

BRIDGING THE IMPLEMENTATION GAP

TACKLING FACTORS
IMPEDING POLICY FOR
THE PHYSICAL LIVING
ENVIRONMENT

DECEMBER 2023



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The Council for the Environment and Infrastructure (*Raad voor de leefomgeving en infrastructuur, Rli*) advises the Dutch government and Parliament on strategic issues concerning the sustainable development of the living and working environment. The Council is independent, and offers solicited and unsolicited advice on long-term issues of strategic importance to the Netherlands. Through its integrated approach and strategic advice, the Council strives to provide greater depth and breadth to the political and social debate, and to improve the quality of decision-making processes.

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SUMMARY

The Netherlands is facing major challenges in the physical living environment, for example the need to build large numbers of homes. Some of these challenges have been ongoing for decades, and they are becoming increasingly urgent, with the term “crisis” being used more and more frequently. Although policy objectives and measures have been defined in numerous areas, they are often not implemented, or not fully or on time. Today’s major issues are therefore persistent. Implementation of policy is faltering in many areas, resulting in government goals and ambitions being achieved to only a very limited extent in recent years. The present advisory report concerns that manifest lack of *implementation*. We focus on the ability (or inability) of the public authorities and other stakeholders to implement in practice what has been agreed on in terms of policy.

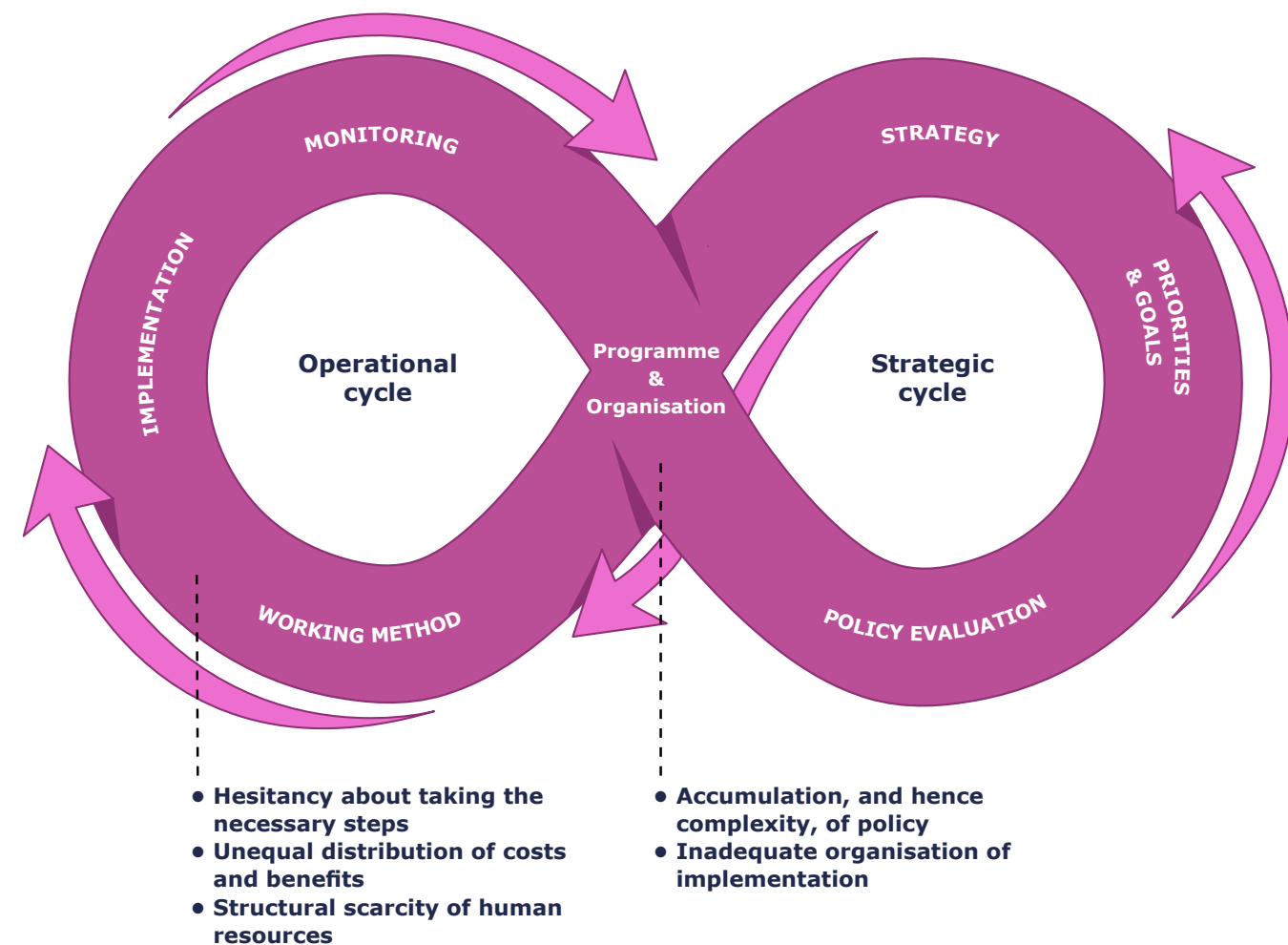
This failure to achieve government goals in so many important policy fields – or to do so fully or on time – calls for further analysis. Just what are the impediments to implementing policy for the living environment? If it is clear exactly where those impediments lie, then one can “twist the right control knobs” so as to bring about improvement.

