



The Netherlands Institute
for Social Research

Summary

Social and Cultural Developments

State of Affairs in the Netherlands 2023



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Introduction

Through its new publication series on Social and Cultural Developments (SCO: Sociale en Culturele Ontwikkelingen), the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) is providing an annual snapshot of the state of affairs in the Netherlands. Our assessment is based on a human-centred perspective. Drawing on new data and relevant research conducted by the SCP, we explore the question of how things are going for people and society as a whole, highlight any relevant policy and social developments, and link all of this to a number of over-arching recommendations to support policymakers and politicians. We also provide a close analysis of five social objectives, outline the main issues and policy options, and explain the choices that politicians and the government have to make in order to address them. These choices will shape our society over the next few years, and further into the future. And it's essential that we do make these choices. After all, there are limits to our financial resources, our human resources, the capacity of our local environments, and what people are willing and able to do. The information shared by the SCP in this publication has been developed specifically with the government's budget process in mind, to allow time for relevant social insights to be considered by policymakers and politicians.

Below, we outline the current state of affairs in the Netherlands based on developments within several different social objectives that we as a society are dealing with today and which will continue to be relevant over the coming years. The starting point for these analyses is the reality of people's lives. It's about how things are generally going for people, what they do in their day-to-day lives, the issues they face, and what people's expectations are of other people and of the government. We also examine a number of relevant policy developments, and the structures and processes that are helping to shape those developments, as well as their possible impacts on people's lives and on the social objectives. This enables us to reach some conclusions about the interfaces of the various spheres that people inhabit in their lives, and what this means for policymaking.

We do this using five social objectives that the SCP previously flagged up in another publication, *Koersen op de samenleving (Steering towards society)* (SCP 2021):

- 1 Unity in diversity
- 2 Full and meaningful participation in society
- 3 Adequate support of vulnerable people
- 4 Equitable progress towards sustainability
- 5 Trust in democracy and government

Our assertions with regard to the current state of affairs are based on these five objectives. We also refer to these objectives as we assess policy developments, look at the challenges this creates for the future, and suggest potential points of intervention. We then focus on specific points of intervention for policies to address each social objective.

For each objective, we have produced supplementary briefings with an overview of relevant recent policy plans, current data and insights, and associated policy implications. These briefings (in Dutch) are available at www.scp.nl with this publication.

The state of affairs in the Netherlands

A relatively high-quality society

Research into social and cultural developments in the Netherlands has revealed that the quality of Dutch society is relatively high. On average, quality of life in the Netherlands is high, and so are social cohesion and social trust. The Netherlands continues to be a *high trust society*. A majority of people (76%) feel connected to Dutch society, 83% feel at home, and social trust has been stable for years and has actually slightly increased, in spite of previous major crises.

At the same time, people feel that the Netherlands is becoming increasingly polarised. A substantial majority believe there are conflicts between people of different political persuasions, and that differences of opinion are becoming greater. However, research has not found that political polarisation is in fact increasing (Miltenburg et al. 2022; Dekker 2022). For most social and political issues, differences of opinion among Dutch people have not increased, although they have grown a little on some topics (membership of the European Union, direct democracy and the climate). There has also not been any movement towards extremes for many social issues. Yet people do feel that there has. Their evidence for this is often the fiercer debates that take place in the political arena and in the media (including social media): people in these spaces no longer listen to each other, have little understanding or respect for each other, and tend to double down on their convictions (Miltenburg et al. 2022).

Most Dutch people currently do feel a part of society and feel they have enough opportunities to participate and to be there for others. This might be through work, education, volunteering or providing care, or some combination of those. Most people are willing and able to do these things, and they do so. They're also willing and able to alter their lives at short notice (sometimes drastically) if circumstances require them to do so. Examples include changes made as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, or the outbreak of the war in Ukraine.

