

Accountability mechanisms for SDG6 in the Netherlands

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INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Global goals trigger global accountability study

On September 25th 2015, the United Nations (UN) agreed on 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with specific targets to be reached by 2030. SDG target number 6 aims to ensure availability and sustainable management of safe water and sanitation for all. As part of a global research study conducted by End Water Poverty, Watershed and partners in 25 countries, this briefing paper reflects on mechanisms in the Netherlands for holding the Government accountable for progress towards achieving the SDG6 targets.

Every country focuses on different areas within the SDG agenda, so different accountability mechanisms, systems and platforms are needed to track progress. How mechanisms are arranged may differ, but what is essential, is that they are transparent; and stimulate multi-stakeholder participation. Therefore, the role of civil society organisations (CSOs), academia, UN organisations and the private sector in accountability mechanisms received special attention in the study.

Mapping accountability mechanisms for SDG6 progress in the Netherlands

"The Netherlands has a solid track record in tackling water-related challenges" - says a 2017 Dutch report to the High Level Political Forum (HLPF) on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. The Netherlands as a country that owes its existence to a forward-looking and well-maintained relationship with water, provides a valuable basis for a case study.

However, even though safe water is generally available

to everyone in the Netherlands and water quality is high, future risks such as climate change or contamination are real. Also the role of the Netherlands in SDG6 progress abroad is not to be discounted, since water management is one of the four priorities of Dutch development cooperation policy. The country aims to reach 30 million people with sustainable access to safe water and 50 million people with sustainable access to improved sanitation. Focusing on accountability mechanisms around SDG6 targets of the 2030 agenda is therefore relevant for the country, both for national and international purposes.

Although a cross section of organisations based in the Netherlands were involved in the formulation of the Sustainable Development Goals, national accountability mechanisms regarding follow-up on implementation have not been standardised by the United Nations and are also not centralised in the Netherlands. This briefing note was written by collecting information from reports and databases, surveys, interviews and focus group discussions. It gives an overview of accountability mechanisms specifically for SDG6, reflects on existing policies and the multi-stakeholder character of these mechanisms, and provides recommendations for improvement.

HOW IS ACCOUNTABILITY ORGANISED?

Policies and mechanisms for WASH progress

Most mechanisms for water sector progress in the Netherlands are connected to pre-existing frameworks, in which SDG6 language and targets are not used for discussions around national water sector progress. There is general consensus that water, sanitation and hygiene services are well organised. This notion is linked to trust in existing national water policies - the 2009 Water

Act, the Regional Water Authorities Act, the EU Water Framework Directive/Kaderrichtlijn Water, the 2016 Delta Programme, the 2014 Delta Decisions. And the 22 regional water boards and their umbrella association, the Unie van Waterschappen for water quality and integrated water resources management (IWRM) and private water companies and their network organisations, such as VEWIN for drinking water and Rioned for sewerage. According to a 2014 OECD report, the democratically elected water boards play an important role in efficient water governance in the Netherlands. This may be regarded as a global standard. However, raising public water awareness and placing a greater emphasis on water quality were also highlighted.

Participatory mechanisms

The Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management (MolW) is responsible for reporting to Parliament, implementation and negotiation with provinces, municipalities, water authorities, private water companies and CSOs. The [Stuurgroep Water](#) of the Ministry is a platform where these conversations take place. This water steering body holds regular consultations on water policy, implementation and monitoring. CSOs do not participate actively, but occasionally receive reports of meetings.

Another mechanism for holding the Government accountable is [the Overlegorgaan Infrastructuur en Milieu \(OIM\)](#). This is also a consultative platform of the MolW for a wider group of stakeholders, CSOs included. Platform participants are informed through a website, newsletters, social media and invited to give feedback on reports and publications. Annual formal and informal meetings, are organised to give people the opportunity to influence decision making. Members can suggest themes for discussion and consultations are turned into reports for advisory purposes and policy making. National progress on SDG6 has not been discussed at the time of data collection.

Participatory mechanisms within regional water authorities are arranged through its governing structure which includes cooperation with provinces, municipalities and non-governmental organisations. Specific examples of participating groups are residents' organisations, farmers, small water businesses, managers of nature reserves or representatives of drinking water companies.

About SDG6 progress

Even though the Netherlands' Government has no overall SDG implementation strategy, reporting and accountability mechanisms on national and international progress exist. The following paragraphs reflect on SDG6 in a national context. Only the most relevant mechanisms for SDG6

progress are mentioned.

