

# SYSTEMIC FAILURE IN POLICY ON THE LIVING ENVIRONMENT

A PROBLEM EXPLORATION

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# CONTENTS

**Systemic failure in policy on the living environment: a problem exploration**  
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**1 INTRODUCTION ..... 4**

**2 TACKLING LIVING ENVIRONMENT PROBLEMS LAGS BEHIND AMBITIONS 4**

**3 AN EXPLORATION OF DRIVERS OF 'SYSTEMIC FAILURE' ..... 6**

    3.1 *The nature of the problems has changed ..... 6*

    3.2 *The social conditions in which problems need to be solved have  
    changed ..... 7*

    3.3 *Institutional relationships no longer fit today's problems ..... 8*

    3.4 *Technocratic solutions and insufficient articulation of values ..... 14*

**4 TO CONCLUDE ..... 16**

**REFERENCES ..... 17**

**COMPILATION OF THIS REPORT ..... 18**

**OVERVIEW OF PUBLICATIONS ..... 18**



# 1 INTRODUCTION

A substantial number of challenges in the living environment have been formulated in Dutch policy, which together may drastically change the use of space, the economy and society as a whole over time. Measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, adapt to climate change, combat pollution, reduce the housing shortage, strengthen nature and produce healthy food all require far-reaching choices for a future-proof Netherlands.

We have been aware of the issues related to climate, biodiversity and raw material transitions and other issues in the living environment for a long time. The intentions to meet the set targets are enshrined in policies, laws and agreements. Moreover, the policy ambitions are still constantly being refined. Progress is being made in many areas as well, yet many key living environment dossiers have so far failed to achieve the intended results or bring them within reach. In the scope of the tasks, it is uncertain whether all ambitions will actually be realised.

Why is that? The interplay between government, the market and the community does not seem to function sufficiently well to bring about effective and supported solutions to the complex issues in the living environment. Each time, government interventions (or a lack thereof) and the free market do not or not yet appear to be delivering the outcomes deemed necessary for society.

In this exploration, we refer to this mangled interplay as 'systemic failure in living environment policy.' As a result of that systemic failure, problems in the living environment are now undeniably piling up.

Below, in Chapter 2, we show broadly that the ambitions are not yet being met for several living environment dossiers. We discussed this issue with a number of experts and thinkers from diverse backgrounds and searched the literature for the characteristics, causes and consequences of this alleged systemic failure. In Chapter 3, based on that exploration, we outline some of the underlying causes of the lack of effective solutions to the problems in the living environment.

# 2 TACKLING LIVING ENVIRONMENT PROBLEMS LAGS BEHIND AMBITIONS

There are bottlenecks with major societal consequences in various aspects of the living environment, be it housing, accessibility, water, nature, environmental pollution, climate, raw materials, food supply, energy supply or hazardous substances. Politicians and media talk about 'crises' with great regularity, but many of these issues have been around for decades and are more a case of overdue maintenance than a crisis. Some problems in the living environment call for changes that will turn our whole way of doing things upside down, such as in energy and food supply, a different approach to raw materials and the switch to a nature-inclusive society (so-called transitions). Other issues, such as the housing shortage and the reduction of pollution and hazardous substances, are not necessarily different from before, but they are very complex and heavily affect people's lives and living environment. Moreover, the Netherlands is facing more major challenges and transitions, for instance in the labour market, healthcare and education. We have omitted these here and concentrated on problems with a clear living environment component.

The aforementioned transitions and other problems in the living environment are interdependent because they all need to be solved in the same scarce space. The nitrogen crisis is illustrative of this. Excess nitrogen is bad for nature, but it also limits the space for all kinds of development. Agriculture, aviation, nature, and residential and commercial construction come together in this way. Such a correlation can also be seen with regard to capacity on the energy grid (or a lack thereof), which hinders the realisation of renewable energy generation, as well as business and residential development (PBL et al., 2023).



The Netherlands is behind schedule in addressing many of the problems in the living environment. The targets and interim targets for the share of renewable energy were not met in 2020. Within Europe, the Netherlands is among the countries with the lowest share of renewable energy (PBL, 2020). With the current climate plans, while a 55% reduction in CO<sub>2</sub> and other greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 compared with 1990 is within reach, that reduction can only be achieved if all the plans envisaged are actually implemented. Delays, for example due to elections and government formation, immediately jeopardise target attainment. In addition, all uncertainties, such as actual policy effects, economic growth, the energy market and technological developments, must develop positively (PBL et al., 2023). The transition to a circular economy is only in its infancy (PBL, 2020). One of the targets is to halve raw material use by 2030, but with current trends and policy efforts, that target will not be met. Moreover, there has been no acceleration in the transition to a circular economy (PBL, 2023).

