in the rankings. According to this report, the Netherlands is on track to achieve SDG 1 and SDG 9 by 2030. In the worldwide report, the Netherlands had a lower score for SDG 9 because different indicators were used, including an indicator for number of women in science and technology, on which the Netherlands scored badly. The Netherlands made progress on SDG 4 (education), SDG 6 (water and sanitation), SDG 8 (economy and work) and SDG 10 (reduced inequalities). According to the European report, the planet goals (SDGs 13, 14 and 15) form the main challenges for the Netherlands, while scores for SDGs 2 and 17 are also relatively low. In this report too, the Netherlands has one of the worst scores for spillover effects on other countries.

2.4 Conclusion

Despite giving different scores for individual SDGs, the reports agree that the planet goals present the biggest challenge for the Netherlands. Every report calls for attention to SDGs 13, 14 and 15 and points to the Netherlands' considerable spillover effects on other countries. They all give high scores for SDGs 4 (education), 6 (water and sanitation), 8 (decent work and the economy), and components of SDG 9 (infrastructure and innovation). According to the international reports, the Netherlands scores well on eradicating poverty, while the Monitor shows a few areas of concern. Scores on reducing inequalities (SDG 10) and on health (SDG 3) show similar inconsistencies.

3. Developments and new initiatives

The SDGs were adopted on 25 September 2015. The fifth anniversary, on 25 September 2020, was marked in various ways, worldwide and in the Netherlands, for example with the SDG flag campaign. After five years' action on the SDGs, this was an important year to take stock, make sure everyone is still focused, put the Goals on the political agenda and engage creatively with the general public. Despite the coronavirus pandemic, 2020 was a productive year, in which an increasing number of people and organisations set to work on the 17 goals.

3.1 Sustainable recovery

Soon after the start of the coronavirus pandemic, the discussion on sustainable recovery and 'building back better' got off the ground. There were many calls for a green recovery, with the assistance of government

support measures. The social research institutes advocated accelerating efforts to realise long-term goals to take advantage of opportunities for synergies,⁸ and the Council for the Environment and Infrastructure explored opportunities for green post-pandemic investment.⁹ In its advisory report on post-pandemic recovery, the Social and Economic Council (SER) also advised the government to work towards sustainable prosperity from which everyone can benefit.¹⁰ The Dutch Sustainable Growth Coalition, the Confederation of Netherlands Industry and Employers (VNO-NCW), Global Compact Network Netherlands, the Dutch Banking Association, MVO Nederland and more than 400 entrepreneurs called for inclusive, green recovery.¹¹ Civil society networks such as Springtij and De Transitomotor, 170 academics and others have issued various calls with the same basic message. SDG Nederland incorporated many of these proposals in a call on the next government to arrive at a sustainable coalition agreement, launching the campaign 'Sustainable Coalition Agreement' ([Duurzaam Regeerakkoord](#)) in late 2020 with its partners, with the aims of putting the SDGs at the heart of the next coalition agreement and elaborating an action plan to achieve the goals. Thousands of organisations and individuals have since signed the call.

3.2 Linkages between wellbeing and the SDGs

There was growing interest in 2020 in using wellbeing and the SDGs as complementary approaches in policymaking. On 7 December the Ministries of Economic Affairs & Climate Policy, Finance and Foreign Affairs held an international conference on integrating the concept of wellbeing and the SDGs into the policy cycle.¹² On the basis of other countries' experiences and the findings of experts, the conference reached an important conclusion: that national, long-term goals need to be set for wellbeing. In response to a request from the House of Representatives, the social research institutes agreed to design a set of indicators within the next few years to enable long-term monitoring of prosperity in the broad sense in the Netherlands. This is a major step forward in thinking beyond GDP, which is also central to the SDG agenda. The importance of integrating wellbeing and the SDGs into the policy cycle was also one of the key

⁸ [Aandachtspunten voor een herstelbeleid](#) (Recommendations on Post-Pandemic Recovery Policy), Advisory letter of 28 May 2020 from network of social research institutes (in Dutch).

⁹ [Groen uit de crisis](#) (A Green Exit from the Crisis), Recommendations of the Council for the Environment and Infrastructure, July 2020 (in Dutch).

¹⁰ [Perspectief op Herstel](#) (Prospects for Recovery), Advisory report by the SER Coronavirus pandemic think-tank, 27 January 2021 (in Dutch).

¹¹ ['Dutch Businesses Endorse Sustainability in COVID-19 Recovery'](#), Dutch Sustainable Growth Coalition (DSGC), June 2020.

¹² [Online international conference: 'Beyond GDP: Well-being and SDGs in Policy Making'](#), (7 December 2020).

messages from the Dutch business community, as presented in the new strategy adopted by VNO-NCW and the small business association MKB-Nederland.¹³ The new course reflects the business community's increased commitment to the SDGs. Central to the strategy is the need for entrepreneurs to actively help address social issues, and to be transparent about their impact on society.

3.3 SDG Spotlight report on the Netherlands

In various countries, civil society organisations draw up an alternative SDG report. These reports spotlight factors that receive too little attention in the official reports. On 1 March, a number of civil society organisations published the first Spotlight report¹⁴ on the Netherlands, written in the form of a constructively critical shadow report. It focuses on government efforts to achieve SDG 10 (reduce inequalities) and SDG 15 (halt biodiversity loss), both within the Netherlands and abroad. The Netherlands is one of the lowest countries in the EU rankings with its scores for SDG 15, which is trending towards stagnation or even regression. The trend for SDG 10 is also negative. The report analyses legislation, policy and measures relating to these goals and concludes that there is a causal link with these negative scores. Some components of policy have actively contributed to placing SDGs 10 and 15 further beyond reach. Positive measures that could contribute to achieving these goals are insufficiently binding and thus ineffective. The report calls on the government to pursue effective, credible policies on the two goals, and makes recommendations to this end. It also underscores the importance of cohesion between efforts to restore diversity and reduce inequalities. The report makes recommendations on better monitoring trends and policy delivery, involving more organisations, including the social research institutes and the SDG Alliances.

3.4 Measuring SDG impact

Organisations are increasingly interested in gaining insight into their own contribution to achieving the SDGs. There are many methods, instruments and standards on the market for measuring and reporting on this contribution. This can make it difficult for organisations to choose the right instrument and get started. What is more, the wide range of methods, instruments and standards means that the data they generate are often difficult to compare. For this reason, the Ministries of Economic Affairs & Climate Policy, the Interior & Kingdom Relations and Foreign Affairs commissioned the consultancy firm PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) to carry out a study into the

many measurement and reporting instruments available in the Netherlands. This resulted in a report for businesses and local authorities on more coherent measurement and reporting of SDG impact.¹⁵ The report contains recommendations on the degree to which instruments and methods must be harmonised in order to ensure comparability of data on SDG impact.

3.5 Young people essential for achievement of the SDGs

A sustainable future requires intergenerational justice, and thus equal opportunities for young people to join the debate on their future. Young people want to be part of the solution. They want to contribute and they want their voices to be heard. The SER youth think-tank's advisory report on post-pandemic recovery¹⁶ is a major development, and young people are asking for follow-up on their recommendations. Commissioned by the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, the Number 5 Foundation recently published a report with recommendations for more effective participation by young people.¹⁷ Working with public administrators and young people, the ministry is now launching and strengthening initiatives to put the recommendations into practice. Examples include strengthening young people's involvement at municipal level, pilot projects with an innovation fund and support for various national youth participation initiatives. The launch of these pilot projects marks the next step forward in the long-term process of strengthening youth participation in the Netherlands.¹⁸ Dutch young people are also making their voices heard at international level. In 2020, the first two Youth Representatives for Biodiversity and Food were appointed, alongside the Youth Representatives for Sustainable Development, European Affairs and Human Rights and Security. The Youth Representatives for Biodiversity and Food also contributed to the SDG Spotlight report.

In 2019, the SER youth platform advocated assessing the impact of legislation on future generations to ensure intergenerational justice. After the government had adopted this recommendation, action was taken under the leadership of the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations to develop an assessment instrument. A plan

¹³ Doing Business to Create Broad Welfare: Towards a New Rhineland Model of Cooperation, Agenda NL 2030: Medium-Term Vision, VNO-NCW and MKB-Nederland, February 2021 (in Dutch).

¹⁴ [SDG Spotlight report on the Netherlands](#), 1 March 2021 (in Dutch).

¹⁵ [Report](#): on more coherent measurement and reporting of SDG impact for businesses and local authorities, 15 December 2020 (in Dutch).

¹⁶ [En nu... daden!](#) (And now... action!), report by the SER youth think-tank on the coronavirus pandemic (January 2021) (in Dutch).

¹⁷ [Bondgenoten in de Democratie](#) (Allies in Democracy), Number 5 Foundation (for the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations), 3 March 2021 (in Dutch).

¹⁸ [Letter to Parliament](#) on enhancing young people's role in democracy, 10 March 2021 (in Dutch).

is also needed to prevent growing inequality between present and future generations. For this reason, the call for a sustainable coalition agreement proposes an SDG plan that takes the interests of future generations into account. The Goldschmeding Foundation's Future Generations Lab shows how the interests of future generations can lead to detailed recommendations for the current period, as in its recent [statement](#) on the value of water (in Dutch).

In schools too, interest in the SDGs is increasing, despite the coronavirus pandemic. In 2020, the Secondary Vocational Education Council signed the SDG charter on behalf of all schools for secondary vocational education. Around half of these schools took part in the SustainaBul rankings for sustainability, and showed how they used the SDGs as guiding principles in teaching, practice and business management. Institutions of higher professional education (HBO) also made progress with their SDG plan and in developing SDG competences in teaching and research. In the past year, five Centres of Expertise were set up in HBO, with a focus on the SDGs. To showcase action by universities on the SDGs, the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU) published a monthly online magazine focusing on each SDG in turn. The e-zine was presented to the Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, Sigrid Kaag.

The SER established the SER Youth Platform with a view to actively engaging as many young people as possible in its work. The purpose of the platform is to give both solicited and unsolicited advice on current topics – for example on the SER advisory report on RBC and the SDGs in late 2019.¹⁹ The SER Youth Platform also publishes its own advisory reports on topics that have an impact on young people. It joined forces with the youth think-tank Denktank-Y to form the youth think-tank on the coronavirus pandemic, which studies how the pandemic affects education, work, housing and climate and advises the government accordingly. Through the involvement of young people in the work of the SER, new policy can be geared for the future, while topics that impact on young people's lives and are directly connected to the SDGs, like education, work, diversity and climate, can be given a prominent place on the agenda.

3.6 Specific actions with the SDG Roadmap

SDG Nederland's new [SDG Routekaart](#) (SDG Roadmap) was presented to the State Secretary for Infrastructure and Water Management on the SDG Action Day on 25 September 2020. The roadmap presents the main actions that will bring achievement of the SDGs closer as we move forward from 2020 to 2025 and 2030. The actions are based on the plans of

the 17 national SDG Alliances and focus on practical steps, including both harvesting 'low-hanging fruit' and more ambitious, long-term 'moonshots'. The Roadmap is additional to action already under way in the Netherlands (including the climate and energy agreements, action on the circular economy and circular agriculture, and the Green Deals) and is updated and expanded each year. The ultimate aim is for the Roadmap to be incorporated into a government-wide plan for the SDGs.

3.7 Flag campaign and Municipal Global Goals Campaign

On SDG Action Day – an initiative of VNG, Global Compact Network Netherlands, SDG Nederland and central government – local and provincial authorities, businesses, schools, NGOs, ministries, Dutch embassies worldwide and other organisations raised the SDG flag and shared the flag-raising events on social media. The hashtag #togetherfortheSDGs was even trending on Twitter. At local level too, the SDGs play a major role in awareness-raising, involving the general public in policy and shaping transitions. In 2020 the number of local authorities taking part in the [Municipal Global Goals Campaign](#) reached 100 – nearly a third of the total. Rotterdam and Teylingen were the most recent to join.

4. Opportunities and challenges for the future

4.1 SDGs as the compass for sustainable recovery

Though there is considerable variation in sectors' experience of the coronavirus pandemic, their contributions to this report unanimously support the view that the SDGs are more important than ever before. The energy and commitment with which the sectors have continued to work on the SDGs, despite the pandemic, is particularly striking. The business community has persevered, with 66% of the businesses consulted saying that they have in fact made an extra commitment to the SDGs. Many local authorities, too, have embraced the SDGs in this difficult year, since they offer the prospect of sustainable post-pandemic recovery. The NGO sector indicates that in addition to investment in recovery, it is essential to work towards a resilient, sustainable and inclusive society. Young people too have made it clear that the pandemic generation cannot be a lost generation. 'Leave No One Behind' is with good reason the SDG motto. Action to combat disadvantage and inequality as a result of the pandemic is far more effective if taken now instead of later. The Netherlands Institute for Human Rights points out that economic and social rights require the government to take measures to prevent people in the most vulnerable

¹⁹ [Seizing Opportunities and Managing Risks](#), SER, 18 October 2019.

situations from being hit the hardest. Human rights and the SDGs should be the basic principles in formulating and implementing recovery measures, so that people in vulnerable situations have equal opportunities to recover and there is less risk that their disadvantage will be lasting. The sectors agree that the SDGs are the compass for sustainable post-pandemic recovery. This is in line with the growing recognition that prosperity and wellbeing should not only be measured in terms of Gross National Product. Our joint, long-term commitment should take shape in a national strategy to achieve the SDGs and prosperity in the broad sense, which may also function as a platform for joint action.