Five impeding factors

For the purpose of this advisory report, we conducted ten case studies on implementation problems within the domain of the physical living

environment. On that basis, we identified five impeding factors that complicate and delay implementation of policy, often simultaneously:

1. Accumulation, and hence complexity, of policy
2. Hesitancy about taking the necessary steps
3. Inadequate organisation of implementation
4. Unequal distribution of costs and benefits
5. Structural scarcity of human resources (HR)



Implementation capacity

We advocate placing implementation and policy on an equal footing, because only then will the Netherlands be able to master the problems involved in implementation. To that end, we are introducing the above model of implementation capacity, representing the equal importance of policy and implementation.

What is also striking in our analysis (and its depiction above) is (a) that many of the causes of stalled implementation can be found at the interface between the operational implementation cycle and the strategic policy cycle and (b) that some of the other causes are located around the interface between methodology and implementation. We therefore believe that it is at these two interfaces in the model that the greatest gains can be achieved in actual practice as regards reinforcing policy implementation in the physical living environment.

Seven recommendations

The Council offers seven recommendations for dealing with these impediments when tackling challenges in the physical living environment.

Place policy and implementation on an equal footing

Our foremost recommendation is for a reappraisal of implementation, with policy-makers and implementing parties being placed on an equal footing. When drawing up policy measures, maximum use should be made of insights derived from actual implementation. Implementing parties must be able to indicate authoritatively the conditions under which policy is actually



capable of implementation. This issue arises, for example, when insufficient (structural) funds are available for achieving (political) ambitions.

Give implementing parties a structural role in policy development

Action is needed to involve implementers as an equal party in policy development right from the initiation phase. It is therefore appropriate that at a number of ministries, governmental implementing organisations are represented within the Senior Management Board [*Bestuursraad*]. In our view, this should be made standard practice at all ministries; that is not currently the case for all of them. Many other parties that contribute to implementation are not however represented on the Board. We therefore believe that the *Secretary General* (SG) of each policy department should more explicitly assume and utilise their responsibility to ensure that the input of all the relevant implementing parties is heard and that they are involved in decision-making on proposed policy or policy that is to be amended. We view aligning policy and implementation in this way as an essential component of the new culture of public administration. The SG – in the role described here – will also become an important guardian of that new culture.