Targets for agriculture are also not being met. Since 2010, ammonia emissions from agriculture and environmental loads of nitrogen, phosphorus and chemical plant protection products have not decreased further (PBL, 2022). In addition, the realisation of the National Ecological Network is going too slowly (PBL, 2022), targets are not being met and agreements are not being honoured. The loss of original natural assets in the Netherlands is considerably greater than the European average. Our nature is diminishing and disappearing at a rapid pace (Rli, 2022). Ecological water quality in the Netherlands was moderate to poor in 2021 for all bodies of water (PBL, 2022).

Similarly, the housing ambitions for 2030 are, for now, only a pipe dream and are not sufficiently resulting in additional housing. On the contrary, the housing shortage and demand are increasing, and a dip in production is expected (at least in the next few years) (ABF Research, 2023).

In general terms, it can be concluded that several persistent problems in the living environment urgently require solutions, but they persist despite continued attention from society, politics and policy.



# 3 AN EXPLORATION OF DRIVERS OF 'SYSTEMIC FAILURE'

In a series of exploratory interviews, we sought to identify the drivers and causes of these impasses. We supplemented the output from these interviews with a literature review. From this exploration, a range of possible explanations emerged that are interrelated and influence each other in various ways. Broadly speaking, we have noted that the following aspects may play a role in the persistence of living environment problems, despite ambitions to solve them:

- The nature of living environment problems has changed.
- The social conditions in which problems need to be solved have changed.
- Institutional relationships do not fit today's problems.
- The underlying values supporting the choices in solutions are not sufficiently articulated.

Below, we explain these four aspects in more detail. The intention is for the Council for the Environment and Infrastructure (Rli) to start an advisory process based on this exploration in which we broaden and deepen the aspects and formulate an action perspective that helps to remove the main causes of 'systemic failure' and solve major living environment problems. The advisory process is envisaged for 2024.

## 3.1 The nature of the problems has changed

*The substantive character and coherence of problems is different*  
The Netherlands has faced periods of major challenges and change before, such as the building of the welfare state after the industrial revolution and reconstruction after World War II. Yet there is a perception among many that the nature of today's problems in the living environment is substantially different from what we have experienced before. One difference mentioned is that, back then, it was mainly a government response to the consequences of the growth of the economy and the devastation of World War II, respectively, while now it is mainly about a shift to a different, sustainable economy. This necessary shift affects vested interests more than ever. In the past examples mentioned above, the government faced the major task of *facilitating and supporting the market* in profound changes in the economy, but now the challenge is to *change the functioning of the market*.

In particular, dossiers involving transitions, such as energy, agriculture and raw materials, seem different in nature from those in the past. These involve fundamental, interrelated systemic changes in technology, institutions and culture that affect the whole of society (Van den Bergh & Kemp, 2006). Another characteristic of these transitions is that they are not just playing out in the Netherlands, but have to be solved in an *international playing field*. Moreover, they affect many interests and stakeholders and depend on technological and social *uncertainties*.

Other living environment problems, such as public housing or reducing pollution, are basically no different from the past. But they, too, are now under the influence of transitions, such as the need to make the housing stock more sustainable or nitrogen emissions from agriculture and industry that are currently affecting both the state of nature and opportunities for construction. On top of that, the various solutions – in both transitions and 'classic' problems – must be found in the same (and scarcer) physical space.

That *interconnectedness* of the problems creates great complexity in the search for solutions. For example, the supposed solution to one problem may create a chain of new problems, as the nitrogen dossier



shows. Or, for example, it is not sufficiently clear that choices in one policy area will have implications for other policy areas. Consider the ambition to electrify the car fleet, which depends on choices about the sustainability of the energy supply in general and the associated development of the power grid in particular. Such complexity, lack of overview and the constant drive to tackle problems 'holistically' has a paralysing effect on making choices that bring solutions closer.

#### *Lack of overview and positive perspective*

Problems in the environment are piling up. People are increasingly feeling the effects in their daily lives: the consequences of climate change, housing shortages, high energy bills, a call to make their homes more sustainable, uncertainty about whether they will still be able to drive their cars soon, campaigns to change their daily diet and so on. For their part, companies face a complete transformation of the economy that requires them to adopt a different approach to waste and raw materials and make their production cleaner and more economical, among other things.

The fundamental nature of the changes envisaged by the policy, the uncertainties associated with them and the long-term nature of the solutions mean that people cannot get a picture of what it means for them and what it will bring them. The lack of clarity on what to expect from the future acts as a barrier to getting society moving. What is clear is that the changes – whatever direction is taken – will not be 'pain-free'. Solving the problems will not naturally produce a better end situation for everyone. This means not everyone will be enthusiastic. This fact, added to the uncertainty about exactly how the future will develop, for individuals, for companies and for institutions, poses a risk to progress (Rli, 2019). Indeed, this makes it difficult for people, companies and organisations to assess what the future has in store for them and what their own contribution and prospects for action are.

