

MEANINGFUL GOVERNMENT

PROMOTING WELLBEING

JULY 2024



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SUMMARY

The pursuit of prosperity has long been central to government policy in the Netherlands. Our country has been very successful in this regard in recent decades, judging by the growth rates of the national economy. But economic growth figures do not tell the whole story. The extent to which we experience prosperity depends not just on our wallets, but also on other things such as adequate housing, safety in our living environment, clean air, clean water, good education and healthcare. And, not to forget, our connection to those around us and to society as a whole. Such aspects of life are covered by the concept of wellbeing, which is the focus of this advisory report.

Several aspects of this wellbeing are currently not functioning well in the Netherlands. For example, there is increasing pressure on available space, on the quality of nature and on the environment. Social cohesion is also under strain. What is more, wellbeing varies widely within the Dutch population – both in terms of income and wealth and in a broader sense. For the Council for the Environment and Infrastructure (Rli), ‘wellbeing’ is relevant because it touches on a wide range of issues in the living environment, from the transition to sustainable energy to the redevelopment of rural areas. Addressing these transition issues affects wellbeing in society and its distribution.

If the government carefully and systematically takes into account the impact on wellbeing in policy measures, it can arrive at better decisions. We call this 'promoting wellbeing'. Of course, the government is already promoting aspects of wellbeing, as policies are in place to address many of the issues we mentioned above. However, these policies are proving inadequate. In order to effectively promote wellbeing, the government must systematically take into account the impact on the economy, society and the living environment in all policies it develops. This includes both short-term and long-term consequences, here and elsewhere in the world. Promoting wellbeing also means that the government must focus on the distribution of the positive and negative impact of policies across regions and groups in society. The government is not currently doing all of this.

Politicians and administrators can only make the complex assessments involved in promoting wellbeing if they have good policy information: on the positive and negative impact of policy options and on the current state of affairs of all aspects (relevant from a wellbeing perspective). Moreover, it should be clear who benefits from a given policy measure and who does not.

There is often a lack of clear distinction between the role of science and civil service on the one hand, which should ensure the best possible information and expose dilemmas associated with decisions, and politicians on the other, who must ultimately make decisions and be accountable. If the necessary information and dilemmas are not systematically brought together, politicians cannot make informed assessments and be fully accountable.

This also creates scope for cherry picking, where positive effects of policy proposals on wellbeing are overemphasised while negative effects are underemphasised. For example, there is a lack of balance in justifying the introduction of a distribution centre by stating that it is good for regional business activity, while failing to mention that this will create a need for housing for a large number of labour migrants.

Promoting wellbeing not only requires more policy information than is currently available: it also requires a different way of looking at policy preparation and accountability. Such a new approach is not easy to introduce, as the way policies are developed is firmly embedded in laws, rules, procedures and mathematical models. This policy culture cannot be changed overnight.

Although the concept of wellbeing has been increasingly embraced by politicians in recent years, current adoption is largely in word only. In practice, the anticipated impact of policy decisions on nature, the environment, society, future generations and other countries often remain implicit. When choosing between different policy options, financial-economic considerations usually prevail.

If the pursuit of wellbeing were to actually start guiding government policy, the result could be substantially different decisions.

That takes administrative courage. Consider, for example, the decision-making on the growth of Schiphol Airport and the associated weighting of economic, environmental and social aspects. In that kind of situation,



effectively promoting wellbeing requires an outlook on wellbeing that differs substantially from the traditional view of wellbeing currently dominant within government. This means that a change in mentality is required.

We make four recommendations for the government to adapt policy decision-making processes. Some can already be implemented in the short term, while others will take more time and elaboration. This will move us further towards promoting wellbeing.

1. Ensure better tools for gathering and providing access to policy information

Promoting wellbeing requires tools that systematically gather information on the effects on all themes that are important for wellbeing. Short-term improvements are needed in the existing tools used to collect and provide access to this information and the way these tools are deployed. The official policy preparation must start to bring the choices between policy priorities ('trade-offs') and the associated dilemmas, including in other policy areas, into sharper focus. This means that policy officials need to systematically provide insight into the effects of proposed policies on wellbeing in a broad sense, including the distribution of those effects across groups of citizens and regions and including the knock-on effects in the longer term and elsewhere in the world. The appropriate tools need to be used at each stage of policy-making (setting goals and ambitions, defining strategy and policy, implementation and realisation, monitoring and evaluation). Existing tools should be made consistent where necessary. The tools should also make the best possible use of statistical calculations. Where this is not possible,

other types of relevant information will need to be provided so that no 'blind spots' remain.

2. When making normative policy choices, make systematic use of policy information provided

In promoting wellbeing, politicians and administrators need policy information that clearly sets out the available normative choices, the trade-offs associated with different policy options and the different perspectives on issues and possible solutions. We recommend that this policy information is used in a systematic and targeted manner when making and justifying normative choices. Crucially, administrators and politicians need to weigh up policy options and their medium-term and long-term effects before making fundamental decisions on matters such as spatial planning and energy infrastructure. Otherwise, they miss opportunities to promote wellbeing. All wellbeing themes must be explicitly addressed during budgeting, planning and accountability, including anticipated policy effects 'later' and 'elsewhere' and including distributional impact.

3. Prepare to include 'capital budget' in the national budget

At present, the potential longer-term consequences of certain measures are not sufficiently taken into account when developing policy. Disciplining frameworks are needed that force politicians and administrators to consider the impact of policy decisions on our economic capital (our future earning power), social capital (the connections between citizens, between citizens and institutions and between citizens and the government) and 'natural capital' (all that nature offers us) – frameworks that already exist for our



financial capital (future public debt). We recommend that the government, under the leadership of the Minister of Finance, eventually make a 'capital budget' part of the national budget and thus ensure that this capital is fully taken into account in future policy choices. This means that the national budget should reflect not only what the proposed government policy means for financial-economic developments, but also for social connectedness, the general public's trust in institutions, quality of nature, the living environment and so on.

As this represents a drastic change, we recommend that, in preparation, national planning agencies develop an appropriate methodology, using international examples from the United Nations and the World Bank and starting with a number of national programmes (focusing on issues such as quality of life, security, the environment and rural areas). The introduction of a capital budget as an effective management tool will also require the introduction of an accrual accounting system as the budget and accountability system for central government.

4. Increase opportunities for regional coordination aimed at wellbeing

In order to effectively promote wellbeing, the government must make coherent, cross-sectoral decisions on combining objectives in a single policy choice (synergy) and prioritising objectives (trade-offs). Municipalities, provinces, water authorities and central government all have administrations within the Dutch system that can be held responsible for making such assessments. However, many challenges and objectives converge at regional level. And it is at this level that a democratically mandated 'table' is lacking, since regions are not a legally enshrined tier of

government. For this reason, regional coordination of wellbeing policy is important, particularly for complex regional challenges.

We do not recommend adding an extra tier of government, but instead that central government increase opportunities for regional coordination that focuses on wellbeing. This can be achieved by having regions draw up opportunity agendas for developing regional wellbeing. Central government must also ensure regional coordination of its policy for different sectors. This can be achieved by setting up multidisciplinary teams chaired by one general central government representative per region. Finally, central government needs to create space in its accountability system for decentralised public authorities to account for spending on wellbeing. This will require sector-specific budgets to be partially decompartmentalised.



PART 1 | ADVISORY REPORT





1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Subject of this advisory report

In many respects, the Netherlands is a prosperous country. Our economic growth rates are generally among the highest in Europe and, as a small country, we are the eighteenth largest economy in the world. Average health, education level and household income are also better in the Netherlands than in many other countries.

From a broader perspective, however, our prosperity comes with a few caveats. For instance, our natural environment is not in good shape (it is even deteriorating; Ecological Authority, 2024), the housing shortage is worsening (CBS, 2024a) and the prevalence of obesity is rising (CBS, 2024b). In addition, not everyone in the Netherlands benefits from this prosperity in equal measure. The chances of a good income vary from neighbourhood to neighbourhood, from region to region, from urban to rural. Less educated people and people with a migration background have, on average, significantly less to spend than higher-educated people and people without a migration background (CBS, 2024c). It is also important to note that money is not the only aspect that determines the prosperity people experience. Many Dutch people do not feel very prosperous in various ways. They do not have the security of a steady job that provides sufficient income, their home is (too) small and/or their living environment is unhealthy.

Economic growth does not automatically equate to prosperity

When an online shop opens a distribution centre somewhere in the Netherlands, it generates business activity that is good for the regional economy. On the other hand, the jobs often require labour migrants, for whom housing must be found in the scarce housing market. What is more, the financial proceeds from the distribution centre will go to a parent company presumably based outside the region, or even outside the Netherlands. It is also doubtful whether the region will benefit from the taxes the distribution centre pays to central government. So the answer to whether economic growth brings prosperity depends on the perspective chosen: that of the entrepreneur, that of the member of the Provincial Executive responsible for economic development, that of the alderman responsible for housing, that of the employee or that of the local resident.

Apart from the quality of our immediate living environment, there are other aspects that influence the extent to which we experience prosperity. Questions that play a role include: how do things stand with regard to national security, how clean is our surface water, how is nature developing, do our children have access to good education and to raw materials, will our grandchildren still be safe behind the dykes?

Nowadays, this comprehensive view of prosperity is often referred to as 'wellbeing'. For the Council for the Environment and Infrastructure (Rli), 'wellbeing' is relevant because it touches on a wide range of issues in

the living environment, from the transition to sustainable energy to the redevelopment of rural areas. Addressing these transition issues affects wellbeing in society and its distribution.

In this advisory report, we examine how the government could use the concept of 'wellbeing' to focus its policies more on safeguarding all economic, social and living environment aspects that are important for the current and future well-being of the inhabitants of the Netherlands.

1.2 Main question of this advisory report

The guiding principle of this advisory report is that adopting a 'wellbeing perspective' can help the government to focus more effectively on issues that matter to how citizens experience their living conditions. 'Wellbeing', however, is a comprehensive concept. Priorities will therefore need to be set when focusing efforts. And choosing one thing often comes at the expense of something else, which is also considered important. It is a challenge for the government to then make the right assessments.

Against this background, the twofold question of this advisory report is: *(a) how can central government focus its policy on maintaining and increasing wellbeing for all current and future generations in the Netherlands and elsewhere in the world; and (b) what specifically is needed to give practical shape to this 'promotion of wellbeing' in various situations?*

By the phrase 'focusing on maintaining and increasing wellbeing', we mean developing and implementing government policy that takes into account



economic, social and living environment aspects, the needs and interests of current and future generations, the impact of policies elsewhere in the world and the distribution of wellbeing between groups of citizens. This is in line with the definition of wellbeing used by Statistics Netherlands (CBS, 2024c). The advisory report does not specifically examine the role of companies or society in relation to wellbeing.

1.3 Working method

For this advisory report, we analysed various methods used by scientists to develop a picture of the economy, wellbeing and happiness. In addition, we spoke with experts from the state planning agencies Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis [CPB], The Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency [PBL] and the Netherlands Institute for Social Research [SCP] that develop policy instruments in the field of wellbeing, and with representatives of national and decentralised public authorities that use these types of instruments in policy preparation, decision-making and implementation of policy in the living environment.

We also held expert sessions based on substantive case studies. These sessions focused on steering questions around (a) the interaction between central government and regions in relation to wellbeing and (b) the wellbeing impact of our actions on areas elsewhere in the world and on future generations.

1.4 Relationship with previous Rli advisory reports

Although we have not previously addressed ‘wellbeing’ as an independent topic, the concept plays a role in several of our earlier advisory reports. These include: Every Region Counts! (Rli, Council for Public Administration [ROB] & Council of Public Health & Society [RVS], 2023), Towards an Integrated Accessibility Policy (Rli, 2021a), Give Direction, Make Space! (Rli, 2021b) and Towards a Sustainable Economy (Rli, 2019).

1.5 Structure of this report

This advisory report is structured as follows. In Chapter 2, we delineate ‘wellbeing’ from the traditional definition of the term. In this chapter we also discuss the extent to which ‘wellbeing’ is a concept that can be used in the development of public policy. In Chapter 3, we highlight from a theoretical perspective the three steps a government needs to take in promoting wellbeing and what each of those steps involves. In Chapter 4, we describe the promotion of wellbeing from a more practice-oriented perspective. In doing so, we look at the role of the layers of government involved and at specific concerns at play in the various phases of government policy. In Chapter 5, we list our main conclusions and formulate our recommendations to central government, municipalities and provinces.





2 USEFULNESS OF THE CONCEPT OF 'WELLBEING'

The material aspect of wellbeing has long played a dominant role in government social and economic policy (Chapter 2.1). In this chapter, we ask whether measuring 'wellbeing' provides a more accurate picture of the societal issues at hand (Chapter 2.2). We also examine the extent to which it is useful to apply the term 'wellbeing' to public policy (Chapter 2.3). We conclude with a summary of our findings (Chapter 2.4).

