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a benchmark study on national strategies towards
sustainable development and the impact of councils
in nine EU member states



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Ingeborg Niestroy
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6 Netherlands

FRONTRUNNER IN ENVIRONMENTAL PLANS, INCLUDING “TRANSITION” FOR ENVIRONMENTAL INTEGRATION; SD STRATEGY/ACTION PROGRAM IN CONTRAST WEAK

- The National Environmental Plan of 2001 (NEP 4) introduced “transition processes” as an attempt at environmental integration in 4 sectoral policies: the processes are evaluated differently, ranging from quite successful to “business as usual”.
- Developing an SDS seems to have been more an exercise in the framework of following-up the WSSD, side-lining other activities, than an attempt at an overarching strategy; with a new government in place the approach for the SDS has been changed to become an “Action Plan”, i.e. a compilation of existing policies; both elements have led to a late adoption (2003) and to the situation that the SDS is not well linked with e.g. the NEP4 and that it seems not to be playing a significant role.
- There are coordination deficits with respect to transition processes and the SDS, and the international SDS and the national one; EU SDS is referred to in the national part.
- The country seems a bit paralysed since a change of government in 2002, that is perceived as stepping back in substantive policy (e.g. environment has become less relevant) and in strategic terms, and regarding stakeholder participation; no commitment for SD.
- There is no SD council (the government has opposed to that); stakeholder dialogue among each other only takes place in the socio-economic council SER, which happens to be engaged in the SD agenda, mainly due to the current chair, but in the current situation hesitates to take new initiatives.
- The local and regional level does not play a role in national SD policies: the association of local authorities even rejected an interview, reasoning that SD is not a priority issue for them anymore; several regional governments (provinces) have an active regional SD policy however.



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ABBREVIATIONS

<i>PM</i>	<i>Prime Minister (the position of Head of Government is called Prime Minister, in Dutch "Minister-President")</i>
<i>MinAgr</i>	<i>Ministry for Agriculture; Nature and Food Quality ("LNV")</i>
<i>MinE</i>	<i>In the Netherlands: Ministry for Housing, Spatial Planning and Environment ("VROM")</i>
<i>MinEcon</i>	<i>Ministry for Economic Affairs ("EZ")</i>
<i>MinFA</i>	<i>Ministry of Foreign Affairs ("BZ"), includes Development Aid</i>
<i>MinTr</i>	<i>Ministry for Transport, Public Works and Water Management ("VenW")</i>
<i>SER</i>	<i>Social-economic Council</i>

A Actors and Process

1 GOVERNMENT: SDS PROCESS, GOVERNMENT COORDINATION AND REVIEW

1.1 SD STRATEGIES' DEVELOPMENT

Predecessors of a SD strategy

- 1984 1st integrated Environmental Plan “More than the sum of the parts”
- 1985 Report “Zorgen voor morgen” [Care for tomorrow] with a perspective until 2010
- 1989 1st National Environmental Plan (NEP 1) with a duration of 4 years (vertical integration, starting with the global level, provinces and local level were asked to also develop integrated environmental plans; coordination of sectors such as agriculture, transport, industry by MinE); voluntary agreements with industry
- 1993 NEP 2: no significant changes in objectives, but improved implementation measures
- 1997 NEP 3: decoupling economic growth and resource use as a key issue; it is made clear that societal choices have to be made, especially to tackle CO₂-emissions and noise; this falls short because the issuance of the plan falls together with elections
- 2001 NEP 4 “Where there is a will there is a world – working towards sustainability”: Introduced “transition processes” as attempt to tackle environmental integration in 4 key sectoral policies: energy (MinEcon), agriculture (MinAgr), transport (MinTr) and biodiversity (MinFA); it contains broad objectives for 2030 (“living healthy and safely in a pleasant environment with a vital nature, without declining biodiversity and natural resources”), and measures for achieving this; seven persistent environmental problems are key

SD strategy

- 2001/2002 Review of government policies and societal activities regarding SD by an inter-ministerial project team, based in MinE
- 03/01-04/02 PM Kok chairs a Steering Committee for SD, the Minister for Environment acts as coordinating Minister for SD
- July 2001 The position of an “Ambassador for SD” and an Inter-ministerial Task Force (MinFA) are created for the preparation of the WSSD
- Jan. 2002 “Study of National Government Policy in the Framework of the National Strategy for SD” submitted to the cabinet; three councils were asked to submit an advice for how to move towards a SDS with the review of government policy and societal activities as building stones¹
- June 2002 *Elections*
First cabinet PM Balkenende: Responsibility for SD is given

¹ Letter Minister Pronk (MinE) to SER, 19.1.2002 (SER, 2002, Annex 1).

	<i>back to the Ministry for Housing, Spatial Planning and Environment, in which the responsibility for environment is with a State Secretary (Junior Minister)</i>
Nov. 2002	Cabinet policy statement on environmental policy 2002 – 2006, which adjusts those parts of NEP 4 that are particularly affected by “the new economical and political circumstances” (submitted to Parliament)
Jan. 2003	<i>New elections</i>
April? 2003	<i>Second cabinet PM Balkenende</i>
Jan. 2003	On the basis of the WSSD commitments, the government endorses a “SD Action Program”, consisting of the international module of a strategy, prepared by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (includes Development Aid)
July 2003	National module (now called “national strategy”) of the SD Action Programme is endorsed Inter-ministerial Task Force (MinFA) is re-established for implementing the international part of the SD Action Program
March 2004	The national module is discussed in Parliament

Assessment:

The Netherlands has a tradition, and has been famous as a frontrunner-country for national environmental plans, which served as a role model in other countries. During the Dutch EU Presidency in 1997 Art. 6 on environmental integration was inserted in the TEC: the Netherlands were also one of the first countries with a serious attempt towards sectoral integration by introducing the so-called “transition processes” in their NEP 4 (2001). The MinE as overall coordinator issued the second progress report in November 2003. In contrast, moving towards an SD strategy has proven rather difficult, which has to be seen in light of the previous phases of environmental policy and integration:

- The 1980s and the run-up to the NEP 1 in 1988/89 is considered as the phase with the greatest momentum, with a PM who wanted a strong environmental plan (coalition government of christian-democrats and social-democrats), a societal debate and the private sector finally convinced of the economic benefits of taking environmental measures (e.g. increased recycling, energy saving).
One trigger was the interest of business in an integrated permitting system, for which a first step was achieved with NEP 1, and more flexible approaches. The latter was settled in around 130 voluntary agreements, around 20 of which are still in place.
- 1990 – 94 there was further commitment regarding integration, and the NEP 2 improved measures for implementation.
Rio did not trigger anything significant: As the Netherlands consider themselves as frontrunner in environment and development aid policies, international agreements in these matters tend to not move the country, but rather the other way round, i.e. the Netherlands influence the inter-

national agenda and/or scrutinise how well things are done. In this way the Dutch delegation to the UNCSO suggested including in the Rio+5 agreements that each country should have a national SD strategy.

- 1994 – 1998 saw a less engaged Minister for Environment, and the NEP 3 is considered as being only an overview of existing policies. Business prefers it over the NEP 4, because it is still more concrete, and the latter rather a concept (cf. nickname “pavement slab”, although it is acknowledged that environmental problems, and hence also measures, have become more difficult and less concrete). Until then there was still a constructive relationship and cooperation between the Ministry of Environment and Industry, which changed with a new MinE coming in 1998.
- The government 1998 – 2002 is considered as having failed to move towards an SD strategy, which was asked by Rio+5 in 1997, and better integration of government policies in general: the PM was not interested, and the majority of Ministers, including the MinE, favoured sectoral approaches. Hence the cabinet rejected a first draft “SD strategy”, developed by an informal group of strategy Directors from about seven Ministries. The development of NEP 4 during this period was required by law, but also reflects the situation well: the opinion exists, shared by the Environment Minister of that time, that NEP 4 is the Dutch SD strategy, as it also covers the economic and social dimensions.

