

Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken

Advisory Council on International Affairs
attn. Chair of the Advisory Council on International Affairs
Professor Bert Koenders
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Date 14 July 2023
Re Request for advice (advisory letter) from the AIV on boosting engagement with the SDGs

Dear Professor Koenders,

We are writing to submit to you the following request for advice.

The government intends to invest further in raising awareness of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).¹ As Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation I am the coordinating minister for the SDGs and, in this capacity, I would like to ask the Advisory Council on International Affairs to identify what central government can do to boost awareness of and engagement with the SDGs among the Dutch public and business community, and how these groups can be mobilised to contribute more to the efforts in this regard.

Background

With seven years to go, we are now halfway through the allotted period for achieving the SDGs (2015-2030). If the Netherlands wants to meet the goals domestically and at the international level, we must combine all our efforts in a coherent way to involve the broadest possible range of actors in society.

As Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, I am responsible for working towards the SDGs through trade and development cooperation. I am also the coordinating minister for all the Netherlands' efforts in this area through the various ministries. I therefore not only take account of the SDGs in my own portfolio, but also encourage my fellow ministers to work in accordance with these goals as much as possible.

The behaviour of citizens and firms in the Netherlands impacts our ability to achieve the SDGs in the here and now, but also affects future generations and

¹ The foreign trade and development cooperation policy document outlines six ways to make an impact. Under point three, 'Invest in a global development system', it says the following: 'There is wide public support for achieving the SDGs in the Netherlands, among businesses, civil society organisations and local authorities, for instance. They have joined forces in the platform organisation SDG Netherlands. The government will make further investments in the coming year in raising awareness of the SDGs in the Netherlands itself.'

people elsewhere in the world, in particular in developing countries (i.e. it has spillover effects). Efforts to pursue the SDGs in the Netherlands and through foreign trade and development cooperation policy are therefore closely interrelated.

At the heart of the SDG agenda is the pursuit of sustainable, future-proof development of human welfare, whereby people, society, the environment and the economy are in balance. In the Netherlands there is considerable scope for driving fair transitions, both domestically and at global level. This is closely connected to the increasing interest in the Netherlands in the concept of 'wellbeing', as defined by the national institute Statistics Netherlands, which identifies three separate dimensions: wellbeing in the here and now, the wellbeing of future generations and the wellbeing of people elsewhere in the world. The systems thinking approach underlying the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is also in line with the major societal challenges that the government is prioritising. The government's efforts with regard to citizenship also overlap with the SDGs: participation and awareness of sustainability themes are part of the SDG agenda, and public engagement with such SDG focus areas constitutes a concrete form of citizenship. Public and corporate engagement with the SDGs is also important for the success of inclusive transitions within the Netherlands and abroad.

In practice, however, it has proven difficult to effectively deliver this overarching message within society. The importance of policy coherence is acknowledged, but it remains a challenge in the development, implementation and communication of policy. This puts pressure on the core principle of the 2030 Agenda (that the SDGs are inseparable and mutually connected). To effectively take on major policy challenges and promote policy coherence, it is imperative that central government and local authorities, the business community – in particular small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), civil society organisations and knowledge institutions be aware of the integrated SDG Agenda.

Fortunately, there has been a visible increase in engagement with the SDGs among a large and diverse group of actors, who have united to form the platform SDG Netherlands. This has resulted in a growing range of initiatives and partnerships based on a coordinated approach. However, this primarily involves professional organisations, and within the business sector mostly larger companies or impact-driven businesses. Individuals and SMEs are not being reached as effectively, while they form the broad foundation whose support is needed.

Increased engagement among the Dutch population and SMEs is therefore important, both to provide the necessary support for transition policy and policy coherence, and to actively bring about these transitions. Greater awareness of the SDGs will also help to strengthen the appreciation by Dutch actors of the importance of international cooperation and responsible supply chains.

Advice requested

The various ministries each have their own area of responsibility with regard to generating support for and communicating their policy, but a joint approach is lacking. The key question is how the Netherlands' foreign trade and development cooperation ministry, together with other ministries, can better inform the general public and business community about the major issues facing the Netherlands, how to boost their engagement with them, and then link these domestic issues to our global responsibility. What scope for action does central government have in this regard, and what other parties should we work with? The relevant ministries have indicated that they would like to exchange thoughts on this with the Advisory Council on International Affairs.

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The goal is to identify how central government can raise awareness among different actors in society (from individuals to SMEs) and mobilise them to contribute in a tangible way to the achievement of the SDGs in the Netherlands and worldwide. In doing so, we would like to request you to explicitly take into account the current financial constraints under article 17 of the central government budget (as set out in the 2023 Spring Memorandum).

Questions to be answered

- How can the importance of the SDGs be linked to current issues such as wellbeing, transitions and (global) citizenship in a way that resonates with people?
- What elements should be included in an engaging SDGs narrative that targets a broad Dutch audience?
- Among which actors and groups of the population should greater awareness of the SDGs be a priority and why?
- How can central government as a whole reach and mobilise the right actors when it comes to contributing to the SDGs? What other actors have a role to play in this regard, and what role is that?
- Would it make sense for another ministry to be responsible for the coordination of the SDGs and, if so, what ministry/minister would that be?
- What existing initiatives can be built upon and what actors should the government work with?
- What lessons can be learned from how other countries are raising awareness of the SDGs?
- What should be done to counter the dissemination of disinformation about the SDGs/2030 Agenda?

Yours sincerely,

Liesje Schreinemacher
Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation

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