2.1 Determining wellbeing: not as easy as it looks

Most Dutch people mainly associate individual wellbeing with money and purchasing power: if your income allows you to buy enough or more than enough to meet your needs, you have a high standard of wellbeing. This is a clear but also a narrow definition. It does not take into account that people have not only material needs such as food, a roof over their heads or clothes, but also intangible needs such as leisure time, safety, health, good education and a clean environment.

If you want to determine wellbeing within in a society, the major advantage of a narrow, unambiguous definition of this term seems to be that it allows you to use a quantitative measure. Gross domestic product (GDP)

has traditionally been one such measure.¹ GDP can be used to express the size of a country's economy in a given year in one single figure. This internationally standardised accounting approach to wellbeing has guided the social and economic policies of many countries, including the Netherlands, in recent decades. Based on the idea that a country's collective output more or less automatically benefits all its residents, GDP took on an increasingly important role within government and the corporate sector as a measure of wellbeing.

However, using such a uniform measure also has its pitfalls. Because what is good for GDP is not necessarily also good for the people of the Netherlands. In economic science and among administrators, it has been agreed for years that increasing wellbeing requires more than simply focusing on maximising GDP. Other financial aspects (such as public debt development) also contribute to prosperity and wellbeing. The same goes for economic aspects (employment, education levels, income trends and so on). Ecological aspects (for example environmental quality and biodiversity) and social aspects (such as civil rights in terms of democracy, participation, association and personal space) also affect people's prosperity and wellbeing. Government policy aimed at increasing national wellbeing therefore needs to take into account all these aspects.

Indeed, public debate on policy usually addresses these aspects of wellbeing. But in practice, when all is said and done, it is often tempting for administrators to emphasise measures that benefit GDP; see box.

National Growth Fund: sustainability ambitions give way to the pursuit of GDP growth

In 2020, the government set up the National Growth Fund. The fund was designed to strengthen sustainable earning capacity in the Netherlands in order to trigger a 'growth spurt' towards a circular economy. The aim of the fund was to support projects that would align wealth generation with climate and nature ambitions.

However, when the assessment criteria for selecting project proposals were laid down, it emerged that the government had tacitly translated the term 'sustainable earning capacity' into 'structural GDP growth'.

The word 'sustainable' had thus been interpreted as a synonym of 'structural'. The consequence of this semantic manoeuvre was that submitted proposals were judged mainly on their expected contribution to structurally increasing GDP rather than on strengthening sustainable (in the sense of environmentally and nature-friendly) earning capacity in a circular economy (Rli, 2021c).

¹ GDP comprises the total monetary value added of (a) all products manufactured in a country in a year and (b) all services offered in a year. The term usually used at international level is 'gross domestic product' (GDP), as opposed to 'gross regional product' (GRP) at regional level.



2.2 Does measuring ‘wellbeing’ provide a more accurate picture?

Politicians have now realised that wellbeing is not only about material wealth, but also about things like good healthcare, a safe living environment, a clean environment and good education. We increasingly see the term wellbeing popping up in election programmes, coalition agreements and policy papers (see, for example: Claassen & Cools, 2023; EZK, 2023; BBB, VVD, GroenLinks, PvdA & CDA, 2023; GroenLinks, PvdA, Partij voor de Dieren, SP & ChristenUnie, 2022; *Coalitieakkoord*, 2021). The underlying idea is that if we promote wellbeing, we place a coherent focus on all relevant aspects of wellbeing and do not overlook important conditions for our wellbeing.

‘Wellbeing’ is therefore a more comprehensive way of looking at our standard of living. As a basis for public policy, it has the potential to ensure wellbeing development across the board: quality of life, the living environment and our way of living and working – both in the here and now and in the future and in other places around the globe. ‘Wellbeing’ can thus provide a framework for working towards a better society now and in the future.

Lack of consensus on interpretation of the concept

On closer inspection, however, it is less straightforward. There is a significant drawback to the concept of ‘wellbeing’, namely the implicit assumption that there is consensus on what ‘a better society’ is, how to measure it and how best to achieve it. In practice, there is no such

consensus. A better society has a different meaning from one person to another. Few people will be against a healthy living environment, but when they discover that the pursuit of cleaner air can potentially affect the freedom to drive a car and light the fireplace, it turns out that people still weigh the importance of that clean living environment differently. For many people, the freedom to decide how and what you consume is a priority in that case. We also see this when it comes to climate impact and weighing the consequences of our choices for future generations.

What is more, measures aimed at wellbeing can affect groups of citizens differently. For example, introducing paid parking to relieve parking pressure in the city centre can have a positive effect on the quality of the living environment, but at the same time force less affluent residents (or at least their cars) out of the centre. Where policy plans refer to ‘optimal wellbeing’, this is therefore the result of a subjective weighting of different aspects of wellbeing.

The diversity of views on what constitutes wellbeing is also reflected in the fact that different methods have been developed to gain insight into the state of wellbeing.² To create consistency in these methods for the government, the central government’s planning agencies jointly drafted a framework to embed wellbeing in the budgetary system in 2022 (CPB, PBL & SCP, 2022). The planning agencies identify eight themes relevant to the degree of wellbeing in a country; see figure 1.

² See Part 2 Chapter 1 for an explanation of some of these methods.



Figure 1: Wellbeing themes



The eight wellbeing themes are briefly clarified below:³

1. *subjective well-being* (extent to which people manage to give substance to their personal attitude towards life and how people value their lives);
2. *health* (extent to which people experience control and resilience in relation to their physical and mental health and any limitations they have to live with);
3. *consumption and income* (extent to which people are financially able to meet their needs and achieve their life goals);

³ The clarifications included here are a simplified representation of the more detailed explanations of the eight themes provided by the planning agencies themselves. For those explanations, see Part 2 Chapter 1.

4. *education and training* (extent to which individuals and society as a whole can benefit from high-quality education and the resulting levels of education, knowledge and skills);
5. *spatial cohesion and quality* (extent to which spatial planning meets the functional and aesthetic needs of people, now and in the future);
6. *economic capital* (extent to which society has what is needed for a well-functioning economy, namely: money, knowledge, competences and skills, physical infrastructure and applicable knowledge in the form of patents and data);
7. *natural capital* (extent to which nature and the natural environment are able to provide minerals, renewable resources and raw materials, renewable energy flows and space for human recreation while maintaining regenerative capacity);
8. *social capital* (extent to which people feel connected to each other, to institutions and to the government, so that they experience security and trust).

In this advisory report, we refer to the italicised headings in this list as ‘wellbeing themes’. Where we talk in a general sense about things that help determine wellbeing, we refer to ‘aspects of wellbeing’.

The last three wellbeing themes from the above list are about the status of our economic, natural and social capital. They also shed light on wellbeing in the future; see box.



Wellbeing themes, capitals and national budget

In 2016, the Temporary Committee on a Broad Definition of Welfare (*Tijdelijke commissie Breed welvaartsbegrip*) argued that these three capitals should be included by default in Wellbeing Considerations. On this 'capital approach', the Committee wrote: '[In it] the main focus is not on wellbeing "here and now"', but on wellbeing "later". The "later" is approached on the basis of the question of the extent to which a foundation is being laid for the future or, conversely, available capital is being diminished. This is done by identifying the available amount of different capital: the capital stock. This stock is available for future wellbeing and its status depends on what is happening here and now. Investment increases the stock, while use of the stock and depreciation decreases it' (House of Representatives, 2016).

It should be noted that the national budget of the Netherlands, unlike the other tiers of government and almost all other countries in the EU, still uses a commitment-cash accounting system to budget and account for expenditure. Investments are financed from the budget as a lump sum. The Netherlands Court of Audit (2018) has been advocating a move to an accrual accounting system for years. This system makes it much easier to take into account future costs and returns when making investment decisions, which is essential in order to promote wellbeing.

The planning agencies mentioned above stress that, to get a clear view of the status of wellbeing, it is important to look at both (a) the wellbeing distribution among different social groups and (b) the impact that wellbeing

developments have on the situation here and now, the situation later and the situation elsewhere. 'Impact on the situation elsewhere' might include the geopolitical consequences of our use of rare metals (dependence on China, for example) or the climate impact of our meat consumption and production (e.g. deforestation in the Amazon).

Within the framework established by the planning agencies, the development of wellbeing shows similarities with the concept of 'sustainable development' used by the UN; see box.

Relationship between wellbeing goals and UN sustainable development goals

When it comes to wellbeing, reference is often made to the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals, set in 2015 as the global sustainable development agenda for 2030. These goals are commonly referred to as Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Although the SDGs have different origins to the concept of wellbeing and are also used differently in policy development practice, there are clear similarities. Wellbeing goals, such as the SDGs, aim to sustainably achieve a balanced distribution of wellbeing, both in the here and now and later. There are also well-developed monitoring systems for both wellbeing goals and the SDGs.

In addition to similarities, there are also differences. For instance, the SDGs are internationally agreed targets for well-being and sustainable development that are mostly used by civil society organisations and



businesses, while wellbeing goals are more of a government instrument, used in developing national policy (Maas & Lucas, 2023).

The state of wellbeing in the Netherlands (at national and regional level) is monitored annually by Statistics Netherlands. In doing so, this institute uses a classification of themes roughly similar to that of the planning agencies. Besides the Statistics Netherlands monitor, there are several other monitors that develop a picture of wellbeing and its impact. They each have their own emphasis and use their own grouping of themes and indicators.⁴

Importance of transparency on considerations in policy choices that impact wellbeing

In official policy preparation, various tools are used to provide decision information to administrators and politicians on aspects of wellbeing. Examples of such tools are the environmental impact assessment (EIA) and social cost-benefit analysis (SCBA); see box.

⁴ See Part 2 Chapter 1 for an overview of the various national wellbeing monitors. An international overview of monitors can be found at <https://beyond-gdp.world/wise-database/wise-metrics> (accessed by us on 6 March 2024).

EIA and SCBA in relation to wellbeing

Promoting wellbeing is different from the tools that attempt to identify the various aspects of wellbeing: an environmental impact assessment (EIA) identifies the environmental impact of a government plan. An EIA outlines the expected impact of projects such as the construction of a wind farm, a road or a new business park. It also describes alternative solutions and their environmental impact.

A social cost-benefit analysis (SCBA) is a tool to systematically identify the social effects of proposed policy measures. This means that all effects that impact people's wellbeing belong in an SCBA.

The EIA and SCBA can play an important role in policy preparation, alongside other tools that provide insight into the impact of policy. This is not sufficient, however, to promote wellbeing. Promoting wellbeing encompasses the whole process of formulating goals and ambitions, defining strategy and policy, implementation and realisation and monitoring and evaluation, where tools can provide policy information. For information on tools to support policy choices, see also chapter 2.3 and 4.2 of this advisory report.

The information provided by such tools is often useful, but not always complete, and does not always reveal underlying values. The resulting risk is that an incomplete and/or opportunistic approach is adopted to assessing wellbeing, in which policy choices are substantiated with positive effects on wellbeing that are convenient, while the negative effects are ignored.



The available information on wellbeing impact of policies thus becomes a lucky dip.

To improve how tools like the EIA and SCBA are used in practice, two things are important:

1. Officials will need to provide information that is factual and as complete as possible on all relevant aspects of wellbeing. As yet, there is no mature methodology for systematically and comprehensively analysing all wellbeing impact of policy options. Today's SCBAs, for example, often do not quantify the costs of biodiversity loss. Nor do they address all relevant social effects of policy options, such as impact on communities.
2. Politicians and administrators will need to be transparent about the considerations they make in their policy choices. Policy choices always involve a normative weighting of values and interests. Essentially, politicians need to make this assessment explicit. Politicians will need to be able to explain publicly that they have, for example, weighed the individual freedom of choice of citizens against the collective security of society. If considerations are made at the official preparation stage or if politicians do not explain these kinds of considerations, the term wellbeing tends to obscure rather than contribute to better decision-making.

2.3 Is the concept of 'wellbeing' useful in government policy?

In order to use policy to promote wellbeing, as a government you need a picture of what you want to achieve on the eight wellbeing themes, the current situation with regard to these themes and the impact of intended policies on all these themes. Below we discuss how governments can work on these three conditions for promoting wellbeing.

Use monitoring

An objective picture of the current situation in different policy areas contributes to an informed discussion on policy goals. Wellbeing monitors are designed to provide such an objective picture. However, it is important to bear in mind that these monitors do not provide a complete picture of everything that wellbeing encompasses, nor a diagnosis of the underlying problems. A wellbeing monitor only identifies the state of affairs for various indicators of wellbeing. Monitors do not provide an explanation for the measured wellbeing level. They mainly serve as an early warning; see box.

Early warning function of wellbeing monitors

In the Statistics Netherlands monitor, wellbeing for the topic of 'housing' is measured by the indicators 'quality of dwelling' and 'satisfaction with living environment'. If the results are not positive, this is an early warning sign to the government that housing policy may need adjusting. The monitor gives no indication, however, of the kind of adjustment needed.