On top of that, governments and experts tend to approach transitions and 'tasks' from the point of view of the technology it requires and how the government can best facilitate it. In doing so, they fall back on pre-existing governance, institutions and instruments, while society is fundamentally changing. Apart from technical changes and solutions,

this requires cultural changes. Transitions need to be supported by citizens, but this will not be possible by following the old way.

### **3.2 The social conditions in which problems need to be solved have changed**

#### *The international playing field is changing*

For many years, European policy has had a major influence on Dutch policy on the living environment. Europe's significance for national choices in the living environment is increasing, for example to follow up on international agreements on climate, water and biodiversity. The Netherlands must increasingly take European directives and regulations into account in its living environment policy. At the same time, European rules in areas such as the single market, free market forces and the common agricultural policy play a role in the emergence of some of the living environment problems and are decisive for the room for manoeuvre in finding solutions.

The European orientation of Dutch policy is stronger than before. Since the last two decades of the 20th century, the Netherlands was always strongly oriented towards the globalising economy. Among other things, operating in the international arena was accompanied by great expectations of the global free market and the solving capacity of market mechanisms, including for collective issues. With the financial crisis of 2008, followed by the euro crisis and more recently as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East and trade conflicts between economic superpowers, this confidence in the resolving power of globalised markets has come under pressure, and more is expected of the EU as a trading bloc. However, this stronger orientation towards the EU does not yet always translate into national policy choices.

#### *Changes in societal debate*

The de-pillarisation of the Dutch society, democratisation and increasing individualisation reduced the Dutch population's attachment to existing political parties and greatly increased volatility in elections. Moreover, the rise of the Internet and social media has greatly

changed the way people communicate with each other and with the government. The same applies to the way people consume information. Scientific knowledge, opinions, news and fake news run unfiltered in the process. People are more broadly and quickly informed (accurately or not) than ever, and they have the opportunity to respond to that information in return.

Partly because of this, there is increasing political polarisation, the political and social debate has hardened and politicians and administrators have become more focused on incident resolution, short-term 'scoring points' and personal visibility. This compares poorly with the long-term perspective needed to solve living environment problems.

#### *Decreasing risk acceptance*

Part of government action is aimed at reducing risks to people and businesses. One consequence is that it makes people and companies more careless in dealing with risks (The Argumentation Factory, 2018), and they do not always take responsibility for their actions. But it also leads people to accept much less risk than before, expecting the government to guarantee the elimination or compensation of those risks. The government is increasingly expected to create a risk-free society. For example, the Council of State (2023) has identified increasing calls for financial compensation or relief for injustices suffered or onerous circumstances and an increased need for individual customisation. The government is increasingly responding positively to this, even when it has no direct responsibility or is not legally obliged to do anything. For example, the government's response consists of compensating for setbacks due to calamities (Hasekamp, 2023) or formulating specific rules for anomalous events and enforcing them strictly.

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<sup>1</sup> This schematisation could be complemented by a fourth and even a fifth domain, namely knowledge institutions and financial institutions (Simons & Nijhof, 2020). In this memorandum, financial institutions are included under 'the market'. While knowledge is covered, it is not

### **3.3 Institutional relationships no longer fit today's problems**

The institutional context within which solutions to problems in the living environment are sought can be roughly divided into three domains: government, community and the market.<sup>1</sup> These domains each exert influence on the issues as well as on each other. There are multiple relationships between domains and a diversity of objectives and characteristics of parties in those domains.

These domains can, of course, be subdivided again into different subdomains. In other words, there is no such thing as *THE* 'government'. After all, the government consists of several layers of government, each of which has its own duties and powers. Moreover, those layers of government are made up of different 'powers', such as the political administration and civil service organisations, each of which plays its own role.

discussed as a separate domain in this memorandum for the time being. This will be discussed in more detail at a later stage of the advisory process.



