



To the Minister for Foreign Trade and Development  
Mrs. R.J. Klever, MA  
PO Box 20061  
2500 EB The Hague

**Date**

16 September 2024

**Subject**

Advisory letter: 'Inextricably linked: the SDGs in the Netherlands and the rest of the world'

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Dear Minister,

In 2015 the Netherlands, together with all United Nations (UN) member states, adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with at its heart the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), aimed at promoting the wellbeing of humanity and nature worldwide. The SDG agenda is of vital importance to the Netherlands, because it addresses the major challenges we face, from socioeconomic insecurity and housing shortages at national level to climate change and armed conflict at international level. The agenda emphasises that national and international challenges go hand in hand. Developments elsewhere in the world have an impact in the Netherlands, and vice versa. Exports, which account for more than a third of the Netherlands' income, depend directly on developments abroad and affect our socioeconomic security. A failed harvest or destroyed infrastructure in a distant foreign country as a result of climate change or conflict can directly hit Dutch people's pockets. Through international trade, activities in the Netherlands also affect people's lives in other countries; whether positively, through job creation for instance, or negatively, through adverse environmental impacts. These interlinked destinies mean that the Netherlands benefits from good international relations and from contributing to meet global challenges. The Netherlands cannot succeed in a failing world.

At the 2023 SDG Summit, it became clear that halfway along the route to 2030 the world is nowhere near being on track to achieve the SDGs.<sup>1</sup> This means that we are heading towards a scenario in which a range of crises, such as poverty, hunger, armed conflict, climate change and loss of biodiversity, will remain unresolved, with all the consequences this entails. In a special declaration, all countries, including the Netherlands, committed to bold, ambitious and accelerated actions to turn the tide.

It is against this backdrop that the Advisory Council on International Affairs (AIV) seeks to respond to your advisory request on how the Dutch government may boost social engagement with the SDG agenda. Such efforts can build on a momentum that is already firmly in place: many Dutch citizens are actively engaged in pursuing social goals. There is scope for improvement, however, by doing more to facilitate such citizen and business initiatives and by strengthening their attention to the international dimensions of the themes they work on.

Accelerated action also demands improved policy implementation by government itself, and a systematic focus on the effects of Dutch policies on other countries. Especially in the area of international cooperation, there is an important public task for government.

While social engagement is essential as a basis for government efforts to achieve the SDGs, it cannot fill all the gaps when government falls short.



## 1. The SDGs and Broad Wellbeing in the Netherlands

Unlike the earlier Millennium Development Goals, the SDGs focus not only on developing countries, but also on high-income countries. By signing the SDG Declaration, for which international human rights constitute a guiding framework, all UN member states, including the Netherlands, have committed to achieving the goals.

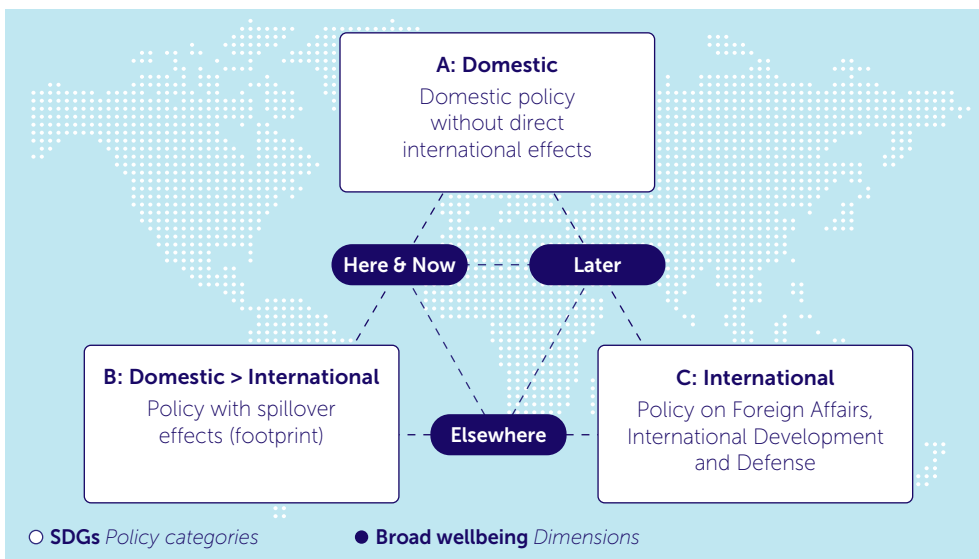
The SDG agenda is characterised by an integrated approach. Development, anywhere, involves an interplay of economic, environmental and social factors, which gives rise to synergies or trade-offs between different goals. Such interconnectedness can also be seen at the level of the different actors. Alongside government policy, the SDG agenda emphasises the role of the private sector, civil society actors and individual citizens.

This is in line with a parallel concept, 'broad wellbeing', that has been gaining momentum in the Netherlands in recent years, especially in central government circles. This concept, too, highlights the ways in which different themes are interwoven with one another, making a distinction between three different dimensions: (1) here and now, (2) later (future generations), and (3) elsewhere in the world. The overlap between these two agendas is reflected in a joint report: the annual 'Monitor of Wellbeing and the SDGs'.<sup>2,3</sup>

In examining Dutch policy on the SDGs, and in alignment with broad wellbeing, we can distinguish three categories: (A) domestic policy focused on achieving the SDGs in the Netherlands, (B) domestic policy that affects achievement of the SDGs in other countries (spillover effects),<sup>4</sup> and (C) foreign policy to contribute directly to achieving the SDGs beyond the Netherlands. In this advisory letter the AIV focuses mainly on categories B and C, in view of their direct relationship with 'elsewhere'. Even policies in category A, however, may be linked, to developments elsewhere, in more indirect ways (see Figure 1).