4.2 Smart investment to achieve multiple goals

The SDGs are the best possible instrument to ensure cohesion in efforts to meet the complex, often overlapping challenges of our time. It is the coherence between the goals that leads to effective action. Achieving one goal at the expense of another does not lead to a sustainable result. Many organisations are showing how they are trying to support several goals at once. One of the companies that contributed to section D of this report made the following comment about this: 'We need a vision which actively promotes interaction between the SDGs, enhancing opportunities for the SDGs to strengthen each other, while reducing the risk of trade-offs between them.' Civil society organisations also urge comprehensive policy that transcends specific ministries. NGOs and young people are calling for clear assessment of policy initiatives and post-pandemic recovery policy for alignment with the SDGs, precisely in order to keep the focus on multiple major challenges. The SER can also make a major contribution to assessing policy in the light of the SDGs. If requests for advice explicitly call for attention to the SDGs, the SDGs can be taken on board in the resultant report. This will enable the SER to explore the effects on various goals, and advise on coherent, effective action in moving forward towards achieving them. The Integrated Assessment Framework for policy and legislation (IAK), incorporating the SDGs, is often referred to as a useful tool for assessing the effects of policy and regulations on the SDGs. Visible, timely application of the IAK, including its SDG components, remains a challenge, however. At the moment, central government agencies are promoting and improving the IAK as part of the Insight into Quality initiative.²⁰

²⁰ [Plan of Action](#) for revision of the Integrated Assessment Framework for policy and regulations (IAK), annexed to the [Letter to Parliament](#) on the progress report on the Insight into Quality initiative, 10 March 2021 (in Dutch).

4.3 Chart and strengthen SDG impact

An increasing number of businesses, local authorities and other organisations are considering their role in bolstering the economy and society for the future. There is a growing willingness to make a positive contribution, in line with increasing expectations worldwide that businesses should take the lead in confronting social challenges.²¹ Organisations often embrace the SDGs because they present a clear, comprehensive to-do list. At the same time, there is a growing need for clarity on the steps needed to anchor the SDGs firmly in these organisations. Organisations also want to know how best to measure their SDG impact. With the assistance of the above-mentioned PwC report on measuring SDG impact, various parties will work together on making SDG impact measurement more coherent and more easily accessible for organisations.

4.4 Link global challenges to national commitment

The SDG agenda involves tasks at both national and international level. It is important to consistently seek synergies between the two levels. Global challenges call for national commitment and national commitment can contribute to international partnerships. In 2020, various experts underscored the importance of these synergies. The Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (PBL) did this by converting the urgency expressed in five recent global environmental reports into recommendations for Dutch national policy.²² PBL advises a more active use of the SDGs and the broad notion of prosperity to make transition agendas more effective, to strengthen the coherence between the agendas and with other policy goals, and to ensure that they make a more explicit contribution to the achievement of the Global Goals. Another example is the launch in the Netherlands of the UNDP Human Development Report for 2020.²³ The report's urgent message is that the pressure of humankind on the planet is beginning to impede human development. From now on, human development will therefore be measured in combination with a country's footprint on the planet. This report was presented by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and SDG Nederland on 12 February 2021 with the aim of emphasising its relevance to the Netherlands.

²¹ According to the worldwide [Edelmann Trust Barometer](#) for 2021, 86% of respondents expect CEOs to show leadership in tackling social issues.

²² [Inzichten uit mondiale milieuverkenningen](#) (Insights from Global Environmental Reports), Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (PBL), September 2020 (in Dutch).

²³ [Human Development Report](#) – The Next Frontier: Human Development and the Anthropocene, UNDP, 2020.

B: CENTRAL GOVERNMENT

The past year was trying for everyone, both people and organisations. The 2020 Monitor of Wellbeing & SDGs showed that the Netherlands started the year in an excellent position in key areas such as satisfaction with life in general, sound government finances, trust in institutions and other people, regular social contacts, digitalisation and skills, a smoothly functioning healthcare system and the necessary knowledge and skills. Nonetheless, some sectors and groups proved to be vulnerable.

At the start of the pandemic, the government was able to do a great deal to soften the first blows, but as time went on various SDGs came under threat. These included education, employment for young people on flexible contracts and, of course, healthcare. It is essential to take these experiences on board in our post-pandemic recovery. Dialogues with society are now being organised to determine the focus of a long-term recovery strategy.

In this chapter of the report, central government always focuses on specific SDGs. This year, we chose SDG 8 (economy and work) in combination with SDG 10 (reducing inequalities) and SDG 4 (education), because the effects of the pandemic on these SDGs became apparent early on. We also indicate how the SDGs are relevant to the Caribbean Netherlands (Bonaire, St Eustatius and Saba). Finally, we will provide an overview of new policy launched last year with relevance to the SDGs.

1. Work, education, opportunities and a buoyant economy

It was abundantly clear from the moment the first lockdown was announced that the situation called for radical government intervention – not only because of the threat to public health, but also to mitigate the social and economic consequences of the pandemic. The priority in the short term was to create stability. Another priority was added more recently – to leave no one behind, in accordance with the principle underpinning the SDGs. With its commitment to a wide range of SDGs, the government is taking action to reduce inequality and thus doing as much as possible to prevent the pandemic leading to backsliding. In this section of the report, we examine the pandemic and policy pursued on the goals related to work, education, opportunities and a buoyant economy (SDGs 1,4,8 and 10) from central government's point of view. The pandemic has sharpened our focus on these issues in particular, which are of importance in enabling us to build back better.

1.1 Moving forward and setting the course for recovery

Since the start of the pandemic, the government has sustained undiminished efforts to retain jobs and support industry with substantial support and recovery packages, including the new schemes NOW, TOZO, TVL, TOGS and TONK.²⁴ Where necessary, these schemes have been prolonged, expanded and made more widely accessible. As long as the future is uncertain, the support package will respond constantly to the economic circumstances, so that businesses suffering higher losses in turnover will automatically receive more support.

The government has made a considerable investment in keeping the economy up and running. The NOW scheme compensates part of the wage costs of businesses whose turnover has dropped by at least 20%. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and self-employed people losing more than 30% of their turnover can claim grants under TVL. Self-employed people are also entitled to claim income support under TOZO if their income drops below the minimum income standard. Under this scheme, they are also entitled to a working capital loan if they face liquidity problems. In addition to these three schemes, businesses may also apply to defer payment of taxes, with a generous payment scheme. To supplement this generic support package, the government is also providing specific support for, for example, the sports and culture sectors and compensation for excess, unused stock, and has introduced a new scheme for new businesses. Various supplementary measures have also been taken, for example more flexible policy on applications by business owners for debt restructuring. Early this year, the TONK scheme was launched for households at risk of serious financial problems.

At the start of the pandemic, the Netherlands was in an excellent position. After years of robust economic growth, more people were in work than ever before, and unemployment was at the lowest point since 2002. Thanks to the above measures, combined with rapid economic recovery in the third quarter of 2020, the rise in the unemployment rate could be kept in check, reaching 3.6% in January 2021 compared to 3.0% in the same month a year earlier. However, we do not as yet know whether businesses will be able to bounce back once society opens

²⁴ NOW: Temporary Emergency Scheme for Job Retention; TOZO: Self-employment Income Support and Loan Scheme; TVL: Fixed Costs Grant Scheme; TOGS: Compensation Scheme for Businesses in COVID-19-affected Sectors, TONK: Temporary Support Scheme for Necessary Costs.

up again. Estimates show that unemployment is likely to rise further. The Netherlands is expected to feel the impact of the pandemic for some time to come, with a rising national debt, higher unemployment rates and a possibly persistent worldwide economic recession.

On the labour market, a division threatens to emerge between people who have retained their jobs and groups who are vulnerable in terms of work, income and opportunities to participate. Young people, flexible workers and self-employed people without personnel have been hit particularly hard by the coronavirus pandemic. These groups were already vulnerable, and they have become even more so during the pandemic. The question is whether they will benefit sufficiently from economic recovery. Unemployment is also a threat to older people who lose their jobs and have difficulty finding new work. New policy on the status of self-employed people without personnel and flexible workers is currently being drafted to provide solutions to underlying structural problems, such as lack of protection and undesirable competition in relation to conditions of employment, which have become more evident during the pandemic. The government is now working on the introduction of compulsory, collective incapacity insurance for self-employed people, and the amount of the self-employed person's tax deduction is gradually being reduced. An online employment relationship evaluation tool was launched as a pilot project in January 2021 with the aim of giving clients a clearer understanding and if possible better grasp of the nature of an employment relationship with self-employed workers. The government has also launched a study into strengthening the legal status of workers in the platform economy.

1.2 Increased spending on poverty reduction and debt restructuring

Poverty and debt (SDG 1) were urgent social problems even prior to 2020.²⁵ Poverty and persistent debt are expected to increase even further for business owners, young people, self-employed people without personnel and flexible workers, and carried the risk of social exclusion. This gives considerable cause for concern, and can also delay the achievement of SDG 10 (reduce inequalities). In the autumn of 2020, the government released an extra €146 million to step up efforts to tackle poverty and debt. A large part of this money will go to the local authorities for crisis payments and a targeted response to the expected increase

in applications for assistance. Some of these funds will go to new projects and a Guarantee Fund will be set up to enable problem debts to be settled faster. With these measures, the local authorities, the organisations involved and central government will build on the steps already taken within the framework of the Broad Action Plan on Debt²⁶ and child poverty reduction strategies.²⁷ By increasing spending on poverty reduction and debt restructuring, the government aims to help people avoid protracted financial problems. Our main aim is to prevent debt and poverty, and if people have money problems it is essential that they report them as soon as possible, before the situation gets out of hand. In mid-February a national campaign was launched, specifically targeting business owners, young people, self-employed people without personnel and flexible workers facing problems with money.

1.3 Long-term employability

2020 was an exceptional year that called for exceptional government measures, which will stay in place as long as necessary to protect jobs and keep the economy going. More will be needed in the longer term. We want to ensure lasting employment for anyone who is able to work. Access to work, job retention and career advancement are essential for sustainable economic recovery in the Netherlands, in line with SDG 8. The economy of the future will call for a different employment landscape, in response to changes on the labour market influenced by trends like globalisation, growing labour market flexibility and demographic ageing. The coronavirus pandemic has for example led to more rapid digitalisation of work. To prepare jobseekers for the future, the government plans to pursue active labour market policies with a strong focus on retraining, further training and development. Everyone – employees, young people, self-employed people without personnel and people with a disability – should have the opportunity to develop skills and improve their prospects for long-term employability. People who are less capable of taking initiatives themselves will receive help. This policy complements initiatives taken by the social partners to promote a positive culture of learning.

Anticipating these measures, the current NOW scheme links support for employers to a best efforts obligation. Employers are required to help employees threatened with redundancy find new work, and to encourage employees to maintain their employability by seeking advice on

²⁵ According to the CBS report *Schuldenproblematiek in beeld (Problem Debt: An Overview)* (17 August 2020), 650,700 households – one in twelve – in the Netherlands had registered problem debt on 1 January 2018. In addition, another 338,800 people were at a higher risk of running up debts.

²⁶ [Letter to Parliament](#) on progress with the Broad Action Plan on Debt, Parliamentary Papers 24 515, no. 533 (15 June 2020) (in Dutch).

²⁷ [Letter to Parliament](#) on the response to the motion on deploying resources to tackle child poverty, Parliamentary Papers 35 300 XV (6 April 2020), and [Letter to Parliament](#) fleshing out ambitions on reducing child poverty, Parliamentary Papers 35 300 IV, G (9 April 2020) (in Dutch).

development opportunities or undergoing training. The introduction of a personal development budget in 2022 should encourage every adult to take part in retraining and further training. The government has also proposed two policy measures to encourage SMEs to invest more in education and training. The first (*MKB-Idee*) challenges business owners to come up with ideas to remove obstacles to investment in training and development. The second (*SLIM-budget*) provides structural financial support in the form of a grant for employers to invest in career and development advice for their employees or a training and development plan for their business, for example.

1.4 Education and opportunities

The government recently decided to set up a National Education Programme (SDG 4). Its aim is to help pupils in primary and secondary education and students develop their potential, despite the coronavirus pandemic and its consequences for the education sector. Through this programme, an extra €8.5 billion will be invested across the educational spectrum, from primary education to higher education, in the next two and a half years. In the 2019/2020 and 2020/2021 academic years, many pupils and students have run up a considerable learning deficit or have fallen behind with their studies. They have suffered setbacks to their mental wellbeing and social development, while school closures due to the coronavirus pandemic have had a negative impact on equal opportunities. With this National Programme, the government wants to create fresh prospects for pupils and students. The programme therefore contains robust measures to prevent further delays and setbacks, and to enable pupils and students to catch up again as quickly as possible. Measures will also be taken to ensure that interventions are sustainable. We are going to support educational institutions and monitor developments, so that we can make rapid adjustments where necessary at educational institution level and national level. Special attention will be devoted to pupils with the most serious learning deficit.