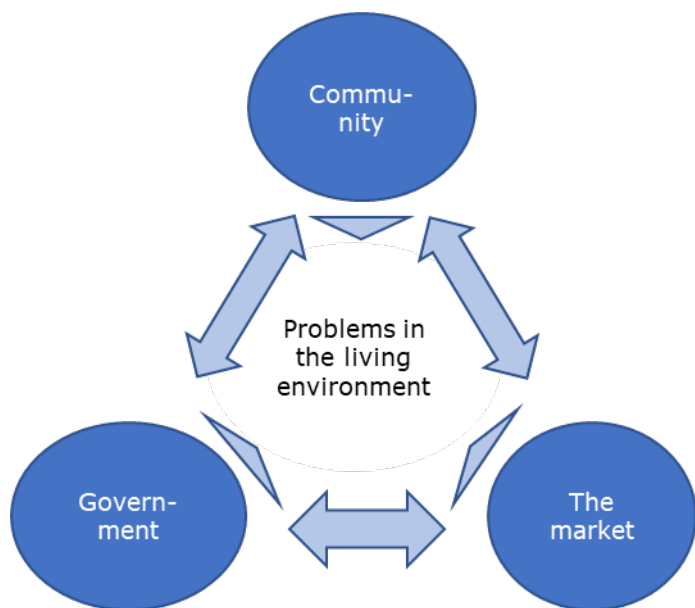


Figure I Schematic of the institutional environment of problems in the living environment

Such diversity can also be seen in 'the community', where interest groups and other cooperative associations are active alongside individual citizens. The same is true for the market, which consists of a wide range of companies of different sizes with different degrees of impact and influence on living environment issues, as well as various organised advocacy groups.

Below, we discuss some elements of the institutional context in more detail. In doing so, we note that the 'market' domain and the 'market-community' axis in particular have not yet been fleshed out in this memorandum.

### Government as a source of systemic failure

*Solutions require complex interplay between layers of government*

In recent decades, the central government has extensively decentralised many tasks and powers, including in the spatial domain and, more broadly, the living environment domain. For example, the

Environment and Planning Act, which will come into force on 1 January 2024, assumes a small government, a strong market and empowered citizens. In current practice, however, these conditions are hardly met, if at all.

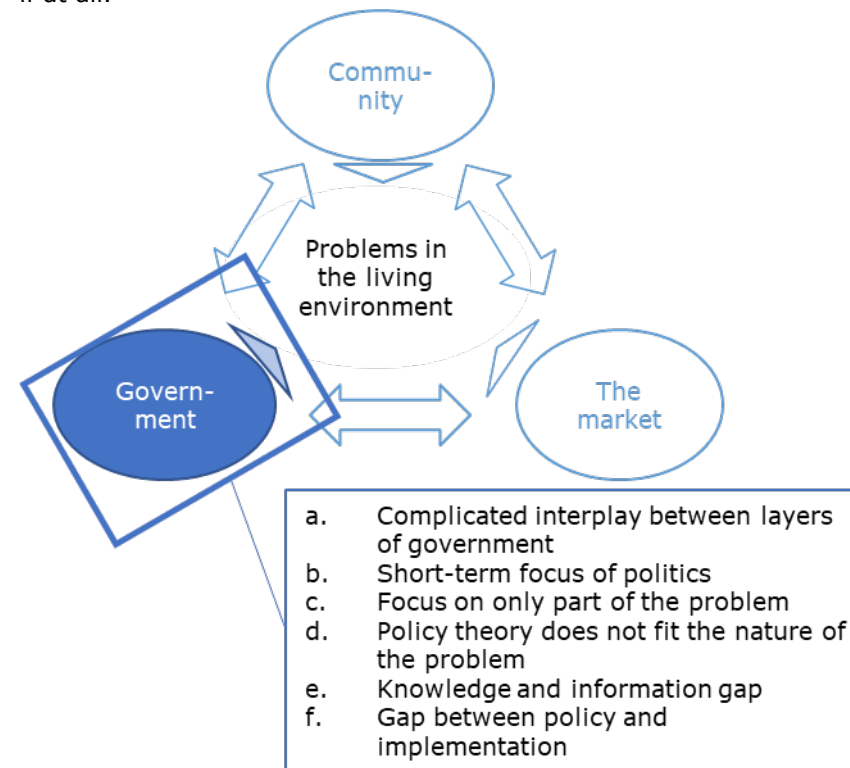


Figure III Overview of elements of systemic failure on the government side

Over the past few years, the central government has increasingly been seeking solutions to the problems in the living environment by providing 'national direction' and more guidance. Problems in the living environment are mostly interrelated. The region is an important scale for tackling problems in the living environment. This is due to the trans-municipal nature of many of these challenges. At the same time,

however, the regional scale is not well organised administratively (Rli, 2021a). This makes it difficult, for example, to synchronise investment agendas for different problems or to merge divergent interests. To meet the desire for a directing and guiding national government, it is necessary for the national level to be fed with knowledge and experience from the decentralised (regional) level. The current institutional set-up does not adequately provide for this.

In parallel with the decentralisation of the living environment domain, the role and influence of the European tier of government has become increasingly important (see also above), causing the national level to lose power. The EU now has a much stronger guiding role when it comes to the living environment than the national government. This has not yet penetrated Dutch policy sufficiently.