It is essential to pay attention to these different dimensions and categories of policy. We have frequently seen that a short-sighted focus on 'here and now', without taking account of 'later' or 'elsewhere', eventually has a boomerang effect. The AIV's advisory report on climate justice emphasises that the goals of the Paris Agreement cannot possibly be achieved without making concessions in the here and now, and without supporting the green transition elsewhere, in developing countries.<sup>5</sup> Conflicts in the Middle East and the Sahel show that a lack of stability and inclusive development elsewhere eventually also affect the Netherlands.

**Figure 1.** The different categories of SDG-policy and dimensions of broad wellbeing are similar in terms of underlying content and closely interrelated.



### Lagging behind the frontrunners

As a universal agenda with measurable goals, the SDGs can be used to monitor the results achieved and make international comparisons. Given that 169 targets and 232 indicators have been formulated for the 17 goals, these provide a considerable basis for comparison. There are also risks, however: sometimes one can no longer see the wood for the trees. An overly technocratic focus on the individual indicators can lead to depoliticisation of the agenda and could detract from the causes that are responsible for the problems to be solved.<sup>6</sup> Measuring then quickly becomes an end in itself.

That said, it is useful to be able to monitor and compare countries' progress on individual SDGs. It helps reveal broad trends and identify for which regions and themes additional political efforts are required.

The UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) documents the degree to which each country has achieved the SDGs. The world as a whole is not on track to achieve the goals by 2030, although differences occur between goals. Figure 2a shows, within each SDG, what percentage of the sub-targets is on track, and to what extent.<sup>7</sup> Since 2018, the percentage of the world's population living below the extreme poverty line has not decreased any further, remaining around 9%. The percentage of the population facing malnutrition has even increased during this period.

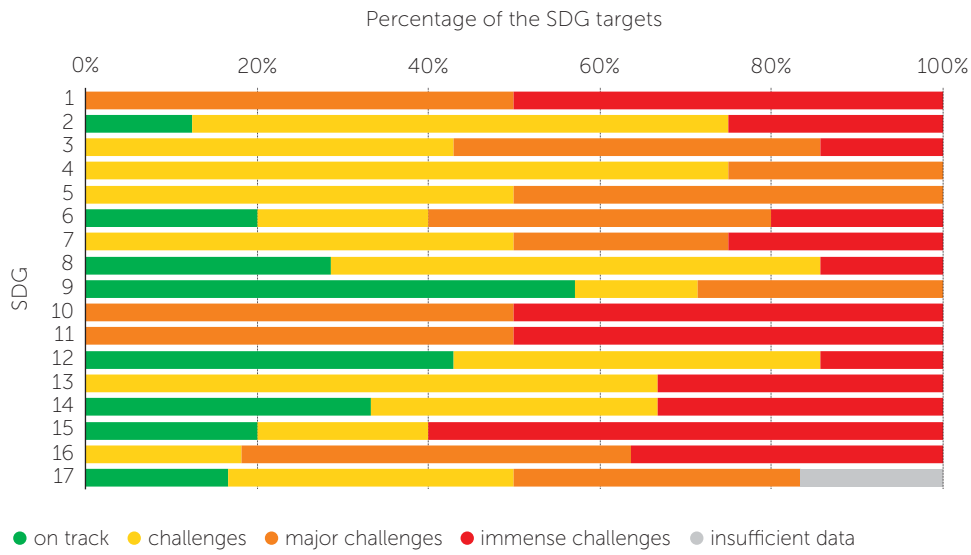
The statistics for the Netherlands in Figure 2b mainly concern the situation in the Netherlands itself (category A), although a number of targets also relate to categories B and C. For example, the existing agreement that rich countries spend at least 0.7 per cent of gross national income on development cooperation is part of SDG 17. The overall picture for the Netherlands, a rich country, compares favourably with the global average. Nevertheless, major challenges remain. This is particularly the case for SDG 12 (responsible production and consumption), SDG 13 (climate action), SDG 14 (life below water), and SDG 17 (global partnership).

The Netherlands ranks 24th (out of 167 countries) on the SDG Index, which assigns each country a total score on the basis of a series of indicators, and joining the frontrunners is unattainable in the near future (see Figure 3). The index is headed by the Scandinavian countries, Germany and France, followed by a number of Eastern European countries, including Croatia, Poland and Slovenia which, despite lower per capita income thus score significantly better than the Netherlands.