Further analysis of the situation is required to translate the monitor's scores on housing into specific policy. Only then can an understanding be gained of the underlying problems (such as high prices for owner-occupied housing, long waiting lists for rental housing, too little green space in the neighbourhood) and the possible causes (such as high commodity prices, too little outflow from social housing, lack of 'green standards' in municipal policy).

The added value of looking at policy areas from a wellbeing perspective lies in the fact that, in response to an identified bottleneck, questions are raised not only about the relevant sector (e.g. public housing), but also the connection with the economy (what about residents' jobs and incomes?), society (is there enough resilience in neighbourhoods?), the living environment (is social safety at an acceptable level, is there enough green space?), the consequences for future generations (is building in the intended locations climate-proof?), the impact in countries we depend on (is the extraction of raw materials for our building materials harmful to nature?) and the distribution of wellbeing between population groups (does everyone have a sufficient probability of securing good housing?).

Take into account the wellbeing impact of policy

In order for governments to make an informed choice among different policy options, tools have been developed to analyse the pros and cons of certain measures as objectively as possible. There are several tools

for analysing wellbeing impact in support of a policy choice (see Part 2 Chapter 1).

- The above-mentioned SCBA develops a picture of the positive and negative wellbeing impact of government decisions, wherever possible in quantitative terms, to facilitate a political choice from the available policy options.⁵
- Another well-known tool is the EIA, which we have also previously mentioned. This compares the environmental impact of different policy alternatives on the physical environment.
- Also worthy of note is the participatory value evaluation (PVE). This is a tool that allows large groups of citizens to express opinions on government policy plans in an accessible way. The results of such a consultation provide insight into how diverse groups in society view the values that administrators must balance when making policy choices. Surveys and focus groups can also perform this function.
- Finally, we should also mention the regional impact assessment (RIA). This tool identifies the potential social, economic and environmental side effects of policy choices.

It is not yet clear to what extent all these types of tools are (or can be made) suitable, whether used individually or in combination, for promoting wellbeing.

⁵ We mentioned back in chapter 2.2 that SCBAs in their current form still have several shortcomings. In Part 2 Chapter 2, we outline adjustments that could make the SCBA tool more suitable for promoting wellbeing in policy preparation.



Tailor policy to potential consequences ‘later’ and ‘elsewhere’

When making decisions, many politicians focus mainly on the current needs of residents and entrepreneurs. In other words: voters. This contributes to the fact that policy measures taken by the government often focus mainly on the short term. For example, by offering compensation for increased energy costs, whereas the better long-term option would be energy conservation.

The focus on narrow, short-term economic goals (purchasing power, the establishment of companies, employment) means that a full wellbeing assessment is often not carried out. For the precise reason that wellbeing means taking into account ‘later’ and ‘elsewhere’. And therefore issues such as: combating climate change, moving towards a more sustainable economy, protecting biodiversity and using raw materials responsibly. The extent to which planned policies affect these kinds of aspects ‘later’ and ‘elsewhere’ is difficult to define in hard figures. Politicians therefore find it complicated to factor them into their decision-making. The generation test was developed by the Young People’s Platform of the Social and Economic Council of the Netherlands (SER) with the aim of understanding the impact of policies on different generations; see Part 2 Chapter 1.

One factor that further complicates making wellbeing assessments is that much of relevant scientific knowledge comes with significant uncertainties. This is often difficult to deal with in the decision-making process. For example, the government’s housing policy is largely geared towards addressing short-term housing needs. The scientific models that forecast

future housing needs present broad ranges due to uncertainties in the development of population, household size and migration levels.⁶ The government still makes little use of methodologies to think in terms of different visions of the future (using scenarios) or to reason backwards from desired futures (‘backcasting’). Such methodologies can counterbalance the knowledge deficit.

2.4 Conclusion

Compared to the narrow definition of prosperity (particularly levels of GDP), ‘wellbeing’ is a powerful concept. Adopting a wellbeing perspective potentially provides a basis for government policy that takes into account everything people consider of value.

In practice, however, promoting wellbeing is no easy matter. This is primarily due to differences in the importance people attach to different aspects of wellbeing. ‘A better society’ has a different meaning from one person to another.

Secondly, it is not sufficiently clear how to best express wellbeing in relevant indicators. Wellbeing monitors are a first step towards this, but they do not provide a complete picture or insight into the underlying problems. As such, they do not provide specific policy guidance.

Thirdly, there is no mature methodology for systematically analysing the wellbeing impact of policy options. There is currently no ready-made, foolproof tool for this. As a result, policy proposals can be touted for their

⁶ For more information on housing need estimates, see the Rli advisory report [Changing Trends in Housing](#) (Rli, 2015).



positive effects on certain wellbeing aspects, without mentioning the negative effects on other aspects of wellbeing.

The conclusion of all this is that while application of the concept of ‘wellbeing’ in developing public policy is useful in theory, there are still many obstacles in practice.

However, if we look at the concept of wellbeing separately from the practical obstacles, we can see that the concept does indeed add value. Although application of the concept makes developing government policy *more complicated* (because all kinds of values and interests must be explicitly taken into account in decision-making), it makes government policy itself *better*, by paying more attention to the relationship between decisions and thus to the positive and negative effects of a decision on society. This also benefits implementation (see Rli, 2023).⁷ The question is therefore not *whether* the government should want to promote wellbeing, but *how it can* do so in the best possible way.

In the following chapters, we elaborate on what is needed to make promoting wellbeing more feasible. We first discuss theory (Chapter 3) and then practice (Chapter 4).

⁷ In its advisory report on Implementation Capacity (Rli, 2023), the barriers identified by the Council to effective policy implementation include (a) the accumulation, and hence complexity, of policy and (b) the unequal distribution of costs and benefits.





3 PROMOTING WELLBEING: THE THEORY

There are three steps to promoting wellbeing: (1) determine the current situation within society in relation to crucial aspects for wellbeing; (2) explore the possibilities to improve these aspects and the values to be weighed in doing so; (3) make choices with regard to prioritising ('trading off') objectives, distributing collective resources and the method of decision-making. In this chapter, we discuss what these three steps involve (chapter 3.1 through 3.3) and then summarise our findings (3.4).

3.1 Step 1: assess the status of wellbeing

Step 1 of promoting wellbeing essentially involves determining the current situation with regard to wellbeing in the country or in a particular region.

Studies on wellbeing identify a number of regular themes that are important for determining wellbeing. Regularly recurring themes are: subjective wellbeing, health, consumption and income, education and training, spatial quality, tangible and intangible property ('economic capital'), nature and environment ('natural capital') and social relationships ('social capital').⁸

⁸ These eight themes, which we explained in chapter 2.2, are sometimes grouped or named slightly differently in scientific studies. In essence, however, there is a consensus on which issues determine the wellbeing within a society (see also Part 2 Chapter 1).

Each theme can be monitored using indicators that show the current situation within society for that particular issue. The current situation with regard to health can be analysed by measuring things like the number of expected healthy years of life, mental health and obesity. The current situation with regard to nature and the environment can be described by looking at things like the number of hectares of nature conservation areas, the level of exposure to particulate matter and the level of hazardous substances in surface water. And the current situation with regard to social relationships can be assessed by examining things like the extent to which people, regardless of their background, culture or orientation, feel welcome and valued and perceive that they are given fair opportunities. In other words, the extent to which they experience inclusiveness.

But it is not always easy to choose representative indicators: if you use pre-existing datasets, in many cases these do not measure exactly what you want to know. For example, traffic delay in terms of 'lost vehicle hours' is not an accurate indicator of accessibility since accessibility is also determined by things like good public transport connections, sufficient parking and affordable transport. If you provide a sharper definition of what you want to measure, however, the relevant data sets are often lacking, particularly when it comes to qualitative indicators.

Another problem is that monitoring various kinds of indicators does not provide a balanced picture, since both objective and subjective things are being measured. And measurements, by definition, involve uncertainties. The results of a measurement also often depend on the geographical

classification used. On top of that, numerical results of measurements are often not directly comparable, because effects that impact on wellbeing are often expressed in different units: for example decibels of noise pollution versus kilograms of CO₂.

The interpretation of monitored data is also sometimes debatable. Does a wellbeing monitor really tell us anything about how well or badly things are going in the country or in a region? And how are the different themes interrelated? In many cases, there is a lack of reasoned insight and people only identify to a limited extent with the picture presented by a monitor report.

In short, step 1 of promoting wellbeing involves various methodological problems: (a) there is no single objective criterion for 'the' collective wellbeing; (b) the indicators used only represent to a limited extent what you really want to know about wellbeing here, now, later and elsewhere; (c) even with objectively measurable indicators, their exact relevance and significance are uncertain and (d) there are aspects of wellbeing that by definition cannot be measured objectively, such as equality of opportunity and inclusiveness.

Despite these limitations, a wellbeing analysis offers rich insight into developments and effects of policy. Even if some of the available information is predominantly qualitative in nature, it helps to broaden the wellbeing assessments.



3.2 Step 2: explore policy options

Step 2 of promoting wellbeing involves government taking stock of opportunities to improve various aspects of wellbeing through targeted policy choices.

Making policy choices from a wellbeing perspective is not a technocratic deliberation process in which the government can select an optimal approach purely based on numbers. Numerous qualitative factors are involved and factors are valued differently by different people. After all, many of the policy choices the government makes impact people's daily lives and well-being. And certain groups of people are often affected more than others. Consider, for instance, the choice of how to generate renewable energy. If the government chooses to install wind turbines on land, this will provide a lot of clean energy, but at the same time will have an impact on the landscape and noise pollution for people living in the immediate vicinity. If the government chooses to build solar parks, there is no noise pollution, but there is still an impact on the landscape and the energy yield is lower. If the government chooses to build a nuclear power plant, although the future energy yield will be higher, costs are also higher and there are concerns around the safe storage of residual nuclear waste.

In short, each policy choice has advantages and disadvantages, which weigh differently for each individual. When assessing policy options, the government will therefore need to identify the values at stake in the various choices. It is advisable for administrators and politicians to make these values explicit from different perspectives, so it is clear to everyone what the choices are really about. This benefits the decision-making process.

It is perfectly possible to agree on which values are at stake before the weighing of these values takes place (Rli, 2022). A successful example is the development of a plan for the national energy system (EZK, 2023); see box.

Values that Dutch people attach to a good energy system

For the purpose of the National Energy System Plan, the Energy System Expert Team 2050 (ETES 2050) carried out research in 2023 on the values that Dutch people attach to a good energy system. All relevant values were explored in close consultation with a residents' committee. The Expert Team eventually arrived at three main values: (a) fairness, (b) robustness and (c) sustainability (ETES 2050, 2023).

Discussion is often required to determine exactly what values are associated with the different policy options on an issue that affects the general public's wellbeing. Futures studies can be useful in this context, presenting a picture of desired and undesired future scenarios and the values at stake.

Once it has been determined which values residents consider important, these values can be weighed against each other openly. For example, a value such as 'security of supply' may come with a price tag, creating tension with the value of 'affordability'. It is then a case of searching for the right balance. Other situations may involve the balance between individual freedom and mutual solidarity. Or the balance between space for business and protection of the environment or animal welfare.



3.3 Step 3: make normative choices

Normative choices are inevitably involved when making decisions (and omitting other decisions): which aspects of wellbeing are given more weight in policy and which less? Making these normative choices is step 3 in promoting wellbeing. In this step, politicians must determine (a) how to balance ('trade-off') the various objectives, (b) how the available resources will be distributed among the selected objectives and (c) how best to organise substantive decision-making on these objectives and on specific projects. These choices must be made explicit and transparent in order for them to be justifiable. We explain this below, as well as clarifying how wellbeing aspects can be compromised at this stage of government control.

3.3.1 Trade-off of objectives

To promote wellbeing, the government must seek to achieve a variety of goals. Usually, however, not everything can be done at the same time. Achieving one objective often comes at the expense of another. In economics, these are referred to as 'trade-offs'.

A government often tries to mitigate trade-offs by linking objectives. For example, combining the construction of an underground car park with the construction of a neighbourhood square and reserving water storage capacity. This then also benefits social cohesion, sports and climate adaptation goals. But even with such a synergetic plan, some things are still impossible: the available money can only be spent once, space that has been built on is no longer available as a square, the expansion of an industrial estate comes at the expense of the natural capital of the surrounding area. So, in practice, definitive priorities must be set.

Dilemmas around trade-offs

It can be difficult to make a choice in these situations. What is the best trade-off? In many cases, careful discussion between administrators, stakeholders and public representatives about desired and undesired trade-offs on all wellbeing issues will be necessary to arrive at a supported choice.

To make the right choice, you need insight into the consequences of each available policy option: for which themes does wellbeing increase and for which does it decrease? Over what time frame will positive and negative impacts occur? Where and for whom are there consequences? On this basis, it is possible to determine which policy choice achieves the most wellbeing objectives on balance.

In theory, such an approach can optimise wellbeing policy. In practice, however, it often proves unsuccessful. This is because, in many cases, assessments are made implicitly. The complexity of making the right assessments becomes clear when we look at issues such as the housing challenge; see box.