Both movements – decentralisation and internationalisation – have consequences for the division of roles between governments in the House of Thorbecke, the division of government, which have not yet been thought through sufficiently. For now, it is leading to an increasingly complex tangle of cooperating administrative bodies, often via administrative agreements that are not always sufficiently committal, and consequently to uncontrollable and unaccountable policies.

#### *Short-term focus of politics*

In a general sense, the political arena represents the wishes and preferences of people in society. On this basis, politicians make policy choices and make the corresponding resources (money, manpower and so on) available. Both because of the need (in the Netherlands) to form coalition governments between parties with different objectives and because of the succession of different governments over time, politics piles up policy choices and objectives. New policies are often created rather than existing ones being properly implemented. As a result, the government has to achieve a large set of partly contradictory objectives, which barely reflect the wishes and preferences of the people who cast their votes (The Argument Factory, 2018).

The time factor is problematic in this context. In a general sense, the living environment problems require a clear view of the distant future and a long haul to find and realise solutions. In contrast, the political system is strongly short-term oriented, partly because of elections being held periodically. After all, governments govern for a maximum of four years and have no or limited say over the periods thereafter. This can lead to short-term sub-optimal solutions, as well as delaying directional choices, structural solutions and far-reaching interventions (Denktank Nederland 2040, 2023). For a government that rules for four years, it is unattractive to tackle issues that require a long-term approach, for example, because of their complexity or their high impact on people, or because the costs fall in one government's term and the benefits only in the next (The Argumentation Factory, 2018). 'Pain' resulting from choices is avoided by pushing choices forward.

#### *Policy development focuses on only part of the problem*

There is a tendency in public policy to focus only on a 'manageable' part of the problem or only on the first steps to be taken. In the process, means are more than once elevated to ends. The overall picture and the long term may thus fade into the background. Consider, for example, the huge focus on nitrogen reduction while the underlying aim is to revitalise nature and biodiversity.

#### *Policy theory does not fit the nature of the problem*

The fiscal orientation of the central and decentralised government is very strong. Decisions are made based on the available budget, and not on the substance of the issues. Therefore, there is a dominant drive in government organisation towards sectoral optimisation and efficiency in policy development (Rli, ROB & RVS, 2023). Effectiveness (using resources efficiently) takes precedence over achieving impact. Policy focuses heavily on sectoral management and (short-term) problem solving (Boutelier, 2019). Underlying problems and their causes thus escape attention.

In addition, Kalden (2023) noted that, at least in the agriculture dossier, mutual trust between government and market players is lacking. This translates into the manner and form of policy-making and implementation and results in detailed regulations with high enforcement pressure. Furthermore, these are always negatively set



standards, never standards that express which way we want to go. This is not reserved for the agricultural sector: government control in the living environment focuses largely on the details. Constant efforts are made to solve problems with more policies, laws and regulations. The result is an increasing complexity and stacking of policies, laws and regulations and a multitude of instruments and agencies. This regulatory burden does not sufficiently lead to actual solutions and relates poorly to the unpredictability of the course and outcomes of living environment problems. Moreover, it causes a high accountability burden; the test of legality is often more important than the test of effectiveness.

#### *Knowledge and information gap*

The knowledge infrastructure, scientific knowledge, available models and calculation methods used for decision-making do not sufficiently match the changing nature of the tasks and perceived problems in society. Moreover, the government has become heavily dependent on others (the market and the community) for its knowledge and information position.

In addition, the government does not handle data and information well. Relevant data for the major living environment problems are missing or insufficiently available. When data are available, they are insufficiently analysed and used, due to the lack of usable standards (Rli, 2021b), inadequate knowledge or impeding regulations. On top of that, the government depends on market players for a lot of data, who obviously act primarily on the basis of business interests when making these data available.

#### *Gap between policy and implementation*

The ability to realise what is agreed policy-wise in practice has declined (Rli, 2023). The divestment of government tasks in recent decades has been accompanied by a loss of knowledge and skills in parts of government. Because the government has chosen to outsource the implementation of public tasks to independent administrative bodies and commercial parties, a gap has emerged between policy and implementation (ROB, 2022). Policymakers lack substantive knowledge of and experience with policy implementation, which means that, when formulating policies, insufficient consideration is given to their ultimate feasibility. On top of that, the chain between

policy formulation – with its ambitions, goals, target groups and instruments – and the final outcomes of that policy is long. To prevent outcomes from deviating too much from what was originally intended by the policy, policymakers draft regulations for implementers and formulate performance indicators (The Argumentation Factory, 2018). As a result, these bureaucratic obligations often create a paper reality divorced from actual problem-solving. This is reinforced by the fact that people working in implementation are hardly involved in policy-making (Rli, 2023) and that policy-makers in government have fewer substantive competences than before and insufficient knowledge about implementation (ROB, 2022). In short, there is a lack of balance between implementation and policy (Rli, 2023).