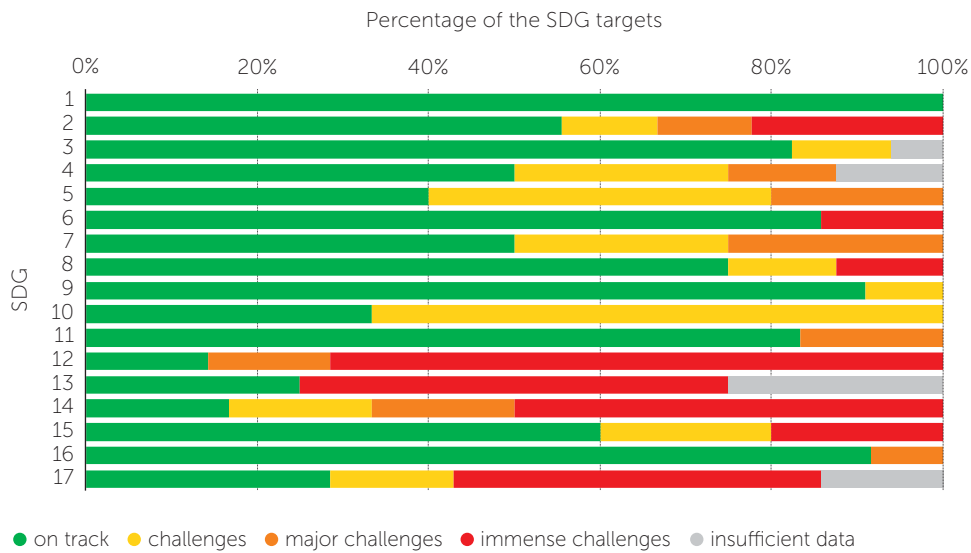
Figure 2a and 2b. Progress on the 17 SDGs, around the world and in the Netherlands.



**World**



**The Netherlands**



Source: AIV, based on data from SDSN SDG Report for 2024

Figure 3. SDG Index, 2024. The Netherlands ranks 24<sup>th</sup>.

Nr.	Country	Index	Nr.	Land	Index
1	Finland	86.35	13	Lithuania	80.99
2	Sweden	85.70	14	Spain	80.70
3	Denmark	85.00	15	Estonia	80.46
4	Germany	83.45	16	Portugal	80.22
5	France	82.76	17	Belgium	80.04
6	Austria	82.55	18	Japan	79.87
7	Norway	82.23	19	Iceland	79.54
8	Croatia	82.19	20	Hungary	79.53
9	United Kingdom	82.16	21	Slovakia	79.35
10	Poland	81.69	22	Switzerland	79.30
11	Slovenia	81.34	23	Italy	79.29
12	Czech Republic	81.26	24	Netherlands	79.21

Source: SDSN SDG Report 2024



On another SDG-related ranking provided by the SDSN, the Spillover Index, the Netherlands ranks near the bottom: 162nd of 167 countries. This index is based on indicators that relate to a country's impact on other countries' abilities to achieve the SDGs, and is thus relevant mainly to category B. It includes, for example, the demands that a country makes on natural resources elsewhere (land, water and raw materials) through investment and trade, and the consequences for biodiversity loss, pollution and emissions. The facilitation of tax avoidance and arms exports is also included in the Spillover Index. Top of this list are Least Developed Countries like Sierra Leone and Madagascar, whose economic activity is so limited that there is no footprint elsewhere. The Netherlands has a relatively large footprint, giving it an unfavourable ranking in comparison with other rich European countries. Germany, for example, with a score of 63.2, ranks 146th, significantly better than the Netherlands with a score of 47.8.

Clearly the Netherlands needs to pay more attention to its performance on the SDGs, particularly concerning spillovers. Sharply contrasting with its consistent top position on other rankings like the Human Development Index and the Global Competitiveness Index, the Netherlands' low score on the SDG rankings is a cause for concern.

## 2. Diagnosis

The Netherlands' relatively low SDG scores are partly a reflection of the structure of the Dutch economy. Sectors with relatively high climate and environmental impacts, such as intensive agriculture, chemicals and transport, play a major role. Moreover, the Netherlands plays a pivotal role in the international economy. Trade and investment flows to and from the Netherlands are among the largest in the world. As a result, the Netherlands makes an above-average contribution to the positive effects of globalisation on the SDG agenda, generating income and jobs in developing countries, but also to its negative effects, such as environmental damage. The country's low position on the Spillover Index is largely due to the Dutch trading economy's large global footprint in the areas of water, biodiversity and emissions.

Adjusting the economic structure towards wellbeing along all three dimensions will require ambitious government policy, as well as broad support and engagement of citizens and the businesses. Both points are elaborated below.

### a. Government policy for the SDGs

The SDGs are often referred to in Dutch government documents such as the Budget Memorandum and the policy letters and strategies of the different ministries. The 'Monitor of Wellbeing and the SDGs', which is published each May on Accountability Day, is a notable example.

So far, however, the SDG agenda has not functioned as a transformative force.<sup>8</sup> While some major SDG elements have been added to policy in areas such as responsible business conduct and the circular economy, there have been no major changes in direction and no broad discussions on the Dutch economy's global footprint. Consequently, a substantial improvement in the Netherlands' low SDG scores does not seem imminent.

Several factors may help to account for this. Firstly, unlike countries such as Belgium, Germany, Finland and Sweden, the Netherlands has not drawn up an SDG implementation plan or sustainability strategy (see text box for more details on Germany). As a result, it lacks an overarching vision of the society and economy of the future, and no clear priorities have been set.

This complicates making the clear policy choices that companies need as a basis for their own change strategies. The report 'Goede Zaken' by the Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) concludes that vested business interests in the Netherlands are all too often shielded. Unlocking business potential to benefit society will require a shift in government policy, to inspire and motivate entrepreneurs.<sup>9</sup>



### **SDG governance in Germany<sup>10,11</sup>**

Germany, Europe's largest economy and ranking fourth on the SDG Index, has had a National Sustainability Strategy since 2002, for which the Federal Chancellery is responsible. Since 2015, the SDGs have been explicitly integrated. A committee made up of the Secretaries-General of the different ministries provides leadership in implementing the strategy. The ministries of environment and development cooperation are the driving force behind the strategy's domestic and international dimensions, respectively.