We also wish to draw special attention to the local and regional governments that are charged with implementing many of the objectives of central government. Safeguards are necessary to prevent them from being assigned implementation objectives without sufficient funding, for example. This requires a stronger coordinating role on the part of the Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations (MinBZK) in allocating targets within

local and regional governments, for example by requiring him or her to co-sign policy plans in order to prevent local and regional governments being overburdened or under-represented during policy development. Because many challenges and solutions in the physical domain coincide at the regional level, it is also important for the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations to implement the recommendation to give the region sufficient leverage, without this being at the expense of properly authorised governance.

Work, organise, and draw up a shared agenda based on the objectives concerned

Policy accumulation will be less of a problem if the implementing parties have a clear idea of what the shared ambitions and goals actually are. A clear statement of the objective concerned will assist in organising and prioritising accumulated policies. A shared agenda can then be drawn up on that basis. The strategies on spatial planning and the environment set out in the Environment and Planning Act [*Omgevingswet*] can assist in this. After all, the national, provincial and municipal strategies on spatial planning and the environment are by far the best place to specify the objective, area, or region concerned and to determine priorities.

Divide up roles, tasks, and relationships based on the specific objectives concerned

The underlying problem in many cases of implementation failure is that it is unclear to the policy-makers and implementers which of them should take action when it comes to choices about priorities and the allocation of funds.



It is crucial for there to be clear arrangements regarding these points at the interface between policy and implementation.

Organise cooperation in such a way that implementers feel confident about taking decisions, even in the face of uncertainties

It is important to develop a setting in which parties feel confident enough – even when the situation becomes tense – to seek solutions and take difficult decisions. This means that arrangements are needed regarding the culture of cooperation. Trust and transparency need to be at the heart of cooperation so that dilemmas, doubts, and uncertainties can be raised for discussion unhindered.

Find ways to determine the costs and benefits of challenges in the living environment more accurately and to distribute them better

When working on challenges in the living environment, the benefits often end up with parties that do not contribute to a given development. This hampers a proactive approach. Greater attention should be paid to sharing knowledge about the application of instruments, for example for land policy. More attention also needs to be paid to innovative ways of financing objectives in the living environment, especially if this allows one to also take account of non-financial benefits, costs that are avoided, and potential future benefits.

Adopt a smart approach to dealing with the structural scarcity of human resources

The scarcity of human resources is structural and unavoidable.

It is therefore necessary to adopt a smart approach to dealing with that scarcity, thus making it possible to both alleviate the scarcity itself and reduce the problems that it causes. Creating a pool of experts and sharing know-how and specialists (regionally) can provide a solution. More can also be done to standardise the work involved.

To conclude, a call to action!

As is customary, this advisory report by the Council comprises analyses, conclusions, and recommendations. Behind the courteous language of those components, however, lies an urgency to which we emphatically wish to draw attention. The major challenges facing society today demand action, and that action will only materialise if we place policy implementation on an equal footing with policy development.

This advisory report is therefore a call for all parties involved to do just that. As we discovered when drawing up the report, there is still too much of a one-way street in the policy world of the seat of government as regards the relationship between policy development and policy implementation. Policy decisions are too often taken without any serious consideration of the implications for their implementation in actual practice. This is striking, given that almost all parliamentary inquiries since 1945 have concerned implementation issues.

For us, breaking away from this mechanism is an important component of the much-discussed and much-desired “new culture of public administration”. In our view, the switch-over to that new culture must not



become bogged down in merely “paper intentions”. And in fact it doesn’t need to; it can be given shape immediately. Our advisory report introduces no new plans or statutory rules, no new tiers of government or structures. It is mainly about different behaviour, a different culture, one that utilises the policy instruments and bodies that already exist. We are aware that our recommendations are necessarily abstract. They cannot be otherwise; their application will vary from case to case, depending on the particular issue and situation. But application can begin right away tomorrow. So get to work!