On the other hand, people's trust in politics is at a low ebb right now, with major doubts about the ability of the government to solve problems. Over the course of 2022, dissatisfaction with the direction the country is going in and trust in politics declined further among all population groups (Den Ridder et al. 2023). This increasingly pessimistic view of society seems to have resulted from a general perception that social problems are mounting, combined with a feeling that politicians and the government are failing to do much in response and don't actually have the ability to solve the problems.

At present, the SCP's research has not revealed any indications that these developments are doing anything to structurally undermine the legitimacy of the democratic rule of law. For example, the vast majority of people in the Netherlands do not question the value of legislation. Most people are also positive about achievements such as equal access to healthcare and education. At the same time, people are concerned about our ability to maintain the high quality of our society, and everything it has achieved. The negative perception among Dutch citizens of politics and administration in the country means there's every reason to keep investing in the legitimacy of democratic rule of law with proportional representation of all population groups in the Netherlands.

Persistent structural inequality

While the quality of Dutch society is relatively high, a number of important developments are putting pressure on that quality. Alongside decreasing trust in politicians, feelings of polarisation and threats to legitimacy, there are also substantial differences within the population of the Netherlands. When it comes to how things are going for individual people, it really depends on the various resources they have (economic, social, cultural and personal capital). There's evidence of structural inequality between groups, and it's a persistent inequality that the government is struggling to tackle (Savage et al. 2013, 2015; RVS 2020; Vrooman et al. 2014, 2023).

Some people are on the right side of these differences. They have a high quality of life, are more likely to have trust in politics, and they feel very satisfied with their lives. But for people with few resources at

their disposal, it's difficult to participate in society and keep their head above water. People who grapple with a multitude of problems and who have few economic and personal resources are more likely to be 'on the sidelines': they're more likely to feel lonely, for example, and are less satisfied with their lives. About one in six Dutch adults (16%) are in this sort of vulnerable position (Vrooman et al. 2023). We can't expect or demand nearly as much of these people than we can of others. They often actually need support to enable them to participate. Although they're to some extent reliant on care provided by the state, in some cases people in these groups don't manage to access the help they're entitled to. They also have the lowest levels of trust in the government and politics out of all of the groups that the SCP looked at in the context of inequality in the Netherlands.

Social objectives

From a human perspective, the SCP has identified a number of social objectives that are already having a significant impact on the current state of society and on people's lives, and those impacts are set to continue in the future. It's about how we shape a diverse society, how we ensure that people are able to participate in that society and, if they can't, how they can access the support and care that can help them. It's also about how we design sustainability transitions in a way that contributes to our society and quality of life for both current and future generations, and how we ensure that the pursuit of these objectives continues to safeguard sufficient and broad support for the democratic rule of law.

Other factors such as our ageing population, increased migration, greater diversity, and digitalisation all add to the importance of these objectives. Digital technology, for example, has a greater influence now on who we interact with and how those relationships are conducted. Our ageing population is increasing the strain on the labour market, but it's also affecting the number of people available to take on other tasks that need doing in society, such as providing care to relatives, doing volunteer work and so on.

These social objectives are wide ranging, need to be addressed in a comprehensive way, and are particularly focused on the question of how inclusive and sustainable our future society will be. This calls for political choices to be made about how we allocate or reallocate resources and invest in our quality of life in the Netherlands, both now and in the future.

Vision of society

It's essential that we make these political choices. Not just because we don't have infinite financial resources, but also because there are limits to the capacity of our local environments and to what people are willing and able to do. To be able to make these choices, the first thing we need is a vision of the future of society in the Netherlands. This is the 'Big Picture': what kind of society are we working towards, what is important and worth pursuing together, what do we want to protect or provide compensation for when the pressure is on (e.g. due to a recession or pandemic), and what are we willing to let slide in those situations. As well as formulating outcomes in terms of the economy and our local environments, this is therefore about formulating outcomes for the quality of our society and our quality of life in the Netherlands. This relates, for example, to health and healthcare, social equality, safety, trust in our society and politics, the ability to participate in society, representation, and social cohesion. Based on this, we can then formulate cohesive policy objectives – specific objectives for which policies can be introduced.