With the WSSD on the horizon the government decided to “prepare something like a strategy”, and established an inter-ministerial project group at the end of 2000, based at the MinE. This group performed reviews of the government policies and societal activities regarding SD by early 2002 and had intended to prepare and draft a strategy, but the then outgoing government signalled not wanting to adopt a strategy². The reviews hence were meant as preparation for the next government, which was expected to be a similar coalition.

- But, the political situation was difficult after the election in June 2002: the success of the populist “List Pim Fortuyn (LPF)”, and the earlier assassination of its leader, caused a political earthquake and a change from the previous “purple” coalition with a social-democrat PM to a christian-democrat PM; the first cabinet Balkenende (PM), comprised of christian-democrats, LPF and liberals, failed, because the LPF left the coalition; new elections led to a new coalition with another liberal party replacing the LPF in January 2003.

This new, and in the beginning unstable, situation contributed to slowing down the SD agenda even more, and the change of government brought changes in substantial, strategic and governance terms: Ambitions were lowered regarding environmental policy and SD:

- instead of a SD strategy an “Action Program” was aimed at (i.e. a compilation of existing policies rather than an overarching strategy);
- environment policy is less relevant in general (partly because of the focus on immigration, which was the main theme of the LPF, partly

² Looking back this decision is considered as a misfortune for the SD agenda.

because slowing down of the economy, and - as opposed to earlier times – no belief that it can be profitable to move towards environmental innovation), and also the rather strong relevance of development aid has been lowered;

- environmental targets were lowered to the EU level (e.g. renewables, GHG emissions);
- responsibility for environment was moved from the Minister to the State Secretary (Vice-Minister) - level;
- the Steering Group for SD under the leadership of the PM was given up;
- there are perceptions that the famous “Polder model” consensus approach has moved towards a more government centred ‘no-more-discussion’ style;
- SD is not on the agenda of the so-called “Innovation Platform” with high level stakeholder and expert representatives, chaired by the PM, which seems not (yet) to be achieving the results as hoped for.

Also in Parliament no momentum has been created for the SD agenda: The hearing on the national module came late, and did not create a follow-up request, though it was stated that the discussion was partly critical, especially regarding a lack of vision and the weak relation to the EU level.

The WSSD was attended by the new PM Balkenende, the State Secretary for Environment and the Minister for Development Aid from the first cabinet Balkenende. Though all stayed in place in the second cabinet, the WSSD at first mainly prompted the MinFA to draw up the “international module” of the SD Action Program for the implementation of the WSSD outcomes. This was submitted to the cabinet in January 2003. The preparation of the “national module” took a bit longer, due to a greater coordination need and/or mechanisms not yet fully in place (cf. ch. A.1.2).

Altogether the SD Action program seems to fall short in terms of

- coordination of the national and international part, as well as coordination with the transition processes (cf. ch. A.1.2),
- a strategic approach, including missing targets and indicators (cf. ch. A.1.3),
- stakeholder consultation (as opposed to the NEP 4, cf. ch. A.2.2).

Overall it seems that NEP 4 and the transition processes are kind of seen as ‘environmental sustainability’, and a more overarching approach for SD is mainly seen in light of the international dimension (cf. C.1): The policy statement 2002 for environment policy puts the SD Action Program in the framework of “follow up to WSSD”³. SD seems to have almost a bad reputation⁴, and actors outside the MinE and MinFA state that there is no overarching SD strategy in the Netherlands. There is some confusion about the terminology: the two parts of the SD Action Program are now called “international strat-

³ VROM, 2002, p. 34.

⁴ It was even mentioned that “SD has a flavour of socialism”.

egy” and “national strategy”. This framing in the WSSD context only is most likely one of the reasons why the SD “strategy” is fairly unimportant.

1.2 LEAD RESPONSIBILITY AND HORIZONTAL COORDINATION MECHANISMS

In the Netherlands traditionally the main Ministers concerned sign up to the environmental plans, which is a favourable situation regarding coordination. The role of the cabinet as collective decision-making body has been strengthened vis-à-vis the responsibility of an individual Minister.⁵ Nevertheless, there are quite some deficiencies.

The formal lead responsibility for SD in the previous government was with the PM, but nevertheless there was apparently no real commitment: a Steering Group of concerned Ministers with the PM chairing was installed as coordination mechanism during the time of the reviews (03/2001 – 04/2002). It was meant to be a separate entity, besides the regular sub-committees of the cabinet, but became rather an agenda item for the environment sub-committee. The new government did not continue this Steering Group and gave the lead responsibility for SD to the State Secretary of Environment. The SD project group that performed the reviews 2001/2002 (the “NSDO-team”) had an inter-ministerial character, i.e. staff were seconded from some other Ministries (not all concerned) besides the MinE, where it was based. Coordination with a wider group of Ministries took place via regular meetings, which worked partly satisfactorily. Positive might have been that the lead of the project group was at the Director level, but nevertheless the commitment of other Ministries was limited. This SD project group was also dissolved by the new government, at least its previous character and composition. With the now overall responsibility of the MinE, the lead for preparing the SD Action Program was given to ‘lower’ levels in the Ministry (Deputy Division-head). A new “contact persons” group (“CPO”) with other Ministries concerned (around 8) was established, which meets on a regular basis (around every 3 weeks). Surprisingly, the individuals from the “transition Ministries” (MinEcon, MinTr, MinAgr, MinFA) participating in this CPO are not the ones involved in the transition processes of their Ministries, and there seems to be no clear link.

At the same time as the SD project group was installed by the MinE in 2001, the MinFA established the position of an “ambassador for SD” and an inter-ministerial task force on SD, both for the preparation of the WSSD. This task force also prepared the international module of the SD Action Program, and has been working on its implementation since then. A first progress report was published in December 2003. The task force is basically composed of the same Ministries as the CPO for the national module, but it’s again not the same persons participating. The link between the national and international modules is perceived as deficient, and hence better cooperation is planned for the future. So far it takes place via regular contacts of the chairs of the two groups. There seems to be no clear link to the transition process ‘biodiversity’ of the (same) Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Also, there is no obvious link to EU policy coordination: this is formally done for all policies by the

MinFA, but it apparently allows in certain policy fields more self-coordination (e.g. agriculture, economic affairs) and plays a particularly strong role in environment and transport policy.

There is also a coordination mechanism via monthly meetings of the four 'transition Ministries, led by the MinE, which has a coordinating role for the transition processes. As mentioned above, the individuals involved in the transition processes of the Ministries and participating in the coordination group, are not the ones participating in the coordination group for the SD Action Program. On the side of the MinE it is the same chair for both coordination groups. The cooperation between the four transition Ministries, which takes place outside the monthly coordination on the Director level, is evaluated as partly very good; the coordinating role of the MinE, here mainly the "Transition Support Centre" that it installed, is predominantly found useful.

In contrast to this rather fragmented situation there seem to be other, 'powerful', committees on the Director-General level, - but not for SD.⁶ Regarding the question of lead responsibility there is no homogeneous opinion in the Netherlands: those who find this an important issue are strongly in favour of a lead by the PM, but only if there is a minimum commitment, and the PM office as "Ministry for general affairs" with its role to manage processes would be the ideal facilitator.

