KALEIDOS RESEARCH

GLOBAL GOALS, LOCAL ACTION?

Approaches of Dutch Local Governments to the Sustainable Development Goals

Gabi Spitz, Edith van Ewijk & Ries Kamphof
Amsterdam, January 29, 2016

DISCLAIMER

The contents of this report do not necessarily reflect the opinions of Kaleidos Research or NCDO Foundation. Responsibility for the information and views expressed lies entirely with the authors. Reproduction is permitted with accreditation of source. Kaleidos Research and the authors expressly disclaim any liability further to the use of the information herein contained.

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

The new United Nations-led 2030 Agenda transforms the global development agenda from a North-South agenda to a universal Global Agenda that requires multi-level action (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aim to eradicate poverty, fix climate change, and reduce inequality. The 17 SDGs (also known as "Global Goals" – see Figure 1.1) are interrelated and require action from all countries worldwide, including the Netherlands. To make the new agenda a success and to have a chance at leaving no-one behind, efforts will need to be made on an international, regional, national, and local level, and by different types of actors.

Compared to their predecessors, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs, 2001-2015), the 2030 Agenda (2016-2030) goes beyond the traditional development cooperation issues such as ending hunger, reducing maternal deaths, and making sure all children go to school. The 2030 Agenda also devotes attention to global public goods such as energy access, resilient infrastructure, sustainable oceans, and inclusive economic growth (United Nations, 2014). Sustainability and security are given a prominent place alongside the traditional poverty reduction targets that were already part of the MDGs. Given the extremely ambitious programme with 17 goals and 169 targets, both the implementation and the financing of the SDGs will be complex, for developed and developing countries (Kamphof, Spitz, & Boonstoppel, 2015).

Figure 1.1: Overview of the Global Goals for Sustainable Development (www.un.org)

The UN considers local governments and their associations as important actors in the new global partnership to achieve the SDGs, and they have been involved in the consultation phase of drafting the new agenda (United Nations General Assembly, 2014). The umbrella organization United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) stresses that local governments should not be seen as mere implementers of the agenda; they are also policy makers and catalysts of change, and the level of government best-placed to link the Global Goals with local communities (United cities and local governments, 2015). As stated by a network of local and regional government representatives: "All

SDGs are local"; yet, all SDGs have targets directly or indirectly related to the daily work of local and regional governments. That said, some SDGs are more closely related to local governments than others. In the run-up towards the formulation of the SDGs, local governments and their organizations have particularly emphasized the importance to adopt a specific goal on sustainable cities. These efforts have resulted in adopting goal 11: "Sustainable cities and communities" (United cities and local governments, 2015).

The role and mandates of local governments vary between countries and is closely related to the extent of decentralization. In many countries, decentralization is a politically sensitive issue, and the constitutional order and responsibilities of local governments differ from country to country. Therefore, some scholars advise to keep suggestions to localise the SDGs as simple as possible and in line with specific policy-making processes at different government levels as well as with the country's own constitution (Lucci, 2015).

1.1.   Dutch local governments at home and abroad

The Dutch governance system is decentralized, implying that Dutch local governments have a relatively large budget and mandate. They are generally used to working in multi-stakeholder arrangements (Hendriks & Tops, 2003). They are therefore key actors in achieving sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11), but also in addressing topics like clean energy (SGD 7), and sustainable consumption and production (SDG 12). In the Netherlands, several of the Global Goals are well addressed like water and sanitation (SDG 6). At the same time, important challenges remain, like the relatively low share of renewable energy and the poor air quality (Kroll, 2015). The Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (2016) also states that the Netherlands needs to intensify efforts in order to reach its targets on air quality, water, and nature.

Many of these topics are closely linked to local policies, and it is therefore important to understand how local government can play their role in the implementation of the SDGs in the Netherlands and abroad. Moreover, the urgency of many global challenges is increasing on the local government level; they are for instance, directly faced with the consequences of urbanisation and water management challenges due to climate challenge. And the impact of the refugee crisis is also very visible at the municipal level, where local governments are both faced with housing the large influx of refugees as well as dealing with opponents and proponents in the local community. Traditionally, Dutch local governments have also played a modest but unique role in development cooperation. They have mainly focused on strengthening local governance processes in middle and low-income countries (Van Ewijk, 2013). Several municipalities have also facilitated activities of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) within their jurisdiction that have been active in development cooperation projects, or they have informed and involved citizens on issues of development cooperation and global challenges.

1.2.   New questions

The main question in this research is the following: *How does the new SDG agenda relate to the role Dutch local governments can play in contributing to (sustainable) development?* To answer this question, we conducted research among Dutch local governments using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods.[1] This policy brief first examines what we can learn from the involvement of local governments with the MDGs, followed by an exploration of the challenges and opportunities of the new agenda for local governments. Thereafter, the different (possible) roles of Dutch local governments with regard to the SDGs are identified as well as the challenges local governments face to play these roles in the Dutch context. The discussion paper ends with a summary of the key findings and perspectives as suggested by this research.

---

[1] More information about the research methods used for this discussion paper can be found in section 6.

This discussion paper is the second part of a three-tier study on the implementation of the SDGs in the Netherlands and the role of Dutch CSOs, local authorities, and small and medium-sized enterprises.

2. LESSONS LEARNT: INVOLVEMENT OF DUTCH MUNICIPALITIES WITH THE MDGS

After the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989), many western countries believed poverty and injustice were the remaining barriers to remove for a prosperous world. This *Zeitgeist* led to the organization of several world summits during the 1990s, where challenges such as education, women's rights, human settlements, and sustainable development were discussed. These conferences formed the stepping stones in the drafting of the Millennium Declaration in 2000 (Spitz, 2012). The Millennium Development Goals, based on the Millennium Declaration and finally adopted in 2001, were rather unique because for the first time in history, there was an international overarching development agenda. It provided a shared framework and a common language for all actors working on development issues (McArthur, 2013). The deadline for the eight goals was set for 2015 and focused primarily on the social side of development: improving issues such as access to education, and maternal and child health. The 1990s was also the decennium in which the Habitat Agenda came about: an international understanding that recognized "cities and towns as centres of civilization, generating economic development and social, cultural, spiritual and scientific advancement (UNHabitat, 2006)." Notwithstanding the recognition of the importance of the Habitat Agenda, the attention for local governments was still rather limited in the MDGs.

2.1. Role of local governments in the MDGs

In 2015, nearly half of the Dutch municipalities (160 out of 390) were involved in raising awareness for the Millennium Development Goals as a result of a campaign initiated by VNG International: the international cooperation agency of the Association of Netherlands Municipalities. These municipalities were called "Millennium Municipalities". The campaign started in 2007, triggered by "a call to action" by the former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan to the world community of local authorities. The main focus of the campaign was to assist municipalities in creating an enabling environment to stimulate active citizenship in the field of international cooperation. Many municipalities set up so-called "Teams 2015" whereby various actors like young people, local enterprises, and volunteers would stimulate activities in line with the MDGs. Activities focused on contributing to development cooperation abroad and to addressing activities within the own municipalities related to global environmental issues, like reducing CO_2 emissions. The campaign – with a total budget of €1.6 million – was partly financed by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, by VNG, and by the municipalities participating in the campaign (VNG International, 2015).