We address this appeal mainly to “The Hague”, but taking the conditions for workable implementation of policy seriously is of course a task not only for politicians and ministries in The Hague. The lack of attention for this need applies in all tiers of government, and according to most of those to whom we spoke, just as persistently. In short, all objectives in the physical living environment demand the attention of administrators, project coordinators, and implementers, so as to ensure that the knowledge and experience gained on the implementation side of things also pervade the world of policy.



1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

The Netherlands is facing major challenges as regards housing stock, accessibility, water quality, nature quality, biodiversity, climate change, scarcity of raw materials, infrastructure, the energy supply, and soil pollution. Some of these challenges in the domain of the physical living environment have been ongoing for decades, and they are becoming increasingly urgent, with the term “crisis” being used more and more frequently.

Although policy aims and measures have been formulated in countless areas, they are often not in fact achieved, or not on time (see also Netherlands Court of Audit, 2020). Much is needed, but too little is happening or succeeding. There are all sorts of plans, but nothing much actually comes of them. Implementation lags behind or fails to get off the ground. The Netherlands risks grinding to a halt.

Poor policy implementation in practice: three examples

Housing production is failing

To solve the acute housing shortage, central government has decided that a hundred thousand homes need be built each year between 2024 and 2030. To achieve this, the government is deploying all sorts of policy instruments, for example Urbanisation Agreements, Housing Deals,

Housing Incentive Grants, and construction of quickly built flex housing. *An Action Plan for Accelerating Processes and Procedures for Housing Construction* has also been drawn up. Nevertheless, it does not look as if the construction target will in fact be met. This is evident from the data tracked by Statistics Netherlands (CBS) on the number of permits issued for new-build homes; that figure is well below what is needed (CBS, 2023). And in the first three quarters of 2023, the number of permits issued fell even further (Gemeente.nu, 2023).

The Netherlands will fail to meet the standards in the Water Framework Directive on time

The EU's Water Framework Directive stipulates that throughout the EU, i.e. including the Netherlands, all surface water and groundwater must become subject to government protection by 2027 at the latest. The Netherlands is working so slowly to achieve this, however, that there is no reasonable expectation that it will be able to comply with that requirement on time. Where things go wrong is in actual implementation: the Department of Public Works and Water Management [*Rijkswaterstaat*] and the water boards are behind schedule with implementing measures for the watersystems; a number of the water boards are behind schedule with the mandatory intensified removal of nutrients during sewage treatment; provinces are allowing permits for activities that impact water systems to remain valid for too long; and monitoring and enforcement are inadequate. Many of the public authorities involved are in fact aware that things are not going well, but holding one another accountable has no effect. The result of all this is that water quality in the Netherlands is

in a sorry state. In 2019, for example, 75% of surface waters exceeded the standards for one or more pollutants. In 2020, the biological quality of 90% of surface waters was still not good enough, while there was groundwater contamination at 92 of the 156 drinking water extraction sites (Rli, 2023).

Nature conservation targets are not being met

Poor policy implementation also means that it will not be possible to achieve the nature conservation targets that the Netherlands must meet under binding international agreements. With the current policy commitment, for instance, agreements on protecting and conserving specific species and habitats cannot be met. A glaring example is the fact that the number of breeding pairs of black-tailed godwits has fallen from 60,000 to 30,000 over the past 20 years (Netherlands Court of Audit, 2021). Things are also not going well as regards the mandatory expansion of nature in the Netherlands. The area given over to nature is intended to have increased by 80,000 hectares by 2027; at the pace of implementation in recent years, that target will not be achieved. Moreover, the country is failing to create the agreed area of contiguous nature conservation areas (PBL, 2020; PBL & WUR, 2020).

The advisory reports that the Rli issues are usually about *policy* for the physical living environment, with our recommendations then focusing on improving existing policies or introducing new ones. What direction can the government take to bring about improvement; what emphases should



be shifted; what new perspective can help provide a more effective answer to an existing or emerging problem? But our recommendations are then mainly about making better plans and organising matters in a smarter manner; they are not about actually putting those plans into practice or about the individuals and organisations responsible for doing so. Generally speaking, we only make brief comments about that aspect, given the expectation that *implementation* of the various intentions will be properly regulated and need not be a separate topic of advice on our part.