Assessment:

In the situation that there are at least two processes in place, it is understandable that each needs coordination. But because the overlap of "transition" and SD is so obvious and strong, it is quite surprising that the MinE, which has the lead coordination for both, does not coordinate the two processes better internally.⁷ The establishment of transition processes and the preparation of the WSSD started as two separate processes, which has never been changed. The experiences of the transition groups were not systematically or conceptually included in the SD Action Program.

Also the link of national and international strategy has been deficient so far: here improvement is planned, e.g. the progress report 2005 is intended to be a joint one. The link to the EU SDS seems to work fairly satisfactorily vis-à-vis the national module of the SD Action Program, but not well for the international one.

The somehow low reputation of SD, or the SD strategy, which is largely not considered as a strategy, is inter alia reflected in low acknowledgement of the concept in general, its overarching character in particular, with the one consequence that there is also no overarching coordination. There seems to be some competition between the MinE and the MinFA (which includes the

⁶ There is e.g. the DG's committee for environment (RME) and for spatial planning (RPC), which meet monthly with an independent (appointed) chair and have the task to coordinate policy proposals before they are submitted to the cabinet.

⁷ It is suggested from some sides that coordination for SD at the DG level could be in principle be done similarly to other policy fields (cf. DG's committees, previous footnote), which is also found in other countries (Junior Ministers and/or top officials preparing e.g. a 'green cabinet').

office of the Minister for Development Aid)⁸, and the coordinating role of MinE for the transition processes is at least ambiguous: on the one hand the MinE is trying to be modest in order to move away from its reputation as dominant, on the other hand this reputation has not disappeared in the transition Ministries (some call the MinE “zealous”). The MinE also has a reputation of “traditional” thinking in terms of governance, i.e. focussing on regulation and taxes, which is also said to apply to other Ministries outside the transition groups, whereas the transition concept has a systemic approach. The MinE’s co-ordination role is mainly to support in procedural challenges that all transition Ministries are facing, and to prepare progress reports. Its involvement is also found useful, because of the learning from the transition philosophy. The transition processes themselves seem to be not well rooted in the respective Ministries: the responsible staffs act as project groups, which very little connection to the rest of the Ministry. This is perhaps natural, as the transition processes are still in the start-up phase and the people in charge focus on finding fields of experiments and establishing “success stories” with external parties; but on the other side the deficit regarding the policy level in their own Ministry is seen, and improvement is aimed at over time.⁹

1.3 MONITORING, REGULAR REVIEWING AND LONG-TERM PERSPECTIVE

It is planned that an annual progress report on the SD Action Program will be prepared¹⁰. As such reports are primarily directed to Parliament, and Parliament only debated the SD Action Program in March 2004 (i.e. only eight months after the adoption by government), the MinE now plans to prepare the first report by the end of 2005, together with the MinFA. It was also planned that the Research Institute for Environment and Health (RIVM) would publish an initial sustainability appraisal by the end of 2003, which then happened end of 2004. This appraisal is meant to produce a “sustainability balance sheet” to be generated annually from 2006. NEP 4 does not foresee making progress reports for the transition processes, but the responsible Ministers decided to do so. The MinE issued the second report as an overview of all transition processes in November 2003¹¹, and the MinEcon issued one for energy transitions in April 2004¹².

1.3.1 Indicators, targets and timetables

There are no well-known quantitative targets in the Netherlands. It is stated that government has adjusted previously existing environmental targets to the (lower) EU level, some of which are repeated in the SD Action Program.

8 This partly seems to be due to the Ministry for Development Aid wishing to rule over their quite big funds alone, which complies with the interests of their “stakeholders”, - development aid organisations, significant in number and size. In the progress report 2003 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs announce that in the future such reports will cover both the national and international strategy, which will however “not affect the fact that the two are distinctly separate” (BZ, 2003, p.4).

9 This applies to the Ministry of Economic Affairs: transition is limited to energy, and with so far no impact on other departments, but it is aimed at by the transition managers.

10 VROM/BZ, 2003, p. 4.

11 VROM, 2003.

12 EZ, 2004.

NEP 1 had strong quantitative environmental targets, which were partly continued in subsequent NEPs, none of which established new targets. NEP 4 states as a pitfall in the Netherlands that objectives were set but sufficient means and instruments were not allocated to them. For this reason NEP 2 and 3 tried to improve in this field, and NEP 4 established predominantly qualitative objectives for 2030. It has a few quantitative targets for sectoral policies, like

- 10% renewable energy sources by 2020,
- dematerialisation: achieve “Factor 2 - 4” by 2030, and Factor 10 by 2050,
- (re-)creation of wetlands on agricultural land (20 – 30 km² by 2030),
- reduction and ceiling of ammoniac and phosphate immissions.

Indicators are not in place; a research institute (RIVM) is only now working on them (expected end of 2005). This mechanism has not yet been used in the Netherlands, and is also not considered as very important, partly due to the current lack of targets. Progress reports as mentioned above are hence done in a qualitative way and tend to look at progress of processes and projects, and not at outcomes (in pressure, state or response).

1.3.2 Review terms, long-term perspective and role of the Parliament

The Netherlands has a political culture for rather strong continuity, as new governments do not easily dismantle approaches and policies of previous ones: this goes back to a societal structure which used to be characterised by stable groups of voters along the catholic-protestant-liberal lines (“Verzuiling”)¹³. In such a situation it was never felt necessary that Parliament endorses long-term strategies. Its role is asking government to develop strategies, and getting reports back. The government therefore mainly directs reviews of policies to Parliament, and understands them to a lesser extent as a trigger for debate and new momentum.

The SD Action Program states that progress reports should be prepared annually¹⁴, but because of the overall delay the report for the national part is planned for end of 2005, i.e. two years after endorsement, whereas the first report on the international part was issued one year after endorsement¹⁵. It is stated that the annual rhythm is probably too short.

The NEPs have a four-year term, and occasionally updates/adjustments are issued in between.¹⁶ The qualitative goals of NEP 4 are an example of a long-term approach: filling this in with medium-term, maybe quantitative, objectives has not happened.

In general it is stated that looking at a long-term horizon would require political courage, which is currently not perceived to exist.

1.3.3 Approach for a SD strategy

The Netherlands has a long tradition of spatial and in consequence also environmental plans, and planning in general. The results are quite diverse rang-

¹³ Cf. also Lepszy, 2003, p.362.

¹⁴ VROM/BZ, 2003, p.4.

¹⁵ BZ, 2003.

¹⁶ e.g. VROM, 2002.

ing from establishing quantitative targets (NEP 1), focussing on instruments (NEP 2 and 3), to qualitative long-term objectives (in NEP 4). “Transitions” are inherently seen as learning processes, with arenas for experiments explicitly allocated to them, encouraging a way of thinking that is expressed as “everything is possible”. In governance terms transition management has a systemic approach, i.e. looking at entire production chains, working with stakeholders in the market and striving for innovative means and new ways of cooperation. The transition groups in the responsible Ministries focus on establishing concrete projects.

There doesn't seem to be a danger of being too much on the rigid side of planning, rather the reverse: there is a gap between strategic goals, as set in NEP 4, and concrete actions (as in the transition processes), which is only rarely filled in with concrete objectives and targets.

The SD Action Program has not the intention to be a strategy (though it is called like this in the sub-header), and hence it doesn't have such an approach from coarse to fine, with a vision and strategy, broken down to objectives, targets and measures. It is an overview of actions in place, and others still to come (though the difference can not be recognised).