2. The Caribbean Netherlands and the SDGs

This section of the national SDG report also examines efforts in the Caribbean Netherlands (Bonaire, St Eustatius and Saba: BES) to achieve the SDGs, in accordance with the recommendations of the Advisory Council on International Affairs (AIV) in its report on the SDGs and human rights, which were adopted by the government in late 2020.²⁸

In this section we discuss the social, economic, ecological and human rights dimensions of these efforts.

2.1 Poverty reduction and safety

To underscore its commitment to improving the livelihoods of the inhabitants of the Caribbean Netherlands, in 2019 the government set a benchmark for the minimum income standard. The aim is to lower the cost of living and raise incomes so that everyone living in the Caribbean Netherlands can provide for themselves. As an overarching goal, it is important to work on the economy and the labour market. To further improve working people's incomes, on 1 January 2020, the statutory minimum wage on Bonaire, St Eustatius and Saba was raised by 5%, 2% and 5% respectively, above the standard adjustment for inflation. From 1 January 2020, people with children also benefit from an increase in child benefit of around \$20 a month. The rise in the statutory minimum wage was accompanied by a comparable rise in benefit under the AOV²⁹ and AWW³⁰ and social assistance benefit, so that the incomes of jobless people and people who cannot work also improved. Ahead of the enshrinement in law of the childcare system in the Caribbean Netherlands, a temporary scheme for childcare grants was introduced for the 2020-2021 period (Government Gazette 2020, 19876). This scheme is a major step forward in the 'BES(t) 4 Kids' programme as it makes childcare more affordable for parents. In addition, temporary measures in the framework of the coronavirus pandemic have reduced the costs to consumers of telecom, energy and drinking water, while the public bodies have received extra funds to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable people. Central government has taken over responsibility for grants to landlords in the social housing sector, giving the public bodies more financial scope to develop policies that will lead to a reduction in housing costs. More social housing will also be built. This policy contributes to the achievement of SDGs 1, 8, 10 and 11.

Major projects completed in the past few years in the Caribbean Netherlands in the field of security and justice (SDG 16) include the introduction of juvenile criminal law and the entry into force of the Criminal Injuries Compensation Fund Act and the robbery prevention scheme. With the introduction of juvenile criminal law, schemes are now in place enabling out-of-court settlement of offences and specific youth penalties with clear pedagogical aims. This is in line with international children's rights. Victims of violent offences on Bonaire, St Eustatius and Saba who have suffered serious physical or mental harm may now claim compensation from the Criminal Injuries Compensation Fund in the form of a

²⁸ [Sustainable Development Goals and Human Rights: An Indivisible Bond](#), Advisory Council on International Affairs, 10 May 2019 and the [Government Response](#), 28 December 2020.

²⁹ AOV: incapacity insurance.

³⁰ AWW: Widows and Orphans Benefits Act.

one-off allowance. This allowance serves as recognition of the wrong that has been done to them, and helps restore their confidence. Under the robbery prevention scheme, grants are awarded to enable home or business owners who have been the victims of robbery to take preventive measures. The scheme contributes to victims' feelings of safety and helps prevent recurrent victimisation.

2.2 Nature and the environment

The aim of the Caribbean Netherlands policy plan for nature and the environment 2020-2030 (NMBP) is to conserve, protect and sustainably use the islands' considerable natural wealth. A healthy natural environment contributes to the islands' economic development. The plan has four central objectives focusing on: 1) healthy, resilient coral reefs, 2) restoration and conservation of unique habitats and species, 3) sustainable use of land and 4) water for the development of the local economy and to create the conditions necessary to enable nature conservation policy to achieve sustainable results. The policy plan for nature and the environment is the starting point for drafting an implementation agenda for each island and provides the strategy and framework within which each island, in collaboration with central government, can set to work. The policy plan contributes to the achievement of SDGs 6, 13, 14 and 16. In late 2020 the Bonaire and St Eustatius National Parks Foundations (Stinapa and Stenapa) and the Caribbean Netherlands Science Institute (CSNI), working on behalf of the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, carried out measurements of water quality. It is likely that reduced tourism during the coronavirus pandemic considerably reduced pressure on both the environment and water quality on the three islands. This was a unique opportunity to measure the quality of sea water, enabling comparison with past and future measurements. The samples will be analysed in the course of this year, and will serve as a baseline measurement for the seawater quality monitoring programme which will be launched in the framework of the policy plan for nature and the environment, contributing to the achievement of SDG 14.

2.3 Human rights

Most international human rights agreements apply equally to the European and Caribbean parts of the Netherlands. In 2019, the government agreed that future human rights agreements entered into by the Kingdom will also apply to both the European and the Caribbean parts of the Kingdom. However, given the essential differences between the Caribbean and European Netherlands, for example geographical location and economic and social circumstances (article 132a, paragraph 4 of the Constitution), scope has been left open for differences between the two parts of the Netherlands in implementing human rights agreements. The 2020 National Action Plan

on Human Rights contains various actions to promote human rights in the Caribbean Netherlands. A job centre is currently being set up on Bonaire, extra social housing is planned for Bonaire, St Eustatius and Saba, and the personal records database on St Eustatius will be cleaned up. There are also plans to see whether the Equal Treatment Act should be introduced in the Caribbean Netherlands.

3. Relevance of new policy to the SDGs

In May 2020, in response to a motion submitted by MP Kirsten van den Hul,³¹ the government agreed to indicate which SDGs proposed new policy will contribute to. In the past year, various major policy initiatives have been launched that contribute to achieving the SDGs. A good example is the National Environmental Policy Framework, which explicitly specifies to which SDGs its various elements contribute. The link to the SDGs will also be made in fleshing out the policy framework in the National Environmental Programme, and action will be taken to explore whether and how SDG targets may serve as the basis for new, measurable environmental goals. Another good example is the new National Action Plan on Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, which is linked to SDGs 5.2 and 16 (see box). The vision on the future of industry also explicitly ties in with the SDGs. The table below provides an overview of all major policy initiatives launched in the past year which are of relevance to the SDGs.

³¹ [Motion](#) submitted by MPs Kirsten van den Hul et al. on 28 November 2019 on highlighting the link between policy and the SDGs, and the [Letter to Parliament](#) of 20 May 2020 agreeing to implement the motion and responding to the 2020 Monitor of Wellbeing & SDGs.

Policy document	Objective	Partners	Relevance to the SDGs
National Strategy on Spatial Planning and the Environment	A long-term strategy on the future and development of the living environment in the Netherlands	Central government in coordination with other government authorities and civil society parties	Links to agriculture (SDG 2), drinking water supply (SDG 6), energy (SDG 7), infrastructure (SDG 9), cities (SDG 11), circular economy (SDG 12), climate action (SDG 13) and biodiversity/life on land (SDG 15)
Biodiversity Action Plan	The Biodiversity Action Plan is an interministerial partnership to identify and take follow-up steps to bring about social and economic transformation aimed at restoring biodiversity, halving the Netherlands' ecological footprint by 2050 and achieving full compliance with the targets set out in the Birds and Habitats Directives	Various government ministries and the Delta Plan for Biodiversity Recovery	Focus on life below water and life on land (SDGs 14 and 15), and on partnerships to achieve goals (SDG 17). Links to health and wellbeing (SDG 3), sustainable energy, the economy and cities (SDGs 7, 8 and 11), climate action (SDG 13), and industry, infrastructure and innovation (SDG 9)
Forest strategy (Bossenstrategie)	In the National Climate Agreement, central government and the provincial authorities agreed to draw up a forest strategy setting out their joint ambitions (10% more woodland by 2030), goals for Dutch forests, and plans for achieving them	Central government and provincial authorities (policy intention). Further elaboration in collaboration with other authorities and social partners	Focus on SDG 13 (climate action) and SDG 15 (life on land)
Clean Air Agreement (Schone Lucht Akkoord)	36 local authorities, 9 provincial authorities and central government set out their shared ambition to permanently improve air quality and achieve a minimum 50% health gain by 2030	Central government in coordination with other government authorities (provincial and local)	Focus on health and wellbeing (SDG 3), and contribution to sustainable cities (SDG 11) and climate action (SDG 13)
Supplementary parental leave after the birth of a child	Supplementary parental leave for partners was introduced on July 2020. Partners are now entitled to five weeks' supplementary parental leave, while still getting paid around 70% of their salary	Central government in coordination with social partners	SDG 5 (gender equality, in particular SDG 5.4: shared responsibility within the household)
Increased spending on poverty reduction and debt restructuring	Extra €146 million released to combat poverty and problem debt (supplementing the current Broad Action Plan on Debt and agreements on accelerating its implementation)	Central government, local authorities, research institutions and parties involved in tackling poverty and debt	SDG 1 (poverty), SDG 10 (reduce inequalities)
Higher supplementary child benefit from third child	From 2021, an extra €150 million will be earmarked for the supplementary child benefit in order to reduce the risk of child poverty. Families will receive a higher allowance for the third and every following child	Central government	SDG 1 (poverty), SDG 10 (reduce inequalities)
Balanced Labour Market Act (Wet Arbeidsmarkt in balans)	Legislation to reduce the gap between conditions of employment and workers' rights in permanent contracts and flexible contracts. This has given on-call employees and payroll workers more security		SDG 8 (decent work) and SDG 10 (reduce inequalities)
Lifelong Development Programme - SLIM (Programma Leven Lang Ontwikkelen - SLIM regeling)	The grant scheme for development and training (SLIM scheme) enables SMEs and businesses in the agriculture, hospitality and leisure sectors to apply for grants for initiatives geared to staff development and training		SDG 8 (decent work), SDG 4 (education)

Policy document	Objective	Partners	Relevance to the SDGs
Strategy for the protection of labour migrants	Measures to improve the position of labour migrants through better regulation of employment agencies, better registration and regional agreements for better housing arrangements	Central government in collaboration with local authorities, social partners, provincial authorities, housing associations and employers/landlords	SDG 8 (in particular 8.8: protect labour rights, including of migrant workers)
RBC Policy: From Giving Information to Imposing Obligations	Steps towards renewed sectoral cooperation, the RBC support office, elaboration of the building blocks for RBC legislation and developments in Europe in relation to due diligence legislation	Central government in collaboration with a broad range of stakeholders, including the SER, social partners, NGOs, business community, the Netherlands Enterprise Agency (RVO), the Sustainable Trade Initiative (IDH), MVO Nederland and the National Contact Point (NCP), and the EU	SDG 12 (in particular 12.6: encourage companies to adopt sustainable practices) and thus most of the other SDGs
Vision for More Sustainable Basic Industries in 2050	The Netherlands has the ambition and the opportunity to become Europe's centre for sustainable basic industries. By strengthening the public sector's role in relation to innovation, infrastructure, upscaling and legislation in the next few years, and by providing the private sector with the necessary clarity, the Netherlands could lead the field in sustainable industrial technology and create new earning capacity in existing and new industrial value chains	Central government and industry	SDGs 7, 8, 9, 12 and 13 (energy transition, decent work, sustainable industry, sustainable consumption and climate action)
Vision on the Future of Industry in the Netherlands	Action to promote the long-term development of Dutch industry in the light of developments such as sustainability and digitalisation. The vision points to the contribution industry can make in terms of a higher economic growth potential, a sustainable society and a resilient, robust Europe	Central government and industry	SDGs 2, 3, 7, 8, 9, 12 and 13 (sustainable food supplies, health, energy transition, decent work, sustainable industry, sustainable consumption, sustainable production and climate action)
Gender Balance in Senior Management (Private Sector) Bill	The bill proposes (1) introducing a compulsory quota of at least 1/3 women and 1/3 men on the supervisory boards of listed companies and (2) requiring the supervisory boards, management boards and upper management of 5,000 large companies to set targets, draft diversity plans and report to the SER	Central government in coordination with the SER	SDG 5: gender equality (in particular 5.5: participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making)
A Broad Approach to Health: National Policy Document on Health, 2020-2024	This policy document sets out national priorities for public health with guidance for local authorities' health policies. Central government and the local authorities will focus on four health issues: improving health in people's physical and social environment, reducing health deficits, reducing stress in young people's daily lives and contributing to healthy ageing	Central government, the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG) and representatives of the local authorities, municipal health services (GGDs) and knowledge institutions	Focuses on health and wellbeing (SDG 3), and contributes to eliminating poverty (SDG 1), improved nutrition (SDG 2), sustainable infrastructure (SDG 9), reducing inequalities (SDG 10) and sustainable cities (SDG 11)

Women, Peace and Security: The Fourth National Action Plan on Resolution 1325

Twenty years ago, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 on the status, rights and position of women and girls in peace and security processes. Since then, another ten resolutions have been adopted on the subject of Women, Peace and Security (WPS). The Fourth National Action Plan on Resolution 1325³² took effect at the start of this year. It sets out how the Netherlands will implement Resolution 1325 and subsequent resolutions on WPS in the years to come. The new NAP is the result of close cooperation between government (the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Defence, Justice & Security and Education, Culture & Science) and civil society, coordinated by the Dutch gender platform WO=MEN. It contains five goals of both national and international relevance: (1) participation; (2) prevention; (3) protection; (4) relief, reconstruction and recovery and (5) WPS mainstreaming. Like other countries, the Netherlands has a long way to go in ensuring women's participation in political life, peace and security. The Fourth NAP on Resolution 1325 contributes to the achievement of SDGs 5, 16 and 10.