Statistical reports of the Central Bureau of Statistics

In 2016, the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) published a first statistical report on how the country is doing on all the SDGs, followed by a second, more elaborate update in 2018. This recent report reflects on the Netherlands doing well on 6.1 and 6.2, and in more detail on progress needed for water quality (6.3), efficiency of water usage and water stress (6.4) and ecosystems (6.6). Data compilation for the overall report is based on a multi-stakeholder approach, but for SDG6 only existing CBS and Rijkswaterstaat data was used.

Annual SDG reports of the Government

Also in 2016, Dutch Government agreed to compile and present an annual SDG report to Parliament, which includes reflections on SDG6. The first report was presented in May 2017 and as a Voluntary National Review in July 2017 to the High Level Political Forum (HLPF). The annual SDG report is written by Government with input of municipalities, CSOs, academia, private sector and youth groups. CSOs are involved through the NGO platform of Partos, a membership body for organisations working in international development. Sections on SDG6 are again based on CBS and Rijkswaterstaat data for national progress on SDG6. National CSOs were not approached separately by Government for SDG6 data and are also not pro-actively asking for participation themselves.

An SDG6 monitoring team in the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management

The MolW has set up its own SDG6 monitoring team through a process of learning events in which five countries (Jordan, Netherlands, Peru, Senegal, Uganda) participated. The process was coordinated by the Netherlands National IHP-HWRP Committee, a platform of Dutch scientists, policy-makers and practitioners. Participating members were Government agencies, knowledge institutions and UN organisations. No CSO or private sector organisations were involved in this process.

Adopt an SDG

A campaign led by Building Change, a collaboration of Partos, Foundation Max van der Stoep and Woord en Daad, initiated the '[Adopt an SDG](#)' movement. Members of Dutch Parliament adopt an SDG and become focal points for CSOs for initiating conversations around their SDG. The campaign increases political commitment to the SDGs and strengthens accountability.

SDG6 and the UN-Water synthesis report

The Netherlands has contributed to and funded the 2018

SDG6 synthesis report, initiated by UN-Water. The report includes brief reflections on surface water pollution in the Netherlands.

An SDG Charter for shared learning

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) supported the establishment of a voluntary platform for joint action on the SDGs, including SDG6: the SDG Charter. Generally, CSOs and private sector organisations with a water focus are not aware of the Charter or opportunities for participation.

There is either low awareness of SDG6 mechanisms amongst CSOs and private sector organisations, or they are considered as having little added value next to existing water sector processes.

Brief reflections on the international context

As far as international cooperation is concerned, both the annual and the voluntary national reviews elaborate on the Netherlands' efforts on SDG6 progress. Contributions to the reporting process are facilitated through the NGO platforms, such as Partos or the Netherlands Water Partnership (NWP). The SDG6 synthesis report includes data received from UN-Water partner NGOs.

[NWP](#), [SWA](#) and [Watershed](#) (a collaboration of IRC, [Simavi](#), [Wetlands International](#) and [Akvo](#)) are all examples of CSO participation in policy influencing and holding specifically the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) accountable for implementing their 2016-2030 WASH strategy.

HOW IS ACCOUNTABILITY EXPERIENCED?

National context

Generally, the way water governance is organised in the Netherlands makes for a positive experience. The democratic set up of the water boards, existing water policies and their transparent national reporting mechanisms, the well-structured communication systems of private water companies and municipalities around repairs and inquiries all provide opportunities for civil society to react to water-related issues when needed. Also the multi-stakeholder approach of national mechanisms, the involvement of national and local water authorities, municipalities, private sector organisations and CSOs are perceived as useful non SDG-related mechanisms for water sector progress.

Nationally active CSOs expressed positive experiences with the approach of looking at water as an integral theme. The Government of the Netherlands also commits to SDG 17, which demonstrates openness to work in partnership and apply a multi-stakeholder approach for

reporting.

The Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) is positive about processes around developing SDG6 monitoring systems, such as the creation of the monitoring unit of the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management through shared learning. However, the SDG6 indicators are not all encompassing and there is more to monitor in the Netherlands.

The fact that it is easy to approach water experts within Government through existing water sector platforms (e.g. events, discussions) is perceived as positive. However, a suitable structure for connecting different responsible members within Government and coordinating communications centrally remains a challenge.

International context

Annual reports to Parliament and the compilation of data by CBS for SDG6 were regularly mentioned as successful outputs. They can be used for raising awareness, prompting discussion and ensuring that the opinions of different stakeholders are included in reports.

Stakeholders participating in existing water platforms or networks, such as NWP or Partos, consider them transparent. However, these platforms are only for member organisations, which limits their outreach.

The positive experiences with water experts within the Government also extends to the Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, Sigrid Kaag. She places the SDGs in the spotlight in the Ministry's policies on development cooperation. Therefore, accountability around SDG6 is enhanced by for example the MFA's participation in the Sanitation and Water for All High Level Meetings or the Watershed programme.