It is very difficult to get an overview in the Netherlands on policies and activities for SD: partly because there is indeed much going on, but mostly because the field is tackled in a fragmented way with no overall architecture: no one of the interviewees was able to give an overview and/or picture of priorities, and there is just no overarching policy. Even if it could be argued that it is the nature of a complex concept, there appears to be no attempt to tackle this complexity.¹⁷

1.4 VERTICAL COORDINATION: LINK TO THE REGIONAL AND LOCAL LEVEL

The RMNO advice on the national SD process in 2002 said that moving towards a sustainable development is a process that has to take place not only top-down, but also bottom-up¹⁸; so it appears that the latter has been deficient.

Regarding public authorities at the regional and local levels, the picture is rather gloomy: the association of local authorities (VNG) refused to be interviewed, because “SD is not a priority issue since 2004”. Hence no information on Local Agenda 21 could be gathered; others state that LA 21 used to be important at certain times, then declined, partly because subsidies stopped. There are still several municipalities with a ‘green’ agenda. On the regional level provinces such as North Brabant invest a lot in developing regional SD actions, but do not feel supported by the national administration.

¹⁷ The RMNO (Advisory council for research in spatial planning, environment and nature) though addressed exactly this in its advice on knowledge for transitions (RMNO, 2003). Discussion about an appropriate approach seem to continue: some interviewees mentioned the advice of the WRR (Scientific council for government policy) 2002 on the review of government policies towards SD, which is interpreted differently, and is in a way not unequivocal in itself. It argues that SD can only be a “meta-term”, a value, which cannot be the basis for making policy choices, and that integrated policy steering is impossible. On the other hand it states that policies must be the result of setting priorities and weighing up different goals and objectives, and that SD, which is too much a general aim would prevent this (WRR, 2002, p.57).

¹⁸ RMNO, 2002, p.4.

The second national progress report on transitions mentions a report of the Association of Provincial Authorities (IPO) from 2002 with proposals for tackling a number of intractable environmental problems¹⁹.

2 NON-GOVERNMENTAL ACTORS

In general the political culture has a strong tradition of stakeholder involvement ('consensus-democracy')²⁰, to which a growing civil society movement since the 1970s has contributed. With this background the so-called "polder-model" was established in 1982: an agreement of employers and trade unions, with the government as mediator, on deep reforms of the social system during a socio-economic crisis. This model led to economic success in the 90s and made the Netherlands a role model for other countries. Since the political upheaval of 2002 it has been increasingly questioned whether it is still in place, and the government has been characterised as more state-centred.

The consensus tradition has also led to institutionalised negotiations between the social partners in the Social-economic council (SER), established in 1950 (cf. ch. A.3).²¹

The Netherlands has a strong environmental movement with a larger membership than in any other country.²² Some of them receive funds from the government.²³ The relationship to government is characterised as traditionally rather good, as environment policy was dealt with by all political parties, though it has also depended on individual actors (like the Minister for Environment).

Since the 1980s there have been collaborations between environmental organisations and business (industry and e.g. retailers), and with actors in the agriculture field, both of which is partly continued nowadays²⁴.

Trade Unions seem not to be playing a strong role, but on SD they are active in the socio-economic council SER (cf. ch. A.3.1).

2.1 CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY (CSR)

Industry is divided regarding the attitude towards CSR: Most of the 250 bigger companies are engaged in CSR, with some of the Dutch multi-nationals (e.g. Shell, Unilever) and certain financial institutes (e.g. Rabobank) as frontrunners, whereas the smaller ones in contrast are not. A similar picture has already shown in the case of environment policy (since the 1980s), both of which go back to the lack of resources and knowledge. The employers' organisation(s) would need to fill in this gap, but they

a) tend to represent more the "conservative" end regarding environment and SD,

¹⁹ VROM, 2003, p.17.

²⁰ Lepszy, 2003, p.362.

²¹ Lepszy, 2003, p.371.

²² E.g. 'Natuurmonumenten' has over a million members (of 16 Mill inhabitants). Development NGOs were not covered (reference to their role: cf. footnote 8).

²³ Note: Some used to be almost fully funded in the starting phase.

²⁴ but assessed as more difficult nowadays, as business takes care of consumer desires that is less prone to environmental friendliness.

- b have internally not linked CSR and SD: the former is dealt with by a department for social responsibility, and the latter by one for environment and economic aspects; members have not asked the association to change this;
- c it is also stated that SD is in principle “good management”, which business has always needed to take care of.

Front-runner companies hence remain individual actors: In the case of environmental policies companies needed a common framework set by the government in order to be able to take environmental measures (cleaning-up, pollution prevention, efficiency increase) and stay competitive. Nowadays in contrast front-running seems to work by exploring and occupying market niches, which is then a competitive advantage, and hence first-movers do not ask anymore for government action. Also, it is stated that “measuring” the “degree of sustainability” is not possible, in contrast to measuring environmental performance, and frontrunners do not want to lose their CSR reputation. Experience shows that consumers might be a bigger problem than a better policy/regulatory framework: “getting the prices right”, which would support in this respect, has been an objective by the government in earlier phases, but not anymore (hence it seems that business has given up asking for that).²⁵

The stronger interest and involvement of business in environment policy has also been due to

- the greater threat of regulation, which also led to the 130 environmental agreements with a desired more flexible approach, and
- their interest in integrated environmental permitting, which has partly come about and is still being worked on.

Nowadays there is a tendency to ask for (even) less regulation, though it is also stated that driving forces for companies to moving ahead are environmental legislation and consumer demands.

On the government side CSR is supported by a knowledge centre, based in the MinEcon (not linked to the transition groups), and a division for “sustainable enterprises” in the MinE, with the aim to stimulate changes of companies “as a whole” by supporting in procedural terms. There is also a project that involves local authorities.

2.2 STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION

With the before mentioned tradition of stakeholder involvement, consultation is performed more or less automatically for major policy proposals, such as for the NEPs. The review of government policies in preparation for a SDS in 2001/2002 was accompanied by a review of societal activities, which provided a good overview, though societal actors already then felt that there is not enough support by the government.

²⁵ An illustrative example is a new type of petrol, which Shell developed: environmentally friendly, good for the engine, and slightly more expensive. Marketing it (as “Pura”) with these two advantages did not become successful. Hence it was taken from the market and re-introduced as “V-Power” with exactly this “powerful” image.

For drawing up the national part of the SD Action Program two major hearings were held, both of which were attended by around 100 people: the first had the purpose of collecting ideas, which did not have much response; at the second a discussion paper was presented, which was mainly criticised for not being ambitious enough, lacking a sense of urgency and strong policy changes. Partly it was also criticised that the stakeholder involvement was not sufficient, but on the other hand there was also a bit of exhaustion because of previous consultation (on NEP 4, on the review of societal activities for SD).

Altogether the development of the SD Action Program was rather government centered, with the international part even drawn up solely by the MinFA. The Polder model tradition stumbles a bit at least on the policy side: one explanation is that in times of budget cuts the funds that are reduced first are the ones for processes and soft targets. Government actions within the SD Action Program though - and this also applies to transition processes - concentrate on creating ownership on the stakeholder and civil society side by providing support for procedures and dialogue, and establishing innovative projects and new approaches.

For 2005 an improved process of stakeholder consultation is planned, which is seen as important for the implementation of the SD Action Program.