SDG 5.2 calls on governments to 'eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation'. Action on target 5.2 is to be found in NAP strategic outcomes 3 and 4, with a commitment to combating the impunity of perpetrators of violent offences against women and girls. The parties are also actively committed to implementing article 7.4 of the Arms Trade Treaty, in relation to the possible impact of the Dutch arms trade on a higher risk of gender-related violence in the country of destination. Action in the Netherlands focuses on a safe, gender-sensitive reception and asylum procedure for people in vulnerable positions, like unaccompanied women and minors, including LHBTQI+ people, and other asylum seekers. The government is also working through [Movisie](#) to promote the safety, equality and acceptance of women and LHBTQI+ people within their own communities. Trained moderators from the community itself play an important role. The government also supports the [Act4Respect](#) alliance, which works with young people and professionals for equal relationships between women and men, in which there is no room for physical, sexual or cyber violence.

SDG 16 promotes a peaceful and inclusive society, with access to justice and establishment of effective, responsible and inclusive institutions at all levels. This goal is therefore closely linked to the NAP's five strategic outcomes, reflected in the Netherlands' commitment to combating impunity for serious violations of international humanitarian and criminal law, including conflict-related sexual and gender-related violence. This is being addressed not only at UN level, with sanctions under the UN regime, but also in criminal law cases brought before the International Criminal Court in The Hague. People suspected of these offences may also be brought before The Hague district court.

Refugees in the Netherlands are provided with information on how they can lodge a criminal complaint against people suspected of international crimes, and how they can give testimony. However, witnesses or victims of offences for which the suspects are being tried in the Netherlands do not currently have access to free legal aid in the Netherlands because the offences were committed elsewhere. The NAP focuses specifically on this group of victims: a temporary advisory body is conducting a comprehensive study of the system of compensation for victims of criminal offences. Depending on the outcome of this study, the government will explore whether and under what conditions the victims of offences committed abroad should be eligible for free legal aid.

It is also essential for women and girls with a migration background to have easy access to security and justice systems, with support in their own language. In the Netherlands, anyone who is not proficient in Dutch is entitled to the services of an interpreter throughout the asylum procedure and subsequent appeals. Nonetheless, women with a migration background may encounter specific obstacles in obtaining access to the courts – due to language or translation problems or cultural differences, for example – in connection with their asylum application or in lodging a criminal complaint. In order to understand the causes of conflict-related violence against women and girls, the Netherlands is committed to generating more knowledge of the issues involved.

³² Fourth National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security ([NAP1325](#)).

C: LOCAL AND REGIONAL GOVERNMENT

Drafted by and under the auspices of the three umbrella organisations for local and regional government: the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG), the Association of Provincial Authorities (IPO) and the Dutch Water Authorities (UWV)

Despite the coronavirus pandemic, the local, provincial and water authorities stepped up their efforts to achieve the SDGs. The call for sustainable post-pandemic recovery, [guided by the SDGs](#), was also voiced by local government in the Netherlands. The municipality of Amsterdam made world news with its SDG-related [circular strategy](#). Rotterdam and Teylingen joined the VNG's [Municipal Global Goals Campaign](#) in 2020, which thus reached the milestone of 100 participating municipalities. On 25 September, around 60 local authorities and five water authorities took part in the SDG flag campaign, raising the flag in support of the SDGs and emphasising their importance on social media.

In 2020, local authorities increasingly used the SDGs as instruments in setting comprehensive [policy on sustainability](#). Súdwest Fryslân used the SDG compass as a basis for its spatial planning and environment strategy and day-to-day policy; Noordenveld linked the SDGs to its local agenda for inclusion; The Hague evaluated local access to justice in the light of SDG 16; St Eustatius linked its Social Domain Masterplan to the SDGs, and Bonaire took them on board in its governance programme and 2030 Masterplan. Local authorities continue to express the need for a national instrument to measure local progress with the SDGs.

Provincial authorities are also moving forward with the SDGs. In 2020, the province of South Holland produced a monitor for the living environment, with indicators linked to the SDGs. The province of Fryslân assessed results envisaged by its voluntary agreement with private sector parties in the light of the SDGs. The [water authorities](#) are contributing to the SDGs by becoming energy neutral and circular and ensuring sufficient supplies of clean drinking water, at home and abroad. [Waternet](#) links its innovation policy to the SDGs, and the Brabantse Delta water authority has opted for a [strategy](#) linked to the SDGs.

1. An equal, inclusive society

In 2020, the coronavirus pandemic had a huge impact on society and the economy. It magnified weaknesses and led to the emergence of new social and regional divisions and growing inequalities in areas like the labour market, income and healthcare (SDGs 8, 10 and 3), as a [study](#) conducted by the provincial authorities of South Holland shows.

In the pandemic year, the presence of government could clearly be felt in society. Local authorities not only delivered [support measures](#) to the cultural sector (€335 million) and businesses (€3.1 billion), ensuring retention of jobs (SDG 8), but also bore the financial impact of the crisis in the form of loss of tax revenue. In relation to work and income, more people claimed benefits under the Work and Social Assistance Act or applied for crisis payments (SDGs 1 and 8). At the same time coronavirus had a major impact on economic activity. Bankruptcies in our shopping streets are likely to have a long-term impact on the vibrancy of our towns and cities (SDGs 8 and 11). To help business owners through the pandemic, the water authorities introduced [an extensive package of measures](#), including stopping or deferring payment of taxes, and paying their suppliers' invoices immediately. There are major ongoing concerns about the long-term effects of the pandemic. In many cases, local authorities were unable to provide assistance under the Social Support Act and youth care (SDG 3), which is normally one of their tasks.

Government was also clearly present in society with coronavirus measures. Though the safety regions managed to control the spread of the virus relatively quickly, the duration of the measures called for more democratic control (SDG 16.3). The COVID-19 (Temporary Measures) Act gave the local authorities more democratic control of the measures, but at the same time led to protests about curtailment of fundamental rights and freedoms.

At the same time, online access to public services (SDG 16.3) spread rapidly this year, through e-participation. VNG provided local authorities with budgets to help them develop this facility. In the wake of the child benefits scandal, parliament approved the Open Government Act. Now local and regional authorities, too, are required to release additional information, leading to more openness and transparency (SDG 16). Of significance is the transition to participatory implementation, engaging with local residents in implementing legislation and by-laws, enabling timely adjustment.

In the past year, the local authorities had the greatest difficulty maintaining local services and thus reducing inequalities (SDG 10), given their exceptionally poor financial position. Due to cuts to their budget in anticipation of economies of scale, and costs of implementing the Social Support and Youth Acts which were much higher than estimated, grants from the Municipalities Fund are structurally inadequate. As a result, charges imposed on local residents are rising, local authorities are unable to invest and services are

deteriorating. Local authorities in some vulnerable areas had to increase taxes in 2020 in order to maintain services. They are also struggling to get a grip on expenditure in the social domain, due to insufficient insight into uptake of youth care services, for example, and to the low cost of subscriptions for services provided under the Social Support Act, which is leading to extra demand. Local authorities urgently need more scope to [control](#) the costs of policy, with more [structural resources](#) to carry out youth care tasks properly.

Apart from more funding, improvements are needed to the prior conditions relating to work, income, debt and poverty. In the past year, the local authorities worked on a strategy which should lead to amendments to the provisions of the Participation Act on helping disabled people find permanent jobs (SDGs 8 and 10). The national [Aanpak 16-27](#) strategy aims to give young people in vulnerable positions the best possible support to become independent (SDGs 4, 8 and 10). Spending on tackling poverty and debt is being increased, with a view to mitigating the impact of the coronavirus pandemic and devoting specific attention to child poverty (SDG 1) and to implementing a new Civic Integration Act, with more assistance for newcomers. In 2020, the water authorities explored scope for faster delivery of the agreement on jobs for disabled people (SDG 8), using a sectoral approach.

2. Healthy living environment and nature

The coronavirus pandemic also had an impact on the environment, with more people visiting nature and recreation areas and more attention for green spaces in the city (SDG 11). Urban centres in the [province of South Holland](#) played a less significant role as drivers of economic growth, while working from home led to demand for different types of housing, influencing plans for residential construction. People's travel habits also changed: more flexible working hours, working from home and an increased preference for travel by private vehicle reduced congestion on the roads as well as pressure on public transport (SDG 11). In the province of Fryslân this led to postponement of procurement agreements for zero-emission buses.

Soon after the coronavirus outbreak and even before cases of illness had been diagnosed in certain parts of the country, it was discovered that higher concentrations of the virus could be detected in waste water (SDGs 3 and 6). Every week, the water authorities and the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment [test](#) wastewater samples for coronavirus particles. From 2021, monitoring has been

carried out daily, and the system will be equipped to enable collection of more health-related data in the future.

It is common knowledge that the Netherlands performs poorly on protecting biodiversity (SDG 15), due among other things to high nitrogen surpluses. In 2020, the provincial authorities and central government drew up the area-based nitrogen strategy ([Gebiedsgerichte Aanpak Stikstof](#)) which will be fleshed out by central government, the provincial authorities, VNG, UVW, and various sectors and stakeholders. As part of the strategy, agreement has been reached on investing nearly €3 billion in making lasting improvements to nature areas up to 2030. Another component is the nature-inclusive agenda ([Agenda Natuurinclusief](#)) to enhance the quality of natural ecosystems outside protected nature areas.

In the next few years, the water authorities will be making an [active commitment](#) to strengthening biodiversity through the [Delta Plan for Biodiversity Recovery](#). Through their wastewater treatment plants the water authorities ensure that wastewater is treated before it enters river systems, removing harmful substances such as nitrogen and phosphorous in order to protect aquatic flora and fauna (SDGs 6 and 15). The water authorities recently introduced [innovative techniques](#) to remove microplastics and drug residues from wastewater. To remove plastic and litter from the entire water system before it enters the sea (SDG 14), the Rijnland water authority worked with ten local authorities to explore whether a [bubble barrier](#) could be installed at the mouth of the Oude Rijn river.

3. Climate, energy and the circular economy

The coronavirus pandemic had little impact in 2020 on the tasks of local and regional authorities in the fields of energy, climate and the circular economy, except that e-participation has enabled the involvement of groups who were underrepresented in the past. In relation to the National Climate Agreement, up to 2022, local and regional authorities and their partners will mainly be occupied with planning. However, future implementation of the agreement will largely depend on the degree of support from central government: [a Council for Public Administration study](#) shows that local, provincial and water authorities will need a total of €1.75 billion in the 2022-2024 period to implement the Climate Agreement.

Local, provincial and water authorities and central government are working on climate adaptation through the Delta Plan on Spatial Adaptation on climate adaptation (SDG 13). The water authorities are now working on

climate-proof flood defences and water systems. In order to prevent extreme weather events obstructing plans for new housing, regions must step up their collaboration in area-based approaches to ensure sound, long-term decisions about water, land and soil use.

In the past year, local authorities have started drafting their plans, neighbourhood by neighbourhood, for a [transition](#) to low carbon heating (SDG 7). They are launching an increasing number of trials aimed at completely phasing out natural gas in neighbourhoods ('gas-free neighbourhoods', [Proeftuinen Aardgasvrije Wijken](#)) to see what this will entail in practice. The first trials show how complex and extensive the operation is likely to be. In 2020, the draft [Regional Energy Strategies](#) were also completed, in which the 30 energy regions indicate what their share can be in wind and solar energy generation. Though this will lead to more renewable energy, the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency calculated that the national targets of 27% [renewable energy](#) and 49% reduction in carbon emissions by 2030 are nowhere in sight. Energy farms call for considerable harmonisation at institutional level. The Association of Provincial Authorities (IPO) and central government are helping to remove structural legislative obstacles to inclusion of wind and solar farms in spatial plans. The water authorities managed to achieve their 2020 goals for energy and climate (SDG 7 and 13) [in 2019](#). Their aim is now to become energy neutral by 2025 through biogas production in their [wastewater treatment plants](#), and providing scope for renewable energy generation on their premises and surface waters, which will also contribute to further reductions in carbon emissions.

The local and provincial authorities are working on the circular economy (SDG 12) through the Circular Economy Implementation Programme. Because a number of sustainability goals converge in the regions, this programme focuses on action in particularly prominent and trendsetting regions. This is linked to Regional Deals, an instrument allowing a comprehensive approach to regional challenges. The parties involved will each be part of the Regional Circular Ecosystem, which is under development, in which the provincial authorities will play a coordinating role. In 2020 the provincial authorities published a circular economy chart ([Krachtenkaart circulaire economie](#)) with five main guidelines on circularity and how each region can use its strengths to work towards the circular transition. Greening of the chemical industry is Groningen's main strength, for example, while Drenthe excels in circular housing concepts. VNG, IPO and UVW are now fleshing out the CO₂ shadow pricing instrument.