Committee meetings are prepared by a working group in which all ministries are represented by department heads. Civil society is also involved, through a special dialogue group. There are clear indications that the integrality of Germany's policy has improved since 2015.

Another reason why Dutch SDG policy is lagging behind has to do with its ineffective institutional anchoring and leadership. While in many other countries the SDG agenda occupies a central place in government, in the Netherlands it is assigned to the Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation (BHOS). With reference to the three categories of SDG policy set out in Figure 1, coordination in the Netherlands is organised as follows:

- Category A: The national SDG Coordinator, part of the SDG team under the Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation (BHOS), bears primary responsibility for domestic policy on the SDGs. The team also relies on a network of SDG focal points at the other ministries.
- Category B: The Office for International Cooperation, one of the departments within the Directorate-General for International Cooperation at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, is responsible for addressing the transnational effects of domestic policy. The main instrument in this regard is the Action Plan on Policy Coherence for Development.
- Category C: The Ministers of Foreign Affairs, for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation and of Defence all directly contribute to the SDG agenda's international implementation, using various instruments such as diplomacy, development cooperation, trade and military cooperation.

In 2021 an evaluation of domestic SDG implementation in the Netherlands was published, which raised important questions about Dutch efforts in this regard.<sup>12</sup> Giving the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) responsibility for the entire SDG agenda allows other ministries to continue to view the SDGs – erroneously – as a UN programme focused on poor countries. It is neither logical nor effective to give MFA sole responsibility for leadership on SDG-related domestic policy. While the team around the SDG Coordinator does a great deal of good work, it simply has too little power and too few staff to impel change. The coordinator only has a small team, and the SDG focal points at the other ministries don't have the job profile they need to effectively move the SDG agenda forward and make it an integral part of their ministries' line of work. The evaluation concluded that these focal points often occupy too low a position in their ministerial hierarchies, are not located in the right departments, and do not have adequate time or budgets allocated to them.



While the broad wellbeing agenda seems to have more traction at many ministries than the SDGs, it has not yet led to genuine policy innovation either. So far it has been used mainly to monitor trends, and much less to set out new policy. Furthermore, the focus tends to remain concentrated on the 'here and now', with inadequate attention being paid to the dimensions 'elsewhere' and 'later'.<sup>13</sup> There is not much emphasis within the broad wellbeing framework on the link with human rights. It is positive that the Netherlands has drawn up an action plan on policy coherence for development, unlike many other European countries. However, a recent evaluation by the Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (IOB) concluded that the plan's impact has been limited, in part because many civil servants, in particular at ministries other than MFA, are not familiar with it.

#### **b. Societal engagement**

A key finding of the 2021 evaluation was that, while central government is lagging behind, enthusiasm and energy for the SDG agenda is mainly to be found among civil society, the business community and municipal authorities. Other studies have confirmed the relatively high level of engagement in society at large. One recent study showed that there is a definite increase in the number of social cooperatives and a relatively high level of civic participation. Three out of ten inhabitants of the Netherlands actively take part each year in local grassroots initiatives.<sup>14</sup> This growing level of engagement is most evident when it comes to climate and sustainability issues.

Where the shoe pinches, however, is on the international side, above all in terms of the impact that choices made in the Netherlands have on other countries. This dimension 'elsewhere' often gets too little attention. This is reflected in the sharp decline in the number of new grassroots initiatives for international cooperation since 2012.<sup>15</sup>

This meagre – and declining – support for the dimension 'elsewhere' does not seem to stem from a lack of interest in international cooperation. The 2018 Eurobarometer public opinion survey showed that a high percentage of Dutch people – 92% – considered support for people in developing countries important, more than the EU average of 86%.<sup>16</sup> Almost three-quarters indicated they were concerned about poverty in developing countries. In a more recent survey, conducted in 2023, 86% of Dutch respondents considered it important that the EU invest in partner countries outside Europe, the highest percentage of any EU country except Luxembourg.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, just over half (52%) of Dutch respondents said international poverty reduction should be a main priority of their own national government, compared to a European average of 62%.

There is clearly broad affinity in Dutch society with development issues, but that does not directly translate into practical action. Without institutional support and structures, it is not straightforward for citizens to tackle complex transnational problems. Yet over the past 15 years, government policy for global citizenship or facilitating international networking, such as municipal twinning arrangements, has been almost completely phased out.

The most recent OECD-DAC Peer Review of Dutch development cooperation policy (October 2023) calls this a 'blind spot' of Dutch policy. The OECD sees renewed attention for citizen engagement with the SDG agenda as 'a much-needed reversal'.<sup>18</sup>

### 3. The SDG agenda in a higher gear



Societal engagement and government policy are inextricably linked. Without citizen engagement with and support for the SDG agenda, the necessary public policy will not materialise, particularly with regard to the dimensions 'elsewhere' and 'later'. Conversely, it is also government's task to inspire businesses and citizens to become actively engaged, and where necessary to support and facilitate their efforts.

Based on the analysis of current Dutch efforts, the AIV concludes that it is up to government to take this agenda to the next level. To accomplish this task, the government should work along six different lines (elaborated below in points a to f) and ensure that the SDG agenda is adequately financed and effectively implemented.