Complexity of trade-offs in housing construction

To combat the housing shortage in the Netherlands, the government has set a target of building 100,000 homes a year until 2030 (BZK, 2023). But there are more hard targets: in the European context, for example, directives have been adopted to limit nitrogen emissions and ensure



good water quality. Housing construction is also complicated by practical constraints: all homes must be connected to the electricity grid and residential areas must be accessible.

In short, not everything is possible – at least not at the same time. So priorities will need to be set. In doing so, not all targets lend themselves to trade-offs, because some targets are hard. There are also limits that the government must observe. Examples include budgetary limits (the national budgetary rules), ecological limits (the resilience of vulnerable nature) and social limits (civil rights). Understanding the wellbeing impact of different policy options can help the government make considered choices.

Sometimes the government deliberately ignores unintended effects of its policies. As a result, negative effects of a policy measure are not identified or taken into account. Effects of a policy choice on things like the state treasury or nature are then passed on to future generations, or effects in other countries (for example resource depletion, or poor working conditions) are ignored.

It would seem that a lack of transparency regarding the exact impact of proposed policy is often an attractive option. To ensure careful decision-making, however, it is important to clearly set out the consequences of different alternatives during policy preparation and to justify how the weighing was carried out. From society's perspective, this transparency helps (a) to ensure a proper substantive discussion before the decision

about the trade-offs to be made and (b) to increase understanding of public policy after the decision.

3.3.2 Distribution of collective resources

Once administrators and politicians have prioritised the wellbeing goals, the next step is to look at expected positive and negative effects of the policy designed to bring these goals within reach. What are the short-term consequences of a proposed decision in terms of money, manpower and claim on space? And what will the decision mean in the longer term for the economy and the living environment? How are these effects distributed among different social groups? And how can any international consequences be justified?⁹ Laying down the answers to the above questions in clear terms and using an unambiguous measurement method creates greater transparency. On this basis, politicians can allocate collective resources to the various objectives and document this allocation in budgets and spatial frameworks.

It is then a case of formulating specific plans for policy implementation. At this stage, politicians will need to consider whether the plans are efficient, effective, fair and feasible. Assessing efficiency is about making the best use of necessary resources. Assessing effectiveness is about achieving the intended result. Assessing fairness is about focusing on the fair distribution of effects of the policy, for example, on certain groups of citizens, certain

⁹ We refer here to the fact that policy we use to improve our own wellbeing can trigger harmful side effects elsewhere in the world, such as the destruction of tropical rainforests or labour exploitation.



regions or certain areas elsewhere in the world.¹⁰ And assessing feasibility means treating insights from implementation practice equally.¹¹

3.3.3 Mode of decision-making

How wellbeing aspects are taken into account in policy development often depends on which organisations are involved in the decision-making process. This is evident, for example, from the way decisions are taken ‘in the field’ to achieve agricultural, nature and water quality objectives. The parties who traditionally take part in consultations on these issues often represent only a selection of the relevant interests. Groups with non-established interests, such as people with lower socio-economic status, young people and people from migrant backgrounds, are in many cases heard only to a negligible extent if at all.

Other interests that tend to be underrepresented in consultations include those of soil, air and water quality, biodiversity and the like (natural capital), the importance of connections between citizens and trust in government (social capital) and the importance of wellbeing elsewhere in the world. This situation can hinder policy innovation. After all, established parties have an interest in maintaining the status quo. Moreover, the trade-off of wellbeing goals is more difficult when not all interests are represented.

¹⁰ In this context, in 2023, we criticised the relatively strong emphasis the Dutch government places on policy efficiency from a national perspective. We argued that the government needs to better account for the impact of its policy on regions outside the central economic areas (Rli, ROB & RVS, 2023).

¹¹ For more information, see also Implementation Capacity (Rli, 2023).

There are also numerous standardised procedures and rules that determine the extent to which wellbeing aspects are taken into account in policy decision-making. For example, the structure of the tax system, budget systems, laws and regulations. Such routines significantly limit the policy options available to the government.

Researchers have long pointed out that values from the past, what we considered important then, have become solidified in the organisational forms, procedures and rules followed today in developing policy. This applies to both content (what research and models are used) and process (who is involved, who is able to exert influence) (Snellen & Tennekes, 2018). An example is the way in which water authorities have for decades made the policy decision to keep water levels low and drain excess water quickly. If all wellbeing impact had been taken into account when these policies were adopted, the decision-making process might have been different. In that case, the considerations would have included the fact that while low water levels and groundwater abstraction facilitate agricultural activities and water storage capacity in the short term, in the longer term they are associated with additional CO₂ emissions, disruption of nature, decreasing suitability for future agricultural activities (due to soil subsidence) and damage to foundations (Rli, 2020; 2024).

How interests and values permeate decision-making on policy is also influenced by fragmentation within central government. This is because policy areas that have a high impact on wellbeing aspects are spread across different ministries, agencies and government departments, which do not always cooperate to the same degree. For example, in the early



1980s, the Ministry of Economic Affairs played a major role in subsidising chemical company DuPont to establish an additional plant in Dordrecht. In this decision, which had a major negative impact on the living environment and the health of residents, the then Ministry of Health and Environmental Hygiene was sidelined. Consequently, a significant emphasis was placed on the effects on the economy and employment while the effects on the environment and health were ignored (NOS, 2024).

In short, the institutional set-up affects decision-making on policy: the existing ‘choice architecture’ ensures that various wellbeing aspects are not given sufficient weight in policy development. In an earlier advisory report, we argued in this context that the choice architecture of mobility policy should be critically examined with a view to wellbeing (Rli, 2021a). We note here that this is needed in many more policy areas. Central government’s efforts thus far towards more careful policy preparation have not yet yielded sufficient results.¹²

All in all, we think that the structure of consultations and calculation models as well as the fragmented organisation of government merit reconsideration – not just at national level, but also at provincial, regional and municipal level. It is important that all interests are also represented at decentralised level when policy choices are made.

¹² In particular, we refer to the – inadequate – way central government uses the Policy Compass (formerly the Regulatory Impact Assessment). This is a tool that has been around since 2011. Ministries developing policies have not made sufficient use of these tools in recent years (JenV, 2021). The government has resolved to make better use of these tools (AZ, 2021).

3.4 Conclusion

The first step in promoting wellbeing is to determine the current situation within society with regard to aspects that are decisive for people’s wellbeing. To do that, the government can start by examining the state of affairs on eight themes: subjective well-being, health, consumption and income, education and training, spatial cohesion and quality, economic capital, natural capital and social capital. There are several methodological problems that need to be overcome when choosing representative indicators to monitor these themes. Nevertheless, consistently analysing wellbeing themes provides a rich overview of wellbeing in the Netherlands.

The next step in promoting wellbeing is to identify policy options to achieve improvements. It is advisable to explicitly state in advance which *values and trade-offs* are at stake in the various policy choices so it is clear to everyone what the choices are really about. This benefits the political decision-making process.

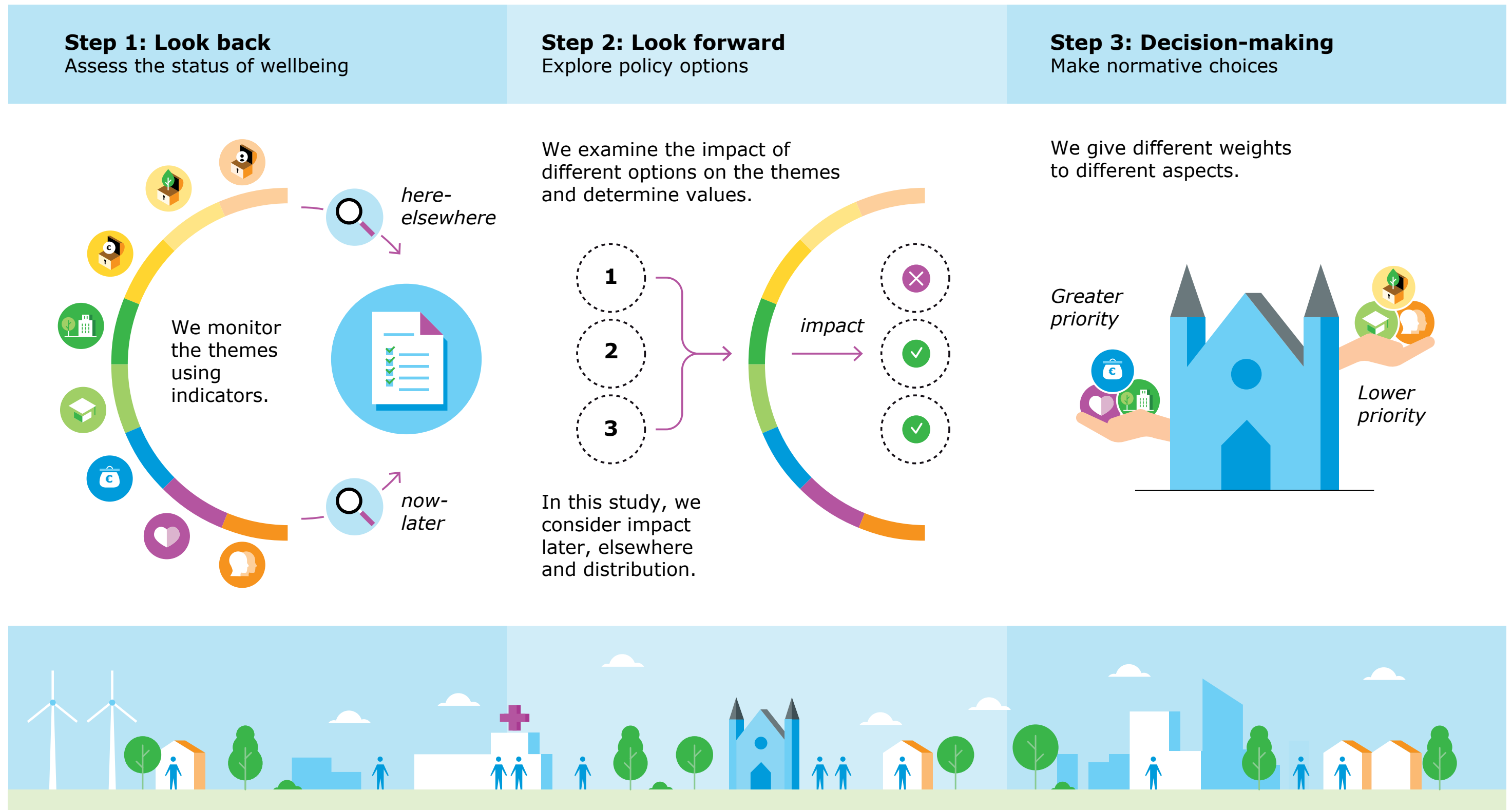
Different wellbeing goals will often be achieved in synergy. In the end, however, trade-offs, where certain objectives are given less weight than others, are inevitable. An open conversation about prioritising objectives and the values involved can help to arrive at considered and widely supported policy choices.



Finally, the government must consider redesigning some aspects of decision-making on policy options (i.e. choice architecture). Actually promoting wellbeing requires a better understanding of values and interests involved. By extension, groups representing non-established interests need to be more involved in decision-making. The procedures, calculation models and rules used also need to be adapted to allow for argumentation based on all relevant wellbeing aspects. Decision-making will also need to be less fragmented. This means more coordination on intended policy between policy sectors and between authorities at all levels of scale. A decision-making forum for this purpose is currently lacking in many cases.



Figure 2: Steps in promoting wellbeing





4 PROMOTING WELLBEING: THE PRACTICE

In this chapter, we explain the promotion of wellbeing from a more practice-oriented perspective. First of all, we discuss in chapter 4.1 at which levels of scale specific challenges in relation to wellbeing occur in the Netherlands and what this specifically means for each level of government in terms of control over these challenges. In chapter 4.2, we go on to explore the specific points to consider when promoting wellbeing in the different policy phases. In chapter 4.3, we discuss a number of barriers to promoting wellbeing. Chapter 4.4 summarises the findings from this chapter.

4.1 Levels of scale of wellbeing challenges

In this chapter, we discuss three levels of scale at which wellbeing challenges arise in the Netherlands. We start at the national level, then deal with the local level and finally turn to the regional level, as this is where the various wellbeing challenges converge.

4.1.1 National wellbeing challenges

For many challenges that affect wellbeing, national control and the formulation of national goals are essential. A good example is the role of green hydrogen in our future fossil-free economy.¹³ The necessary choices in relation to this topic require numerous considerations: geopolitical (which countries does the Netherlands want or not want to be dependent on), economic (what type of activities does the Netherlands want to use hydrogen for), financial (how much investment risk is the Dutch government prepared to take) and spatial (what are responsible spatial and infrastructural choices in relation to generation, transport and storage). National direction and the formulation of national goals and financial frameworks are also crucial in other sectors that play an important role in national wellbeing, such as the chip industry, agriculture and passenger and freight transport. The same applies to national direction on issues such as public health, water safety and energy supply.