The water authorities are drafting a strategy to achieve circularity, aiming at a 50% reduction in use of primary

resources with a negative environmental impact by 2030. They are also recovering raw materials like bioplastic. In Dordrecht, the water authorities are building a [factory](#) to produce biodegradable plastic from sludge. Other examples include the pumping station being built by the [Fryslân water authority](#) in accordance with circular principles and the [Vallei en Veluwe](#) water authority's assessment framework for circularity in the area-based development of the Grebbedijk.

Finally, water authorities are increasingly adopting a sustainable approach to civil engineering works ([Aanpak Duurzaam GWW](#)). In addition, they made a great effort in 2020 to enable civil engineering firms to [carry on working](#). In the coming years they will invest [more than €1.7 billion](#) a year in projects for stronger dikes, better water management and clean water, boosting the hydraulic engineering sector and ensuring green post-pandemic recovery.

4. Cooperation between different tiers of government

The greatest challenge in the past year for cooperation between different tiers of government – which was met successfully – was posed by the coronavirus pandemic (SDG 16). Agreements were reached in a [constructive](#) manner on implementing pandemic-related measures and who bears which costs. By working together, water authorities and local and provincial authorities secured rapid approval of the bill on online decision-making, giving them scope to reach decisions online (SDG 16).

The [Interbestuurlijk Programma](#) (IBP) in which local and regional authorities and central government work together to meet social challenges is coming to an end. The IBP's focus on tackling issues in synergy to arrive at added value for society was very much in the spirit of the SDGs. The final stages of the programme showed an increasing tendency towards regional cooperation. However, despite the willingness to continue working together, [it has not proved possible](#) to function as one government: compartmentalisation continues to pose problems. Nevertheless, we worked together closely in 2020 on specific topics like human trafficking (SDG 16) and climate and energy (SDGs 13 and 7). The new government will also have to work with local, provincial and water authorities to tackle major social challenges. An area-based approach to these challenges will be essential.

D: THE PRIVATE SECTOR AND FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS

Drafted by and under the auspices of Global Compact Network Netherlands, MVO Nederland, the Dutch Sustainable Growth Coalition (DSGC), Social Enterprise NL, the Dutch Banking Association (NVB), the Confederation of Netherlands Industry and Employers (VNO-NCW) (including the Groene Groeiers network) and the Royal Association MKB-Nederland

By 2030, the Dutch private sector wants to have made a difference in achieving the SDGs. Doing business in the interests of prosperity in a broad sense is central to the [new course](#) set out by VNO-NCW and MKB-Nederland, illustrating the fact that a commitment to sustainability and inclusion has now penetrated to the very core of the private sector. The employers' organisations want to emphasise that business owners should be transparent about their impact on society and should actively contribute to finding solutions for social problems. They can do this by endorsing the [ten principles](#) of the UN Global Compact.

The employers' organisations have set out this new course in the middle of the coronavirus pandemic, in which businesses have needed support packages to keep their heads above water. This is not particularly surprising. The coronavirus pandemic has exposed society's vulnerabilities and increased calls for close cooperation between the private sector, government, trade unions and civil society organisations. Solidarity and social cohesion have proved to be strong. Businesses were able to contribute creative solutions, for example by switching to the production of face masks and disinfectants.

Businesses are highly aware that giving priority to major transitions in the field of climate and the circular economy is crucial to their future resilience. They do not want to return to the past, but to help build a sustainable economy that is geared to the future. That was the key message of the [Green Recovery Business Statement](#) which was signed by more than 400 businesses. Businesses increasingly seek to define and increase their social impact. Developments such as the creation of a new legal entity for socially responsible businesses through [BV Maatschappelijk](#), the [City Deal on business with an impact](#) and the election of a [Minister for the New Economy](#) respond to this need.

1. The private sector and the SDGs

In order to gain a better understanding of how the private sector experiences the SDGs, a survey was held in early 2021, in the run-up to this report.³³ In their answers, businesses indicated which SDGs had priority, what obstacles they encounter in efforts to increase their impact on them, and what opportunities they identify. The survey also gave a useful glimpse of some good examples of SDG frontrunners.

1.1 Priority SDGs

Of the businesses that took part in the survey, 67% of the respondents said that they gave priority to tackling climate change (SDG 13). Examples include NWB Bank which has charted the impact of financing on climate, NN Group which has decarbonised its investment portfolio and now invests in climate solutions, and Signify which became fully carbon-neutral in 2020. This is encouraging – given that to be climate neutral by 2050, the Netherlands must be more than halfway towards achieving this goal by 2030, but is nowhere near this as yet. Businesses also devote considerable attention to sustainable production and consumption (SDG 12) and to decent jobs and the economic infrastructure (SDG 8). They give less priority to SDG 5 (gender equality), SDG 10 (reducing inequalities), SDG 6 (clean water and sanitation) and SDG 14 (life below water), though there are major challenges in these areas too. Fortunately, we came across good examples of inclusion, for example the release of the cultural diversity barometer for employers. This instrument will enable better measurement of [cultural diversity in the workforce](#) while ensuring anonymity. Businesses like Randstad recognised the significance of the [Alliantie Culturele Diversiteit in de Top](#) (Alliance for Cultural Diversity in the Boardroom), which informs people from culturally diverse backgrounds about jobs in senior management.

1.2 The coronavirus pandemic and the SDGs

It was interesting to note that 71% of the businesses completing the SDG survey indicated that the coronavirus pandemic had not significantly affected their commitment to the SDGs. In fact, 66% indicated that they plan to focus more attention on the SDGs in this coming year. Rabobank and MVO Nederland conducted a more in-depth [analysis](#), differentiating among different sized businesses, and concluded that larger businesses in particular were still

³³ The survey was held among members of the networks of VNO-NCW, MKB-Nederland, Global Compact Network Netherlands, MVO Nederland, *Groene Groeiers*, the Dutch Sustainable Growth Coalition, NVB and Social Enterprise NL. A total of 100 businesses completed the questionnaire.

planning to devote more attention to the SDGs, but that this year SMEs had not done so. There is thus a risk that the gap between large businesses and SMEs on achieving the SDGs will widen. The challenges have also become greater; the coronavirus pandemic has had a negative impact on a great many SDGs. PwC's [COVID 19 SDG barometer](#) shows that the coronavirus pandemic has clearly had consequences for the SDGs in the Netherlands, since achievement of practically all SDG targets is further away than before. The pandemic has had a positive impact only on climate action (SDG 13). It has therefore become even more urgent for businesses to take action on the SDGs. The [Social Enterprise Monitor](#) shows that many socially responsible businesses introduced innovations during the pandemic, for example new products or services or digitalisation of products and services.

1.3 SDG action within businesses

Respondents indicated that it is no longer possible to imagine the private sector without the SDGs. 89% indicated that they have incorporated the SDGs into their business strategies and core activities – like CocaCola partners who seek to use fully recycled plastic by the end of 2021, KPN that plans to be fully circular by 2025, and NS that consciously links the SDG targets to its internal objectives. 86% take account of SDGs in developing products and services. There are also good examples of how businesses include the SDGs in their annual reports: Alliander, for instance. It is interesting to note that businesses experience their own efforts to achieve the SDGs as positive, giving themselves an average score of 7.5 on a scale of 1 to 10. However, they give the private sector as a whole and government a score of 6 out of 10, which is considerably lower. They even give government an average score of 5 out of 10 for its efforts to facilitate the private sector in achieving the SDGs. 73% of the respondents reported having serious concerns about achieving the climate goals, restoring ecosystems and maintaining biodiversity. Some businesses provided input on how government's SDG strategy could be encouraged or improved. One of the respondents put it as follows: 'We need a vision which actively promotes interaction between the SDGs, enhancing opportunities for the SDGs to strengthen each other, while reducing the risk of trade-offs between them.'

1.4 Opportunities and obstacles for businesses

Businesses identify opportunities for action to achieve the SDGs, but also encounter obstacles. The majority (80%) say that the SDGs lead to more long-term value creation. Other opportunities identified by the business community include entering into social alliances with stakeholders, such as suppliers, government authorities and civil society (73%), and innovation and development of new products and services (70%). The most serious obstacle is customers'

lack of interest in the SDGs (39%). Businesses also feel that the playing field is insufficiently level due to inadequate legislation (34%).

2. Highlights and inspiring examples

- The call for a greater focus on long-term value creation rather than short-term profits led to greater interest in stakeholder engagement. In a [publication](#) on stakeholder inclusion, Global Compact Network Netherlands presented inspiring examples from the private sector to show how the Netherlands could lead the field by involving stakeholders in developing strategies, setting priorities and reporting. DSGC published a [white paper](#) identifying the internal transformation needed within businesses to make their organisations more purpose-driven.
- Definitive steps were taken in 2020 to ensure that businesses' responsibility for limiting the risks of negative impact and taking more account of their social role in their operations will no longer be strictly voluntary. Both the European Commission and the [Dutch government](#) decided that a statutory due diligence obligation is needed with regard to RBC. A Sustainalize study showed that the private sector is in favour of a broad due diligence obligation to limit RBC risks, which will have a positive impact on the SDGs.
- We are also seeing a trend towards pricing externalities and increasing support for this. Some companies already work with shadow pricing, taking on board societal costs such as climate change, soil degradation or poverty. This usually occurs behind the scenes, but in the past year a few supermarkets have been giving consumers insight into 'true prices'. Businesses are increasingly taking account of the fact that they will have to pay for their emissions in the future, and are taking this on board in their investment decisions (internal carbon pricing). This also applies to companies that do not fall under the ETS system.
- Biodiversity is still not high on the private sector agenda. This is striking, because according to reports published by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), PBL and De Nederlandsche Bank, among others, problems relating to biodiversity and ecosystem losses are becoming increasingly grave, which also has consequences for the economy. Relatively few businesses work with measurable targets (such as the Science-Based Targets for Nature). A positive example is LC Energy which is working with the Netherlands Organisation for Applied Scientific Research (TNO), landscape architects, other businesses in the energy sector and knowledge institutions to carry out pilot projects on recycling and

reusing solar panels, making a positive contribution to biodiversity and multiple land use, and enabling the energy transition to go hand in hand with the food transition.

- In 2018, the European Commission drew up an EU Action Plan on Sustainable Finance with the aim of using finance and investment to achieve a sustainable economy in line with the Paris Agreement and the SDGs. The European Commission has since developed various initiatives, including the Taxonomy Regulation which establishes a framework for classifying economic activities that contribute to climate mitigation and adaptation without negatively impacting on other climate goals, such as protection of ecosystems and biodiversity, sustainable use of water, the transition to the circular economy and pollution prevention.
- An increasing number of companies want to play a leading role on sustainability and inclusion, and are joining networks that can help them achieve this aim. Global Compact Network Netherlands grew by 26% in 2020. Through the [SDG Ambition](#) initiative, the network gives businesses practical help in translating the SDGs into business objectives and plans on the basis of ten business benchmarks. There was also growth in

the number of certified [b-corporations](#) and various initiatives focused on helping social enterprises achieve impact. On the basis of the New Economy Index ([NEX](#)), MVO Nederland provides a roadmap for businesses to achieve further sustainability. VNO-NCW's *Groene Groeiers* Network focuses on the development of sustainable business cases in the fields of circularity, the energy transition and biodiversity, with members explicitly identifying the SDGs to which they contribute. The Dutch Sustainable Growth Coalition launched the report titled [Transition Time! – A Circular Economy for Plastics](#), with recommendations for government and parties in the plastics value chain. One tangible result is the pilot project with Obbotec and Unilever on the chemical recycling of plastics.

- Finally, we can see that various tools and instruments have been launched on the private market that enable better identification, measurement and monitoring of SDG impact. While meeting a need expressed by the private sector for practical assistance, these tools and instruments are often too diverse to make things any clearer for business owners. This was also concluded in the [report](#) on more coherent measurement and reporting of SDG impact.

E: CIVIL SOCIETY

Drafted by and under the auspices of Partos

Civil society in the Netherlands is committed in many ways to achieving the SDGs. Sixty-eight of these organisations contributed to this section of the SDG report. Views were collected through a questionnaire distributed by [Partos](#) (the sector organisation for development cooperation) among members and non-members that are active in civil society. 35.5% of the organisations completing the questionnaire are active in the field of development cooperation, 10.3% are environmental organisations, while 5.9% are religious organisations. We also received responses from women's organisations, climate organisations, capital funds and network organisations. In this section we will first discuss current trends, including the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the SDGs. We will then go on to examine civil society's efforts to achieve the SDGs, giving examples. We will conclude by looking at the role civil society organisations would like to see the various actors in society playing, with a number of recommendations.

1. A crucial period for achieving the SDGs

2020 marked the start of a crucial period for achieving the SDGs. Current efforts will not be enough to achieve the SDGs by 2030, and we need to change course to move towards genuinely sustainable development. Political parties, the private sector, civil society organisations and members of the public will have to take a critical look at their own actions, and do what is needed accordingly.