3 SD AND OTHER COUNCILS

There is no separate SD council in the Netherlands. Explanations include:

- 1 There is a wide landscape of advisory councils:
 - Since a reform in the 1990s each Ministry has an independent expert policy advisory council, and there are several so-called “sector councils”, each advising several Ministries on more cross-cutting questions, related to knowledge gaps and research needs in these fields;
 - Negotiations between social partners take place in the Socio-economic council SER, which also gives policy advice. It is the only body where stakeholders have a dialogue among each other. It also has a sub-commission for SD.
- 2 The attitude towards SD (“we are doing this anyhow already”) similarly applies to advisory councils: “we already have all kinds of councils” (typically also “... too many...”, and there is a new reform on councils ongoing).

Regarding councils as one type of bridge from government to civil society it was stated that the advisory councils mentioned under 1) used to be more composed of stakeholders, but have been changed over time into rather expert councils. This trend might nowadays be even stronger, as government refuses to establish an additional council, and does not see an added value in stakeholder dialogue. This might be an indicator for an overall trend of “governing is for governments”, or it might be due to the lack of interest and sense of urgency for SD.

The “Innovation platform” is a new body with independent experts (and government, including the PM as chair), and an independent secretariat composed of staff partly from different Ministries. With this institutional setting and the broad theme it could play the role of a SD council, but SD is not on the agenda of this platform.

In 1999 the “National Institute for Sustainable Development (NIDO)” was founded with the task to bring together the private sector, government, NGOs and science in practical programs for SD.²⁶ This body was dissolved in December 2004.

In NEP 1 it was already proposed to establish a SD platform, which was then combined with a committee for development aid to become the “National Committee for Sustainable Development (NCDO)”. This body does have some platform function, but it mainly sponsors projects of development aid. For the WSSD stakeholders established a “Johannesburg platform”; and attempt to continue this after the WSSD failed (cf. ch. A.3.3 below).

3.1 ROLE, FUNCTIONS AND INTERNAL ASPECTS OF OPERATION OF THE (ADVISORY) COUNCILS SER, RMNO, VROM-RAAD/RLG

General role and composition, way of operating

- 1 The Social-economic Council SER is a stakeholder council (functions cf. above), composed of 33 members (11 each appointed by employers’ associations, trade unions and by government; the latter are mostly University professors from the economic, social and/or environment field). Organisations from broader civil society are not represented; environmental NGOs are though invited to participate in SD-related activities. Regarding a permanent membership it was argued that there are many topics covered by the SER for which environmental NGOs do not have expertise.
- 1 The advisory councils RMNO, VROM-raad and RLG²⁷ (and policy and research/”sector” councils in other fields) are set up in an independent way, which comprises:
 - mostly independent agenda setting (besides being asked for certain advice),
 - having their own budget and an independent secretariat (linked to Ministries in administrative terms only),
 - independent members: a Minister appoints the chair of the councils and the council members; most councils have government members, but only as observers;
 - sector councils like the RMNO have a tri-partite composition: science, society and government.

The government is obliged to reply to the advice of these councils.

²⁶ One program e.g. was “market chances for sustainable products”, for which research was conducted on the market chances of sustainable products, workshops were held and experience exchanged on best practice of sustainable advertisement (www.nido.nu).

²⁷ RMNO: Advisory council for research in spatial planning, environment and nature; VROM-raad: Council for Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment; RLG: Council for the rural areas.

Role vis-à-vis the SDS

The SER and the RMNO gave advice in 2002 on the review of government policy with respect to moving towards a national SDS. Both shared the view that this document lacks an overarching vision²⁸, and the SER recommended to the incoming government to take SD as an umbrella for the cabinet program.

- The SER works on SD in three lines (environment NGOs are participating in all these activities and sub-committees):
 - plays a major role in promoting CSR in Dutch society,
 - the SD committee within SER issues reports on SD(-related) themes,
 - gives advice on spatial planning and transport.
- The RMNO with its overarching and cross-cutting 'knowledge'-remit is a strong agenda setter in the field of SD²⁹, and it also continuously tackles the question of 'bridging the gap' between scientific knowledge and policy making. In this function it communicates (SD) issues to interested parties, including five ministries. It gave advice on the problem of complexity of SD (2003), on the need for more research (2004), and developed the idea of a 'dynamic knowledge agenda for SD'.

The VROM-Raad gives advice to the MinE on environmental policy and related fields, which might include SD. It did not comment on the 2002 government review for the SDS.

The RLG gives advice to the MinAgr on all matters regarding the rural areas. The council has an overarching approach for this area, and hence deals directly and indirectly with SD issues. With its formal limitation to the MinAgr it did not comment on the 2002 government review for the SDS. The Wadden Sea Council typically advises on sustainable development issues in the area, although it does not have a (self-)image as a regional SD council.

Council members operate on equal footing

The expert advisory councils can be characterised as think-tanks with a consensus approach. None of them has the explicit aim that 'stakeholder' members should take results from council debate into their organisations, though this might occur naturally.

For the SER the relation of its members cannot be answered. Judging by its history, and even constitutional remit, one could conclude that it might have more predominantly a negotiating style.

Relation to and role of socio-economic partners

The SER has a very good reputation, and the relationship to the other councils presented here is very good.

Relation to government departments

As government members are only observers, there is no potential for

²⁸ RMNO, 2002, p. 3.

²⁹ e.g. on sustainable tourism, which it considers as neglected policy field in this context (to be published in spring 2005), and on the North Sea (published October 2004).

conflicts. For the RMNO this membership is meant to serve the information flow from the Ministries to the council, as well as the ‘sounding board’ function of the councils (for the government).

3.2 ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE COUNCILS

All councils covered here have achievements in environmental policy and SD through their quality of advice, agenda setting, a watchdog function etc., with the RMNO to the greatest extent engaged in the SD agenda:

- According to the RMNO’s remit it is a “boundary” organisation between science, policy and society; in this function it raises “knowledge questions” and hence agenda setting is central in its work (cf. above); on the basis of 20 years experience it is currently elaborating a “methodology for boundary work”;
- stimulating inter-disciplinary research and suggesting research programs, e.g. on biodiversity and on SD;
- a study on stumbling block in decision-making “Willingly and knowingly” caught attention internationally;
- program “teachers for SD”;
- the stakeholder consultation on NEP 4 was organised by the RMNO, which was highly valued by government.

The SER has the greatest reputation (it is also the far biggest and oldest one), which might be inter alia an indicator for the authoritative potential of a stakeholder composition. As it probably has more a negotiation culture, the potential of progress and innovation, both in substance and ‘governance learning’, deriving from stakeholder dialogue might be limited.

Success-factors of the RMNO

- Independence: council members act as individual experts from science and stakeholder group; government representatives of five ministries are observers, but can actively take part in the discussions: for them the RMNO has also a sounding board function;
- In the council meetings consensus is aimed at;
- The combination of scientific and stakeholder members guarantees that advice always has a scientific basis as well as practical recommendations; whenever possible RMNO uses a trans-disciplinary approach;
- Advice is prepared in steering groups with, besides council members, invited experts; this allows the council to have deeper looks into specific themes while at the same time having strategic discussions in the council meetings;
- Gaining acknowledgement of the government and the wider political community through quality of work, and by helping the ministries to articulate better their strategic research questions;
- Advice is delivered each with a dissemination plan, which may include presentations, conferences or an informal ‘RMNO-café’, and press-releases;

- Guarding the position as ‘boundary work’ organisation between science, policy and society is guarded,
- Strong chair and well-acknowledged personalities as council members from the scientific world, the private sector and NGO’s;
- Well-established and broad links into government: the council works for five ministries;
- The focus on research for policy automatically implies getting involved in early phases of policy making or programming; the council also produces advice on issues that are not yet on the policy agenda but are expected to become important within five to ten years;
- Link national views to European views; growing international contacts and cooperation.