Central government also plays an important guiding role when it comes to international themes that impact on our wellbeing. Examples include security within Europe, international agreements on climate policy and cross-border partnerships in relation to the water quality of our rivers and the international power grid.

¹³ The availability of green hydrogen can be seen as the wellbeing goal of a 'clean' energy supply. The same applies to the availability of wind and solar power and, although more controversial, nuclear power.

For many of the policy issues mentioned above, while central government sets the priorities and allocates budgets, specific decision-making on where and exactly how the goals will be achieved takes place at a lower level of scale. The role of central government here is to create frameworks within which decentralised public authorities, businesses and citizens can independently develop activities.

The effectiveness of the central government's promotion of wellbeing is reliant on its ability to fulfil its role properly in relation to provincial, regional and local authorities. So far, the way that this is done in practice is less than optimal. We already noted in Chapter 3 that, within central government, policy areas with a major impact on wellbeing aspects are divided among various ministries, agencies and government departments, which do not always coordinate their policies sufficiently among themselves. In practice, this fragmentation leads to the simultaneous imposition of different objectives on decentralised authorities by different policy areas. However: not everything can be done at the same time and some objectives conflict with others. In short, regional decisions need to be made by provinces and municipalities. In our view, all sections of central government should be involved in and committed to these decisions.

4.1.2 Local wellbeing challenges

At local level, there are very specific wellbeing challenges such as issues in housing, formal and informal care, nature, education, recreation areas and business activity. In many cases, it is possible to cleverly combine wellbeing goals in addressing these challenges. But heavy industry and a



healthy residential and living environment are difficult to combine, just like a motorway and a nature reserve. With such issues, the decision to enable one has implications for the realizability of the other.

The specific considerations on such issues (where people can and cannot undertake certain activities) are made at local level by provinces and municipalities. These are questions such as: where do we make space for business activity, education, sports and housing and where do we give priority to protecting nature, water, soil and air quality, people's quality of life and health? What goals do we spend money on?

A wellbeing mindset is in keeping with the creation of 'inclusive and sustainable communities' in society. In other words, there needs to be space in cities, villages and rural areas for all kinds of groups of citizens and all kinds of business activity, in a way that is sustainable in the long term and has no harmful side effects in other regions in the Netherlands and elsewhere in the world.

4.1.3 Interface of government-wide and local wellbeing challenges: the region

In the case of many wellbeing challenges, the region is an important level of scale for an effective approach. After all, various challenges, programmes and specific projects come together at regional level: on the one hand, the question of how and where the national objectives can be achieved and, on the other, how local projects and programmes can be coordinated in such a way as to avoid unnecessary duplication (for example the presence of

several swimming pools or megastores in one region). Coordination is also needed to avoid the omission of important actions within a region, such as reserving space for water storage during rainfall peaks or building housing for senior citizens.

For wellbeing challenges in the areas of well-being, care and education, defence, the labour market and culture, the region is also an extremely important level of scale: it is the day to day environment where people live and work and where they need certain facilities. And from a physical and ecological point of view, the region is also the logical working area for policy implementation in many cases. After all, streams and rivers, soil conditions, forests and moorlands care little for municipal boundaries.

In administrative terms, the region is not a legally enshrined entity: the Dutch constitution only distinguishes between central government, provinces, municipalities and water authorities as administrative levels of government. In practice, however, a great deal of coordination takes place on a regional scale. This is done through cooperative and consultation bodies in which municipalities and often provinces take part, such as the Amsterdam and Rotterdam-The Hague metropolitan regions, the safety regions (in which municipalities cooperate on fire services, disaster and crisis management, medical assistance, public order and safety), the housing regions (in which municipalities cooperate in making and implementing agreements on housing to be built) and the waste regions (in which municipalities cooperate on waste collection and processing).



Various tasks, challenges and requirements are therefore coordinated by regional consultation bodies. However, interviews we conducted in several regions in the context of this advisory report revealed that local administrators need more than just regional-scale coordination. They lack coordinated participation by central government with a focus on wellbeing in setting priorities and distributing money. Meeting the various conditions attached to financial contributions from different government ministries is a complicated task for local administrators.

We note that there is a need for structural coordination on cross-domain wellbeing challenges. Coordination is needed not only within central government, provinces and municipalities (for example on the conditions attached to financial schemes in various policy areas), but also between the different administrative levels of scale. This is because considerations, choices and decisions at one level of scale often affect other levels of scale. For example, the decision to allow the population of the municipality of Almere to grow to 350,000 has implications not only for the space needed within the municipal boundaries for housing, business activity and facilities, but also for (a) the way people will move around within the Amsterdam metropolitan region (b) the housing needs, business activity and facilities in surrounding municipalities such as Lelystad, Amsterdam, Huizen and Zeewolde, and (c) the distribution of population and business activity across other regions in the Netherlands.

4.2 Point to consider: adopting a ‘wellbeing perspective’ in every policy phase

There are four stages to promoting social issues:

1. formulating *goals and ambitions*;
2. mapping out a *strategy* and choosing the corresponding *policy*;
3. *implementing and realising* the policy; and
4. *monitoring and evaluating* policy implementation.

We explain these four phases here because there are specific points in each that require attention to ensure that the policy developed benefits wellbeing. In each phase, it is important to adopt a ‘wellbeing perspective’. This means that all themes relevant to the degree of wellbeing in a society (see chapter 2.2) need to be explicitly and consistently addressed in each phase (see, for example, CPB, 2023).

Below, we outline the points to consider in each of the four phases. We also state which tools can help the government in each of the phases to consistently maintain a focus on the impact on wellbeing during policy development:

1. *Goals and ambitions*

The first phase of policy development involves considering the ambitions and goals to be achieved and priorities therein. The initial step is to formulate a vision. This is done based on certain political preferences, but also on the basis of monitoring reports, evaluations of existing policy, interministerial policy studies or reports by bodies such as the Budget Margin Study Group. Tools of this type can be used to systematically



assess what policy visions mean for the eight wellbeing themes, for the dimensions here, now, later and elsewhere, and for distributional impact.

2. *Strategy and policy*

The second phase of policy development looks at how different issues are interrelated, what alternatives there are to achieve the set goals, what important values (for individual stakeholders, for groups and for society as a whole) are at stake, what are the anticipated costs and benefits and how will they be distributed. Comparing alternatives in terms of their impact on the eight wellbeing themes makes it possible to assess the pros and cons from a wellbeing perspective in political decision-making. Various tools can be used in this ex-ante policy analysis phase: an SCBA, an EIA, a PVE or other forms of citizen participation.

It is important to have a clear picture of the dilemmas involved in the various options (not just the consequences ‘here and now’ but also ‘later’ and ‘elsewhere’ and for the distribution of the wellbeing impact), so that politicians can make conscious and transparent decisions.

3. *Implementation and realisation*

The third phase of policy development involves policy implementation. Laws and regulations will need to be drawn up (tax rules, environment plans, subsidy schemes and so on). Investments will also need to be made (design and construction of roads and bridges, subsidies for innovative sustainable businesses and so on). In addition, there needs to be coordination with neighbouring municipalities and regions. It is important in this phase to use the eight wellbeing themes to look for ways to combine policy goals in such a way as to achieve an optimal balance between positive and negative wellbeing impact. Helpful tools in

this phase are monitoring of implementation and policy impact. In order to learn lessons, it is important to critically review implemented policy in an ex-post evaluation of both efforts (inputs) and direct results (outputs)..

4. *Monitoring and evaluation*

The fourth phase of policy development is designed to assess whether the ambitions and goals have been achieved. A picture is obtained of the wellbeing development in society (outcome) as a result of the policy pursued and other developments. Both evaluation and monitoring reports are useful tools in this phase. The eight themes that define wellbeing provide a framework for a clear and comprehensive picture of the above.

Adopting a ‘wellbeing perspective’ in each policy phase ensures that attention is paid to (a) the eight themes that are important for people’s well-being and (b) the effects that the policy has here and now, later and elsewhere, and (c) the distribution of effects of the policy across different groups, regions and time periods.

As the above list shows, different policy instruments are useful and necessary in different phases of the policy process. A monitor of wellbeing development in the previous year can help formulate goals and ambitions, while looking ahead to the effects of proposed policy is useful when preparing political decisions. By contrast, an SCBA of the entire past year’s government policy on Accountability Day is not a useful exercise, just as ex-ante project evaluations based on Statistics Netherlands’ Wellbeing Monitor do not provide sufficient direction for choosing between project



alternatives. While the tools should differ from phase to phase, they need to be mutually consistent by using the same wellbeing themes, definitions and units.

In practice, temporary reversals are regularly made within the policy process, resulting in certain phases being completed multiple times. For instance, information from a policy evaluation may lead to adjustments in the implementation of other policies. If, for example, the construction of a university of applied sciences has led to unexpected passenger flows to and from a municipality, this may result in the policy decision to make adjustments to the public transport timetable or impose different requirements on road and train infrastructure yet to be constructed. It may also be necessary to revert to earlier phases when working simultaneously on interrelated policy topics that are at different stages of elaboration.

4.3 Barriers to promoting wellbeing

In this chapter, we address three types of practical barriers that we have identified to promoting wellbeing: policy principles, rules and customs that are difficult to break (chapter 4.3.1), inadequate methods (chapter 4.3.2) and, last but not least, the dominant role of money in policy choices (chapter 4.3.3).

4.3.1 Principles, rules and customs that are difficult to break

A government that is promoting wellbeing uses a fundamentally different starting point for policy than usual. Because the way policy is traditionally

created is embedded in all kinds of existing institutions (see chapter 3.3.3.), it is difficult to operate in such a fundamentally different way. Many policy principles, legal rules and customs are fixed and mainly geared towards developing policy for individual sectors and promoting 'narrow' wellbeing. This has a negative impact on the practical implementation of wellbeing policy. The integrated area-specific perspective needed for effective wellbeing policy on a regional scale often comes up against institutional constraints. Below we describe two examples that illustrate this problem.

Example 1: money for local authorities cannot be spent on a cluster of wellbeing goals due to accountability requirements

The accountability requirements attached to specific benefits made available to local governments by central government impose restrictions on how the money can be spent. Spending conditions often include only a limited number of wellbeing aspects. For example, accountability requirements often unintentionally curtail opportunities to address several problems at the same time (Rli, 2023). A regional plan focusing on a range of wellbeing goals must, of necessity, be funded from different budgets. This means red tape delays in accounting for how the money is spent. Each ministry involved has different requirements. Implementation of plans for the Arnhem-Nijmegen Green Metropolitan Region and the neighbouring Foodvalley region has been brought to a halt for a considerable time by such complications. The question of whether societal goals are being achieved with the money seems to be less important than that recipient authorities are able to demonstrate that they have followed the correct procedures and met the conditions.



Example 2: no project funding because the intended impact on wellbeing does not fit within the legal framework

In some cases, promoting wellbeing is also complicated by the dominance of a particular mindset within a policy sector. One such case involves decision-making on a rail link from Amsterdam to Almere, known as the IJmeer line. The significance of that link for wellbeing aspects such as education, culture and housing was found to be inconsistent with the considerations in the Mobility Fund Act. As a result, no financing became available from this fund; see box.

Wellbeing gains from new rail link are not in line with Mobility Fund targets

Almere's population is projected to grow from 190,000 to 350,000 in the coming years. Not only does this require a substantial housing programme, but also consideration of employment, transport of people and goods, education, culture, nature creation and so on. Local and regional plans place a strong focus on wellbeing. Options discussed include completing the city by setting up a university and/or cultural institutions. A key pillar of the plans is the infrastructure to and from Almere, particularly motorways and rail links. However, in determining the contributions from the Mobility Fund, the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management was only able to take into account mobility effects. The legal framework of the fund did not allow for the consideration of other wellbeing impact. As a result, the rail link could not be established for a long time.

Both these examples clearly illustrate that promoting wellbeing calls existing routines into question. Effectively promoting wellbeing requires changes in stakeholder access to policy preparation and political decision-making. Currently, it is mainly lobbying organisations that are in a position to influence policy preparation and decision-making. Parties with new business models that can contribute to wellbeing have much less access to these phases of policy. The same applies to parties implementing or advocating projects that serve the interests of future generations or those of people elsewhere in the world.

We note that it is time to reconsider the prominence established interests have compared to other interests. This is crucial to achieving different choices and thus promoting wellbeing.

4.3.2 Inadequate methods

In chapter 3.1, we identified four methodological problems that theoretically hinder the analysis of existing wellbeing. The lack of appropriate criteria, indicators and measurement methods also turns out to be a barrier to the actual promotion of wellbeing. We explain this below.

1. In practice, the lack of an objective measure of 'the' wellbeing in society leads to slow progress in discussions about the pros and cons of major projects. For example, there have been decades of debate about whether or not to build the Lelylijn: a fast rail link between Amsterdam and Groningen. Different variants have been the subject of studies and SCBAs. It is tempting for interested parties to highlight a limited number



of partial outcomes from these studies to support their own preferences. Arguments such as ‘the other side is not looking at real wellbeing’ then arise. This essentially means: the other party is not properly taking into account my priorities. The lack of structured discussion on the values at stake makes it difficult to reach consensus on what exactly constitutes collective wellbeing.