1.1 The influence of the coronavirus pandemic

The coronavirus pandemic has had a considerable impact on the work of civil society organisations, both in the Netherlands and worldwide. At international level, the focus has shifted to emergency aid, hindering efforts to step up work on sustainable development. Programmes focus mainly on helping people survive, with less attention for social and economic development. In countries with poor governance, this has led to increasingly uncontrolled exploitation of natural resources. At the same time, falling GNP as a result of the pandemic will impact on the total budget available for development cooperation, putting a squeeze on contributions to sustainable development.

It is a fact that the coronavirus pandemic has slowed down efforts to achieve the SDGs, and an extra effort is needed to achieve the goals by 2030. While the pandemic has had a huge impact on the Netherlands, it has been catastrophic for developing countries. It is therefore

essential to maintain the development budget at an adequate level. The importance of a sustainable, inclusive recovery is greater than ever. In addition to investment in post-pandemic recovery, it is essential to work towards a resilient, sustainable, inclusive society, based centrally on human rights, and with action to combat climate change.

1.2 Government and political parties need to take the lead

For civil society organisations, government and political parties clearly need to take the lead. The first [SDG Spotlight Report](#) on the Netherlands was published on 1 March 2021. The report contains a critical analysis of policy, legislation and measures relating to SDG 10 (reduce inequalities) and SDG 15 (life on land) and concluded that some policies had actually contributed to placing these SDGs further beyond reach. In addition, many positive measures are purely voluntary, such as those aiming for sustainable international supply chains and a sustainable economy. To ensure genuine impact, the government needs to act as the market overseer.

In 2019, Partos welcomed the inclusion of a separate SDG assessment tool in the integrated assessment framework. Unfortunately, a recent [study](#) by Building Change concluded that application of the SDG assessment is not being applied visibly enough, and that transparency is essential to remedy this. The SDG assessment should be made a visible and compulsory element in the process leading to new policy and regulations, and in the Explanatory Memorandum, for example. Civil servants at every ministry should be made more aware of the existence of this tool and how it is used. It is also essential to tap into the expertise of civil society organisations by actively involving them in implementation.

2. Civil society and the SDGs

Civil society organisations (CSOs) are highly aware of the need to achieve the SDGs and they contribute in various ways to this. Of the CSOs who responded to the questionnaire, 44.1% indicated that they had stepped up their efforts to achieve the SDGs in the past year. For 66.2% of the respondents, promoting sustainable development both in the Netherlands and elsewhere through communications, campaigns, dialogue and awareness-raising was the main form of activity. 60.3% of the organisations were also engaged in advocacy and lobbying, while 58.8% were involved in international projects.

The table below shows the SDG clusters to which the organisations completing the questionnaire are committed. Looking at commitment to specific SDGs, we can see that – unlike in previous years – SDG 5 (gender equality) was the most popular among civil society partners, with 51.5% indicating that they were taking action in this field. This was followed by SDG 1 (eliminate poverty) at 47.1% and a joint third place for SDG 4 (quality education), SDG 10 (reduce inequalities) and SDG 16 (peace, security and justice), each at 42.5%. SDGs 7 (sustainable energy), 9 (innovation, industry and infrastructure) and 14 (life below water) were less popular among the respondents, with fewer than 20% saying that they were taking action in these areas.

Organisations' commitment by SDG cluster

Cluster	SDG's	Percentage of CSOs active in cluster
People	1 to 5	41.48%
Planet	6, 12 to 15	27.64%
Prosperity	7 to 11	27.36%
Peace	16	42.6%
Partnerships	17	44.1%

2.1 Inspiring examples

CSOs are a driving force in promoting widespread awareness of and action for the SDGs. For example, the Council of Churches ([Raad van Kerken](#)) distributed a brochure among 5 million Dutch Christians, calling for sustainability to go hand in hand with poverty reduction (SDG 1). 'Looking at our commitment to sustainability, we must conclude that it poses a social risk to people who are already struggling to make ends meet. The solution is to link sustainability to poverty reduction, in order to create equal opportunities for sustainability.'

Many civil society organisations are leaders or members of the SDG Alliances ([SDG Allianties](#)). The coordinators of the 17 alliances ensure collaboration and consultation in driving action to achieve the SDGs. SDG Nederland's SDG Roadmap ([Routekaart](#)) lists major initiatives, specified by SDG. We give a few examples here. The Armoedelab (poverty lab) was launched in 2020 on the initiative of the SDG 1 alliance in collaboration with Erasmus University Rotterdam's Dynamics of Inclusive Prosperity programme. Its aim is to collate academic knowledge relating to poverty reduction and apply it in practice. With the support of 40 partner organisations, WOMEN Inc. submitted a gender equality plan to political parties, with eight issues they need to address in order to achieve SDG 5 in the Netherlands. WO=MEN developed a gender assessment tool for organisations to improve their performance on gender

equality. Environmental organisation De Rijke Noordzee is working to achieve various goals by incorporating nature development and biodiversity restoration in offshore wind farm projects. Its Dutch Wave Makers programme aims to make young people aware of the importance of marine life. The SDG 7 and SDG 12 alliances worked with Data for Good to launch a 'Mission Control Centre' to make the country's SDG status transparent by means of dashboards. Organisations can use the dashboards to highlight their own role, and publicise the results.

2.2 View of their own and others' role

CSOs were asked to rate their own and other actors' commitment to the SDGs. The table below presents the scores (on a scale from 0 to 10). This year's scores were much the same as last year's. They show that civil society remains critical of action by government and the private sector on the SDGs, although scores have risen slightly over the years. Practically every organisation believed that government, the private sector, civil society, knowledge institutions and members of the public share responsibility for achieving the SDGs. The main recommendations focus on a more proactive role by government, awareness-raising, public support and a different economic model – one not based on economic growth but on the wellbeing of people and planet, and on solidarity and equality.

Scores for Dutch action on the SDGs, by sector

Actor	2018	2019	2020	2021
Own organisation	8.5	8.1	8.1	8.2
Civil society	6.0	7.2	6.3	6.7
Government	4.9	5.2	5.6	5.5
Private sector	4.0	4.4	4.9	5.2
Knowledge institutions	5.8	6.3	6.4	6.5

A majority of the organisations pointed out that government bears chief responsibility for achieving the SDGs, through policy and legal frameworks that enforce their implementation. Organisations call for a single, comprehensive cross-ministerial policy, instead of the many different policies currently in place which often conflict with each other and thus obstruct progress. Policy should be assessed in the light of the SDG agenda and human rights. The government needs to make fundamental choices on, for example, transitions in agriculture, energy and finance and the shift to a circular economy. People need a new awareness and a change in mentality if processes of change are to be set in motion.

However, the Central Office for Fundraising Organisations (CBF) points to the unique role civil society organisations can play in meeting the challenges now before us. The SDGs

are the core business of the more than 60 charities under CBF oversight. Charities have been working for many years now to achieve these goals. They have a wealth of experience, and know what works and what doesn't. They know about policy that fails and policy that succeeds, but their expertise is seldom tapped. There are two reasons for this, according to the CBF. First, charities are too often seen as a safety net for all the problems that neither government nor the market can solve. Second, too many charities see the SDGs as a secondary issue. They link their impact on society mainly to the achievement of their own goals, and only secondarily to the broader SDG agenda. This is a missed opportunity, because by using these organisations' knowledge and experience, efforts to achieve the SDGs could be accelerated.

3. Time for systemic change: make the SDGs a priority without borders

Achievement of the SDGs is in jeopardy. Within the Netherlands, civil society organisations are mainly concerned about SDG 13 (climate action), followed by SDG 10 (reduce inequalities) and SDG 15 (life on land). The CBS Monitor of Wellbeing & SDGs confirms this, and points to the Netherlands' poor position compared to other EU member states in relation to SDG 15, for example. The figures for excess nitrogen deposition in the environment, for example, give cause for concern, with the Netherlands trailing behind the rest of the EU member states. The Netherlands also comes in last for the proportion of nature and forest areas. If there is to be any prospect of achieving the SDGs by 2030, civil society organisations believe that it is time for systemic change. We need to move forward towards a more circular, inclusive and sharing economy, which no longer focuses on maximising profits, but on promoting people's wellbeing and improving the quality of our living environment.

At international level, too, progress towards achieving the SDGs by 2030 is under pressure. Organisations indicated that SDG 1 (eliminate poverty) poses the greatest challenge for developing countries, followed by SDG 13 (climate action), SDG 16 (peace, security and justice), SDG 4 (quality education) and SDG 10 (reduce inequalities). A greater commitment is needed to poverty reduction through a comprehensive approach to economic, social and sustainable development. A more equitable tax climate is also needed, in which businesses and the wealthy contribute their fair share to the public purse. In combination with a fair wage, this would provide a robust social safety net for people still living in poverty. More scope and funding is also needed for civil society organisations in the South, with an extra commitment to

ensuring access to funding for locally-based organisations. Similarly, trade policy between rich and poor countries needs to be coherent and fair, while international cooperation must be stepped up. It is crucial to raise development budgets now that many countries' financial resources are depleted due to the impact of the pandemic on the economy and to the fact that they have redirected funds to coronavirus-related measures and security.

As we write this report, the Dutch general election has just been held, and work has started on the formation of a new government. We would urgently advise the new government to take the SDGs on board in the coalition agreement. Government has a major role to play in drafting coherent policy for a resilient, future-proof, sustainable society, here in the Netherlands and for people in developing countries. A clear vision, supplemented by a clear government strategy, should form the basis of a determined effort to actually achieve the SDGs by 2030. In this effort, cooperation between government, civil society, businesses and the general public is essential.

F: KNOWLEDGE INSTITUTIONS

Drafted by and under the auspices of NWO-WOTRO Science for Global Development

For knowledge institutions too, 2020 was marked by the coronavirus pandemic and the measures taken to deal with it. From one day to the next, teaching had to be organised online, and research requiring physical presence or travel had to be suspended several times. Students, teachers and researchers mainly stayed at home and communicated online. This caused problems for both teaching and research, and had a huge impact on students' mental health (see section G of this report). The pandemic also offered fresh opportunities, however. Many activities could be held online, and this sometimes had its advantages. Online seminars and conferences were more [accessible](#) and led to a reduction in [CO₂ emissions](#), travel times and costs. All in all, knowledge institutions and their staff members and students displayed considerable resilience, albeit out of necessity. With the same resilience, major steps were taken towards building a more solid knowledge base for the SDGs. The SDGs are also being more strongly embedded in course curriculums and in [work experience placements](#) and [traineeships](#).

1. Secondary vocational education (MBO)

In May 2020, the Secondary Vocational Education Council signed SDG Nederland's SDG Charter on behalf of its member schools, underscoring the importance of the 17 SDGs and encouraging the schools to make an active contribution to them. A growing number of schools are individually endorsing SDG Nederland's vision and conditions. The SDGs increasingly form an important framework for MBO schools in their capacity as both educators and organisations. The Council is also incorporating the SDGs in its multiyear outlook for vocational education.

MBO schools prepare students for the world of work, further training and good citizenship, and thus for a future role in society. Skilled workers are crucial to achieving the SDGs by 2030. The private sector works with the education sector to set the requirements for MBO qualifications. The circular economy, the energy transition and climate adaptation have been standard components of the [occupational profiles](#) of every MBO course since 2019. Aspects of sustainable development and the SDGs therefore play an increasingly important part in MBO courses. The building installation sector, for example, faces labour shortages and is hard at work setting up re-training and further training

programmes to meet demand for fitters of solar panels and heat pumps. The SDGs are guiding principles not only for job-related subjects but also for citizenship, with young people learning to think about issues like sustainability and achieving the SDGs.

Some schools explicitly discuss the SDGs in their communications, on their websites, or include the SDGs in their mission statements. At other schools, the link with the SDGs is less explicit, but they devote attention to them in various projects and courses. Examples include inviting guest speakers to talk about gender equality, carrying out studies into ways of saving water and small-scale use of solar panels, designing the school grounds to promote biodiversity, optimising waste separation and participating in human rights week.

Schools seeking an extra boost, or wishing to give a teacher the recognition they deserve, may join [SustainaBul MBO](#), which ranks MBO schools by teaching, practice, management and comprehensive approach to sustainability and helps them learn from each other. The SustainaBul award for sustainability may be seen as a yardstick and benchmark. Through a network of sustainability coordinators, the organisation facilitates sharing of knowledge, experience and ideas.

The website [Duurzaam MBO](#) (Sustainable MBO) contains information on the SDGs and has a knowledge base with teaching materials. Sustainable MBO seeks to embed sustainable development in schools' strategies, curriculums, organisation and management. The vocational research platforms ('practoraten') also work with the SDGs. The vocational research platform on sustainable thinking and sustainable action ('Duurzaam Denken Duurzaam Doen') integrates the 17 SDGs into MBO courses. Other vocational research platforms focus on specific clusters of SDGs, such as the [Circular Agribusiness](#) platform.

