

1. Executive Summary

This report explores the role of Civil Society Actors (CSOs) and Local Authorities (LAs) in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the Netherlands. The new global agenda for poverty eradication and sustainable development requires multi-stakeholder action, both abroad and at home. This research, initiated by the Policy Forum on Development, explores which national multi-stakeholder approaches can support inclusive implementation of the goals. The findings central to this research are based on document analysis, interviews with CSO and LA representatives as well as other stakeholders, three focus group discussions and two online surveys (see annexes at: <http://capacity4dev.ec.europa.eu/policy-forum-development/>).

Half a year after the adoption of the SDGs in September 2015, the first steps are being taken by a wide variety of actors in the Netherlands to strategize and implement the SDGs. After a kick-start with the Prime Minister and King present at the adoption of the SDGs in New York, the national government, CSOs, LAs, labour unions as well as the private sector have been exploring what the new agenda could or should imply for their roles and how they can contribute towards achieving the goals.

Several promising initiatives have been set up in which CSOs, LAs and/or the umbrella organisations, such as Partos (the Dutch association for CSOs working in International Development) and VNG international (the International Cooperation Agency of the Association of Netherlands Municipalities for LAs), play an important role. These include the Global Goals Charter (a multi-stakeholder initiative which was signed by over 70 organisations), the Dutch Global Goals website (also a multi-stakeholder initiative), the CSO-initiative Ready for Change (that focuses at coherence and the SDGs), and the global goals municipality campaign (an initiative of VNG International).

Efforts have been put in place to take stock of existing frameworks and policies which are in line with the SDGs. A clear example is the analyses of policy targets in the field of the environmental SDGs, executed by PBL Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency. Netherlands Statistics (CBS) has explored how the new agenda could be monitored and plays an active role in the process of developing indicators

for the SDGs. All stakeholders included in the research believe that, for effective and sustainable implementation of the agenda, **it is crucial that the goals are integrated in existing policies and mechanisms instead of building new frameworks.**

As the research shows, it is clear that CSOs and LAs support the SDG agenda. Many CSOs have also been active in the negotiation process, for instance by providing input to the Dutch government. Although the SDGs have just been adopted and the Netherlands is still in the phase of exploring the implications of the agenda and strategizing the implementation process, several CSOs as well as LAs have started to take their own initiatives. The Dutch government in turn has also been exploring its own role, while it is embracing and facilitating initiatives from civil society such as existing multi-stakeholder arrangements. This also fits with a general development in the Netherlands, known as **the 'participation society,' (see box 1) whereby both national as well as local governments act increasingly as enablers and facilitators and leave more actions to civil society.**

Both national governments as well as local governments and CSOs do not seem to embrace a top down approach that imposes a central strategy for CSOs and LAs and other actors. That said, in the exploration of their own roles, CSOs and LAs do voice **the need for more clarity about the role of the government, in order to show strong support to the international agreement, as well as to determine their own roles in the implementation process.**

The development of a strategy for the national implementation of the goals is being led by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in consultation with other ministries. **A special coordinator for national implementation has been installed, as well as a SDG ambassador. SDG focal points at all ministries have been appointed.** In the near future, this might help stakeholders like CSOs and LAs to seek dialogue with those parts of the government that are responsible for the implementation of specific parts of the agenda. Until now, civil society participation in the SDG process has been organized in an informal way. The advantage of this approach is that it provides flexibility and efficiency to an already complex and time consuming

implementation challenge. The disadvantage might be that stakeholders that are not (yet) part of the informal dialogue structures may have difficulty in getting access to information and to relevant contacts.

According to the respondents, a crucial role for government and politicians at national and local level, as well as branch organisations like Partos and VNG International, is to **make a strong case for the SDGs** and show their support for the agenda. CSOs and LAs indicate that if key actors at the national level do not repeatedly underscore the importance of the SDGs and do not lead by example, it is much harder for actors at grassroots level to integrate the SDGs in their work.

Dutch CSOs and LAs perceive the SDGs as a **valuable framework which they can use for their own work**. They are not opting to enlarge their own activities in line with the interconnected framework of all SDGs. Many organisations feel burdened with tasks and under financial pressure already and will choose to stick to their current focus or strengths and connect this to the SDGs. At the same time, **CSOs are eager to take up the role of watchdog to hold governments accountable** for their commitments. Many **local authorities emphasized the integration of development and sustainability issues in the goals as an opportunity, because they can link these themes jointly to policies and practices at the local level**.

The research also shows that the **response to the SDGs outside the development cooperation sector is somewhat lukewarm**. For instance, nationally-oriented environmental CSOs and local authorities that are not internationally-oriented are generally not aware of the goals, and for these actors the relevance or added value of the SDGs is not evident. Research participants regarded it as a crucial step to inform these actors that can potentially contribute to the agenda. Nevertheless, the enthusiasm to take up such a communication role was quite limited among the stakeholders consulted in the research. It was suggested that branch organisations and associations, such as CSR Netherlands and VNO-NCW, might possibly be able to take up this challenge.

Although the Dutch implementation of the SDGs is still in an early phase, the first steps seem to point towards an **inclusive implementation strategy**. The SDG agenda fits well with

Dutch government's broad view of development cooperation (such as combining aid and trade, focusing on coherence, etc.). Furthermore, the ties between Dutch development stakeholders are strong and initiatives from civil society on the agenda are generally welcomed by the government and vice versa. The largest challenge will be to reach beyond the development community and to get other actors and sectors on board for the SDGs. Another key challenge might be that organisations at various levels will not embrace the SDGs as a holistic framework, but rather focus on a few SDGs in line with their existing activities. As the research shows, the SDGs **will need some time to take root**. This is important for creating sustainable ownership for the goals among a large range of stakeholders. **Strong champions at national level are crucial** to engaging more actors and creating wider support for the agenda as well as to facilitate partnerships.

In order to stimulate the implementation of the SDGs in the Netherlands, recommendations for the government include to:

- More explicitly take up a coordinating role for the implementation of the SDGs and continue facilitating and supporting collaborative arrangements among different stakeholders to enable dialogue and exchange on the inclusive implementation of the agenda.
- Broaden the political leadership on the agenda from the minister for foreign trade and development cooperation (Ms. Ploumen) towards other ministers. (Some respondents mentioned examples from Sweden and Germany where responsibility for the agenda is (expected to be) placed with the prime-minister or 'Kanzleramt'.
- Use the EU presidency as an opportunity to take on more leadership of the SDG Agenda.
- Use the SDG focal points at the different ministries to inform and involve actors outside the development sector.
- Building on Minister Ploumen's ambition to be leading in the field of policy coherence, use the SDG agenda for policy coherence for (sustainable) development. The Netherlands already has a track record in this field, which makes the Netherlands a credible champion on this topic.
- Set long-term policy targets on the SDGs now that Agenda 2030 is adopted.
- Combine existing monitors of the Dutch governmental research institutes (PBL, CBS, CPB and SCP) to create a comprehensive monitoring system for the SDGs.