More than half of the participants of the survey indicated that their local government paid attention to the Millennium Development Goals over the past few years. Most of the respondents indicated that they were active for MDG 7: "A sustainable (living) environment", while half of the respondents indicated their municipality has focused on education. Contributing to a "worldwide partnership" was mentioned by one-third of the respondents. According to the local government representatives who participated in the research, the millennium campaign was important in several ways. It provided legitimacy, visibility, and an international framework for activities related to development cooperation and addressing global sustainability. An example mentioned by several municipalities[2] was the Millennium Municipality sign posts, which local governments could place under the sign post of the name of the municipality. It was a way to make the involvement and commitment visible and a way to involve the local politicians in international affairs. As one of the consulted municipalities explained: "Council members could really take credit and claim successes in activities that contributed to the MDGs."

---

[2] In the focus group discussion and by participants in the launch of the Global Goals campaign organized by VNG International.

Figure 2.1: Sign post of a Millennium Municipality

BOX 2.1: Topics of the Local Government Capacity Building Programs

The central topics in the most recent support program for local governments (the Local Government Capacity Building Programs 2012-2016, funded by the national government) are food security, water management, safety and legal order, and sexual and reproductive health, and rights. Although there are connections between these topics and the MDGs (like MDG 5 on reducing maternal mortality), these themes were selected because they are in line with the priorities of the general development cooperation policy pursued by the Netherlands (VNG International, undated). In the past, Dutch local governments have also worked on other issues like waste management (as part of service delivery) and local tax collection.

2.2. Dutch local government reception of the SDGs

Before executing this survey, it was expected that there would already be some acquaintance with the SDGs among local governments, as VNG International announced their campaign on the Global Goals in November 2015. About half of the respondents in our survey research have indeed heard about the SDGs. Among the respondents whose local government had paid attention to the MDGs (for instance, by being a Millennium Municipality), there was a greater connection to the SDGs than among the respondents whose local governments had not worked with the MDGs in recent year.[3] The survey also shows that in general, the consulted representatives do not expect large policy shifts in their municipality as a result of the adoption of the SDGs. A majority of the respondents even believe that the transition from the MDGs to the SDGs will not have any effect on their municipality, while almost one in three respondents believe that this transition will have some effect. Nevertheless, representatives of local governments do indicate they perceive the SDGs as a new useful framework. The added value of the SDGs was mainly seen in relation to their international activities, although participants also acknowledged the connection and opportunities related to local environmental policies.

---

[3] A survey executed by VNG International among Millennium Municipalities in October 2015 showed that slightly more than half of the respondents of the municipalities involved in that study indicated they were not or hardly familiar with the new Global Goals. This implies that the Global Goals have become more familiar among Millennium Municipalities since October 2015.

Box 2.2: Dutch citizens and the MDGs/SDGs

Compared to other European countries, public awareness on the MDGs has been relatively high. In 2007 for instance, 38 percent of the Dutch had heard about the MDGs. Within Europe, only in Sweden was public awareness of the MDGs slightly higher (41%) (Scheunpflug & McDonnell, 2008). However, recently, the awareness on the MDGs has decreased: representative opinion research carried in alignment with the research for this discussion paper shows that currently only 18 percent of Dutch citizens have heard about the MDGs.* Nevertheless, 7 in 10 people do think that it is important to make new international agreements to combat global poverty. We presented the respondents a list of 17 topics reflecting the SDGs and asked them which topics are most important to achieve a better world. According to Dutch citizens, the three most important issues are: peace and security, education, and healthcare (Boonstoppel, 2015b). They give little priority to the environmental topics that are

part of the SDGs: sustainable energy, clean oceans, infrastructure, sustainable industrialization, and sustainable cities. Previous research has shown that Dutch citizens do not yet see a connection between environmental issues and global poverty (Boonstoppel, 2015a), which might explain why they do not prioritize the environmental goals as a solution to create a better world. The increased attention paid to peace and security does not reflect the results of similar previous studies and is likely to have a relation to the European refugee crisis, which reached a zenith around the time that the research was carried out (September 2015).

* Based on an online survey among 1,083 respondents in September 2015 carried out by Kaleidos Research in cooperation with TNS NIPO (Amsterdam, the Netherlands). More information can be found in the Methodology section.

3. THE DIFFERENT ROLES OF DUTCH LOCAL GOVERNMENTS WITH REGARD TO THE SDGS

The SDGs were adopted by national governments, and the implementation of the global agenda is therefore primarily regarded as a national affair. Almost all of the Global Goals, however, also have local components. Some scholars have even argued that, in order to make the SDGs work, "common, but differentiated governance" is needed: meaning that different forms of governance on different levels are needed for an effective implementation of the agenda (Niestroy & Meuleman, 2015). In our research, we explored the roles Dutch local governments see for themselves in relation to the implementation of the SDGs. Considering the SDGs have just been adopted, local authorities are understandably still exploring these roles, and roles are likely to change over time. Nevertheless, almost one-third of the local government representatives indicated that they already have (planned) activities related to the goals. At the same time, a large part of the municipality representatives is not aware of the existence of such (planned) activities.[4]

3.1. Identification of roles

When asked whether the consulted representatives see a role for their local government in the implementation of the goals, it appears there is quite some uncertainty among municipalities about their role in the execution of international agreements. Although almost half of the respondents see a role for their municipality in carrying out the agenda, a similar proportion of the population indicates that they do not know how to contribute to the agenda. A few respondents indicated they do not see a role for their municipality, mostly because they feel that their municipality is too small to have an impact. A majority of the local governments consulted in the survey indicated that involving citizens with the goals is most important to them. Other roles follow at quite a distance. These include: addressing companies to contribute to the goals, facilitating cross-sector collaboration, activities to contribute to the implementation of the goals in the Netherlands, and carrying out activities to create awareness on the goals. Figure 3.1 shows the different roles mentioned in the survey amongst representatives of Dutch municipalities. It is interesting to note that relatively few municipalities consulted in the survey select the role of contributing to the goals abroad. This might indicate that local authorities mostly want to contribute to the goals on the level of their own municipality. Below we discuss the different roles identified in the research process.