October 2020 saw the launch of a European project titled Exchanges of Practices in Education for Climate Targets (EXPECT). This project, which is funded using Erasmus+ grants and has the MBO Council as project leader, compares approaches to the Paris Agreement in vocational education in six European countries (Austria, Finland, Italy, Latvia, Spain and the Netherlands).

2. Universities of applied sciences (HBO) and practice-oriented research

The SDGs are now an indispensable part of higher professional education and research. Under the Professionals of Tomorrow ([Professionals voor Morgen](#)) strategic agenda, the universities of applied sciences (HBO institutions) play a major role in society in enabling sustainable development. The SDGs are central to both teaching and research, and various education networks have launched initiatives to embed them more firmly in their work. For example, 11 HBO institutions have now joined the HBO SDG Coalition, which is facilitated by the Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences (VH). This coalition focuses on enhancing SDG impact in education, research and management, in collaboration with various stakeholders at both national and international level. HBO institutions thus endorse SDG Nederland's conditions and ambitions.

In 2020 the HBO institutions worked on the development of SDG competence in teaching and research. A few good examples are the [SDG Certification Project](#) of HAN University of Applied Sciences in Arnhem and Nijmegen, various studies being carried out by HBO research groups ('lectoraten', such as the [Art and Sustainability](#) research group at the Hanze University of Applied Sciences in Groningen), and the various SDG innovation challenges launched by the [Windesheim](#), [Avans](#) and [HU Universities of Applied Sciences](#). The number of HBO expertise centres, research groups involving collaboration between educational institutions and the business community, and professional workshops on this subject has increased considerably. Nine HBO institutions have now signed up to the work placement board [SDGs on stage](#), which is supported by the VH. Its aim is to integrate the SDGs in students' careers.

The network of Universities of Applied Sciences for Europe also contributed to raising awareness of the SDGs. In February 2021, the nine member organisations signed a [statement](#) pledging their commitment to the SDGs and agreeing to use their position in Europe to strengthen the role and visibility of HBO institutions in achieving the SDGs. The statement lays the basis for using European applied research and innovation more effectively to promote the 2030 Agenda.

After a number of successful editions of the national SDG Challenge for university students, this year's competition will also be open to HBO students, giving them the opportunity to make a difference. During the first national

edition of the [UAS SDG Challenge](#) interdisciplinary teams from 10 HBO institutions will work together on challenges set by organisations. The competition will end on 17 June. In 2020, the [SustainaBul](#) award for sustainable development in higher education was awarded for the first time to a HBO institution ([Van Hall Larenstein University of Applied Sciences in Leeuwarden](#)).

3. Universities and academic research

The Dutch universities are making an effort to contribute to achievement of the SDGs with their research. The Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU) showcases these efforts in monthly online magazines, each focusing on the contribution to a specific goal and building on the [SDG dashboard](#). On SDG Action Day, the fifth anniversary of the SDGs, the VSNU presented an [online magazine](#) reviewing universities' actions to achieve the SDGs over the past five years.

A number of universities – including [Utrecht University](#), [Wageningen University & Research](#), [Eindhoven University of Technology](#) and [TU Delft](#), have now provided insight into their contribution to achieving the SDGs, explicitly identifying the goals on which they are focusing. Universities have drafted policy to contribute to a sustainable world through their teaching, research and management.³⁴ This focus on sustainability has led to participation in various rankings, enabling universities to highlight their efforts. The [Green Metric World University Ranking](#) of 900 universities is led by Wageningen University & Research, with the University of Groningen and Leiden University both occupying places in the top ten. There is also a specific [ranking](#) focusing on contribution to the SDGs. It started in 2019 with 500 universities. In 2021, 1240 universities took part. Two Dutch universities took part in 2019 (University of Amsterdam and VU University, Amsterdam), with Tilburg University and the University of Groningen joining in 2020. Of the four Dutch universities, only VU University made it to the top 50.

Soapbox recently organised the fourth [SDG Challenge](#). During this competition, teams of students each advised a public or private organisation on an urgent SDG issue. Each team worked on an innovative solution for the challenge presented by the organisations to which they were linked. On 19 March 2021, the University of Groningen team and partner Vitens were the winners of the SDG

³⁴ [Leiden University](#), [Utrecht University](#), [University of Amsterdam](#), [Tilburg University](#), [Open University](#), [VU University, Amsterdam](#), [Erasmus University Rotterdam](#), [University of Twente](#), [University of Groningen](#), [Maastricht University](#) and [Radboud University](#).

University Challenge 2021. Wageningen University & Research and Hotelbedding came second, and Eindhoven University of Technology came third with partners TwynstraGudde and ProRail. Nyenrode Business University won the public award, with partner Johnson & Johnson.

The SDGs also play an increasingly prominent role in the activities of institutions for applied research such as Deltares, the Maritime Research Institute Netherland (MARIN), the Netherlands Aerospace Centre (NLR), the Netherlands Organisation for Applied Scientific Research (TNO) and Wageningen Research (WR). Many of the SDGs are recognisable elements in the topics on which these organisations focus. In its research, TNO chiefly focuses on seven SDGs (SDGs 3, 7, 8, 9, 11, 16 and 17) where the organisation expects to be able to achieve the greatest social impact. Deltares has adopted a similar approach, focusing on the SDGs where it expects to deliver the greatest added value: 6, 7, 9, 11, 13 and 14.

The Dutch Research Council (NWO) focuses on the SDGs mainly in its international activities, for example in

the research programme '[SDG Interactions and Policy Interventions in Developing Countries](#)' under the Dutch Research Agenda, the [Tackling Global Challenges](#) programme and bilateral research partnerships with the [Merian Fund](#). The research programmes developed through the Dutch Research Agenda and the Voluntary Agreement on Knowledge and Innovation also contribute to the national knowledge base on the SDGs. As there is increasing interest in using this knowledge, NWO is developing a [system](#) to support research consortiums in achieving social impact and thus the SDGs.

The Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) aims to use the results of Dutch research to develop knowledge of relevance to the SDGs. In Europe in particular, the KNAW is proactively contributes to recommendations through the European Academies Science Advisory Council (EASAC) and the European Commission's Scientific Advice Mechanism (SAM). In 2020, the KNAW organised various webinars on subjects related to the SDGs, including a series on the concept of universal basic income and various webinars on COVID-19.

G: YOUTH

Drafted by and under the auspices of the National Youth Council

This section looks at progress with the SDGs from the perspective of Dutch young people. There are nearly four million young people in the age group between 12 and 30 in the Netherlands, many of whom are formally represented in the National Youth Council ([NJR](#)) through its 39 member organisations and more than 20 projects. These young people were consulted by means of an online event and survey. In this section we not only look back at events in 2020, but also issue recommendations for the government on stepping up progress towards the SDGs from the viewpoint of youth. Since recommendations from earlier reports are still relevant, we take them on board again, while seeking coherence between the SDGs.

The pandemic generation must not be a lost generation. 'Leave No One Behind' is with good reason the SDG motto. Though the virus itself poses relatively little risk to young people's health, the measures taken to contain it have serious consequences for their lives, opportunities and wellbeing. By investing in young people and their future prospects, we can move forward towards achieving many of the SDGs. Action to reduce disadvantage and inequality is far more effective if taken now instead of later. What is more, young people's commitment is sorely needed if we are to make progress towards achieving the SDGs. Young people want to be part of the solution. They want to contribute and they want their voices to be heard. In May 2020, Prime Minister Mark Rutte called on young people to come up with ideas to help the country out of the pandemic. More than 2,500 young people contributed their ideas through the SER's youth think-tank on the coronavirus pandemic. These ideas mainly concerned housing (SDG 11.1), work (SDG 8), education (SDG 4) and climate action (SDG 13). Mental health problems (SDG 3) and the inequalities (SDG 10) encountered by young people are recurrent challenges in all these fields. The youth think-tank published its ideas in the report [En nu... daden!](#) (in Dutch).

1. Education for future citizens

Though the Dutch education system (SDG 4) is one of the best in the world, it does not prepare young people adequately for the great challenges that await them. The rapidly changing labour market and developments on the world stage call for different skills, and a stronger focus on citizenship (SDG 4.7) and media skills (SDG 4.4). Teaching in subjects that occupy young people's minds, sex education for instance, is failing to meet their needs (SDG 3.7). Moreover, young people also report that online

teaching has seriously affected the quality of their classes and courses through lack of personal assistance, discussion and practical experience. Research by the Dutch National Student Association shows that 7% more students at all levels of education encountered delays in completing their studies, and 10% more at HBO and university level.

Recommendations to the government on improving education and development include:

- Revise the student loan system, re-introduce the basic grant and compensate students who have run up debts due to the loan system;
- Reduce pressure on students by at least temporarily allowing them more time to complete their studies;
- Take on board lessons learned from online teaching in designing more accessible, hybrid forms of education;
- Strengthen the focus on social and emotional skills, personal development, citizenship and media skills in schools;
- In doing so, create more scope to gain experience outside the classroom, for instance by upscaling the SDG Traineeship scheme or by linking the community service scheme to the SDGs;
- Ensure that personal development and post-secondary education are more accessible to young people, including after they have completed a course, and invest in retraining and further training;
- Bring sex education in schools up to date so that it meets young people's needs, with sexual and gender diversity and communicating wishes and boundaries as basic principles. Engage with young people in deciding on content;
- Step up investment in education so that teachers can help their students catch up on their learning deficit and develop.

2. Caught in problems with housing, work and income

Existing problems relating to housing, work and income (SDG 8 and 11) have been magnified by the coronavirus pandemic. Young people more often work on the basis of flexible contracts in sectors that have been hit hardest, and they have built up less entitlement to benefits under the Unemployment Insurance Act (WW). Graduates now have more difficulty finding a job. The youth branch of the National Federation of Christian Trade Unions is now in talks with the organisation for cooperation between vocational education and the private sector (*Samenwerkingsorganisatie Beroepsonderwijs Bedrijfsleven* (SBB)) on a strategy to tackle youth unemployment and spend training budgets. Student accommodation is becoming

increasingly expensive, and thus unaffordable. The Dutch Student Union's report on student accommodation ([Check-je-kamer rapportage](#)) shows that no less than 80% of students pay too much rent (SDG 11.1).

Recommendations to the government on housing, work and income are as follows:

- Use existing knowledge on youth unemployment and invest in retraining and further training;
- Use capacity available among young people and create more paid work placements, jobs and traineeships focusing on green and inclusive post-pandemic recovery and reconstruction;
- Make young people more financially independent by setting a realistic minimum wage and devoting more attention to the transition to adulthood;
- Create more labour market security for young people, and reduce the gap between permanent and flexible contracts;
- Ensure sufficient affordable student accommodation and homes for first-time buyers and tenants in urban areas and elsewhere;
- Build a fair, simple and balanced pension system, which gives weight to the interests of young and future generations.

3. Coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated growing inequality between young people

In addition to young people's unequal position in relation to older generations, the coronavirus pandemic has also painfully exposed the differences among young people themselves (SDG 10). Young people do not all come from families that can give them the necessary support or resources for continuing their education and development. They do not all have a safety net for financial setbacks. The lockdown makes it more difficult to build one's own network. Various youth initiatives address the problem of inequality. The MBO student organisation JOB and the Secondary Vocational Education Council recently launched a campaign ([#KiesMij](#)) targeting discrimination in awarding work placements. Recommendations given in last year's report on improving young people's future prospects will particularly help vulnerable young people.

Recommendations to the government specifically to reduce inequalities between various groups of young people:

- Ensure high-quality work placements for all young people, and conduct studies into structural solutions to prevent discrimination in job application procedures, such as anonymous job applications;

- Make extracurricular activities accessible to more students by linking them to financial support.

4. The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on young people's mental health

Young people feel lonelier and have more money worries. Problems with their studies, work or finding a place to live are also causing stress (SDG 3.4). We are also receiving signs of increased drug use among young people (Trimbos Institute, SDG 3.5). Coronavirus measures devote too little attention to the pandemic's impact on mental health, though there has been more discussion in the media and among young people themselves. For example, with its project [Druk of Geluk](#) (Stressed or Happy?), the youth branch of the Federation of Christian Trade Unions encourages organisations to work on improving job satisfaction among young people. Global challenges such as climate change also make many demands on young people's mental capacities, which was spotlighted by the UN Youth Representatives for Sustainable Development during the [#HeelHollandHiked](#) campaign. The extra pressure on healthcare has not helped with the waiting lists for youth mental health services. LGBTIQ+ young people are especially vulnerable: transgender young people in particular face extremely long waiting lists before they even have the prospect of treatment, and are then given too little say in decisions on treatment.

Recommendations to the government on young people's mental health both during and after the pandemic:

- Improve pupils' and students' mental wellbeing with easily accessible assistance and counselling, easily accessible information on available services and action to prevent and identify problems;
- Take action to reduce waiting lists for youth mental healthcare and give young people a say in their own treatment;
- Take action to reduce waiting lists for transgender care, give transgender young people control over their own healthcare, in accordance with the principle of informed consent, and engage with them in devising policy on this care.