But the present advisory report is different. It is not about plans, emphases, or intentions but about implementation and fulfilment. The under-performance as regards policy implementation makes clear that more is needed. After all, attention to policy and policy development is of little use if it turns out in practice that the stated policy goals and ambitions are not being achieved, or only far too slowly. Policy is only as good as what is achieved with it, and there are increasingly major concerns in that regard. The extent to which policy is implemented, the actual achievement of the stated goals and ambitions, is very limited and falls short of what is needed (and also what is intended). The present advisory report concerns that manifest lack of *implementation*. We focus on the ability (or inability) of the public authorities and other stakeholders to implement in practice what has been agreed on in terms of policy. This report is about doing what you say, rather than just saying what you want to do.

1.2 The questions to be answered in this advisory report

The failure to achieve government goals in so many key policy areas, insufficiently or on time, calls for further analysis. Why are the matters agreed on as policy not actually being implemented, or only far too late? Why is actual implementation so problematical? If it is clear exactly where the impediments lie, then one can “twist the right control knobs” so as to bring about improvement. In the light of these considerations, we formulated the following questions for this report to answer:

Just what are the impediments to implementing policy for the living environment? How can implementation be improved so as to achieve the goals of policy for the living environment?

The term “implementation” in these questions needs to be made rather more precise. We view implementation in the domain of the physical living environment as *the performance of activities necessary to achieve the agreed goals of policy for the living environment in actual practice*. Putting policy into practice includes not only achieving certain final results but also getting things started in good time, staying on track, making progress, achieving interim results, and so forth. All these belong to what we classify in this advisory report as implementation of policy for the living environment.



1.3 Target group and purpose

Target group for this advisory report

In our analysis, we do not only consider parties in the domain of the physical living environment (public authorities, market parties, and civil-society organisations) that each separately face obstacles to implementing policy; we also consider the *interaction* between those parties. They are, after all, highly dependent in numerous ways on one another's functioning and performance. Moreover, for successful implementation, the government needs all of them. Consider, for example, policy aimed at addressing the housing shortage. The government does not build homes itself but relies on initiatives from market parties, corporations, and collective bodies made up of private individuals. Policy implementation in this context requires effective interaction between all those involved so that homes are not just announced on paper but are actually built.

Given the above, this advisory report is directed to central government, and expressly also to all parties involved in implementation, such as local and regional authorities, market parties, corporations, civil-society organisations, and so forth.

Purpose of this advisory report

This report is not aimed at evaluating policy for the living environment as such. We focus on a different aspect, namely putting policy into actual practice. We do so by highlighting examples of implementation from which we believe lessons can be learned regarding factors that promote or in

fact impede implementation. In this way, we attempt to determine what problems arise during implementation and to understand how they can be solved.

Based on these possible solutions, our report offers a number of recommendations. Given the *agenda-setting* nature of this report, we have framed our recommendations in broad terms. They require further elaboration and application by those directly involved in implementation and policy.

1.4 Approach

In drawing up this advisory report, we took actual practice as the basis. To that end, we commissioned ten case studies from the BMC consultancy firm, covering the broad domain of the physical living environment. We selected the cases based on our expectation that a lot could be learned from the policy topics concerned regarding circumstances that impede or in fact promote implementation in actual practice.



Topics of the case studies

Implementation of...

- The energy-saving obligation for businesses
- The natural gas-free neighbourhoods programme
- Urban densification
- Separation of household waste
- Onshore wind power
- Mobility as a Service
- Silt and sediment policy
- Drought prevention policy (nature)
- The High-Frequency Rail Transport Programme
- The Netherlands Nature Network

The case studies showed that there were five impeding factors that frequently emerged as causing poor implementation: (1) the accumulation, and therefore complexity, of policy; (2) hesitancy about taking the necessary steps; (3) inadequate organisation of implementation; (4) unequal distribution of costs and benefits; and (5) structural scarcity of human resources (HR).