3.1.1. Facilitator/partner

The role of facilitator was reflected in the focus group discussion, where participants expressed the importance of civic participation for the agenda and their desire to act as a facilitator in this process. To guarantee the processes are really bottom-up, and to avoid that municipalities press their own agenda onto their citizens, several representatives of local governments mentioned the importance of consulting local groups as a means to set the local policy agenda. As one participant put it: *"We, as a municipality, consider ourselves a grassroots organization."* In the "MDG-era", there was an active movement of engaged citizens on topics such as international cooperation and fair trade. These citizens formed committees and working groups, and organized activities for the municipality and its citizens to contribute to a better world. Now the MDGs have passed and are replaced by the SDGs, local governments are assessing to what extent such bottom-up energy still exists, and whether local policies can encourage and support local initiatives. Representatives mentioned they wanted to build on existing networks, but also wanted to use the SDGs as a fresh start to engage with new actors. The survey shows that quite a large share of the consulted municipalities wants to stimulate the private sector to contribute to the goals as well as facilitating cross-sector collaboration. The focus group

---

[4] It must be noted that there is a possibility that in some municipalities (planned) activities were developed, of which the respondents were not aware of.
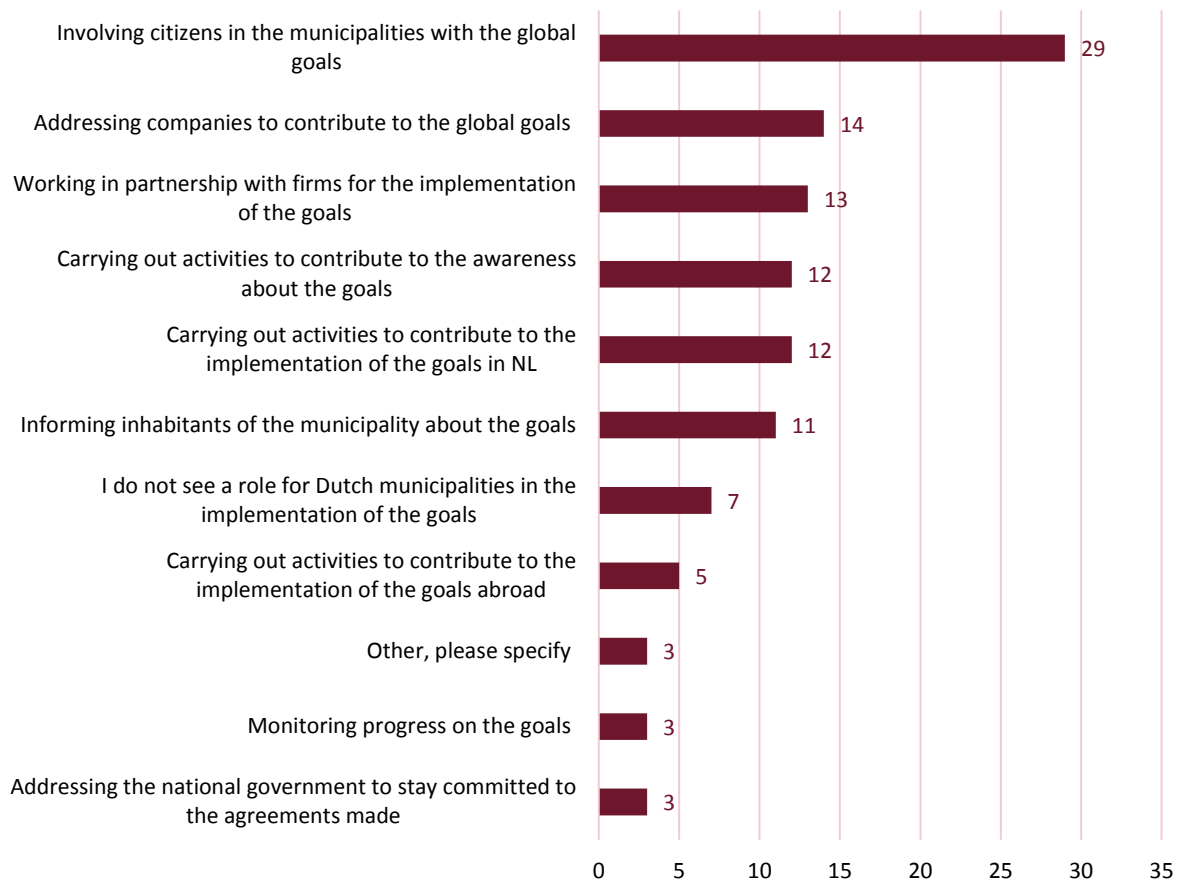
discussion yielded similar results as "stimulating collaboration" was mentioned by almost all of the participants. Emphasis was placed especially on horizontal cooperation between different local groups and sectors, although vertical cooperation between different governance levels was also mentioned. The participants considered local governments to be in a very good position to bring different parties together, also in international activities such as the cooperation between municipalities.

3.1.2. Communicator

Involving citizens in the SDGs is considered by the consulted representatives as a key role for local governments. Contributing to the awareness of citizens about the goals and informing inhabitants of the municipality about the goals are also mentioned relatively often. This seems to imply support for a communicating role for local governments. The importance of communicating about the goals was also reflected in the focus group discussion. Nevertheless, it seems that public awareness of the goals is not seen as a goal in itself. Knowing that the goals exist was not considered very important, and the large number of goals was mentioned as an impediment for communication. Instead, the goals were seen as a framework that binds existing activities and interests in society together. According to some of the participants, the goals can be used in the policy context and provide starting points and momentum to carry out activities, but in practice, the themes and subsequent activities matter and not so much the labels. Consulted municipalities stressed that national government and VNG should be engaged in the communication process of the new goals.

3.1.3. Implementer at home and abroad

The consulted municipalities also see a role for themselves as implementers of activities that contribute to the SDGs, especially in their own municipalities. According to participants in the focus group discussion, the SDGs were seen as a useful framework that could connect with the key policy areas they were already working on, or felt they had specific specialization strengths, like food security, or health issues. The city of Eindhoven, which is home to the High Tech Campus for instance, uses their international and technical profile as a building block for their policies on international cooperation, in which economic development and internationalization are central issues: *"We choose to work from the DNA of Eindhoven and the surrounding region, by linking to what is already going on in the city and by supporting schools, societal organizations and companies in their ambitions"*(Volwater & Caalders, 2014). Especially for local environmental policies and projects, the SDGs are regarded as a possible point of departure and subsequent funding opportunity, mainly at the European level. The local government representatives who took part in the research mention green public procurement as a very practical topic for municipalities where the SDGs could be used as a guideline. Project implementation in developing countries was also mentioned; for instance, in (mutual) learning partnerships or trainings for local governments abroad. However, as many of the participants in the focus group discussion mentioned, the traditional concept of development partnerships with municipalities in developing countries are becoming less popular. Instead, economic collaboration (project based forms of cooperation and partnerships aimed at mutual learning), are preferred. This is in line with findings of other research (Breugem, Wiggers, Van Ewijk, & Hogeling, 2014; Van Ewijk, 2013).

Figure 3.1.: What role do municipalities see for themselves? (n = 48, maximum of 3 answers)

3.2. Role of the Dutch national government

In order to get a better understanding of who should drive the local implementation of the SDGs, we also asked the participants in the research what they expect from the national government. Generally, the local representatives consulted expected the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and umbrella organization VNG International to play an active role and were to some extent waiting to hear more about this role. Communicating towards the public about the goals is considered to be the most important role for the national government. Also a large share of the participants mentioned facilitating cross-sector partnerships: for instance, between NGOs, enterprises, and local governments. Providing local governments with information about the goals as well as providing them with financial support to carry out activities for the implementation of the goals, was mentioned as third main role. Providing funding is therefore not the most important resource local governments need, and representatives participating in the service do not primarily rely on these sources as compared to Dutch CSOs (Spitz, Kamphof, Van Ewijk, 2015). Some financial means in order to create support amongst for instance, council members or to assist local groups working on the goals is, however, important. Moreover, in the focus group discussion it was emphasized that by making some funds available, national governments also show they take the role of local governments seriously. In that regard, some of the consulted municipalities expressed their disappointment about previous budget cuts on support programs for international cooperation by local governments like the former LOGO South Program.[5] It is interesting