3.3 AN SD COUNCIL AS ADDITION?

Several interviewees would welcome the establishment of a separate SD council, with the particular functions:

- keep SD on the agenda,
- advise government from a high-level stakeholder perspective, serve as a sounding board, and hence provide an additional link between the two sides,
- provide direct best practice examples and be a driving force for government policies,
- platform for stakeholder dialogue among each other.

These are very similar to the functions of SD councils in other countries. The existing expert councils fulfil the first point, partly the second and third, but do not have a setting to provide for the last one. The SER in a certain way does (cf. above); but its remit does not comprise SD mandatorily: SD has been on its agenda mainly due to the commitment of the current chair. The possible option of turning the SER into a SD council is not seriously at stake: It would require a change of the constitution, and hence a strong political will. Whether this would be useful is also questionable, because of its primary remit of negotiation between social partners, which is not conducive to a cross-cutting think-tank atmosphere.

The RMNO has taken two initiatives regarding a SD council:

- in March 2003, together with NIDO and NCDO (cf. above), a proposal for a coalition of advisory councils and stakeholder groups, which did not receive government support;
- in September 2004 it organised a round-table session with high-level experts and stakeholder representatives, attended by two concerned Ministers. This initiative was intended to continue as “SD platform” (an informal think-tank), but so far this has not been established (response of PM pending).

B Themes and scope

NEP 4 identifies seven “important environmental problems”: loss of biodiversity, climate change, overexploitation of natural resources, health, external safety, living environment (including for example noise), future risks (e.g. new technologies),

from which four “transition areas” are concluded:

- energy,
- agriculture,
- transport,
- biodiversity (which is seen by some as not plausible, because it is not a ‘sector’ in the sense of “transition”).

At the beginning of preparing a SD strategy for the WSSD (2001) the cabinet prioritised five themes:

- population (aging and immigration),
- climate change,
- biodiversity and agriculture,
- water,
- knowledge.

The international module of the SD Action Program took up the (UN) “Wehab” sectors (January 2003, not changed later):

- water,
- energy,
- health,
- agriculture,
- biodiversity,

and added

- trade,
- CSR and investment.

The SD Action Program (national and international part), with reference to the WSSD commitments within the EU and preliminary work in the Netherlands, identifies twelve sustainability themes (July 2003):

- 1 Poverty reduction
- 2 Effective global governance
- 3 Good global financing structures and trade
- 4 Good water management and access to clean drinking water
- 5 Sustainable energy management (clean, reliable, affordable)
- 6 Health and safety
- 7 Sustainable agriculture
- 8 Biodiversity
- 9 Population (aging and migration)
- 10 Sustainable mobility
- 11 Sustainable production and consumption
- 12 Knowledge

The overview shown in Table 1 reveals a slightly inconsistent picture with respect to priority fields: Partly, the final 12 themes of 2003 are a compilation of previous and ongoing activities, partly there are additions, which are e.g. supposed to be dealt with in the international part, but are not (e.g. 1. and 2.); partly the additional themes are not much more than listed in the national part (e.g. 9.). The national part of the Action Program is in general very brief in content, always referring to the three levels (WSSD, EU and NL), and listing some international targets³⁰. It refers to the four transition processes (under theme 5., 7., 8. and 10.), but only in a very vague way. It mainly consists of three chapters on governance (roles of the national government, instruments, accountability), one overview of model programmes and projects (unclear whether in place, or whether to be developed) and a chapter “agenda for sustainable action” with some ideas for future topics to be addressed³¹. The international part is structured along the WEHAB themes (plus trade), lists the WSSD outcomes and the additional Dutch actions. It does not cover themes 1 and 2 (although allocated to the international part by the national part), nor theme 9 (which is apparently more seen from the immigration point of view, and not with respect to global migration). Altogether, the selection of themes suggests that there has been no real review of priority fields, or a prioritisation itself, and hence it remains a compilation of ongoing activities. It also illustrates the coordination deficits described in chapter A.1.2.

Table 1: Development of priorities for SD policies in the Netherlands

THE NETHERLANDS' SUSTAINABILITY THEMES (JULY 2003)	NEP 4 (2001): TRANSITION PROCESSES	2001 PRIORITIES FOR SD	PRIORITIES OF INTERNATIONAL MODULE (JAN. 2003)
1 <i>Poverty reduction</i>			
2 <i>Effective global governance</i>			
3 <i>Good global financing structures and trade</i>			⊙
4 Good water management and access to clean drinking water		○	○
5 Sustainable energy management (clean, reliable, affordable)	●	●	●
6 Health and safety			⊙
7 Sustainable agriculture	●	●	●
8 Biodiversity	●	●	●
9 Population (aging and migration)		○	
10 Sustainable mobility	●		
11 Sustainable production and consumption			⊙ (CSR)
12 Knowledge		○	

italic: themes to be covered by the international part

- themes of all four phases / parts of the Action Program
- themes of 2001 SD priorities, the international module and the final Action Program
- ⊙ themes the international module and the final Action Program

³⁰ not complete, e.g. the Gothenburg target for the halt of biodiversity loss by 2010 is not mentioned.

³¹ e.g. tourism as a future priority field, but also population, which is supposedly already covered by now (but it is not).

C Relation to the EU (SDS) and other international strategies

1 CONSIDERATION AND IMPACT OF THE EU SDS

Not the EU but the international agenda was the key trigger for developing a SD “strategy” (the SD Action Program), i.e. the commitment of Rio+5 that all countries shall elaborate a SDS for the WSSD 2002. The reinforcement of this commitment at the Gothenburg Summit 2001 did not play a role.

The SD Action Program is mostly seen in the frame of “follow-up of WSSD”, with an international and a national part. This is a likely explanation for the weak link to previous and ongoing national policies in coordination terms (a different group was set up to prepare for the WSSD) and the development of the Action Program, and possibly also in content³².

The same applies to the selection of priority fields: First the WEHAB themes were chosen, and then others, in which national activities already took place, were grouped around. The SD Action Program refers to EU policies under its own priority fields, but not to the EU SDS. At the time of the national review 2001/2002 it was said that the work at EU level was helpful for the national level.

The Lisbon process is considered as important (by actors more closely involved), as it is closer to the heart of economic policies of the EU, but also (from non-governmental actors) as a “matter of intergovernmental wrangling”, as well as separated from the concept of SD. The EU SDS is strongly perceived (again: by actors more closely involved only) as a “side-track” to the Lisbon process, i.e. as ‘environment policy’, and the review will most likely be seen as a normal ‘dossier’, probably coordinated by the MinE, whereas the Lisbon review will be coordinated more widely, lead by the MinFA (cf. ch. C.3). The State Secretary of the Environment announced that his main theme during the Dutch presidency was connecting the Lisbon agenda with SD³³. Environment actors are partly committed to strengthening the environment dimension of the Lisbon process during the Presidency.

As compared with earlier times as a frontrunner in environment policy, it is nowadays said that the EU objectives are helpful in the Netherlands, because without them the national ones would have fallen even lower. The former position is apparently overhauled by empirical findings: the country lags behind in transposing EU law.

2 ADVISORY COUNCILS: EUROPEAN AND INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION

The Dutch advisory councils VROM-Raad (environment), RLG (rural areas), RvdW (Wadden Sea, since 2003), and the RMNO (“knowledge” council for environment, nature and spatial planning) have been active in the evolving EEAC network since the early years.³⁴

The SER is member of an international association of socio-economic councils

³² The policy statement 2002 separates the transition processes and the SD Action Program, which is mentioned under the header “Follow-up WSSD” (VROM, 2002, p.34).