We believe that these five impeding factors should be the object of greater attention in the context of implementation, and in the present advisory report we offer an initial approach to ensuring this. We carried out an in-depth analysis for each of the five factors, attempting to identify (a) exactly what conditions complicate and/or delay policy implementation in actual practice and (b) what interventions would seem to help.

Our findings are largely based on roundtable discussions and interviews with those involved in implementation, supplemented by an analysis of relevant documents. It goes without saying that additional impeding factors emerged from the case studies, but we focus in this report on the factors that are by far the most frequent ones involved in obstructing the implementation of policy.

1.5 Scope

In drawing up this advisory report, we noted during our interviews with those involved in implementation that it was not clear to all of them exactly where “policy” becomes “implementation”. The lack of consensus on the exact boundary between them sometimes leads to misunderstanding. It is therefore necessary to make a clear distinction between them.

In making that distinction, we opted for the perspective of central government, given that our report concerns central government policy on the major challenges in the living environment. From the point when central government sets the aims for addressing those challenges, one can speak of “policy”. Once that policy has been adopted by the Council of Ministers, then – from central government perspective – implementation begins. From the perspective chosen for the present report, working on a regional housing construction programme or a regional housing deal forms part of implementation, even if it requires new policy at local level, with the issue then again arising, regionally and locally, of how that policy once more relates to implementation.



The above considerations also mean that we regard the elaboration of central government policy in the form of arrangements with parties “outside The Hague” – for example the Association of the Dutch Provinces (IPO), the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG), the Union of Water Boards (UvW), (national) implementing organisations, environmental services, market parties, and civil-society organisations – as *implementation*.

1.6 Structure of this advisory report

After this first introductory section, we set out our findings in Section 2. Those findings are based on our analysis of five factors that appear to hamper the implementation of policy in actual practice. In Section 3, by way of synthesis, we take stock of the lessons and insights derived from our findings. In Section 4, we offer our recommendations.





2 FINDINGS: A CLOSER LOOK AT FIVE IMPEDING FACTORS

For the purpose of the present advisory report, we analysed how policy for the living environment is implemented in actual practice, doing so on the basis of ten case studies. Our analysis revealed five factors that appear to impede implementation. In the present section, we summarise our findings, based on the implementation in actual practice identified in the ten case studies.

2.1 Accumulation, and hence complexity, of policy

Dutch national policy for the living environment is divided up into various policy fields (environment, spatial planning, public housing, energy, agriculture, nature, water, climate), which are handled by separate members of the government.

One consequence of this sectoral structure of policy for the living environment is that there is inevitably an *accumulation of policy*. We found that this accumulation is perceived as an impediment to implementation, with policy and regulations being viewed as complex, especially if there is a lack of policy coherence or even conflicting goals, rules, and standards.

What impedes implementation in actual practice?	What would seem to help?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• the amount of (rapidly changing) policy• the lack of substantive cohesion• detailed elaboration in the form of sometimes conflicting goals, rules, and standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• a dedicated agenda for challenges as the benchmark for prioritising accumulated policy• greater scope for customisation• a robust implementation programme (drawn up in consultation with implementing parties), overarching programmes, or a coordinating member of government

What impedes implementation in actual practice?

Parties involved in the implementation of policy for the living environment are impeded by the fact that a great deal of policy is amended shortly after it is introduced. Constantly changing goals, rules, and standards lead to inertia. The accumulation of legislation and rules – all of which are often relevant to tackling an objective – also makes it difficult to explain policy to implementing parties, members of the public, and market parties. This leads to opposition and delays in implementation.

Parties involved in implementation also experience a lack of substantive cohesion. Almost all our case studies showed that those parties have to deal with a mountain of policies and rules, for which central government policy departments have failed to establish a clear hierarchy, making it difficult to determine what needs to be tackled first.