#### **The market as a source of systemic failure**

##### *The market cannot achieve sufficient transformation on its own*

Market players (companies) have transformational power of their own to contribute to solving collective problems. For example, Polman & Winston (2019) describe a set of principles for companies through which they can improve well-being for everyone on whom a company has an impact. When companies choose to change to benefit the collective, this can have a big impact. In practice, however, there are major counterforces in markets, such as the focus on short-term growth and shareholder primacy in companies. The current rules of play within which the market operates are not adequate for the challenges ahead. Transparency, fair and reliable information exchange in the chain, real prices and clear legal frameworks are necessary in this but are currently lacking. When they are actually in place, the market can do an excellent job. Government steering on these issues is essential (Kalden, 2023).



## The market-government relationship as a source of systemic failure

The relationship between government and the market is relevant to the ability to achieve solutions to major living environment problems in at least three ways. Firstly, because of the choices the government makes to facilitate, regulate and create markets; secondly, because of the partly resulting detailed laws and regulations and; thirdly, because of the influence of market players, organised or otherwise, on government action.

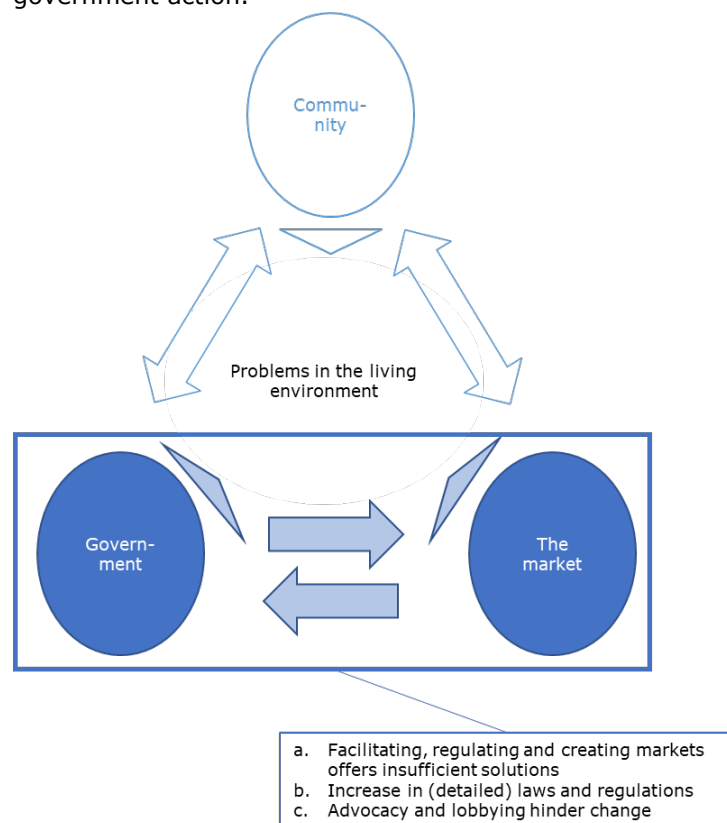


Figure III Overview of elements of systemic failure in the government-market relationship

*Government facilitation, regulation and creation of markets does not provide sufficient solutions*

In recent decades, the government has largely facilitated the economic use of space (PBL, 2021). This has produced developments that are not always future-proof and do not always mesh well with how people experience space. The collective problems in the living environment that are now under discussion call for radical changes in the use of space and the economy. This will entail renewing the economy and converting and downsizing existing activities (Rli, 2019). However, the transformations deemed necessary are often at odds with vested economic interests.

Moreover, in recent decades, the government has expeditiously distanced, corporatised and liberalised tasks in the physical environment, such as supplying energy or operating public transport services. At the same time, it can be seen in several living environment domains that market players – despite their potential power to change – are unable or unwilling to solve collective problems.

*Increase in (detailed) laws and regulations*

With the distancing and divestment to the market, and the corporatisation of public tasks, the government's role has shifted from policy-making and executive to framework-setting and supervisory. This has been accompanied by a sharp increase in (detailed) laws and regulations. These laws and regulations are often sector-based and land in the living environment together with other sectoral laws and regulations. Living environment issues often call for a coherent approach between many different policy areas, such as the connection between water management, nature development and agriculture, which is hampered by the accumulation of sometimes even conflicting sectoral laws and regulations.