2. Another practical issue is the problem that existing datasets provide indicators that are only of limited relevance for monitoring wellbeing. One example is the steering of a major project aimed at reducing traffic congestion in Maastricht by routing the A2 through a tunnel under the city. The SCBA for this project was invariably negative: the costs were much higher than the benefits. Eventually, the politicians decided it had to happen anyway. The CPB evaluated this project around 15 years later. The planning office came to the notable conclusion that the benefits were many times higher than anticipated. The main explanation was that the expected benefits had been primarily based on the reduction in congestion. The previously used indicators did not reveal that there were also significant benefits in the residential and living environment (CPB, 2018).
3. The fact that the exact relevance and significance of even objectively measurable indicators of wellbeing can be uncertain is also a regular problem in practice. For instance, although criteria to measure air quality had been available for a long time, it proved difficult to objectify the extent to which clean air would benefit residents’ health. It is only in recent decades that more has become known about the impact of air quality on the likelihood of people staying healthy in the long term or

developing certain conditions. At the same time, the importance attached to health has grown significantly.

4. Finally, we identified in chapter 3.1 the problem that some aspects of wellbeing are not objectively measurable. How do you determine whether a particular distribution of benefits and burdens is ‘fair’ or ‘sufficiently inclusive’, and how do you determine whether a measure contributes to the quality of spatial cohesion? In policy preparation tools, these aspects of wellbeing are often stated as ‘to be determined’, or points to consider. But in administrative practice, they are completely ignored and not taken into account either in official preparations or in political decision-making. And yet it is often perfectly possible to provide a general picture of these wellbeing aspects. For example, by estimating the impact that different variants of a decision will have on things like distributional issues, inclusiveness issues or spatial issues. Or by consulting residents, specialist representatives or scientific experts on the expected policy impact on these kinds of subjective wellbeing aspects.

The examples just given make it clear that the definition of wellbeing is not consistently applied in practice, taking into account all relevant (including non-quantitative and uncertain) aspects of wellbeing. The danger is then a risk of opportunism in justifying policy choices. When touting their policy proposals, politicians and administrators can easily point one-sidedly to ‘proven’ positive effects for wellbeing, while omitting to mention other, negative effects. In particular, long-term effects and effects that occur elsewhere in the world are often left out of the equation.



Societal validation of scientific knowledge, whereby insights are tested among citizens and businesses, can help achieve greater objectivity in policy justification and greater support for the policy itself.

4.3.3 Dominant role of money in policy choices

Money traditionally plays a dominant role in promoting wellbeing. Because when all is said and done, the implementation of policy plans and projects depends to a large extent on (a) whether sufficient funds are available to cover the costs and (b) whether the benefits sufficiently outweigh the costs. Standards have been set for this (partly at European level, partly at national level): a maximum budget deficit (no more than 3% of the total budget), a maximum public debt (no more than 60% of GDP) and a minimum rate of return (at least 2.25% of the total investment). The latter standard, known as the discount rate, is relatively unknown, but it has a major effect on how future costs and benefits factor into decisions; see box.

Return requirements for policies and investments: the discount rate

Central government uses an established method to calculate what the minimum return on policy should be. This involves extrapolating future expected costs and benefits of a public investment project or public policy to the present. This extrapolation is necessary to compare the present costs (and the resulting interest charges) to the future revenues. The higher the rate of return used (officially the 'discount rate'), the less weight is given in the calculation to costs and benefits in the near or distant future (Finance, 2020). The discount rate thus determines not

only how effects that occur at different points in time can be made more comparable within current generations, but also how policy effects can be taken into account for future generations.

In order to effectively promote wellbeing, policy proposals must also consider whether the plans meet other, non-financial preconditions. Examples include protecting fragile nature or ensuring a safe living environment. The current government standards for policy costs and benefits and the budgeting process do not systematically address such preconditions. The impact of policy plans on the eight wellbeing themes, in other words including our natural, economic and social capital, is usually not explicitly examined.¹⁴ What this means in concrete terms can be illustrated by looking at the policy that has been put in place in recent decades to enable the growth of Schiphol Airport. Politicians and administrators have mainly looked at the economic and financial effects of this policy on the Netherlands. The effects on natural capital (greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, or healthy nature) and the effects on social capital (pleasurable living conditions, trust in institutions, sense of security) were only taken into account to a very limited extent.

¹⁴ A great deal of research and methodology development has already been carried out for the purpose of measuring and calculating social and natural capital and associated discount rates. The National Economic & Social Council of Ireland (NESC, 2024) and Brander et al. (2024) provide overviews of research on natural capital. Research on social capital is discussed, among others, by the Social & Human Capital Coalition (2019).



No firm agreements have as yet been reached on how the government deals with the impact of policy on social, economic and natural capital, and what ecological and social limits need to be observed in this context. Conversely, the government has indeed reached firm agreements when it comes to the impact of policy on the budget deficit, public debt and financial returns. There is no budget that also includes the ‘income and expenditure’ and ‘public finances’ of our social, economic and natural capital. The result is a persistently noncommittal approach to promoting wellbeing.

4.4 Conclusion

Wellbeing challenges occur at various levels of scales in the Netherlands. For some challenges (in areas such as public health, water safety, energy supply and national security), central government is primarily responsible for promoting wellbeing. Many other challenges (for example the design of public spaces, the development of residential areas, primary and secondary education, recreation areas and business activity) mainly occur at local level. The various challenges come together at regional level: on the one hand, the question of how to contribute to national objectives and, on the other, the question of how to coordinate local programmes in such a way that no actions are duplicated within the region and no actions are forgotten.

There is a need for structural coordination between the levels of scale at which wellbeing challenges are addressed in our country. There is currently a lack of coordination, both within central government (where insufficient emphasis is often placed on wellbeing considerations and

attention is mostly fragmented across separate policy areas) and between administrative levels of scale. The sectoral perspective plays a dominant role in policy development, implementation and monitoring. There is no regional decision-making table where joint assessments are made between levels of scale, sectors and interests.

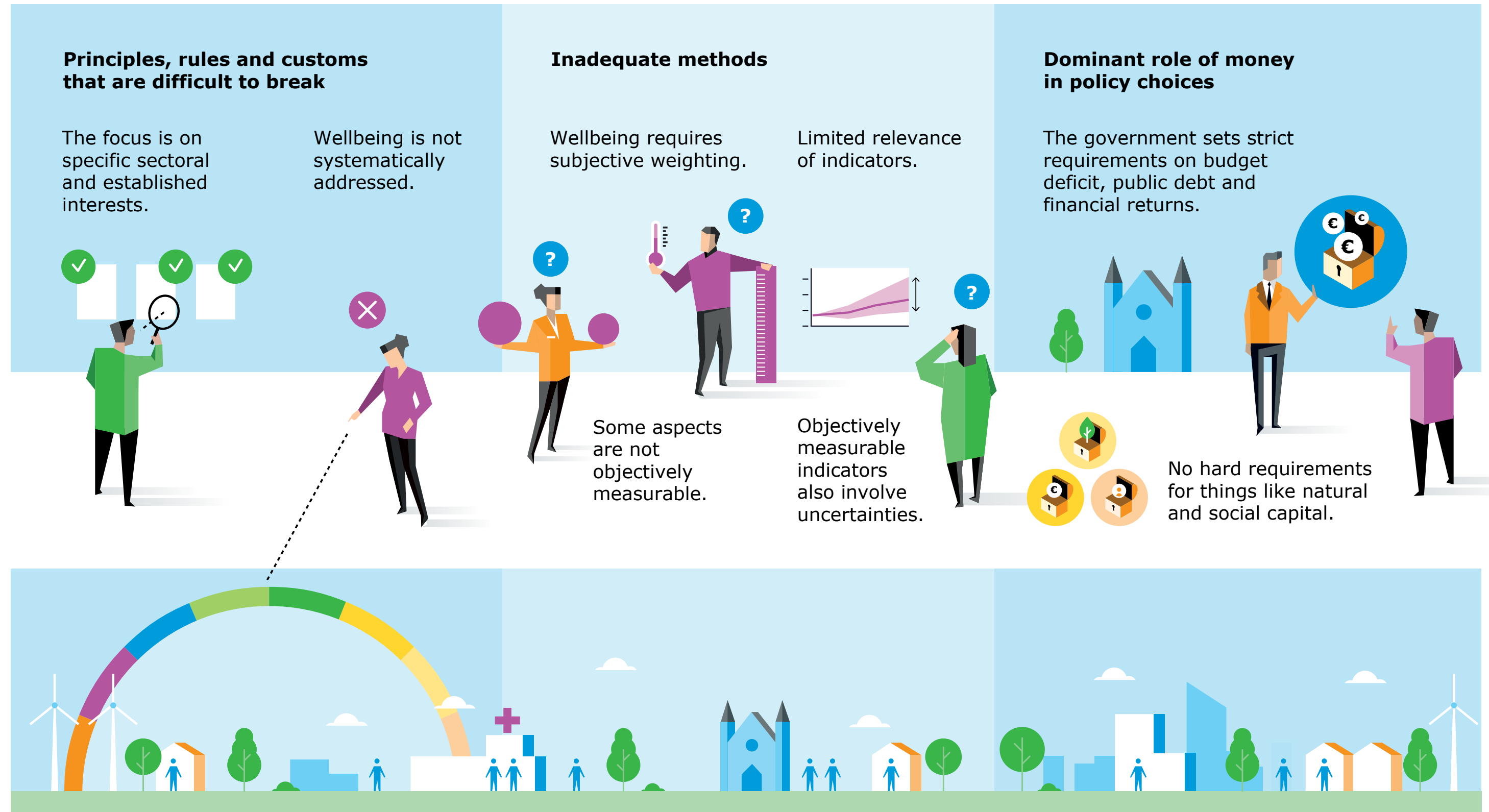
At each policy stage, there are specific issues that require attention to ensure that policies benefit wellbeing. Adopting a ‘wellbeing perspective’ should ensure that attention is paid at every stage, from the formulation of goals and ambitions to monitoring and evaluation, to the aspects that are important for people’s well-being and to the consequences of policy – not just here and now, but also later and elsewhere.

In practice, unfortunately, there are still several barriers to actually promoting wellbeing:

- Many established policy principles, legal rules and customs are aligned with ‘narrow’ wellbeing goals and established interests. As a result, broader wellbeing considerations are not systematically addressed.
- Several methodological problems cloud the view of exactly what wellbeing entails. This encourages opportunism in justifying policy choices.
- When dealing with social, economic and natural capital, the government does not impose hard requirements – while it does impose requirements when it comes to the budget deficit, public debt and the financial return on policy.



Figure 3: Types of barriers





5 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusions

The aim of promoting wellbeing is to take into account ‘everything people consider of value’ in decision-making. This involves the economy as well as society and the living environment, the here and now, elsewhere and later, and the distribution of wellbeing between groups and regions. Careful use of wellbeing can help the government create greater transparency in complex administrative deliberations and arrive at ‘better’ decisions.

The government is already implementing policy on many aspects of wellbeing. Does this mean that wellbeing is actually already being promoted? This would be the logical, but an erroneous, conclusion. The tools available to systematically analyse the wellbeing impact of policy options are not yet sufficiently mature and those that are in place are not used effectively. As a result, distributional impact and trade-offs made with other policy issues are not sufficiently taken into account. Furthermore, no clear requirements have been imposed in terms of how to approach economic, natural and social capital. In short, politicians are currently not sufficiently facilitated to make wellbeing considerations. This creates room for opportunistic and selective use of the available policy information – it

becomes a lucky dip, from which arguments can be pulled out for or against certain proposals at will.

Promoting wellbeing requires tools that systematically collect information on the effects of intended policies on all wellbeing themes, both here and now and elsewhere and later, and on the distribution of those effects between different groups and regions. The wellbeing themes cannot simply be lumped together into a single figure because of their disparity and distribution issues.

In promoting wellbeing, politicians make normative considerations and choices. It is important that available instruments, appropriate to the different policy phases, are deployed consistently so that these normative choices are also on the table for politicians.

Clear requirements are needed to ensure that the effects of proposed policies on our economic, natural and social capital are properly taken into account when promoting wellbeing. There are currently no disciplining frameworks that force administrators and politicians to consider the impact of their policy decisions on our future earning power, on the connections between people, on the quality of nature and the environment and so on. The future benefits and burdens for wellbeing therefore remain invisible. As a result, the long-term consequences for wellbeing are not sufficiently taken into account in policy development.

The effective promotion of wellbeing also requires policy choices for different sectors (housing, energy, nature and so on) to be made in conjunction with each other. This is not happening enough at the moment. Government policy is mainly formulated through targets and budgets by sector. The coordination needed to make this more coherent is lacking, which has a particularly big impact at regional level. One of the reasons for this is that the region is not a legally enshrined tier of government. As a result, regions do not have a democratically mandated 'table' where elected administrators can make wellbeing considerations in mutual coordination.