#### a. A long-term vision with focus

Making choices that may at times be painful in the here and now, in order to achieve quantitative targets like emission reductions in the future, can be difficult. A clear long-term vision, based on a constructive dialogue about the common desires regarding the Dutch society and economy of the future, can help. The building blocks for such a long-term vision already exist. For example, a group of organisations from the SDG network have elaborated a vision of the Netherlands in 2040, which includes the role of the Netherlands in the world.<sup>19</sup>

There is a certain tension between the breadth of such a long-term vision, or of the SDG agenda as such, and the focus that is required for government to get things done. After all, not everything can be done, certainly not at the same time. The work of economist Mariana Mazzucato emphasises the potential of clearly formulated missions as a vehicle for effective government policy, thanks partly to their power to mobilise people.<sup>20</sup> The US project in the 1960s to send a mission to the moon is an example of a project that captured the public imagination with a successful, effective, cross-sectoral public-private partnership with a clear objective. Elements of this mission-driven approach can also be used to tackle societal challenges. This is a way to get actors from a range of government bodies, economic sectors and civil society organisations to work in concert at different levels towards a specific goal. Such an approach, which has been used for several years within Dutch innovation policy, also offers opportunities for SDG policy.<sup>21</sup> By making clear choices through setting up specific missions, within the framework of an integrated long-term vision, policy initiatives can be more focused and gain strength. In doing so, it is important to pay sufficient attention to the dimension 'elsewhere'.

#### b. Mission-driven approach

The mission-driven approach advocated by Mazzucato could not only lead to targeted innovation and more effective government policy, but may also play a major role in fostering greater societal engagement with the international dimension of the SDG agenda. Many people perceive the SDGs as technocratic and far removed from their everyday reality. Moreover, the holistic nature of the agenda can also become a barrier to action. Organising a number of missions that are carefully designed to link domestic and international issues with one another, while connecting with the daily lives of citizens, could help provide practical tools for action and thus facilitate civic engagement.

Given the priorities for international cooperation as formulated in the framework coalition agreement of May 2024, it would be sensible to organise missions of this kind focused on food security, water and migration. A theme like food security is linked to many different topics, such as climate change, water, conflict, the global footprint of Dutch consumption, and income distribution across global supply chains. From an international perspective, it also provides many opportunities for Dutch business, particularly when the knowledge and expertise of the private sector is effectively combined with development cooperation. Finally, it lends itself well to civic engagement, cooperation and participation, because



it is part of everyday life. In Sweden, for example, a mission has been formulated on sustainable and healthy food at schools.<sup>22</sup>



Implementation of the missions can build on existing initiatives such as citizen's assemblies, SDG Netherlands, the National Climate Platform, The National Human Rights Action Plan, and the Global Goals initiative of the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG).

#### **c. The SDGs as a matter for top-level decision-making**

Strengthening civic engagement also requires the government itself to take adequate action and adapt its own organisation so that it can pursue SDG policy more effectively. In many European countries the SDGs were initially the responsibility of the foreign ministry, like in the Netherlands. This situation has now changed, however. In an increasing number of countries SDG policy has been entrusted to a key agency in central government, like the prime minister's office or an equivalent.<sup>23</sup> In the Netherlands, the Ministry of General Affairs should play a leading role at the highest level, to ensure that the SDGs and the broad wellbeing agenda are prioritised. Following the German example, the overall agenda could be assigned to the prime minister's office, with the Board of Secretaries-General bearing responsibility for implementation at the individual ministries. This would enable the SDG agenda to be discussed in the weekly meeting of the Board, which is chaired by the Secretary-General of the Ministry of General Affairs. With the SDG team integrated into the Ministry of General Affairs, it could support day-to-day implementation.

Two other ministries should be given a prominent role in SDG governance. The Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations could focus on civic engagement and ensure accelerated action on the SDGs in the Caribbean part of the Kingdom, where urgent action is vital. A third of the population of the Caribbean Netherlands lives below the poverty line. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs should also continue to play a prominent role in guiding SDG policy, given the importance of its multilateral dimension and its strong link with foreign trade and international cooperation.

Addressing the spillover effects of Dutch policy on other countries (category B), requires a direct link with almost all ministries, including Agriculture, Fisheries, Food Security & Nature, Infrastructure & Water Management, Climate Policy & Green Growth, Economic Affairs, and Asylum & Migration. The existing network of SDG focal points should be upgraded by assigning this responsibility at the level of Directors-General, thus giving it greater weight. These focal points should meet regularly to analyse the impact of new and existing policies on developing countries and make adjustments where necessary. Relevant implementing organisations, like the Netherlands Enterprise Agency and Invest International, should also be represented at these meetings. This will give more traction to the Action Plan on Policy Coherence for Development, which, after all, is everyone's business.

Finally, SDG policy needs to be more closely aligned with EU initiatives, as Brussels plays an important role on many of the relevant issues, for example through the Common Agricultural Policy and the European Green Deal. In fact, external trade policy is an exclusive Union competence, conducted on behalf of the member states. In 2023, for the first time, the European Commission published its own assessment of the EU's progress on the SDGs.<sup>24</sup>

#### **d. Strengthening policy instruments**

Besides changes in its institutional positioning, the SDG agenda also requires improved policy instruments and monitoring.

Especially in category B (spillovers), further policy development is needed to reduce the Netherlands' global footprint. Expanded use of mandatory standards and labelling,

for instance, would provide consumers with better information on the SDG impact, for better or for worse, of the products they purchase. Particularly in combination with a renewed focus on global citizenship (see point e), this could lead consumers to make more conscious choices. The Netherlands could also advocate within the EU to keep from the market imported products that are produced using methods not allowed within the EU while demonstrably harming people or the environment elsewhere.<sup>25</sup> In doing so, it is important to carefully consider the interests of producers in developing countries, where entrepreneurs usually do not have access to the resources or technology to meet the highest European production standards. Those countries should be given support or exemptions.