³³ (Financieel Dagblad, 16 July 2004; this apparently has not come true).

³⁴ The RMNO also hosted the EEAC secretariat 2002-2004; one of its council members is chair of the Steering Committee from 2005.

and served as chair from 1999-2001.

In the RMNO- and SER-advice on the review of government policies towards sustainable development the EU SDS is mentioned.

3 LISBON PROCESS: PREPARATION OF SPRING SUMMITS

There is a special group within the MinFA that prepares the Spring Summits, in consultation with other Ministries concerned incl. the MinE.

As the EU SDS is not perceived as an integral part of the Lisbon process, and because on a national level the link between the national and international part of the SD Action Program (and to EU activities) is not satisfactory, there are no clear links either to the Lisbon process or to the EU SDS. Surprisingly, the fact that former Dutch Prime Minister Wim Kok chairs the Task Force for the Lisbon review does not seem to have inspired an initiative from national actors.

4 POLICY FIELDS UPSTREAM AND DOWNSTREAM

Upstream action - EU activity is desired/required

- energy tax (and fuels: kerosin, diesel);
- phasing out and/or adjusting unsustainable subsidies;
- getting the prices right;
- environmental innovation (cf. also environment priority for the Dutch Presidency), with increased funds for research and development including a dematerialisation target ('Factor 4' etc.).

The Common Agriculture Policy receives credit for going in the right direction, but more needs to be done.

Downstream impact - EU policies hampering national SD processes

Besides overall criticism of business on environmental regulation no downstream problem is mentioned.³⁵

Overall assessment

The Netherlands was a strong driving force in the EU environmental integration agenda; e.g. the Dutch Presidency in 1997 succeeded in strengthening Art. 6 TEC in the 'Treaty of Amsterdam'.

The nationally front-running role in environment policy, including greening the taxation system, has changed since a new government in 2002, with the exception of transition processes and long-term environmental agreements with industry as continuing policies from previous government(s).

In earlier times EU targets (and policies) were considered rather as the smallest common denominator and the Netherlands was more ambitious. Nowadays things have changed, and environmental policy makers are glad about EU targets, because without them the national targets would have been lowered or removed. Emission trading and the EU objectives for renewables were mentioned as such examples. Environmental NGOs (but also the EC) have court cases against the government for non-complying with EU law.

³⁵ NB: This aspect was not explicitly covered, mainly because of the overall national trend (cf. Overall Assessment).

D Achievements and shortcomings in the national SD agenda

1 SUCCESSES AND SHORTCOMINGS

Success stories of the NEPs (1989 – 2001/today):

- (partly) integrated environmental permitting;
- more flexible approaches for business, - achieved by 130 environmental agreements, which have also provided for continuity (new governments did not dare to change them);
- NL frontrunner in greening taxation system (e.g. energy, ground water, pesticides);
- decoupling and phasing out perverse subsidies has been a goal since NEP 1 in 1989, and has seen some achievements;
- installation of transition process in three key economic sectors (energy, transport, agriculture) plus biodiversity: the energy transition seems to be the frontrunner (20 transition “paths”), which has already achieved some successful results (e.g. energy-neutral greenhouses; energy companies starting to invest in micro co-generation; paper and board industry investing in energy efficiency throughout the entire chain, with the aim of achieving a reduction in resource use by 50%), including the creation of ownership.

Shortcomings:

- lack of a comprehensive SD strategy: broadening out to all dimensions has not succeeded, neither has the link to the international dimension;
- quantitative (environmental) targets were strong in NEP1 and 2, but not since then: there has been the rather negative experience that means and instruments were not allocated to the targets, hence later plans and policies focussed on that;
- expert and stakeholder consultation is organised only on an ad hoc basis.

2 DIFFICULT POLICY FIELDS

Three “transition” sectors energy, transport and agriculture were chosen for these processes in NEP 4, both because of their importance and because they are difficult fields for the Netherlands.

Transport and agriculture are considered as more difficult:

- the former because of a strong transport-related business (freight transport, Amsterdam-Schiphol airport, Rotterdam harbour) and the socio-geographical situation of a small, densely populated country with many commuters;
- the latter because of the structure of the sector with large farms and high cattle density.

The fourth transition area is biodiversity, which is tackled more in its international dimension, reflected in the fact that the MinFa has the lead. There are almost no statements about this field, which could mean a) that people not directly involved underestimate it, or b) the field of activity is rather confined.

Additional fields mentioned are:

- decoupling, which has been an objective since the 1980s, successful for pollution, but regarding resource and material use the successes remain very limited³⁶,
- (industrial) waste,
- land use planning (danger of urban sprawl, i.e. dilution of previous strict policies), and
- water (groundwater pollution), as an overall important issue for the Netherlands.

Energy:

Is considered as difficult because of resistance of the energy intensive industry (steel, petro-chemicals).

Transition in energy is considered as the most successful one of the transition processes, with a committed Minister of Economic Affairs³⁷. The project group has been concentrating on pilot projects in five main paths (efficient and green gas including preparing for a future hydrogen economy, efficiency of the energy chain, biomass, alternative fuels and sustainable electricity; the latter two have not yet been tackled, with the aim of achieving successful examples that can be used for further “convincing”). It is also the first and only one to have issued a progress report.³⁸

The Dutch target of 10% for renewable energy sources by 2010 is considered as ambitious.

CO₂ reduction objective: The burden sharing agreement was not mentioned as a difficulty; it was agreed at national level that 50% of the reduction may be achieved outside the country, and 50% with internal measures. For the former, and emission trading, the Dutch government signed a contract with the Rabobank on identifying and creating suitable projects for them; the Rabobank hence became a frontrunner in this field. On the latter it is said that the 50% national contribution to the reduction is challenging.

The energy policy field is interestingly not framed as climate change: the SD Action Program does not even mention climate change as a driving force for reforming energy policy; the energy transition process sees itself placed in a frame of multiple objectives (environment – diversification – costs – effectiveness). For the SD Action Program this goes back to the fact that the WEHAB themes were taken over directly, and at the WSSD energy policy was deliberately separated from climate change, because of the sensitivities linked to the latter.

³⁶ it is stated by some that modesty in economic growth would be needed, on top of shifting the type of growth towards an eco-efficient one.

³⁷ A former Director General Environment of the European Commission.

³⁸ EZ, 2004 (April 2004).

*Transport:*³⁹

The assessment of the transport transition ranges from “business as usual” to “more sense of urgency, and stakeholders are more active”. There is no progress report yet.⁴⁰

Though transport is a main contributor to CO₂-emissions, the two project teams (energy transition and transport transition) have not jointly discussed objectives or targets.

Agriculture:

Similarly, for agriculture the assessment of the transition process also ranges from “a lot achieved” to “unclear what is happening at all”. The illustrations given in the context of the former statement though seem to refer to previous policies in general, and not to the transition process in particular: downsizing of intensive animal farming⁴¹.

3 IMPROVEMENT POTENTIALS FOR THE NATIONAL SDS

Procedural: improve coordination (no significant measures taken) and consultation (measures are planned for 2005).

Content:

- turn the SD Action program into an overarching SD strategy, and intertwine with NEP 4 and transition processes;
- improve prioritisation of policy fields;
- despite previous rather negative experience with quantitative targets, this approach should not be given up, and key indicators are still missing; at the moment only international and EU targets are referred to; no indicators are in place.

Other actors:

- In the business community it would be desirable if the employers’ association encouraged other than the big companies that are already engaged in CSR, i.e. particularly the SMEs;
- the local and regional level has lost pace regarding the SD agenda, or even given it up (the former one); the possibility of giving input and momentum to the national agenda is currently not in place, and the link from the national level to the local/regional could be much improved.