---

[5] In the LOGO South Program that ran until 2011, 50 Dutch municipalities and regional water authorities worked together to strengthen local governance in 17 developing countries. It was followed by the Local Governance Capacity Program (2012-2016). VNG International executed more projects financed by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs in which Dutch local

to note that a relatively modest share of the consulted local governments would like the government to provide a policy strategy for the implementation of the goals by municipalities. This was also reflected in the focus group discussion, in which some participants stated they would not just blindly carry out a top-down strategy for the SDGs.
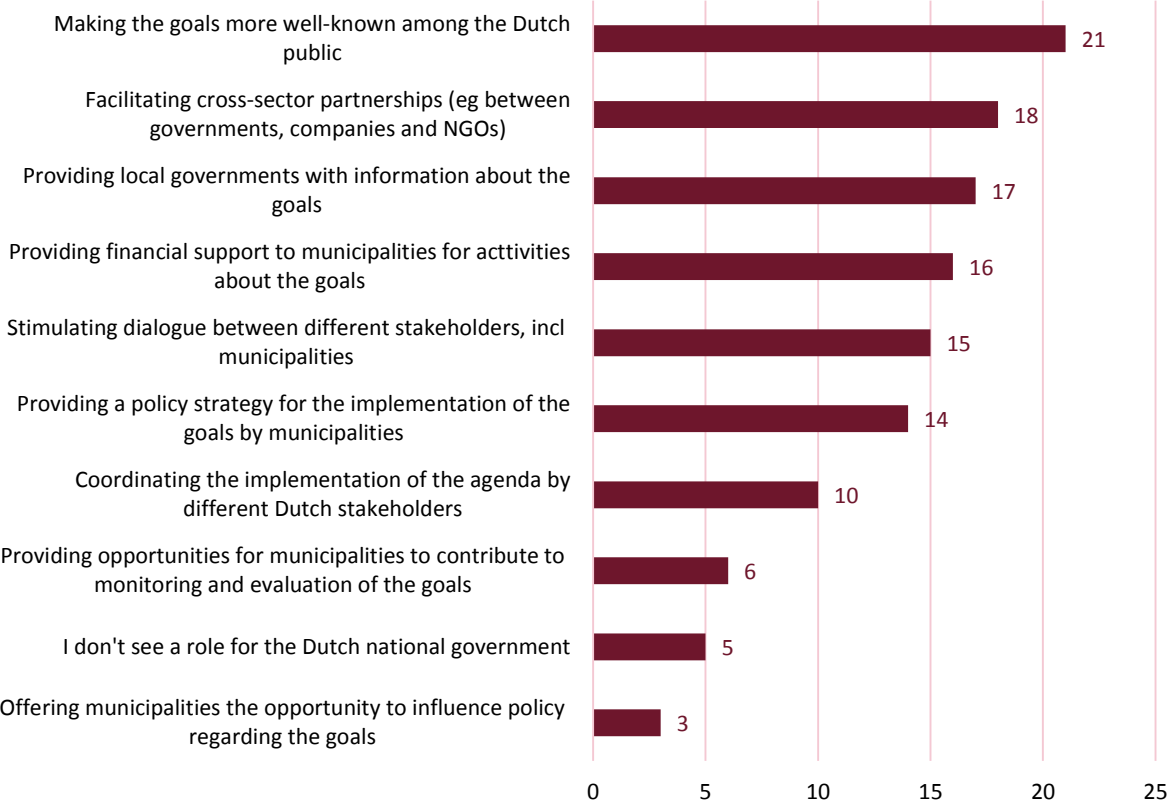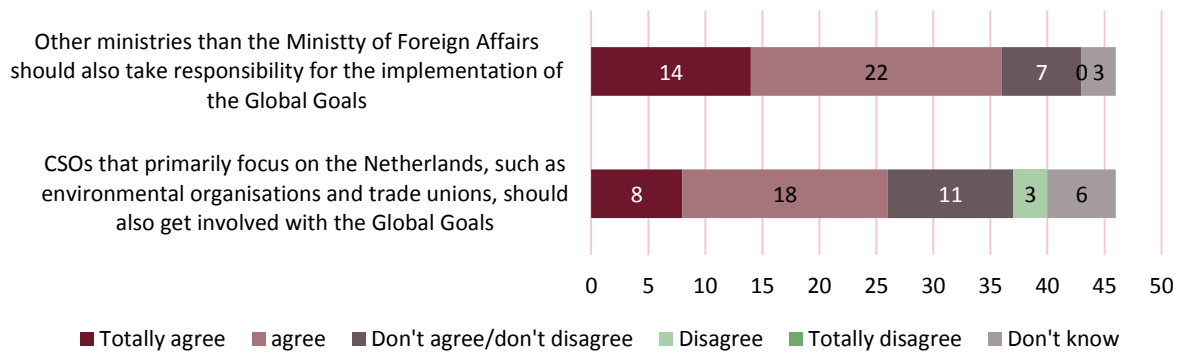
Making the goals more well-known among the Dutch public — 21
Facilitating cross-sector partnerships (eg between governments, companies and NGOs) — 18
Providing local governments with information about the goals — 17
Providing financial support to municipalities for acttivities about the goals — 16
Stimulating dialogue between different stakeholders, incl municipalities — 15
Providing a policy strategy for the implementation of the goals by municipalities — 14
Coordinating the implementation of the agenda by different Dutch stakeholders — 10
Providing opportunities for municipalities to contribute to monitoring and evaluation of the goals — 6
I don't see a role for the Dutch national government — 5
Offering municipalities the opportunity to influence policy regarding the goals — 3

Figure 3.2.: What role do Dutch municipalities see for the Dutch government? (n = 49, maximum of 3 answers)

3.3.   Other actors

The general feeling among the consulted local government representatives is that: the SDGs are a universal agenda and that everyone should contribute. They emphasize the desire to collaborate with companies, schools, NGOs, and knowledge institutions in the municipality. The first are also explicitly mentioned as a possible financial source for activities. This might be considered as a shift in the attitude towards the private sector, because during the MDGs, it was considered to be difficult to involve companies. About half of the consulted municipalities (fully) agree with the statement that societal organizations, focusing on the Netherlands, should also get involved with the SDGs. As Figure 3.3 shows, a large majority is of the opinion that also other ministries than the Ministry of Foreign Affairs should take responsibility for the implementation of the goals. Local governments participating in the focus group discussion also expected an active role of, as well as support from, the International Cooperation Agency of the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG International), for instance, in sharing of best practices, documentation, and communication materials.

---

governments are involved, like providing international municipal assistance to the Al Zaa'tari refugee camp and local governments in Al Mafraq Governorate in Jordan.

Figure 3.3.: Role of other actors (n = 46)

In conclusion, many of the local governments consulted for this research are open to playing a role with regard to the implementation of the SDGs. In general, they take a pragmatic approach: as facilitator, communicator, and implementer of the goals. Most importantly, they prefer to follow the engagement with the goals and related topic in the local community, instead of unilaterally pushing for a local SDG agenda. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, there are also quite some municipalities that are not yet aware of the Global Goals or see it mostly as an international affair. As a result, it is not surprising that some respondents do not even see a role for municipalities in the implementation of the goals. The next chapter addresses the obstacles and opportunities for local governments to play a role in the implementation of the Global Goals.