In terms of monitoring, the Action Plan on Policy Coherence for Development, which mainly uses process-based indicators, would gain relevance and strength by using more concrete outcome-level indicators with target values. In general, policy efforts to improve performance on international spillovers could be structured using the OECD framework around five types of transboundary flows with positive or negative impacts on developing countries: financial flows, trade flows, movement of people, environmental flows and knowledge transfers.<sup>26</sup> A similar framework could be used to track the impacts of developments elsewhere on the Netherlands.

The use of *ex ante* impact assessment tools for new policies could also be strengthened. The integrated assessment framework (IAK) was introduced in 2011 to assess effects on developing countries, and an SDG assessment tool was added in 2019. Concrete results have been limited, however. The tools were mostly used to assess the impact of legislation derived from European Directives and Regulations. The IAK was replaced by the 'policy compass' in 2023, but it remains to be seen whether this tool will be applied more consistently. Lack of knowledge and data about the impacts on other countries remain a challenge in this regard. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs/Foreign Trade and Development could do more to support other ministries in assessing effects elsewhere, with the help of existing knowledge networks in both the Netherlands and in the countries in question.

#### **e. Citizens' and business initiatives**

A recent report by the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (PBL) stressed the importance of collaborating with citizens' initiatives to effectively tackle societal challenges related to the human environment. This applies equally to the international aspects of the SDG agenda, including spillovers and development cooperation (B and C). As noted above, the attention paid by government to private initiatives with an international focus has decreased over the past ten years. There are still many private initiatives, especially visible around specific international emergencies like the earthquakes in Türkiye and Morocco, and the war in Ukraine. It often proves difficult for such initiatives to connect with official policy programmes. This is a missed opportunity to promote broader engagement, especially because these individuals often have extensive networks, and tend to play an active and respected role in local communities. If they experience more support and recognition from government, this could reflect positively on international cooperation policy in general and boost its effectiveness.

Citizens' initiatives often depend financially on gifts and donations. The plans announced in the 2024 framework coalition agreement to scale back the deductibility of charitable donations from taxable income are therefore not conducive to societal engagement. This plan should be carefully reconsidered, or an alternative method should be adopted to stimulate financial support for citizens' initiatives.

In addition, appointing an ambassador for civic engagement with the SDGs would boost efforts to link successful citizens' initiatives with official international cooperation programmes. A small investment could yield major benefits by mobilising and linking up initiatives that are already under way and capitalising on them to the benefit of the



SDGs. In doing so it would be good to include initiatives from the diaspora, where appropriate. These communities have considerable knowledge of the situation in their countries of origin, but are hardly involved in Dutch global efforts to achieve the SDGs. This ambassador for civic SDG engagement should simultaneously play a leading role in the three missions outlined above (see point b) by forging social coalitions around each of the missions, together with SDG Netherlands. Relevant actors from the private sector and academic institutions would be indispensable actors in this process.

More generally, there is potential to join forces with and within the business community. In recent years, considerable attention has been devoted in the EU to curbing the private sector's negative impact on the SDGs, culminating in EU legislation on responsible business conduct. It is important to persevere with these efforts and to continue pressing for effective implementation and enforcement of this legislation throughout the EU, to ensure a level playing field and full compliance. This will force laggards to catch up. At the same time, more benefits can be reaped by focusing on business frontrunners that are prepared to do more than the legislation requires, and by encouraging their leadership. For example, the government can use procurement policy to encourage companies to adopt true pricing, which aims at reflecting external social and environmental costs in prices, or to join sector-specific voluntary agreements aimed at resolving problems in the value chain and increasing companies' positive contributions when it comes to tackling social challenges.

#### **f. Global citizenship**

Since 2015 considerable attention has been devoted to disseminating knowledge about the SDGs, which has yielded results. As the SDG Barometer shows, the SDGs are increasingly being used by municipalities and companies as a guiding framework.<sup>27</sup> However, broader knowledge of the SDG framework itself is not enough to achieve actual results. That demands a more substantive approach to address Dutch policies' blind spot concerning global citizenship, as identified by the OECD, thus enhancing awareness of the many ways in which the Netherlands is interconnected with the rest of the world. The Netherlands can follow Belgium's example: the most recent OECD-DAC report on Belgian development cooperation praises Belgium's commitment to global citizenship.<sup>28</sup> Its policy features clearly identified target groups, effective strategic coordination and policy evaluations point at impact.

Enhanced focus on global citizenship is needed to give impetus to the SDG agenda. A joint policy letter on this topic from the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister of Education, Culture and Science would be a good first step in recognising the importance of civic engagement and the role of government in fostering it. Drafting a letter to parliament is also an effective way of gathering the ideas of different stakeholders and launching a debate on the best way to shape global citizenship policies.

## Finally: looking ahead to post-2030



The policy options discussed above are primarily aimed at achieving the SDGs by 2030. This horizon is fast approaching, however, and discussions about the post-2030 period are gathering steam. It is important that Dutch citizens and businesses are properly involved in this process right from the start. The use of citizens assemblies would be a suitable tool in this regard.

For geopolitical and other reasons, the Netherlands also needs to actively and visibly join post-2030 discussions at the international level. China is becoming increasingly prominent in this area, through its Global Development Initiative (GDI), enjoying credibility in many parts of the world, given China's domestic success in significantly reducing poverty and hunger within a few decades. However, the Chinese initiative pays little heed to key elements of the SDG agenda such as inclusion, gender equality, biodiversity, political freedoms and democracy.