All in all there are still many obstacles to the effective promotion of wellbeing by the government. Numerous ingrained habits, thinking patterns and assumptions, as well as the way government is organised are delaying the necessary change to a different, broader promotion of wellbeing. In short, a substantial culture change is needed, in politics as well as in official support, in order to effectively promote wellbeing.



5.2 Recommendations

We make four recommendations to the government in this advisory report. Each recommendation concerns an adjustment in the way decisions are made in order to more effectively promote wellbeing. Some of our recommendations can already be implemented in the short term, while others will take more time and elaboration, enabling a gradual shift towards promoting wellbeing.

5.2.1 Ensure better tools for gathering and providing access to policy information

Short-term improvements are needed to the existing tools for gathering and providing access to the information needed by politicians to make informed decisions on wellbeing policy options. These improvements need to make policy information on wellbeing easier to use in policy-making and enable politicians and administrators to make their normative considerations in a more explicit (and thus more transparent) way. This can be achieved by:

- providing information in each phase of policy-making using the appropriate tools for that phase (see chapter 4.2), and making existing tools consistent with each other where necessary;
- where necessary, supplementing these tools so that they clarify the effects on all eight wellbeing themes (see chapter 2.2), including the anticipated effects 'later' and 'elsewhere' and including the anticipated distribution between groups and regions;
- deploying these tools to identify possible 'trade-offs' between wellbeing goals;

- using statistical calculations in the tools as much as possible and, where this is not possible, providing other types of relevant information so that no blind spots remain;
- instructing those who prepare policy information to add an analysis that addresses the quality of and uncertainties associated with the information.

We are of the opinion that some improvements can also be made to the social cost-benefit analysis (SCBA) tool. We have included our suggestions for this in Part 2 Chapter 2 of this advisory report.

5.2.2 Make systematic use of policy information provided when making normative policy choices

In order to promote wellbeing, politicians and administrators need policy information that clearly sets out the available normative choices and the trade-offs associated with certain policy options. An important element of this information is the different perspectives on issues and possible solutions of groups of citizens, businesses, civil society organisations and age groups, among others. Paying targeted attention to the diversity of values in society enables the government to more effectively take into account the wellbeing impact for specific groups or specific regions when considering policy choices. We recommend that politicians make systematic and targeted use of the policy information provided when normatively assessing the (often disparate) effects of policy options and when justifying the choices made.



It is also crucial that administrators and politicians can compare the medium-term and long-term effects of various policy alternatives *at the right time*. Fundamental decisions about things like housing and spatial planning (location choices for large construction sites), mobility (choices for a certain means of transport or a certain connection between cities) or energy (choices for certain energy carriers) are often made at an early stage. As a result, the possibility of taking a fundamentally different path disappears from the outset. Policy alternatives can then only be compared *within the choice already made*. Opportunities to effectively promote wellbeing are therefore missed.

The government will need to explicitly address the eight wellbeing themes during budgeting, planning and accountability, including anticipated policy effects ‘later’ and ‘elsewhere’ and including distributional impact.¹⁵

5.2.3 Prepare to include capital budget in the national budget

We recommend that, under the leadership of the Minister of Finance, a procedure be developed that ensures government decisions take into account our financial, economic, social and natural capital. Specifically, it is important to ensure that the national budget reflects the impact of the proposed policy (of individual ministries as well as of central government as a whole) on the deployment and development of each of the four capitals, in monetary terms or otherwise. This will have a disciplining effect on the approach to each of the capitals. In time, the effect of this procedure will also need to extend to the budgets (and accountabilities) of decentralised

¹⁵ This is in line with the advice of the 17th Budget Margin Study Group to have planning agencies reflect on the development of wellbeing in the national budget (17e Studiegroep Begrotingsruimte, 2023).

public authorities. In order to effectively manage future costs and revenues on each of the four capitals, it is imperative that in the national budget – following the example of most countries in the EU and decentralised public authorities in the Netherlands – the current commitment-cash accounting system is converted to an accrual accounting system as soon as possible.

We realise that focusing on protecting and enhancing our social, economic and natural capital is largely uncharted territory for central government. Nevertheless, there is a lot of knowledge and experience available, for example in some municipalities¹⁶ that have climate budgets, to enable steps to be taken in this direction. Existing methods and information (including from organisations such as the United Nations and the World Bank) can provide insight into the impact of our actions on all capitals.

This recommendation can be achieved by:

- asking the planning agencies CPB, PBL and SCP to develop a method for budgets for the various capitals and gradually improve this method;
- starting with some major government programmes, such as the National Environmental Programme, the National Rural Area Programme and the National Quality of Life and Safety Programme, and learning from the experience gained through these programmes;
- practicing with the disciplining effect of budgets by including all capitals in the public finance planning and control cycle. Future needs, pre-established standards (e.g. the Paris climate agreement) and social

¹⁶ Including Breda, Amsterdam and Eindhoven.



reform processes can be examined to determine the annual budget margin for each of the capitals.

5.2.4 Increase opportunities for regional coordination aimed at wellbeing

To effectively promote wellbeing requires making cross-sectoral decisions on synergy (combining objectives in a single policy choice) and trade-offs (prioritising one objective at the expense of another). Municipalities, provinces, water authorities and central government all have administrations within the Dutch system of government that can be held responsible for making such assessments. However, many challenges and objectives converge at *regional level*. And it is at this level that such democratically mandated governance is lacking, since regions are not a legally enshrined tier of government. Different tiers of government need each other to tackle complex regional challenges (Rli, 2019).

As we have previously advised (see Rli, ROB & RVS, 2023), it would be good if the various tiers of government and their sectoral representatives agreed on their contribution to improving wellbeing on the basis of regional opportunity agendas. This requires the following:

- Decentralised authorities in the regions would need, in consultation with residents, local and regional businesses and civil society organisations, to produce regional opportunity agendas for developing wellbeing. These opportunity agendas can set out coherent possible solutions to challenges put forward by the region itself or formulated by central government or the European Union.

- For coordination on a regional scale, central government could set up multidisciplinary teams chaired (per region) by one general central government representative with a clearly defined mandate. This representative would then have the power to negotiate and reach agreements with the decentralised authorities on interrelated wellbeing challenges within different sectors.
- Central government would need to adjust the system it uses to account for the deployment of budgets that are made available by the government via specific payments and from the Municipalities or Provinces Fund. This system must create scope to account for spending on wellbeing. This will require the sector-specific budgets of the different tiers of government to be partially decompartmentalised.

5.3 Final remarks

Promoting wellbeing does not make the work of politicians and administrators easier, however it does improve the scrupulousness with which decisions are made and increases their enforceability. With the above recommendations, we aim to contribute to the quality of official preparation and political decision-making. Our recommendations can be seen as an encouragement to continue existing wellbeing efforts and improve them where necessary.

Some of our recommendations can be implemented in the short term. However, enhancing the budget methodology and strengthening regional coordination are expected to take more time. This is because the changes

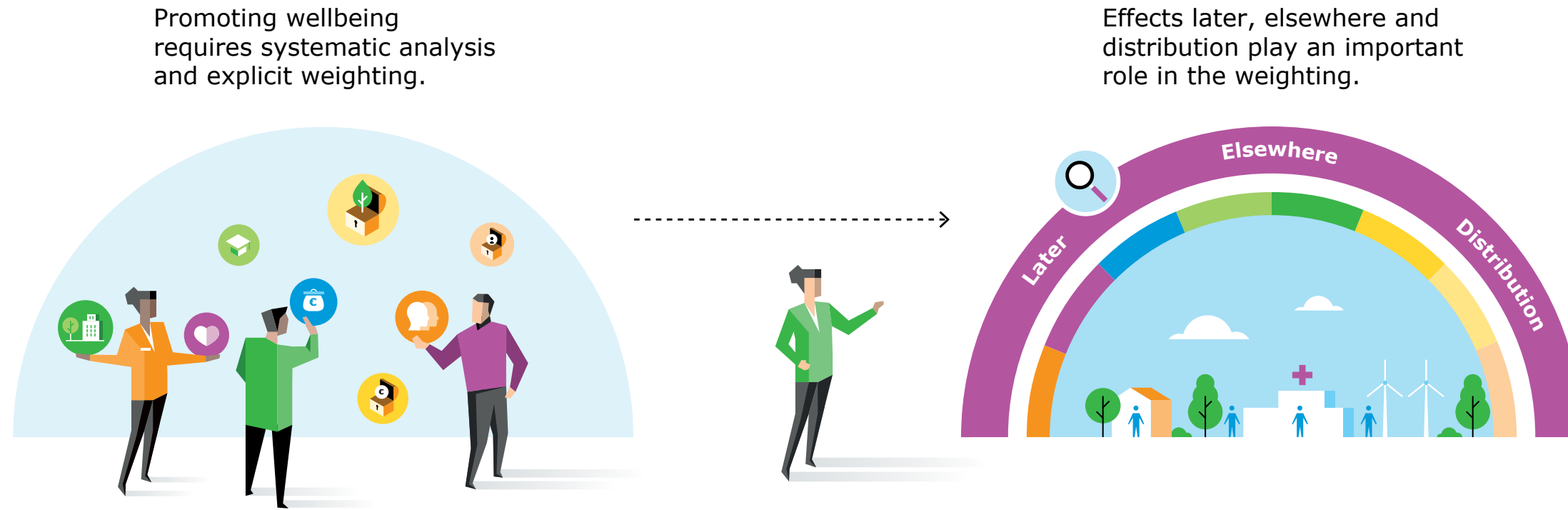


required are not only methodological in nature, but, as mentioned above, also require a culture change.

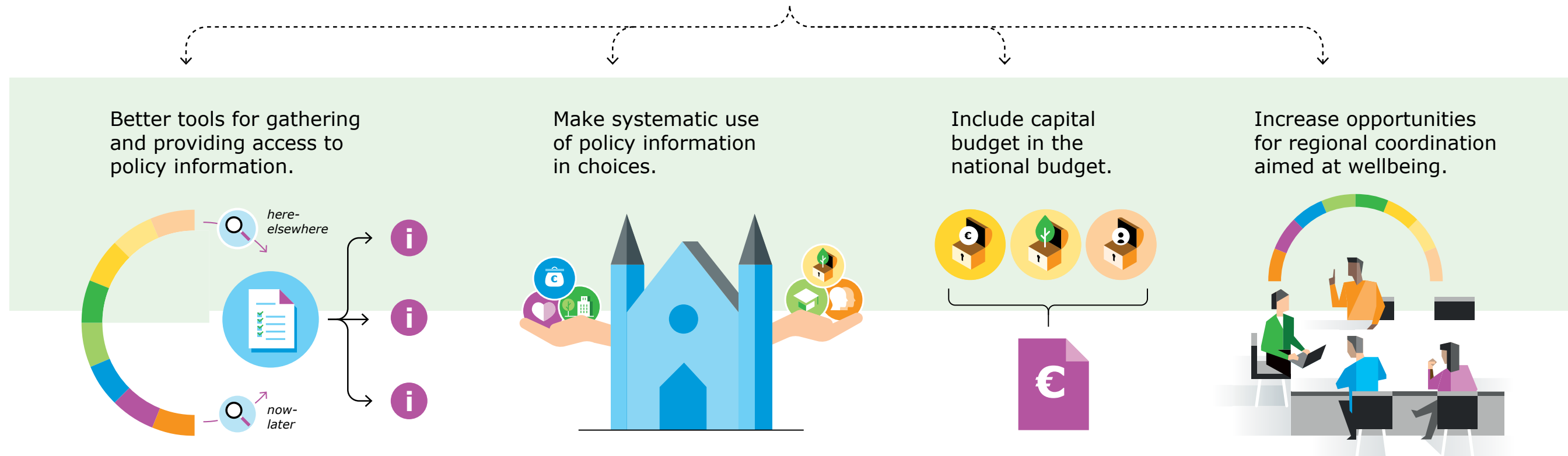
Finally, we realise that following and implementing our advice will prompt other follow-up questions, for example when it comes to increasing the desired regional coordination. However, we have chosen to confine ourselves to the essentials, not least because it is not easy to answer all these follow-up questions in one advisory report.



Figure 4: Conclusions and recommendations



What changes are needed?



1 METHODS TO DEVELOP A PICTURE OF WELLBEING AND ITS IMPACT

A number of the methods commonly used to develop a picture of wellbeing are explained below.

Planning agencies

Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis [CPB] and the Netherlands Institute for Social Research [SCP] are currently jointly developing a method to integrate wellbeing into the budget cycle. The plan is to have the details ready in 2025. The table shows the themes used by the planning agencies, with a brief explanation.