4. CHALLENGES IN TAKING UP A ROLE IN THE SDG AGENDA

As the earlier sections of this report reveal, Dutch local governments are generally positive towards the SDGs and see different roles for themselves in relation to the SDGs. Their actual contribution to SDGs is, however, dependent on several internal and external factors. Based on the research findings, five challenges for the Dutch municipalities can be identified in their contribution towards the implementation of the Global Goals, namely: a) lack of (political) support, b) unclear role local government amidst the Dutch national government and umbrella organizations, c) overcoming financial dependence, d) lack of public awareness, and e) the abstract nature of the new agenda and the UN process. In some cases, these challenges are directly related to opportunities.

4.1.   Political support

The SDGs are related to a very broad set of topics. They are universal in nature and have a long-term scope. The local political process is, however, often pragmatic, locally oriented, and focuses on day-to-day issues in the short-term. A key challenge for local governments - or at least the people responsible for international cooperation and sustainability - is therefore, to find **political support** from the local politicians (city council members and deputy mayors) for the SDG-agenda. Many of the consulted local government representatives consider the distance between these UN-led processes and their local areas of concern in some cases insurmountable. As one of the participants mentioned, every two years the "international" policy of his local government is critically evaluated by the local council. Especially in times of budget constraints, international or global-oriented activities can be regarded as controversial or irrelevant for what is happening in their own municipality. Especially when the local component of the Global Goals is also explicitly embraced by umbrella organizations such as VNG and by the national government, this would help "legitimize" action and gain local political support, as respondents involved in this research indicated.

4.2.   Unclear role of local government amidst the Dutch national government and umbrella organization

The second challenge for local governments is related to their place in the constitutional order: as was already concluded in an earlier study focusing on the implementation of the SDGs, the central government is still exploring its role (Spitz, Kamphof, & Van Ewijk, 2015). As a result, the consulted municipalities state that they are not yet sure what is expected from them. On the one hand, some local representatives indicate they prefer more clarity from the government about their role as local implementers of the agenda. On the other hand, representatives also stated they would not be happy if the national government would confront them with a top-down strategy for the local implementation of the goals. Furthermore, the focus group discussion showed a need for more clarity about the exact role of VNG International. The consulted local governments would especially like to know more about the services and support they can or cannot expect from VNG International. As an example, new "Global Goals Municipality sign posts" were mentioned as some representatives see much value in having a tangible and visible sign of the local commitment to a better world.

In other words, at this moment it is still somewhat **unclear what the scope of activity (or the rights and responsibilities) are in which local government could contribute to the SDGs and the subsequent support they can or cannot expect**. Can they become responsible for specific SDGs or (sub-) targets such as sustainable waste management? Should they inform their citizens on the SDGs? Which roles can they take up internationally? At the same time, they are not passively waiting for responses but start exploring for opportunities.

4.3.   Resources

The tasks for Dutch local governments have increased in recent years, while the pressure on municipal budgets has increased (Raadslid.nu, 2011). Dutch municipalities are therefore faced with a **budgetary allocation challenge**. The Dutch Minister for International Trade and Development Cooperation is seeing an increasing role for Dutch local governments in the implementation of her international agenda ("Brief inzake Hulp, handel en investeringen", 2013). However, this has only partly resulted in additional funding opportunities by central government for local governments (see also footnote 5). At the moment of writing this report, there are fewer budgets available for the implementation and promotion of the SDGs compared to the MDGs-era, which could mean that municipalities make a cost/benefit-analysis of their priorities. This could have adverse effects on the local implementation of the SDGs. As it is a non-binding international agreement and Dutch local governments have not yet been formally requested to contribute to the goals, it is very hard to justify allocation of already scarce means for this agenda. This financial uncertainty manifested itself already in the level of ambition of Dutch municipalities in implementing the SDGs. They especially seem to focus on linking *existing* activities and match these with the SDGs.

To overcome this budgetary challenge, some of the interviewees had interesting ideas to sit together with people and companies from their local constituency to see how they can contribute to the SDGs. They merely see a facilitating role for the local government in the implementation of the SDGs, which is most cost-efficient. While the budgetary challenge is absolutely present, municipalities expect less from central government compared to the Dutch CSOs (Spitz, Kamphof, Van Ewijk, 2015). Where financial support to the CSOs has been the number one role foreseen for the Dutch central government based on the CSO survey, this is only the fourth expected role of the Dutch central government for the Dutch municipalities.[6] Possible funds from the European Union were mentioned as an option in which the SDGs could provide a useful framework, especially in relation to sustainability policies.

4.4.   Lack of public awareness

A challenge for the implementation of the Global Goals that has already been raised in the previous discussion paper is public awareness (Spitz et al., 2015). **The consulted municipalities consider public awareness** a prerequisite for the success of the SDGs. Until now, it does not seem the Dutch national government nor do the Dutch CSOs consider public communication of the goals as their primary responsibility. Local governments seem somewhat more inclined to play the role of communicator, but also do not have the means to roll out high-impact campaigns for this purpose. If other stakeholders remain noncommittal on taking up this communication role, the Global Goals will most likely play a very marginal role in the Netherlands as the political agenda and the public debate are interconnected (Spitz, Muskens, & Van Ewijk, 2013). Furthermore, without public awareness, respondents feared political support will be weak, and Dutch local councils might not be willing to take up this "hot potato", for there will not be much incentive for them to fulfil an active role. Furthermore, chances that local groups will actively participate in the 2030 Agenda will be smaller.

The role Dutch local governments (can) play in creating public awareness is not only a challenge, but can also be considered as an opportunity. Taking into account that the local level is the closest political level to Dutch citizens, it would be extremely valuable if Dutch municipalities could contribute to communicating the SDGs to their citizens. A majority of the survey respondents consider involving municipal citizens with the Global Goals as main role for local authorities in the implementation of the SDG agenda. During the field research, it was nevertheless acknowledged that many of the small and medium-sized local governments would need (communication) support materials from for instance,

---

[6] See chapter 3.

umbrella organization VNG (International), because the local knowledge and capacity is sometimes insufficient to play this role without additional support.