With the Hague as the international city of peace and justice, the Netherlands has a crucial role to play in strengthening the connection of the SDGs with human rights.<sup>29</sup> Although the SDG agenda refers to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in general terms, stronger anchoring is needed at the level of subtopics and individual goals, both in civic and political rights and in economic, social and cultural rights. This would also help avoid the perception that developing countries should turn to China for economic issues and to a Western-led SDG agenda for the rest.

In moving towards a post-2030 agenda, the Netherlands should therefore explicitly seek cooperation with countries from the global South and strengthen enduring partnerships with them. The proactive role played by the Netherlands in the elaboration of a Declaration on Future Generations, in the run-up to the September 2024 Summit of the Future, is a good example to be followed. Together with Jamaica, the Netherlands acted as co-facilitator of the process.<sup>30</sup>

Money remains a factor of importance for the post-2030 agenda. A solution will need to be found urgently for the SDG financing gap, especially in the global South. The current funding gap, taking private and public investment together, is estimated at some 4 trillion dollars annually, and needs to be filled as much as possible within the next few years.<sup>31</sup> Private capital and reforms of the international financial institutions will need to play a significant role in this regard, but public funding by high-income countries will also remain essential.<sup>32</sup>

The Netherlands cannot afford to neglect the dimension 'elsewhere' by failing to address the negative transboundary effects of the Dutch economy or by undermining enduring partnerships. Sooner or later, a failure to make substantial progress on the SDG agenda in the rest of the world will have adverse consequences for Dutch society.

1. **Recognise that strengthened commitment to global SDG progress is in the Netherlands' interest, part of an international agreement, and therefore a public duty. Broader engagement and agreements with business, civil society organisations and citizens' initiatives are part of this.**
  - As an open trading nation, the Netherlands is closely linked to the rest of the world. Developments elsewhere often affect the Dutch economy and society, and vice versa, either directly or indirectly, in the short or long term. International cooperation, founded on solidarity and protection of human rights, is therefore a public task in the national interest.
  - Contributing to achievement of the SDGs worldwide is part of this task and requires additional funding. The Netherlands should contribute through its own ODA budget and promotion of sustainable private capital flows, but also by advocating reforms of the international financial institutions.
  - Equally part of this task is engaging Dutch businesses and citizens on issues that relate to the Netherlands' interconnectedness with the rest of the world.
  
2. **Work on developing an overarching, long-term national strategy with a clear focus and a mission-driven approach with a strong emphasis on the dimension 'elsewhere'.**
  - Ensure that this is done through an inclusive and widely supported process, together with citizens and businesses, aimed at a shared vision of the future, and aligned with the mission-driven innovation policy.
  - Use this long-term vision to provide focus and make fundamental choices for the short- and medium-term, to enable the Netherlands to reduce its global footprint and improve its performance on the spillover index.
  
3. **Formulate targeted and concrete missions that connect domestic and international issues, for the priority topics identified in the framework coalition agreement (food, water and migration). Use these missions to encourage societal engagement with the SDG agenda.**
  - Form broad coalitions with relevant stakeholders from government, the private sector and civil society to formulate and implement these missions and ensure, where applicable, alignment with the mission-driven innovation policy.
  - Ensure that the missions are closely connected to people's daily lives, so that local participation and engagement can be made tangible.
  - Connect the missions to business opportunities, at home and abroad, for sustainability frontrunners among Dutch businesses.
  
4. **Make the SDG agenda a matter for top-level decision-making within central government.**
  - Assign governance of the SDG and wellbeing agendas to an agency at the heart of central government, with ultimate responsibility residing with the Prime Minister (Ministry of General Affairs). The Board of Secretaries-General should take leadership, with support from an SDG team at the Ministry of General Affairs.
  - Further strengthen SDG governance through enhanced focal points at all the other ministries, at the level of director-general or director level.
  - Ensure consistent assessment of the transboundary effects of policies, using existing knowledge networks, and be transparent about the outcomes and the ways in which these have informed decision-making.



**5. Facilitate citizens' initiatives for international cooperation and strengthen global citizenship.**

- Appoint an ambassador for civic engagement with the SDGs, to work on strengthening the links between SDG-related citizens' initiatives and official policy programmes in the area of international cooperation and policy coherence. The ambassador can be a driving force for societal engagement with the international dimension of the SDG agenda.
- Give this ambassador a leading role in forging social coalitions and agreements to promote the SDG missions referred to in recommendation 3.
- Reintroduce general policy on global citizenship and encourage more conscious consumer choices by expanding the use of social and environmental product labels.

**6. Contribute proactively to global discussions on the future of the sustainable development agenda beyond 2030.**

- Commit to maintaining an ambitious agenda, with clearer agreements on implementation and financing than in the current SDG agenda.
- Involve Dutch society in this process at an early stage, for example through citizens' assemblies.
- Internationally, seek proactive partnerships with countries in the global South, and ensure stronger links with human rights, in line with the 2019 AIV advisory report on the SDGs and human rights.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Bert Koenders  
Chair