*Advocacy and lobbying hinder change*

Companies and their interest groups, following on from the enabling role that the government has long played, have acquired great influence over political decision-making. This is true in almost all sectors of the economy, whether industry, agriculture, transport or services. In this regard, vested interests in particular are in a position to act as an obstacle in addressing major problems. The influence of

new market players, who seek to connect to the necessary transformations and can actually act as a cooperating force for change, is much more limited.

### **Community as a source of systemic failure**

#### *Civil society has become fragmented*

In the Netherlands, policy has been made by compromises at high administrative levels for centuries. The consensus model that emerged in the Netherlands – of consultation, debate, exchange of interests, rationality, factuality and argumentation, understanding of each other and a willingness to give and take – is alive to this day (The Argumentation Factory, 2019). In solving the living environment problems and the far-reaching consequences this will have, the involvement of all social parties is also necessary, and their interests and concerns must be seriously taken into account in decision-making (Energy System Expert Team 2050, 2023).

Traditionally, people and entrepreneurs have organised to collectively stand up more strongly for their interests and have a voice in political decision-making. The so-called civil society comprises a multitude of civil society organisations that amplify and resonate citizens' views and represent them in it, including outside the political process. In the Netherlands, the civil society is partly institutionalised in formally established organisations such as the Social and Economic Council of the Netherlands (SER), in which employers and employees work together. Various civil society organisations and interest representatives of companies and governments are also actively involved in the living environment domain, such as environmental and nature organisations, umbrella organisations of agriculture, housing associations, business or decentralised authorities.

Like the political playing field, civil society in the Netherlands has become increasingly fragmented in recent years. Civil society organisations are split into multiple parties, action committees and ad hoc action groups, each with its own constituency. Consider, for example, the agricultural sector, where LTO Netherlands and its constituent regional associations used to be virtually the only mouthpiece for the majority of farmers and horticulturists, but for some years now, organisations such as Agractie, Farmers Defence

Force and Caring Farmers have also been representing a highly polarised sector.

The umbrella and other organisations that traditionally sat at the table with the government have lost authority and now only represent part of a sector or stakeholders. There are many organisations whose stances often differ considerably in terms of opinion and understanding. One consequence of this is that the exercise of influence on decision-making has become fragmented and the civil society has lost access to power. Fragmentation gives relatively small groups de facto power to veto change (The Argumentation Factory, 2019). Newly organised citizen associations often do not have access to institutionalised consultations.

The traditional way of building support through consultations and agreements with civil society only works if civil society actually represents the community. This is no longer the case: the government's discussion partners are now mostly interest groups of market players and a 'nationalised' civil society (Van Hedel, 2021).

On top of this, representative organisations have increasingly shifted their focus towards advocacy and away from seeking common solutions to a common problem. The 'change capacity' of the consensus model seems to be losing momentum. Adjustments fail to materialise, and issues such as the nitrogen dossier, making aviation more sustainable and building enough housing drag on for years. The consensus model is failing, with the Netherlands being less able to adapt laws and regulations to changing circumstances.



## The relationship between government and the community as a source of systemic failure

### *Insufficient innovation in governance, institutions and instruments*

The government tends to approach solving major problems in the living environment from the engineering and technology required for it and focus on facilitating markets – and to a lesser extent the community. The search for solutions still takes place within the same governance, where market forces and the top-down control model are dominant.

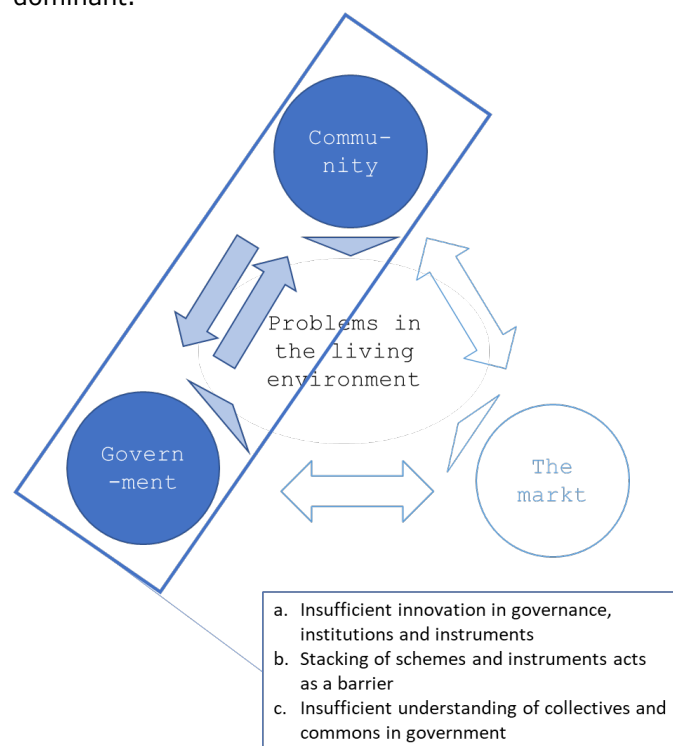


Figure IV Overview of elements of systemic failure in the government-community relationship

According to ROB (2022), government is still mostly organised vertically and top-down, while the community has become increasingly horizontal in recent decades. In addition, the community is more diverse than before without this having led to fundamental adjustments within public administration.