At present, we still don't have an approach in place centred on a vision of what our society should be. The various goals set by the cabinet aren't well coordinated and tend to be focused on a specific policy domain. Not enough thought has gone into how policy plans could reinforce each other, or indeed how they can sometimes counteract each other. This makes it more likely that policies will have little relevance to people's lives, and that those policies will have a short-term focus and fail to anticipate future developments. The SCP has drawn attention to this issue in the past, sometimes in partnership with other organisations (SCP et al. 2021; SCP and RVS 2022).

Choices based on broad prosperity

A vision of the future requires us to set priorities and make choices based on achieving broad prosperity and well-being, both for today and the future. It's therefore important and urgent to take an approach based on a broad perspective of society. Taking a broad perspective of prosperity allows social, economic and environmental issues to be considered as a whole. It's essential that we do this, and the importance of doing so is indeed widely acknowledged in political and social discourse, as well as in the cabinet's stated intentions. In the latter, it's becoming increasingly clear that while the growth of gross domestic

product (GDP) is important as a measure of ‘narrow’ economic prosperity, it’s not a satisfactory measure of the development of our current and future society and of human well-being. Recent social developments, such as the riots during the coronavirus pandemic, the childcare benefits scandal, the outcomes of the parliamentary inquiry committee on natural gas extraction in Groningen and the results of the provincial elections in March 2023, have made it irrefutably clear that the social and impacts of policies and their impacts on neighbourhoods can no longer be ignored. From a social perspective, it’s really about how to design social cohesion in an increasingly diverse society, and how we handle social divisions. It’s also about how to enable people to fully participate in society, both now and in the future, and how we can ensure that people can participate meaningfully throughout their lives and engage in lifelong personal development. At the same time, it’s also about supporting people in vulnerable situations and improving the resilience of those people and their neighbourhoods, and involving people in sustainability transitions in a meaningful way, taking account of what people from different groups are able and willing to do. Finally, it’s also about implementing government policy in such a way that you deliver results for people and take account of differences between them. This will help legitimise policy.

The urgency of considering social, economic and local environmental issues as a whole is being amplified by the mounting up of social problems that people are experiencing, and by the way that people are questioning the ability of the political and administrative spheres to actually solve those problems. This calls for additional efforts from the government as a whole. For policymakers, it requires that they understand the consequences of their policies and that these are fully considered. For research institutes and agencies, it requires that they offer timely, coordinated and practical insights and knowledge to feed into policy.

The SCP has found that a thorough consideration of the social consequences of policy is often absent, and that those consequences often end up being a surprise to policymakers and politicians. Too often, policies emerge out of a single domain or department, and the systems, rules and laws that are introduced are poorly coordinated with each other. The risk is that policy formulation and implementation fail to take a human perspective, even though the policies themselves have direct consequences on people’s daily lives. Whether it’s about housing issues, the costs and sustainability of healthcare, or how we design the energy transition and measures taken to address climate change: all these objectives have significant social consequences as well as consequences for our economy and living environment. The social developments associated with measures to reduce nitrogen emissions are a case in point: the issue is not just about reducing those emissions, but also about how we create solidarity, social cohesion and security in the Netherlands. For the government and politicians, taking a broad prosperity approach offers a way of ensuring that policies are coordinated across different government policy domains, and that social objectives are achieved. As we’ve explained, it’s therefore important to place this approach at the heart of the policymaking process. This also requires research institutes and agencies such as the SCP to offer the necessary expertise in a timely and coordinated way, so that it can form an integral part of the design, implementation and evaluation of policies and budgets.