5. Green post-pandemic recovery for a clean and liveable world

The coronavirus pandemic has pushed other global challenges to the background. As the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) shows in its rolling opinion survey

([Continu Onderzoek Burgerperspectieven](#)), many young people are still highly concerned about climate change (SDG 13), pollution (SDG 3.9) and biodiversity loss (SDGs 14 and 15)). They are afraid that action to tackle these problems will be delayed because the political focus is now on the coronavirus pandemic. These young people make their opinions heard during climate strikes – e.g. last year's #ClimateStrikeOnline – organised by youth movements like Fridays for Future, or by signing the [climate manifesto](#), an initiative of six political youth organisations (Young Democrats, and the youth organisations of the Labour Party (*Jonge Socialisten*), Christian Union (*Perspectief*), the Socialist Party (*Rood*), the Green Left Alliance (*Dwars*) and the Animal Rights Party (*Pink*)) and Young Friends of the Earth. At international level too, young people from the Netherlands are working with others on climate action: with the [Youth Engagement Plan](#) on the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), as agreed in the Paris Agreement (SDG 13), or through World Youth for Climate Justice (WYCJ), linking climate change to human rights.

Recommendations to the government on passing on a clean and liveable world to the next generation are as follows:

- Assess the growth agenda, the investment fund and policy on pandemic and post-pandemic recovery in the light of the SDGs and calculate the climate impact of different policy options;
- Ask the International Court of Justice for advice on the rights of future generations in the light of climate change, through a UN General Assembly resolution;
- Work for the earliest possible resumption of international negotiations on climate and biodiversity;
- Support members of the public in making sustainable choices, and ensure that climate measures are accessible and just.

6. Listen to young people's voices

Young people still have too little say in policymaking, so that their interests are not always sufficiently taken on board (SDG 16.7). For effective policy with broad public support, you need young people at the table. Young people want to have a greater say about what happens in the Netherlands than political officeholders think, as is evident from a recent [study](#) carried out by I&O Research for the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations. The youth think-tank on the coronavirus pandemic and its report are major developments, but it is essential that the recommendations in the report be followed up. In 2020, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced the launch of a [youth advisory committee](#) as part of its Youth at Heart strategy. The Ministry is now working on a plan with youth organisations, while the Ministry of Infrastructure and

Water Management is setting up a youth environment council. The Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations is currently working with the Number 5 Foundation to investigate effective forms of co-creation after young people themselves had recommended dropping plans for a youth parliament. Recommendations on cooperation between young people and political officeholders were published in the report 'Allies in Democracy' (*Bondgenoten in de Democratie*). We are seeing many initiatives at local level, including in the Caribbean Netherlands, though there is considerable scope for more. In the Bonaire Innovation Lab, for example, young people on Bonaire called on the government to support youth participation on the island.

Recommendations to the government on ensuring meaningful and structural engagement with young people on decisions that concern them are as follows:

- Apply the assessment tool for measures' impact on future generations to proposals for new legislation, and link it to the National Growth Fund;
- Set out a national SDG strategy, with specific actions for each ministry, including a strategy for engaging with young people, and link this to post-pandemic recovery plans;
- Organise and release funding for meaningful, structural youth participation at local, national and international levels – and make this an inclusive process;
- Lower the voting age to 16, integrating this with the social studies and citizenship school syllabuses;
- Strengthen the position and autonomy of youth organisations through legislation and long-term funding;
- Give youth organisations a role in the talks on the formation of the new government;
- Use language that the majority of people can understand, making it easier for them to give their views on social issues.

H: HUMAN RIGHTS

Drafted by and under the auspices of the National Institute for Human Rights

In this contribution, the National Institute for Human Rights ('the Institute') examines the role of human rights in times of crisis. The coronavirus pandemic affects many human rights. We will then focus on the pandemic's impact on work, with specific attention to decent work (SDG 8), and on the labour market, with specific attention to vulnerable workers with flexible contracts and homeworkers. The pandemic has led to even greater inequality on the labour market, affecting not only human rights and SDG 8 but also SDG 5 (gender equality) and SDG 10 (reduce inequalities).

According to the United Nations policy paper [Covid-19 and Human Rights](#), 'The 2030 Agenda, underpinned by human rights, provide a comprehensive blueprint for sustainable recovery from the pandemic.' In an earlier report, the [Advisory Council on International Affairs](#) pointed out that the SDGs and human rights are two sides of the same coin, and that policy on the two themes needs to be coherent. It is therefore essential that human rights and the SDGs play a central role in post-pandemic recovery policy.

1. Human rights in times of crisis

The measures to prevent the spread of coronavirus have had a great impact on human rights. Schools, hospitality venues and places of prayer may only open under certain conditions, or have had to close their doors completely; court cases have been cancelled or postponed; people in care homes could not receive any visitors; anyone with symptoms has to stay at home; and a curfew has been imposed. These measures have major consequences for our basic freedoms, such as the right to freedom of movement or to demonstrate. Any curtailment of human rights must be subject to strict conditions, with measures extending no further than necessary, and having a solid statutory basis. In its [dossier on the coronavirus pandemic](#) the National Institute for Human Rights answers questions on curtailment of human rights in the pandemic.

In addition to the basic freedoms referred to above, the pandemic has also impinged on economic and social rights, like the right to education, health and work, which will be discussed in greater length below. Economic and social rights are closely connected to the SDGs. Like the SDGs, achieving human rights often calls for major government investment in order to provide people with a decent standard of living. However, unlike the SDGs, these

rights are compulsory – government is obliged to pursue their achievement for everyone in the country as vigorously and effectively as possible.

Though stagnation as a result of an economic recession does not necessarily lead to violations of economic and social rights, the pandemic does not relieve governments of the obligation to achieve these rights. What is more, in its recent [statement on the coronavirus pandemic](#) the Committee on Economic and Social Rights (CESCR) stressed that during the pandemic, countries should take measures to mitigate the impact on vulnerable groups (such as people with disabilities, young people or labour migrants). This approach is in line with the SDG motto, 'Leave No One Behind'. In any crisis, therefore, an effort will need to be made to achieve human rights, and with them the SDGs.

2. Decent work during the coronavirus pandemic

In addition to economic growth, SDG 8 also stands for decent work for everyone. The notion of decent work was developed by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and builds on the human right to work. The right to work goes much further than merely the right to choose an occupation or profession. It also means that everyone has the right to safe work, to form trade unions and to fair employment conditions, without any discrimination and with respect for fundamental rights (articles 6, 7 and 8 of the [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#)). The right to work is thus in fact the right to decent work, not just work. This was also the conclusion reached by the CESCR in its [general comment](#). The notion of decent work, with standards based on human rights and the SDGs, demonstrates the connection between human rights and the SDGs.

2.1 Vulnerability of the flexible labour reserve

As a result of the coronavirus pandemic, it has become more difficult to take decent work for granted. According to the [Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis](#) (CPB), the unemployment rate will rise to 5% in 2021, before falling to 4.5% in 2022. Unemployment has been lower than expected, due to government support packages. Nonetheless, many people have lost their jobs or are at risk of losing them. People working on flexible contracts (the flexible labour reserve) were especially likely to become jobless. As a result, according to the [Netherlands Institute for Social Research](#) (SCP), many young people, many people with fewer qualifications and many people with a migration background became jobless during the coronavirus

pandemic because they are more likely than average to work on flexible contracts. If earlier crises are any indication, these groups also run the greatest risk of being jobless during the recovery period.

Compared to other high-income OECD countries, an exceptionally large number of people in the Netherlands work on flexible contracts. Shortly before the coronavirus outbreak, the Committee on the Regulation of Work ([Commissie Regulering van Werk](#); Borstlap Committee) warned against the emergence of a society of insiders and outsiders: of people with secure jobs and a secure income, a good education and good health, as opposed to the outsiders with flexible jobs who have none of these things. According to [CBS](#), flexible workers lose their jobs more frequently, return more frequently to the flexible labour reserve and experience longer periods of unemployment. They usually have fewer savings and have less entitlement to benefit under the Unemployment Insurance Act, making them more vulnerable if they lose their job. These flexible workers are therefore particularly vulnerable in times of crisis. The Institute would therefore ask the government to heed the CPB's [recommendation](#) on a temporary extension of unemployment benefit during the recovery period for employees with only a limited entitlement.

In addition to growing labour market flexibility, the coronavirus pandemic also affects vulnerable groups on the labour market in other ways. A recent report by the team for the protection of labour migrants made these migrants' vulnerable position painfully clear. Levels of infection were high in this group due to the appalling conditions in which they live and work, in particular their poor accommodation, with several strangers sharing a small room, and no social safety net. In its report the SER's [youth think-tank on the coronavirus pandemic](#) also sounded the alarm. Not only do young people often work on flexible contracts and lose their jobs in the pandemic, but they also face many other problems, including high student debt, the crisis on the housing market, lack of work placements and mental health problems due to the lockdown.

The government has taken additional steps to facilitate uptake of jobs and assist the unemployed. The Institute is impressed by the extensive financial resources the government has freed up to mitigate the effects of the pandemic. There are however concerns as to whether the government is paying enough attention to the vulnerable position of flexible workers. From the figures it seems that the [call](#) on employers to keep jobs open for their flexible employees has not achieved its goal. In addition, [women's organisations](#) have expressed concerns about the support measures; they take no account of loss of income due to pregnancy during the mandatory reference period which

forms the basis for calculating loss of income and the size of the grant. No exceptions are allowed.

Even if flexible working may in some cases be regarded as decent work, excessive labour market flexibility and workers spending long periods in the flexible labour reserve are at odds with the standards for decent work (SDG 8). The poor conditions in which some groups – such as delivery drivers – work have also become clearer during the pandemic.

It is good to see that government [recognises](#) that the pandemic has deepened polarisation on the Dutch labour market. It will be up to the next government to take the necessary action. The coronavirus pandemic demonstrates the urgent need to take account of human rights and the SDGs in doing so.

2.2 Homeworking and decent work

Another major change caused by the coronavirus pandemic is that many people in the Netherlands have started working from home. A TNO [study](#) shows that in mid-2020 nearly half of the workforce (45%) was working from home. Homeworking is also expected to be more usual once the pandemic is over. The government therefore wants to [encourage](#) it, not only during but also after the coronavirus pandemic.

First and foremost, the Institute would draw attention to the risk of domestic violence entailed in working from home – and the lockdown in general. In the workplace, a victim's colleagues may detect signs of physical abuse sooner. The [United Nations](#) warns that lockdown measures are leading to a shadow pandemic of violence against women. In the Netherlands, a Leiden University [study](#) concluded that more children suffered abuse during the pandemic. 'Safe at Home' centres report an increase in reports of [serious domestic violence](#). There are also indications of an increase in online sexual harassment. This touches on SDG 5. In encouraging homeworking, the authorities must not ignore the threat of domestic violence. A gender-sensitive approach is essential.

In a recent [report](#) the ILO pointed out that homeworking should meet the standards for decent work. An SCP [policy memorandum](#) lists the pros and cons of working from home. For example, people experience more autonomy and less commuting-related stress. On the other hand, the boundaries between work and private life become blurred, days have less structure and people have little contact with their colleagues. The SCP believes that the pandemic has accentuated the disadvantages, because homeworking is prolonged, is often accompanied by the need to supervise children's school work, and provides fewer opportunities to relax. The TNO study showed that

people with care tasks and young people find homeworking particularly difficult. Young people often have no quiet place to work, and have a greater need for contact with others.

According to the ILO, governments should be more alert to the negative effects of homeworking such as working long hours, fewer opportunities for training and the general problem that homeworkers are sometimes invisible. As a result, they are less likely to build a career, and there is less oversight of their working conditions. Attention is therefore required for the differences that may emerge between people who work from home and people who don't. For example, it is possible that certain groups who want to work from home more frequently, for example women or people with a disability, will have fewer prospects of promotion.

The ILO also warns that there are often differences between men and women in relation to homeworking. At the start of the pandemic, men appeared to be taking more responsibility for care tasks because they were forced to work from home. However, this was short-lived. Now a [study](#) shows that fathers' share in childcare tasks has fallen back to pre-pandemic levels. Mothers have sacrificed more free time, experience more pressure of work, and have to work in the evenings and at the weekends more often than their male partners. This may further increase inequality between men and women on the labour market, as described in the Institute's contribution to last year's [SDG report](#).

The government has asked the SER for advice on the future of hybrid working and homeworking. The Institute would ask the government to focus on fundamental rights and decent work in drafting new policy on working from home. Studies need to be conducted into how promoting working from home may negatively affect vulnerable groups.

3. Put human rights and the SDGs at the core of post-pandemic recovery policies

The Institute is impressed by the efforts and financial resources deployed to mitigate the impact of the economic crisis. Nonetheless, the coronavirus pandemic has revealed existing patterns of vulnerability, inequality and discrimination on a major scale. Though exposed by the pandemic, these are not new problems – they are the same patterns and challenges we seek to address through human rights and the SDGs. The negative effects we now see are a consequence of not fully achieving the SDGs or human rights. We as a society can become more resilient to future crises by achieving human rights and the SDGs. Human rights should therefore be at the core of policy to mitigate the effects of the coronavirus pandemic.