### *Stacking of schemes and instruments acts as a barrier*

From the government, steering towards players in the community always takes place with the same types of instruments that have been used for years. As a result, for instance, a patchwork of rules, funds, subsidies and pricing policies has emerged, with some of the power present in the community being lost in a search for the right desk or accurate accountability.

### *Insufficient understanding of collectives and commons in government*

At the same time, alternative forms of governance are increasingly emerging in the community, for example based on collective action or the idea of the commons. Substantial contributions to solving living environment problems are made from these alternative forms. Think of energy collectives, agricultural nature management collectives or area collectives tackling multiple problems. This development is insufficiently understood in central government. The dominant control model and the resulting complexity and regulatory burden mean that both individuals and people in organised contexts do not have enough room to act to work on solutions themselves. The frameworks set by the government are constricting and not 'liberating'. Local, collective initiatives are thus thwarted, while there is a need and goodwill in at least part of the community to contribute.

## 3.4 Technocratic solutions and insufficient articulation of values

The scale of the problems in the living environment and far-reaching consequences that the tasks formulated in the policy have for the economic structure, the use of space and society as a whole require solutions that include the whole of society. Currently, however, policies



and the choice of measures are mostly technocratic and preferably presented as 'non-political'. Emphasis is placed on (ostensibly) neutral and science-based processes and interpretive frameworks, pushing questions about the fairness of government action in relation to citizens into the background or even out of sight (ROB, 2022). Thus, the 'tasks' such as the energy transition, the agricultural transition and housing are portrayed as inescapable and the corresponding measures as unavoidable. This goes hand in hand with a technical and legalistic approach, with many rules that interfere with people's daily lives and entrepreneurs' business operations. The Council for Public Administration (ROB) (2022) argues that the normative nature of public administration's actions is denied and with it the mostly unintended immoral consequences of these actions.

This approach has three main shortcomings. First, both formulating the task and choosing the measures are never neutral or non-normative. Worldviews, ideologies and value perspectives always play a role. Second, the need to be able to measure effectiveness and efficiency of interventions means that government, politics and science tend to reduce complex issues to what is measurable. Third, this way, a debate on the weighting of problems remains far off. Climate change is life-threatening for current and future generations, housing deprivation is dire and revitalising biodiversity is paramount for a healthy life; but how important do people consider such problems relative to each other, and what type of measures do they think should accompany them?

The weighting is even more complicated in practice, because there are also various issues outside the living environment domain that affect people's daily lives, such as issues of distribution or livelihood security. Positioning living environment issues as indisputable and conceiving of solving them as a technocratic exercise ignores the fact that different people value different problems in different ways. For example, the WRR (2023) concludes that, prior to making climate policies, there is often limited discussion about the fairness of the divisions. The fairness of the divisions is thus not sufficiently addressed in policy-making.

To bring the whole of society on board in solving the problem, the underlying values will have to be made explicit, and an open debate on clashing values will have to take place. The current policy approach does not sufficiently consider the different value perspectives within society and the consequences these value perspectives may have for the interpretation of problems in the living environment and the conceivable directions for solutions.

The lack of attention to and debate on these differences manifests itself both in the political arena and in policy formulation. Even in the relationship between government and civil society and between organisations in that civil society, the moral dimension often remains underexposed, and there is insufficient understanding of each other's values (see also Kalden, 2023). As a result, guiding choices are avoided, support for the choices that are made is lacking (at least in part of society) and the effect of choices is obstructed.



## 4 TO CONCLUDE

In the foregoing, we have noted that the high ambitions are not sufficiently being realised in living environment policy. We broadly explored the driving forces contributing to this.

In 2024, the Rli will follow up this exploration with an advisory process. In it, the outlines of this exploration will be elaborated, expanded and reviewed. In the advisory process, we will also analyse what approaches are possible to deal with the driving forces, to address the causes of systemic failure and to actually realise ambitions. Based on the lessons learnt, we hope to formulate an action perspective that will allow the Netherlands to make great strides in solving living environment problems.





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# OVERVIEW OF PUBLICATIONS

## 2023

Bridging the implementation gap: Tackling factors impeding policy for the physical living environment. December 2023 (2023/07)

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Every region counts! A new approach to regional disparities. March 2023 (2023/01)

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