³⁹ NB: Only energy was looked into as example for the transition processes, hence transport can not be assessed on own grounds.

⁴⁰ Momentum was expected from a conference in October 2004, which took place as part of the official program of the Dutch EU Presidency. The outcome cannot be assessed.

⁴¹ reducing the number of pigs from 15 Mill to 10 Mill, which was done by national environmental legislation combined with the fact that the sector lost competitive power, and a government scheme to buy out pig farmers.

4 NATIONAL SDS: ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES

Achievements and challenges are assessed in a summarised way as follows⁴²:

- + Early achievements in environmental policy;
- + Individual front-running companies: most bigger companies are engaged in CSR;
- +/◆ Strong background in environment integration: transition processes are a promising approach, which currently in a phase of experimenting and establishing innovative projects; so far little influence internally on the policies of the MinE, and the link to the SD(S) is very weak; there is hence the danger that it remains just a project;
- (+)/◆ If SD is acknowledged as a concept at all, it is perceived as a learning process, but leadership and a strategic approach are missing; the MinE with overall responsibility for the national part doesn't seem to be a driving force; the PM is not interested; some Ministries are (partly) committed to transition, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs plays a strong role, but weakly linked to the national activities; Parliament doesn't create momentum either;
- (+)/◆ Improving stakeholder involvement and consultation: a strong tradition of stakeholder involvement, but not well done for the SD(S), - partly also due to previous overload of consultation;
- (+)/◆ Fragmented approaches and coordination deficits, some improvement aimed at, but it doesn't appear as a breakthrough so far; oversight seems to be missing;
- ◆ SD(S) seems to be imposed and is largely seen as WSSD follow-up; hence there is no perceivable architecture, no strategic approach: it appears as muddling-through, - and even if this is at least partly a natural characteristic of a complex concept, tackling this complexity by vision and strategy, prioritisation, followed by means and objectives, linking with previous and ongoing policies etc., is missing;
- ◆ Agenda for SD(S) shall be "not static", but this attitude does not result in underpinning objectives; too much concentrating on action;
- ◆ A new government slowed down the SD agenda more; possibly a stakeholder institution (SD council) would have been able to provide for more continuity (the "National Institute for SD (NIDO)" has more an experimenting and facilitating function); also previously successful instruments in environmental policy were partly abandoned (taxation) or reduced (subsidies);
- ◆ The association of local authorities (VNG) has abandoned priority for SD since the beginning of 2004 (no overview of local activities incl. LA 21 was given; interview was refused).

42 + achievement
 (+) partial achievement
 +/◆ mixed: achievement and challenge
 (◆) partial challenge
 ◆ challenge

Overall the impression in the Netherlands is that there are three ‘tragedies’, due to (A) the previous frontrunner position in environmental policy, and partly also (B) a change of government that has changed this in substantive, strategic and governance terms:

- 1 Tragedy of the frontrunner:
 - Many policies, activities and actions have already been going on, implicitly under the SD agenda, but not explicitly (A):
 - almost exclusively as “environmental sustainability” (A), and the step to broadening has not been seriously tackled (B);
- 2 Tragedy of complexity:
 - Because of many things already going on (A), and no overarching approach (B), Ministries’ policy activities remain fragmented; there is no overall strategic approach;
 - actors in Ministries seem to live in their own bubbles, - a bit like in a sandstorm, where oversight is lost, and competition rules rather than joining forces;
 - there are inter-ministerial coordination groups, but separate ones for each process (national SD strategy, international SD strategy, transition processes; EU policies), and even those seem to remain fragmented, as no one seems to be informed about the activities/state of the art of the other, i.e. the communication within each Ministry is weak⁴³;
 - looking back it was most likely a mistake that not enough, or no, use was made of the review of government policies and societal actions (2001/2002), which was partly due to (B) and the braking related to it, and partly because some key actors left or were removed;
 - the reflections of the interviewees on e.g. difficult policy fields, and assessments of progress made (and challenges left) differ more widely than in any other country; the only common ground is regretting the lack of commitment of the current government⁴⁴, and that transport is a problem;
- 3 Tragedy of the Polder model:
 - Firstly this has led to a tradition of strong stakeholder consultation and involvement, - partly with better results regarding confidence and accountability, partly with the same disappointments as elsewhere, which has often been due to a lack of rooting of “inter-active” civil servants in their Ministries, and a lack of coordination on the government side (‘the right hand does not know what the left-hand does’);
 - uncoordinated strategy approaches have led to an over-saturation in consultation: e.g. when the SD review and SDS development started (in 2001), the country had just seen wide consultation for NEP 4 (finalised in 2001);

⁴³ This feature can also be observed in other countries, but there tends to be more acknowledgement of an overarching strategy.

⁴⁴ even this does not apply to the business association, which denies that there can be/should be a SDS.

- the Polder model is based rather on a negotiation attitude than on innovative thinking; stakeholders talk bi-laterally to government⁴⁵;
- because of the Polder tradition the idea of a SD council for stakeholder dialogue ‘among each other’ has not fallen on fertile ground; the existing councils have over time been turned more and more into expert councils; the social-economic council SER is the only existing dialogue mechanism of stakeholders: but here also the negotiation attitude predominates; environmental NGOs are involved in the three lines of SD activities of the SER, an approach which functions well.

Assuming that both leadership and ownership are needed for moving towards SD, in the Netherlands it strongly seems that leadership is lacking. The country as a whole seems to be a bit paralysed, with a tendency to pass the buck⁴⁶. This could mean that the country is a bit spoiled by earlier successes (via negotiation), and environmental policies being on the agenda for roughly all political parties in the past, i.e. there might be no concept for dealing with a less favourably inclined government. More strongly than in other countries it is emphasised that “moving SD forward depends on persons”.

Advisory councils are a bit of an exception, but besides RMNO they also tend to remain in their sectoral activity (this is how the system is set up: one council per Ministry), and neither the VROM-Raad has criticised the Ministry of Environment, nor the SER have criticised the new government for the relatively weak, or: undetermined, SD agenda.

E Recommendations for the EU-SDS review

Because of an overall rather deadlock-mood, and many interviewees directly involved in EU affairs, this question was almost not discussed. The environment priorities of the Dutch EU Presidency stood in the foreground, which are to focus on eco-innovation. The EU SDS is perceived as a side-track to the Lisbon strategy.

One recommendation is made: The external dimension should be better integrated in the EU SDS.

Some suggest that the Lisbon strategy should include an objective like “most eco-efficient economy”.

⁴⁵ “lobby”; this is also common in other countries, but the benefits of a mechanism for stakeholder dialogue ‘among each others’ are (more) acknowledged.

⁴⁶ mainly to the government, but also to the consumer (by business) and/or to burying heads in the sand (all, including Ministries and NGOs).

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NB: There used to be a website for SD policies and the strategy (www.nsd.nl, "National Strategy for Sustainable Development"), which does not exist anymore.

INTERVIEWEES

Jan van den Broek, Hugo Brouwer, Bart-Jan Krouwel, Paul de Jongh, Louis Meuleman, Maartje Nelemans, Ton Boon von Ochssee, Lukas Reijnders, Diederik Samson, Herman Sips, Herman Wijffels

Colophon

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More information

European Environment and Sustainable Development Advisory Councils (EEAC)

c/o RMNO - P.O. Box 93051, NL - 2509 AB Den Haag

T 070 31 55 210

F 070 31 55 220

E ingeborg.niestroy@rmno.nl

I www.eeac-network.org