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- <sup>1</sup> United Nations (2023), *Political Declaration Adopted at the High-level Political Forum (HLPF) on Sustainable Development Convened under the Auspices of the General Assembly in September 2023*. Resolution 78/1, adopted by the General Assembly on 29 September 2023.
- <sup>2</sup> Timo Maas and Paul Lucas (2023), 'Brede Welvaart en de SDG's: overeenkomsten, verschillen en rollen voor beleid' (Wellbeing and the SDGs: similarities, differences and roles for policy) (in Dutch), The Hague: Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (PBL).
- <sup>3</sup> Statistics Netherlands (2024), *Monitor Brede Welvaart & de Sustainable Development Goals 2024 (Monitor of Wellbeing and the SDGs 2024)*. The Hague: Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (Statistics Netherlands).
- <sup>4</sup> In government documents, this is known as 'policy coherence'. Usage of this concept gradually increased after the turn of the century, usually in reference to the coherence between OECD countries' development cooperation policies and their domestic policies. The term can be confusing, however, as there can also be (a lack of) policy coherence between two strands of domestic policy, such as agricultural and environmental policy. Therefore, in this advice, the AIV opts for the term 'spillovers' to refer to the effects of domestic policy on developing countries.
- <sup>5</sup> AIV (2023), *The Necessity of Global Climate Justice*, AIV advisory report no. 125, October 2023. The Hague: Advisory Council on International Affairs.
- <sup>6</sup> Yunita, A., F. Biermann, R. Kim, M. Vijge (2022), *The Anti-Politics of Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development in the Netherlands: Logic, Method, Effects*, Geoforum, Vol. 128, Jan. 2022.
- <sup>7</sup> Sachs, J.D., G. Lafortune, G. Fuller (2024), *The SDGs and the UN Summit of the Future. Sustainable Development Report 2024*, Paris: Sustainable Development Solutions Network, Dublin: Dublin University Press.
- <sup>8</sup> Biermann, F. et al. (2002), *The Sustainable Development Goals as a Transformative Force?*, in: *The Political Impact of the Sustainable Development Goals: Transforming Governance through Global Goals?*, Cambridge University Press.
- <sup>9</sup> Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR, 2023), *Goede zaken. Naar een grotere maatschappelijke bijdrage van ondernemingen (Doing good: Towards a greater corporate contribution to society)*, WRR report 107, The Hague: WRR.
- <sup>10</sup> Birner, J., Bornemann, B., & Biermann, F. (2024). *Policy integration through the Sustainable Development Goals? The case of the German Federal Government. Sustainable Development*.
- <sup>11</sup> Berger, G. (2022), *Country Approaches to the SDGs and Well-being: Overview Survey on National Activities in Europe and Beyond*, Vienna: Gerald Berger Sustainability Consulting.
- <sup>12</sup> Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR, 2023), *Goede zaken. Naar een grotere maatschappelijke bijdrage van ondernemingen (Doing good: Towards a greater corporate contribution to society)*, WRR report 107, The Hague: WRR.
- <sup>13</sup> Council for the Environment and Infrastructure (2024), *Waardevol regeren: sturen op brede welvaart (High-quality governance: leadership for wellbeing)* (in Dutch). The Hague: Raad voor de Leefomgeving en Infrastructuur (RLI).
- <sup>14</sup> Bekkers, R., T.Schuyt and J. Suijs (2023), *Burgercollectieven in Nederland: een conceptuele en empirische verkenning' ('Grassroots collectives in the Netherlands: a conceptual and empirical exploration)* (in Dutch), VU Amsterdam Center for Philanthropic Studies.
- <sup>15</sup> Kinsbergen, S. and M. Molthof (2022), *The rise and fall of government support for small-scale voluntary development organizations – and their remarkable resilience*, *Development Policy Review* 40 (2).

- <sup>16</sup> Netherlands Institute for Social Research (2020), *Dealen met de grote wereld; globalisering in de publieke opinie en op het werk (Dealing with the wider world: Globalisation in public opinion and at work)*(in Dutch), The Hague: Sociaal Cultureel Planbureau (SCP), December 2020. The percentages above, from this report, are taken in part from the Eurobarometer survey on development cooperation in 2018/19.
- <sup>17</sup> European Commission (2023), *EU Citizens and Development Cooperation: Special Eurobarometer 537*.
- <sup>18</sup> OECD (2023), *OECD Development Co-operation Peer Reviews: Netherlands 2023*, Paris: OECD Development Co-operation Peer Reviews, OECD Publishing.
- <sup>19</sup> Denktank Nederland 2040, *Nederland in 2040 – Een toekomstbeeld (The Netherlands in 2040: a vision of the future)* (in Dutch).
- <sup>20</sup> Mazzucato, M. (2021), *Mission Economy: A Moonshot Guide to Changing Capitalism*, London: Allen Lane, Penguin Books.
- <sup>21</sup> The National SDG Report 2023 already provides a good base, highlighting six interconnected challenges.
- <sup>22</sup> Mazzucato, M. (2021), *Mission Economy: A Moonshot Guide to Changing Capitalism*, London: Allen Lane, Penguin Books, p.130.
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- <sup>24</sup> European Commission (2023), *EU Voluntary Review on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*.
- <sup>25</sup> This is also in line with an intention announced in the framework coalition agreement of May 2024.
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- <sup>29</sup> AIV (2019), *Sustainable Development Goals and Human Rights: An Indivisible Bond*, AIV advisory report no. 110, May 2019. The Hague: Advisory Council on International Affairs.
- <sup>30</sup> United Nations (2024), *A Declaration on Future Generations - SOF | United Nations*.
- <sup>31</sup> United Nations, Inter-agency Task Force on Financing for Development (2024), *Financing for Sustainable Development Report 2024: Financing for Development at a Crossroads*, New York: United Nations.
- <sup>32</sup> For more details on funding, see AIV advisory report no. 125, *The Necessity of Global Climate Justice*.