4.5.   Abstract and universal to concrete and local

A fifth challenge for Dutch local governments is the **abstract and technical nature of the universal Global Goals agenda,** which seem to be quite a distance from daily practice. This abstract nature both refers to the goals themselves as the process in which these goals have been adopted, and the technical focus on indicators to measure progress on the goals. There have been many recent attempts to measure sustainability in a local context, but it has proved to be difficult to align these indicators with broader EU and UN goals and targets (Lucas, Ludwig, Kok, & Kruitwagen, 2016; Science Communication Unit, 2015; Van Dijken, Dorenbos, & Kamphof, 2012; Zoeteman et al., 2015). This was also felt by some of the respondents that indicated that for them, *"the SDGs were just another set of goals"*, and that with all the different national, European, and global frameworks, they could no longer see the wood for the trees.
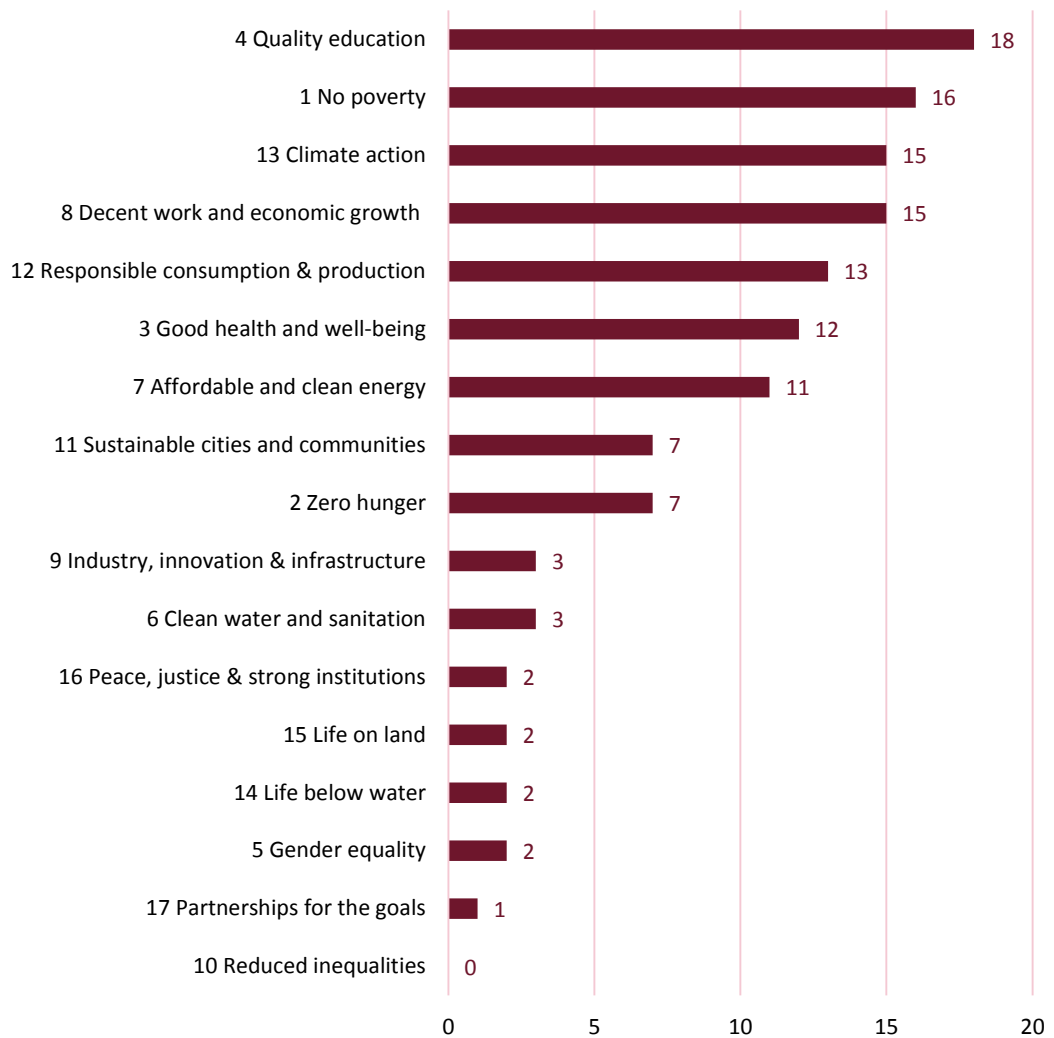
Some of the interviewees complain about the jargon of international institutions that does not appeal to the local situation in the Netherlands. As one representative put it: *"For many council members, a term like "NGOs" sounds like a horrible disease or something."* In addition, in international projects, the use of jargon and abstract frameworks can be problematic. One of the interviewees gave the example of a city-to-city project in a developing country in which the thematic focus on food security was the result of top-down policy priorities. As a result, it took both municipalities a long time before this abstract concept and the objectives were clear in concrete terms, only to conclude that none of them had actual competencies on this topic, followed by a choice to focus on a related topic they both felt comfortable with.

Box 4.1: Priorization of the goals by local governments

While it is acknowledged that it is quite an achievement to "capture the world in 17 goals", the concrete implementation in local governments of these goals was perceived as challenging. This is also visible in the popularity of the goals. While there is a specific local government-goal on sustainable cities and communities, it is not even in the top five of most popular goals of the consulted local government representatives (see Figure 4.1). Instead, the top five is made up of education, poverty eradication, climate action, decent work, and sustainable production and consumption. Most of these topics have indeed a clear local component. Although education is primarily a central governance affair, local governments do see this as an issue of their concern as well in relation to the SDG framework. It is also a topic that many municipalities have already been working on in relation to international affairs. One respondent explained: *"We'll continue to work on our goals for education and sustainable cities"*, while another said: *"In 2016, we'll be updating our sustainability policy and we will use the SDGs as an umbrella in this process."* Respondents indicated they were likely to connect the Global Goals to existing specific policy focus areas, which as they mentioned, could be seen as a way of "cherry picking", but was also considered to be indispensable in order to build on the local strengths.

Figure 4.1.: SDG priorities for Dutch local authorities (maximum of 3 choices, n=48)

4.6.   Global Goals closer to citizens?

Although local governments are in a unique position to bring the SDGs closer to Dutch citizens and to involve a wide range of actors at the local level, they do face some serious challenges in doing so. Perhaps the biggest challenge is to transform these obstacles into opportunities. For example, a much mentioned challenge is the fragile local political support for international cooperation, while the mere "framing" of existing local activities as contribution to solving global challenges might raise the international profile of the municipality and could therefore receive support from the council. The SDGs are meant to integrate the development cooperation agenda with the sustainability agenda. In many cases, these are also two different "pillars" in the organogram of local governments. However, the SDGs can be considered as an external factor that binds economic, social, environmental, and local governance policy areas. Even more important seems to be the communication of the Global Goals in a local context. While the Global Goals are very broad and might be abstract to people operating at the local level, municipalities are in a unique position to tailor the goals to their own specific context and make them understandable for local citizens. This would definitely bring the Global Goals closer to citizens. But as respondents in this research indicated, local governments cannot do this alone.

5. SUMMARY

The transition from the MDGs to the SDGs has led to a global agenda that is clearly related to issues of local governance. As a result, the 2030 Agenda confronts local authorities with questions about their role and responsibilities in the implementation of the SDGs. In this discussion paper, we have tried to shed light on these questions using a mixed methods approach consisting of a literature review, interviews, survey research, and a focus group discussion.

- The Sustainable Development Goals the consulted municipalities find most important for their own local situation are: **quality education, poverty eradication, fixing climate change, decent jobs and economic growth,** as well as **sustainable consumption and production.**

- Municipalities seem to approach the Global Goals in a **pragmatic** manner. They use them as **starting points** to put **existing local activities** in a global perspective. With this approach, they seem to like to express that their municipality is not just working on local issues, but is also contributing to solving issues of global importance.

- Municipalities that have already been active on the MDGs or contribute to international cooperation in other ways are more enthusiastic about the Global Goals than municipalities that have not yet been active on such topics. Many of the local governments that participated in the research regard the goals as an opportunity to **integrate international solidarity and local sustainability.**

- In the study, three specific **roles** for local governments with regard to the SDGs were identified: that of **local facilitator or partner**, a role as **communicator,** and the role of i**mplementer** of the goals, at home as well as abroad.