Themes that determine the level of wellbeing people experience		Explanation (according to: CPB, PBL & SCP, 2022)
1	Subjective wellbeing	Subjective wellbeing includes attitudes towards life, personal experiences and how people value their lives.
2	Health	Health involves physical diseases and conditions, but also mental health, living with disabilities (the functional aspect of health), perceived health, control over one's life and resilience (positive health).
3	Consumption and income	Consumption and income provide the opportunity to meet needs, pursue goals in life and acquire a certain social status. Work and assets are the main sources of income.
4	Education and training	The education provided to people and the resulting level of education, professional competence and learning and development capacity of the population affect the quality of society.
5	Spatial cohesion and quality	Spatial quality and cohesion require that the spatial layout is not only functional now (value in use), but will also be so in the future (future value). In addition, the aesthetic quality of spatial planning affects wellbeing (experiential value).
6	Economic capital	Economic capital consists of human capital (competences, knowledge and skills), physical capital (machinery, buildings and infrastructure); knowledge capital (R&D, data and patents) and financial capital (household and government assets). Both the stock and distribution of economic capital are important for wellbeing.

Themes that determine the level of wellbeing people experience		Explanation (according to: CPB, PBL & SCP, 2022)
7	Natural capital	Natural capital includes raw materials (ores and minerals, fossil fuels such as coal, petroleum, natural gas), renewable biotic resources such as production services (wood, food), regulatory services (filtering rainwater for drinking water) and cultural services (quality of nature and landscape), and finally abiotic flows (solar, wind, hydropower and geothermal energy).
8	Social capital	Social capital involves both connections between people and groups (horizontal) and connections between citizens and government (vertical). Terms such as security, and trust in fellow human beings and in institutions play a major role here.

Statistics Netherlands monitor

Statistics Netherlands (CBS) publishes an annual national wellbeing monitor in May at the request of the House of Representatives on Accountability Day and an annual regional wellbeing monitor in December (CBS, 2024c).

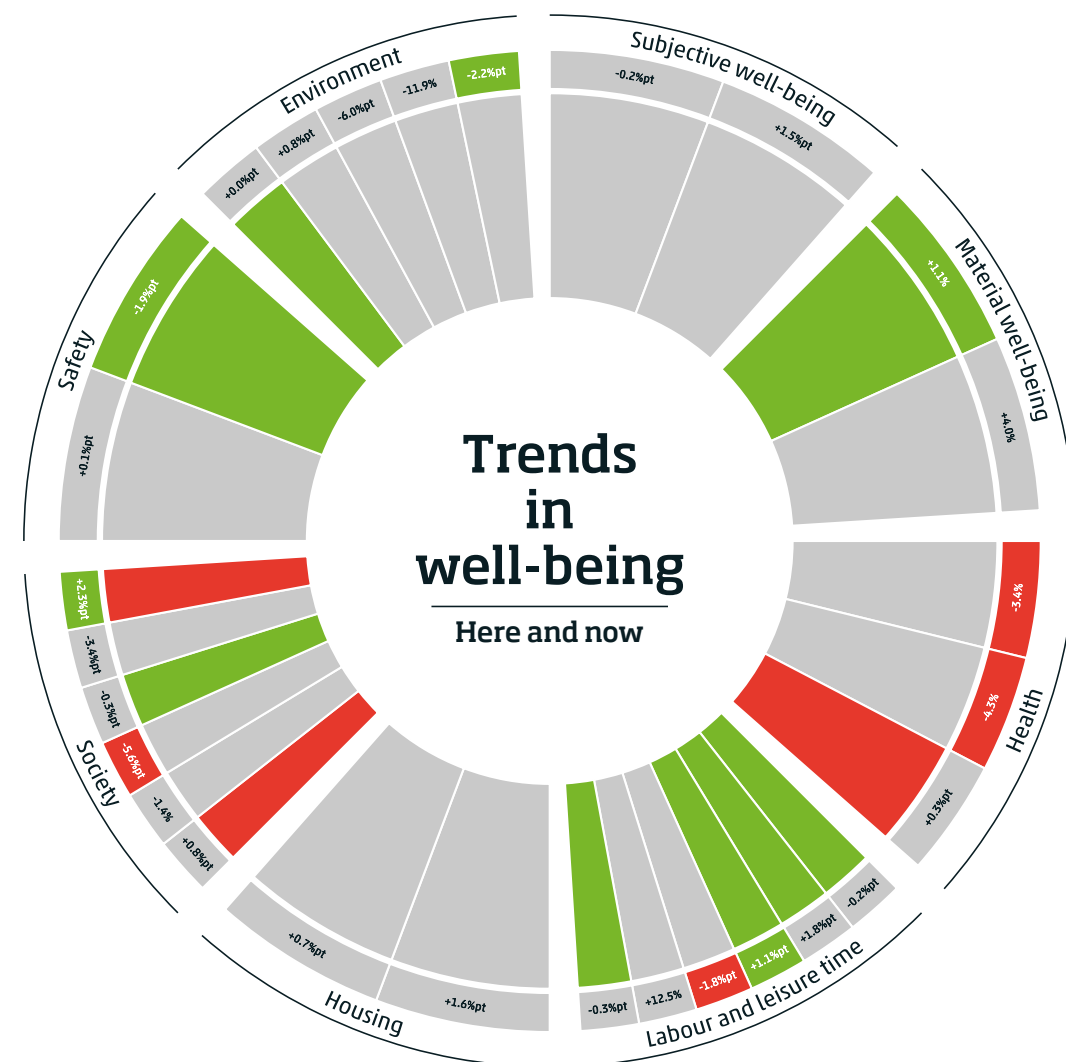
Both monitors have been compiled in accordance with the *CES Recommendations for Measuring Sustainable Development* (United Nations, 2014).¹⁷ The classification into themes differs slightly from the classification used by the planning agencies discussed above. The themes identified by Statistics Netherlands are: subjective wellbeing, material wellbeing, health, labour and leisure, housing, society, safety and environment.

¹⁷ These are recommendations drawn up jointly by the United Nations, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development and Eurostat.



The figure below shows the development of various themes. For each indicator (a 'wedge' in this figure), the trend over the past year (outer ring) is shown, with green indicating a positive trend and red a negative one, and the trend over the past eight years (inner ring).

Figure 5: Development of wellbeing trends



Source: CBS, 2024c

Statistics Netherlands shows the dimension 'later' separately using four types of capital: economic, natural, human and social, with human capital mainly referring to labour. The dimension 'elsewhere' represents wellbeing impact in other countries resulting from trade and aid by the Netherlands, and effects on environment and resource availability elsewhere in the world.

Better Well-being Index

Rabobank and Utrecht University have been working with the Better Well-being Index (BWI) they developed since 2016. The BWI is an aggregated indicator of trends and regional differences in wellbeing.¹⁸ Eleven themes have been brought together in a single indicator to present developments in a simple manner. The underlying indicators and themes are given, along with survey research, for further analysis and explanation.

Social cost-benefit analysis (SCBA)

Social cost-benefit analysis (SCBA) is a tool to evaluate and perform an ex ante assessment of the effects of policy alternatives and specific projects. In its original form, the SCBA expresses expected effects in monetary terms wherever possible. As a result, SCBAs focus relatively heavily on quantitative aspects of wellbeing.

A supplement to the General SCBA Guide was published in 2022 (CPB & PBL, 2022). This supplementary guidance shifts the focus of the SCBA

¹⁸ See [Better Well-being Index - Better Well-being - Utrecht University \(uu.nl\)](https://www.uu.nl/better-well-being)



beyond traditional economic factors. The new-style SCBA described in the supplementary guidance also considers distributional impact, effects on future generations and possible effects elsewhere. In addition, the supplement to the guidance outlines ways to include non-quantitative effects and use the SCBA not only as a 'hard calculation tool' but also as a conceptual framework.

Participatory Value Evaluation (PVE)

The Participatory Value Evaluation (PVE) is a method of consulting large groups (thousands to tens of thousands) of citizens on a government issue. The evaluation usually focuses on a plan that is yet to be implemented. Participants are put in the driver's seat, so to speak. In an online environment, they are presented with the choice the administrator needs to make. They are given an overview of the pros and cons of the options available to the administrator and the constraints involved (such as a limited budget or mandatory target). They are then asked what they would advise the administrator. Finally, citizens explain their choices, providing a clear picture of their preferences and reasons.

The PVE is not the only method of gathering information on general public opinion. Surveys and focus groups, for example, can also perform this function.

Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA)

An environmental impact assessment (EIA) identifies the environmental consequences of a plan. Considerations include landscape values, nature, odour, noise, air quality, soil, water and safety. The assessment outlines the

expected impact of projects such as the construction of a wind farm, a road or a new business park. Alternative solutions are also described.

Regional Impact Assessment (RIA)

A regional impact assessment (RIA) identifies the potential social, economic and environmental side effects of policy choices. An RIA has a broader scope than the environmental aspects highlighted in an environmental impact assessment (EIA). An RIA also incorporates themes such as health, social cohesion, energy transition and climate adaptation.

Policy compass and impact scan

The Policy Compass (formerly the Regulatory Impact Assessment) is a policy development support tool used by central government since 2011. The compass outlines five steps in which policy can be developed. There is a focus on due process, involvement of relevant stakeholders, quality requirements and consideration of different policy options.

A specific tool within the Policy Compass is the 'impact scan' (see kabr.nl). The scan is designed to help systematically consider the implications of policy options.

Wise Cube

TNO has developed a set of tools that can be used to understand the effects on well-being by population group in terms of perceived physical and mental health, social connectedness, sense of autonomy and safety in advance of developing policy initiatives (see, for example, Vonk et al.,



2022). This results in a visualisation of impacts that is used for stakeholder dialogues to achieve a more informed decision-making process.

Other methods

A more comprehensive overview of methods available to address wellbeing at different stages of policy development and in different practical situations can be found in the toolbox Getting started with wellbeing. An exploratory study of how the Directorate-General for Public Works and Water Management can use existing instruments to promote wellbeing (IenW, 2022). PON & Telos have also developed a guide to applying wellbeing as a conceptual framework for governance and policy (PON & Telos, 2024).

2 POSSIBLE ADJUSTMENTS TO THE SCBA TOOLS

The social cost-benefit analysis (SCBA) tool has been discussed several times in this advisory report. We have noted that improvements are needed in the tool and in its use if it is to contribute to the effective promotion of wellbeing by the government. In this chapter, we make some suggestions.

Improving the SCBA tool

There are at least three main improvements to be made to the SCBA tool:

- The first improvement is to resolve issues that are currently included in the SCBA as to be determined (TBD). This can be done by working towards setting prices for effects that can be quantified but lack a monetary valuation for the time being. One example is the system of ecopoints, which allows a 'shadow price' to be assigned to environmental impact. This approach makes it possible to draw a financial comparison between policy effects within the SCBA system. However, it is important to regularly reassess the shadow prices during this process.

It is also necessary to examine whether a shadow price can be set for other aspects. The advantage of this approach is that: (a) alternatives can be weighed against each other on aspects that would otherwise be left out of the equation as TBD items, (b) alternatives can be tested for their



sensitivity to changes in shadow prices and (c) wellbeing assessments can be made that transcend policy domains and individual decisions.

- The second improvement needed is the standard inclusion of a qualitative reflection by the authors of the SCBA report. In this reflection, authors must at least consider wellbeing aspects not covered in the SCBA and whether the policy alternatives identified in the SCBA systematically 'score' differently on these aspects. This ensures that the relevant wellbeing aspects are taken into consideration.
- The third improvement needed concerns the distributional and redistributive impact of policy. If the underlying modelling already includes information on such impact, this information can be presented more clearly and as a regular feature. And if the information is not available, this impact can at least be identified in socio-economic and spatial terms.

Improving the use of SCBA reports in the decision-making process

The SCBA is a tool used in the *policy preparation* phase (see chapter 4.2). It is important that SCBA reports are utilised in the *decision-making* phase. There are at least two points to consider to ensure efficient utilisation in that phase:

- The first point to consider relates to the *timing and scope* of the use of the SCBA. In many cases, major decisions are already made before the tool is deployed (Rli, 2021a). For example, decisions are already being made to build a road or railway without making the underlying goals explicit or considering them in the context of wellbeing.

Possible alternatives for regional accessibility or regional socio-economic development are therefore left out of the equation.

- The second point to consider concerns the use of the rich information from an SCBA report. Narrowing this information down to just one or two overall figures means that the actual trade-offs in different variants remain implicit and are no longer part of the political consideration.



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Original title

Waardevol Regeren: sturen op brede welvaart

Copy editing (Dutch version)

Saskia van As, Tekstkantoor Van As, Amsterdam

Infographics

VormVijf/Jeroen van Ingen, The Hague, The Netherlands
(pages 16, 31, 42 and 49)

Photo credits

Cover: Freepik / Freepik.com

Page 5: Amsterdam Zuidas / Jan Vonk

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Graphic design

Jenneke Drupsteen Grafische vormgeving, The Hague, The Netherlands

Publication Rli 2024/04

July 2024

Translation

Acolad, Maastricht, The Netherlands

Preferred citation

Council for the Environment and Infrastructure (2024).
Meaningful Government: Promoting Wellbeing. The Hague.

ISBN 978-90-83469-72-0

NUR740