WHAT TO IMPROVE AND HOW?

Even though there is progress to be made on SDG6 nationally, in current mechanisms there is no clear distinction between the role of CSOs in national or international development. CSOs, such as environmental organisations with a focus on water in the national context are not part of the accountability mechanisms. The platforms used are selective and oftentimes oriented towards development cooperation.

This raises one of the most important questions to reflect on based on study results:

Which CSOs to involve for participation in accountability mechanisms for national SDG6 targets?

This is both a question for Government and a question for CSOs to address.

CSOs need to take responsibility for their role in achieving SDG6, participating in existing accountability mechanisms, holding Government accountable and sharing information on progress with the public.

However, transparent communications from Government are needed to trigger involvement of CSOs that currently do not participate in existing mechanisms because of lack of capacity or knowledge on SDG6.

Government does not know how stakeholders think about working within SDG6 frameworks for monitoring WASH progress in the Netherlands. Communications about the added value of SDG6 targets and indicators for national progress could definitely be beneficial here. Also, a reliable assessment could help in setting up a centralised and simplified strategy for reaching and involving CSOs and private sector. A more detailed list of recommendations can be found below.

CONCLUSION

When examining national accountability mechanisms for SDG6 in the Netherlands, it is important to understand the existing frameworks for water accountability, to identify the role of SDG6 in these, to assess the potential gaps and to identify new questions to ask.

The Netherlands is well known for its sophisticated water management systems. Existing platforms raise questions in Government about the added value of adding SDG6 frameworks for national monitoring and consequently, accountability. Government assumes that there is low interest in SDG6 because the existing monitoring and accountability systems already cover WASH progress in the country. However, this is an assumption. So it limits national stakeholders and especially CSOs in assessing whether holding governments accountable within the frameworks of SDG6 is desirable.

As the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is working within the frameworks of the SDGs, a number of multi-stakeholder mechanisms to hold Government accountable exist. The gaps to be addressed are mainly around central coordination of these mechanisms to enhance the involvement of not only NGOs with available capacity but also of smaller organisations.

General awareness around accountability mechanisms for SDG6 and transparency in contact, contents and

access need to be on the radar of all stakeholders within the Netherlands. For national progress and international cooperation. The main responsibility for actual multi-stakeholder participation lies with Government. But because of the complexity of the different networks - of academia, bilateral, multilateral, NGOs, private sector and civil society - creating awareness, dialogue and transparency is a responsibility for all.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For Government:

- For Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management: Conduct baseline inventory research amongst nationally active water stakeholders to understand interest and willingness to participate in accountability mechanisms for SDG6.
- Increase transparency on the added value of SDG6 for national water sector progress and accountability mechanisms for SDG6.
- Increase transparency in reporting: Put more detailed and qualitative data (from CBS and other stakeholders) in reports to make them more encompassing for both national and international progress. Multi-stakeholder input in reports is important, but does not guarantee that the reports include all the relevant information.
- For Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management and Ministry of Foreign Affairs with support of other stakeholders: Create a contact database of all water related organisations and connect it with a centrally coordinated SDG6 communication platform. Combine contacts of different network organisations, such as Partos, Partin, NWP to ensure an overview of all stakeholders. Use this database to inform participants about possibilities to participate in discussions, meetings, events. Make sure that information and invitations are disseminated in a timely manner so that organisations with smaller capacities can plan their participation. For an overview of information around SDG6, provide one transparent source e.g website or other open source data system for Dutch efforts on SDG6 at national and international level. This has to be practical and simple to navigate. If it is, also organisations with smaller capacities can participate and exchange good practices. Both for contact database and information hub, it is necessary to make a clear distinction between national and international targets.
- For involvement of private sector organisations more criteria from Government are needed to comply with the SDGs.

For other stakeholders (some recommendations concern Government too):

- For CSOs (national and international) and national water authorities: Take responsibility for participating in existing accountability mechanisms, holding governments accountable and sharing information about SDG6 progress with the public.
- For nationally active CSOs: Connect SDG6 targets and reporting to other national policy targets or EU frameworks. Bringing targets of SDG6 together with existing mechanisms for water management on a national level shows potential for incorporating a bird's-eye view on progress and new water challenges in the Netherlands. Through this broadened perspective, raising general water awareness amongst the public can be increased.
- Some indicators on SDG6 are not yet finalised, so lobbying on improving these is recommended and helpful for progress.
- Create overview of good practices of CSO participation in other national accountability mechanisms and use lessons learned for improving participation in SDG6 implementation.

Based on: 32 questionnaires answered, 13 organisations interviewed, 14 people of 11 organisations present at validation meeting.

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