- The consulted municipalities choose not to impose SDG-related policies on the local community, but prefer to **encourage** and **support existing initiatives** and **stimulate horizontal collaboration** that can be related to the SDGs. Many of them **consult** the local community in order to develop policies that are locally supported. They also **seek dialogue** with local businesses and societal organizations to see what they can and want to contribute to sustainability and poverty eradication.

- Local governments indicate that **public awareness** about the goals is crucial. Improving this awareness is mostly seen as a task for the national government, but also seen as one of the roles of local governments. Previous research however, shows that is not evident that the government will take up this role, nor might the Dutch CSO community. Public communication about the goals therefore remains a **bottleneck**. Some of the local representatives, who took part in the research, indicated that they see more value in involving people with the themes behind the SDGs, than in informing them about the Global Goals labels just for the sake of public awareness.

- The research identified several (possible) **challenges** local governments face with regard to their role in implementing the SDGs. These are: the **lack of local political support**, **unclear roles and responsibilities of local governments**, as well as the **lack of a clear mandate from the national government or other actors**, the **abstract nature of the SDG framework and the UN process**, **public awareness** about the goals and the subsequent lack of public debate, and serious **resource allocation challenges**.

- The local governments that took part in the research expressed several **needs** that can help them in playing a role for the SDGs. In particular, they would like the opportunity to **exchange** more knowledge, experiences, and materials with other municipalities. They also indicated that **vocal support** from organizations on a national level can help provide **legitimacy and political support**

for local activities related to the SDGs. At the same time, only paying lip service by stating that the local government level is important without any financial commitment was perceived as not very convincing or supportive.

The research shows that outward looking Dutch municipalities have the enthusiasm and potential to contribute to local implementation of the SDGs. Box 5.1 provides an overview of the suggestions and practices shared by participants in the research and that might be helpful for other actors exploring their role with regard to the global goal. All in all, the pragmatic approach of local governments and their proximity with society make municipalities a unique actor that can provide a precious contribution to the integration of social, economic, and environmental policies as envisaged in the 2030 Agenda.

Box 5.1: Suggestions and practices for local implementation of the SDG

- Bring existing local groups and networks on international and sustainability issues together to stimulate contribution to the Global Goals.
- Regional collaboration can help municipalities to build strong international networks and develop a distinct international profile with specific knowledge.
- Certain cities could focus on specific SDG that align with their unique profile. For instance, The Hague and SDG 16 (peace and security), Delft and SDG 6 (water), Wageningen and SDG 2 (hunger and agriculture), etc.
- An element of competition stimulates local support. For instance, developing an "SDG-showcase" that inspires how different municipalities can contribute to the

Global Goals. This is in line with the existing initiative of VNG International to award a most promising Global Goals municipality.
- Make sure a supportive facilitating framework is in place that stimulates (political) support.
- Contributing to the SDG-framework might increase possibilities for additional funding, e.g. by the European Union.
- Try to "frame" the local contribution to the SDGs as a municipal effort to help solving global challenges. This would also make it easier for local politicians to embrace the agenda as they could take credit for this important contribution.

METHODOLOGY

This Discussion Paper is the second part of a three-tier study on the implementation of the SDGs in the Netherlands by Dutch CSOs, local authorities, and small and medium-sized enterprises. Kaleidos Research (part of NCDO Foundation) carried out this study using four different research methods: desk research, semi-structured interviews with key experts from CSOs and national government, a focus group discussion, and survey research among municipality representatives as well as a survey amongst the Dutch public.

1. The desk research focused on relevant publications (policy documents and academic literature) from renowned sources. It enabled us to contextualise the empirical findings in this study and to offer the reader a more comprehensive overview of the debate on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. Publications were selected based on their relevance, recentness, and the importance of the author or source. The desk research did not aim to include all relevant publications, as it is impossible to do justice to all available sources.

2. The qualitative research consisted of semi-structured interviews with key respondents (3 in total, with 4 experts) that were conducted from July to December 2015. Also, on January 7, 2016, a focus group was organized, where seven representatives from Dutch local governments were asked about their perceptions, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes towards the SDGs. These stakeholders were selected based on consultation with VNG International. Furthermore, participative observation was carried out during the event *Wereldgemeenten, daar draait het om* on November 5, 2015. The data collected during the interviews and focus group were analysed in a structured and replicable manner; based on transcriptions/reports and using content analysis software.

3. Survey for local governments
- A survey for local governments was sent in December 2015 to 394 town clerks, with information describing the focus of the survey on international cooperation and sustainability and that the study was set-up in collaboration with VNG International. Two reminders were sent. The survey was open to answer from December 17, 2015 to January 11, 2016. A total of 99 local authority representatives started the survey and 46 completed the questionnaire; we therefore have a valid response of 11.7% (25.1% initial response).

Response characteristics
  - There were no double responses. Only one representative per local authority responded.
  - Representatives from local authorities (municipalities) all over the Netherlands responded, although the share of responses from the different regions does not (always) equally represent the number of municipalities per region or province. This is illustrated in Table 1 (provinces) and Table 2 (Dutch regions).

Table 1: Number of municipalities by province in the Netherlands (2015) and in our response

	The Netherlands		Response	
	#	%	#	%
Flevoland	6	2	4	4
Friesland	24	6	7	7
Gelderland	54	14	11	12
Groningen	23	6	3	3
Limburg	33	9	10	11
Noord-Brabant	66	17	17	18
Noord-Holland	48	13	11	12
Overijssel	25	7	9	10
Utrecht	26	7	9	10
Zeeland	13	3	5	5
Zuid-Holland	60	16	8	9
Drenthe	12	3	0	0
Total	**390**	**100**	**94**	**100**

Table 2: Number of municipalities by region in the Netherlands (2015) and in our response

	The Netherlands		Response	
	#	%	#	%
East	85	22	24	26
North	59	15	10	11
South	112	29	27	29
West	134	34	33	35
Total	**390**	**100**	**94**	**100**

o No representatives from the province of Drenthe responded to our invitation to fill out the survey.

o A common way to look at regions in the Netherlands in research is by using the standardized "Nielsen classification of districts". This classification is very useful to study among others, relevant differences between the urban areas and the regional areas. Unfortunately, representatives from the typical urban areas (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Utrecht, The Hague) have not filled out our survey.

These remarks imply that the sample cannot be considered representative for the whole of the Dutch municipalities. The results provide useful information on the attitude and expectations of Dutch local governments, but should be regarded as merely indicative.

4. Survey among Dutch citizens

An online survey among 1,083 respondents in September 2015 was conducted using the Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) system. The design and analysis was done by Kaleidos Research, while fieldwork was done by TNS NIPO (Amsterdam, the Netherlands). In order to have a sample that was representative for the entire population of the Netherlands, the data was aggregated based on gender, age, region, education, and size of family. A separate factsheet on the survey can be found here: https://www.oneworld.nl/research/nederlanders-vrede-en-veiligheid-belangrijkste-werelddoel.

Questions about this publication and the research methodology can be directed to the authors through: info@kaleidosresearch.nl.