Establishing a minimum threshold

In formulating a vision of society, one of the components must also be the establishment of a minimum threshold: a level that people and society as a whole must not be allowed to drop below. What do we consider to be acceptable when it comes to social cohesion? Closed groups that exclude others, neighbourhoods where people live separate lives, or something in between? What sort of image of humanity will we base these choices on? How much security do we want if we also want to live our lives freely without the intervention of governments or businesses? What is the minimum that people need if they are to participate in Dutch society? What perspectives do we take when we consider social and economic security, and what consequences would we consider to be acceptable? And what sacrifices are we prepared to make to enable others to participate in society? For instance, are we prepared to really support people with complex needs, or will we prioritise the provision of broadly accessible and more general types of help in the social sphere, and to what extent should either of those take precedence over the other? These minimum thresholds, as well as the finite nature of our resources discussed above, will be important in determining how much leeway our politicians and policymakers have in the choices they make.

Many of the minimum thresholds that we consider to be important are already captured in our legislation, constitution, treaties ratified by Parliament, national and international jurisprudence and EU laws and regulations. These basic rights provide people with protection against the government: protection against arbitrary treatment, for example, and from exclusion by means of the ban on discrimination.

They set clear boundaries, such as the requirement to make healthcare universally accessible. At the same time they establish a variety of obligations on the part of the government to ensure that people can in fact exercise their rights. As well as obligating the government not to do certain things, it's also about actively delivering on other obligations, such as healthcare. This means that while the government must on the one hand guarantee universal access to healthcare, it is also on the other hand obliged to ensure that healthcare is accessible to people who currently might be excluded from it. When it comes to basic social, cultural and economic rights, the government is also obliged to progressively actualise those rights. This gives the government the freedom to determine the extent to which these basic rights are implemented, and at what pace. In this context, the minimum threshold does however also shift in line with social developments: the more these rights are actualised, the more the minimum threshold shifts upwards. The government can't just take a step backwards in these matters and therefore needs to move with society.

These basic rights, and the government's associated obligations, help to determine what we need in the long term in order to ensure social cohesion, social and economic security, and equality of opportunity, but also to ensure that everyone has access to education, meaningful work, healthcare and support.

Assigning roles, tasks and responsibilities

It's not enough simply to offer a vision as a perspective of the future: we also need to define and articulate the roles, tasks and responsibilities of all actors in society. Doing this requires us to consider what we think is acceptable or not, how roles and tasks should be allocated, and what the government, private sector and general public can and should expect of each other. There is after all a limit to the scope and influence of the government: policies can't solve everything, and it's not up to the government to do everything everywhere. Companies, civil society organisations, unions, stakeholder/umbrella organisations and associations all play an important part in organising Dutch society. And of course, people themselves shape society in all sorts of ways. When people take on roles, tasks and responsibilities, or are assigned them as a matter of policy, that's an explicit choice and it comes with important social consequences. Opting for a highly individualistic approach, with an emphasis on personal freedom and autonomy, is something that will fit well with certain groups in our society and less so with others (Beugelsdijk et al. 2019). A more family or neighbourhood-centred approach will, on the other hand, come with a different set of consequences.

Summary

- As a cabinet, formulate a **vision of the society** we are moving towards, and of the social, economic and local environmental outcomes that will go with it, and how they fit together.
- **Make choices based on broad prosperity.** Do that by fully and explicitly including the social impacts of policy in the formulation, implementation and testing of policies and budgets, as well as the impact of policy on the economy and local environments.
- **Use these decisions as a basis for designing policy and budgets.** This will create space for policy and budget processes to include benefits that are difficult to measure or to express in monetary terms.
- **Link policy objectives to stated goals and clarify how policy dossiers and measures relate to these.** This requires further development on the part of policymakers, who need to have an understanding of policy consequences and to be able to weigh those up, as well as of research institutes who need to be able to provide timely, coordinated insights.
- As politicians and as the government, indicate the **minimum threshold that people and society cannot drop below.**
- **Provide clarity on roles, tasks, responsibilities and expectations.** This is about what the government, private sector and general public can broadly do and what they can expect of each other. It's also about our expectations of people and of society itself, the safety nets we put in place for people at risk of falling below the minimum threshold, who is expected to act, and why we want that to happen.

The SCP considers these recommendations to be an important step in safeguarding the quality of our society.

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