REFERENCES

Boonstoppel, E. (2015a). *Nederlanders & de toekomst van ontwikkelingshulp.* Amsterdam: Kaleidos
    Research / Stichting NCDO.
Boonstoppel, E. (2015b). *Vrede en Veiligheid belangrijkste werelddoel.* Amsterdam: Kaleidos
    Research / Stichting NCDO.
Breugem, J., Wiggers, A., Van Ewijk, E., & Hogeling, L. (2014). *Partnerschap, daar draait het om:
    Internationale aspecten van gemeentelijk beleid.* Den Haag: Vereniging van Nederlandse
    Gemeenten. Retrieved from http://kaleidosresearch.nl/download/2015/08/2014-Partnerschap-
    daar-draait-het-om.pdf.
"Brief inzake Hulp, handel en investeringen" (2015). *Brief van de Minister voor Buitenlandse handel en
    Ontwikkelingssamenwerking. Hulp, handel en investeringen* Den Haag: Tweede Kamer der
    Staten-Generaal. Retrieved from https://zoek.officielebekendmakingen.nl/kst-33625-182.html
Kamphof, R., Spitz, G., & Boonstoppel, E. (2015). *Financing development now and in the future:
    Implications for the Netherlands and beyond.* Amsterdam: Kaleidos Research/Stichting
    NCDO. Retrieved from http://kaleidosresearch.nl/download/2015/07/2015-Financing-for-
    Development-report.pdf.
Kroll, C. (2015). *Sustainable development goals: Are the rich countries ready?* Gütersloh, Germany:
    Bertelsmann Stiftung. Retrieved from http://www.bertelsmann-
    stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/BSt/Publikationen/GrauePublikationen/Studie_NW_Sustainable-
    Development-Goals_Are-the-rich-countries-ready_2015.pdf.
Lucas, P., Ludwig, K., Kok, M., & Kruitwagen, S. (2016). *Sustainable development goals in Nederland:
    Bouwstenen voor leefomgevingsbeleid voor 2030 (Beleidsstudie).* Den Haag: Planbureau voor
    de Leefomgeving. Retrieved from http://www.pbl.nl/sites/default/files/cms/publicaties/pbl-2016-
    sustainable-development-goals-in-nederland_1798.pdf.
Lucci, P. (2015). *'Localising' the Post-2015 agenda: What does it mean in practice? (Shaping policy
    for development).* London, England: Overseas Development Institute. Retrieved from
    http://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/9395.pdf
McArthur, J. (2013, February). Own the goals: What the millennium development goals have
    accomplished. Retrieved from http://www.brookings.edu/research/articles/2013/02/21-
    millennium-dev-goals-mcarthur.
Minister voor Buitenlandse Handel en Ontwikkelingssamenwerking. (2013). *Hulp, handel en
    investeringen.* Den Haag Tweede Kamer der Staten Generaal.
Niestroy, I., & Meuleman, L. (2015, 21 April). Common but differentiated governance: Making the
    SDGs work. Retrieved from http://www.ps4sd.eu/images/Common-But-Differentiated-
    Governance%20Niestroy-Meuleman_Apr2015.pdf
Raadslid.nu. (2011). *Raadsleden: 'Gemeente komend jaar in grote problemen'.* Retrieved from
    http://www.raadslid.nu/content/raadsleden-%E2%80%98gemeente-komend-jaar-grote-
    problemen%E2%80%99-0
Science Communication Unit (2015). *Indicators for sustainable cities: In-depth report (Science for
    Environment Policy, 12).* Bristol, England: European Commission.
Scheunpflug, A., & McDonnell, I. (2008). *Building public awareness of development: Communicators,
    educators and evaluation Policy Brief (Vol. 35).* Paris, France: OECD Development Centre.
Spitz, G. (2012). *Armoedebestrijding in de 21e eeuw. De post-2015 agenda (Globaliseringsreeks, 5).*
    Amsterdam: NCDO. Retrieved from http://kaleidosresearch.nl/download/2015/08/2012-
    Armoedebestrijding-inde-21ste-eeuw.pdf
Spitz, G., Kamphof, R., & Van Ewijk, E. (2015). *Wait-and-see or take the lead? Approaches of Dutch
    CSOs to the Sustainable Development Goals (Discussion Paper, 1). Amsterdam: Kaleidos
    research/ Stichting nCDO. Retrieved from http://kaleidosresearch.nl/download/2015/12/2015-
    Discussion-paper-1-Dutch-CSOs-and-SDGs.pdf*
Spitz, G., Muskens, R., & Van Ewijk, E. (2013). *Dutch development cooperation: Ahead of the crowd
    or trailing behind?* Amsterdam: NCDO. Retrieved from
    http://kaleidosresearch.nl/download/2015/08/2013-Dutch-development-cooperation.pdf
United cities and local governments (2015). *The sustainable development goals: What local
    governments need to know.* Barcelona, Spain: UCLG. Retrieved from
    http://www.uclg.org/sites/default/files/the_sdgs_what_localgov_need_to_know.pdf?utm_sourc
    e=Base+de+datos+%5BEN%5D&utm_campaign=dd53fb36ac-
    The+SDGs_+what+local+governments+need+to+know&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_f6
    d8315489-dd53fb36ac-73772521

United Nations (2014). *The road to dignity by 2030: Ending poverty, transforming all lives and protecting the planet. Synthesis Report of the Secretary-General On the Post-2015 Agenda. New York, NY: United Nations.* Rertieved from http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/5527SR_advance%20unedited_final .pdf

United Nations General Assembly (2015). *Transforming our world: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development* (Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 25 September 2015, 70/1). New York, NY: United Nations. Retrieved from http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E

UNHabitat. (2006). *The Habitat Agenda: the Istanbul Declaration on Human Settlements.* Istanbul: United Nations

Volwater, C., & Caalders, J. (2014). *Stad in de wereld, wereld in de stad.* Eindhoven Gemeente Eindhoven

UNHabitat. (2006). *The Habitat Agenda: the Istanbul Declaration on Human Settlements.* Istanbul: United Nations.

Van Dijken, K., Dorenbos, R., & Kamphof, R. (2012). *The reference framework for sustainable cities (RFSC): Testing results and recommendations. The Hague, the Netherlands: Nicis Institute.* Retrieved from http://app.rfsc.eu/userfiles/Final%20report%20Nicis%20testing%20RFSC.pdf

Van Ewijk, E. (2013). *Between local governments and communities. Knowledge exchange and mutual learning in Dutch-Moroccan and Dutch-Turkish municipal partnerships (*Proefschrift, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands). Retrieved from http://dare.uva.nl/record/458559.

Volwater, C., & Caalders, J. (2014). *Stad in de wereld, wereld in de stad.* Eindhoven Gemeente Eindhoven.

VNG International (2015). *Local government capacity programme: An introduction VNG International.* Retrieved from http://www.vng-international.nl/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/LGCP_Brochure_EN_An_introduction.pdf.

Zoeteman, B., Van der Zande, M., Smeets, R., Wentink, C., Dagevos, J., & Mommaas, H. (2015). *Nationale monitor duurzame gemeenten 2015. Tilburg: Telos.* Retrieved from http://www.telos.nl/Telos/Medewerkers/MMommaas/downloads_getfilem.aspx?id=506225.