Parties involved in implementation are also hampered by the fact that central government policy for the living environment is often elaborated in the form of detailed and mutually conflicting rules and standards. During one of the roundtable discussions that we organised, it was pointed out in this context that the pursuit of perfection set out in central government policy sometimes has the effect of paralysing implementation. For each policy area, the focus is on achieving the maximum possible, without regard for the broader social context, in which numerous factors contribute to determining what is in fact feasible. The rules do sometimes offer some room for manoeuvre, but there is a lack of knowledge, support, or (administrative) boldness within one’s own organisation for making use of that scope.

What would seem to help?

In the context of actual implementation, policy accumulation is taken as a given. After all, policy is drawn up for good reasons. Moreover, the complexity of challenges within the living environment fosters such accumulation of policy. According to the experts we consulted, a solution is not brought any closer by calling for there to be less in the way of policy. It would already be splendid – and it is moreover very necessary – if central government were to draw up policy for the living environment in *a more cohesive manner*.

The parties that participated in our roundtable discussions also indicated that successful developments do not start with central government policy, but with having one’s *own agenda*. Such an agenda makes clear where



one’s own priorities lie. From there, smart links can then be made to programmes and subsidies from central government. A strong coherent narrative about the planned development and its urgency also helps in ensuring people’s commitment to the objective.

Furthermore, given the complexity of policy, parties engaged in implementation need more room for *customisation*. This could be provided, for example, by being flexible as regards setting standards, or by “decompartmentalising” the use of available budgets. We noticed, incidentally, that the roundtable discussions on this matter did not bring up the topic of the Environment and Planning Act. After all, the need for customisation and room for manoeuvre was one of the reasons for that legislation. A possible factor here is that introduction of the Environment and Planning Act has been postponed several times and had still not come into force at the time of our interviews. It will enter into force on 1 January 2024.

Finally, the discussions revealed that implementation would benefit from a robust implementation programme, drawn up in consultation with the implementation parties, an umbrella programme, or a coordinating member of government. This would reduce the perceived complexity and also help prioritise policies.

2.2 Hesitancy about taking the necessary steps

Among parties engaged in implementing policy for the living environment, we noted hesitancy at points when action is needed. This applies in particular (a) when deploying available policy instruments and (b) when discussing opposing interests and opinions. At such times, there is regularly a lack of boldness. This has several causes: public and political pressure, zooming in on public opposition in the (social) media, insufficient knowledge and expertise regarding the issues and available policy instruments, and insufficient space to accept uncertainties. The doubt and reluctance that this creates among those involved in implementation leads to delays in taking the necessary steps to put policy into practice.

What impedes implementation in actual practice?	What would seem to help?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• pressure from negative media coverage and public opposition• lack of knowledge and expertise regarding specific instruments• increasing uncertainties that could lead to a negative impact in actual practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• a culture of learning and handling mistakes differently• arrangements to deal with tense situations• investing in training and sharing experience

What impedes implementation in actual practice?

The lack of boldness among policy implementers about carrying out certain measures or engaging in discussion with opponents of the relevant policy acts as an obstacle to a swift approach to challenges in the living environment. In actual practice, there is apprehension and sometimes



self-censorship, stemming in part from increased aggression against administrators. As we know, it is in particular social media that contribute to this, although mainstream media also increasingly devote attention to struggle and conflict. Public opposition and negative media coverage can lead to doubts and procrastination about making choices.

What also regularly hampers policy implementers is their insufficient knowledge of specific policy instruments, for instance in the field of land policy. If there is too little expertise at implementation level regarding instruments for (active) land policy – such as land price policy, costs recovery, establishment of preferential rights, compulsory purchase, land allocation, etc. – then the available room for manoeuvre will remain unused. This is also relevant in rural areas, where there is little willingness as regards compulsory purchase.

Finally, implementing parties find it difficult to handle uncertainties effectively. On the one hand, they are required to base their decisions on clear and measurable facts, while on the other hand they must take account of unpredictable developments and uncertain processes. The “accountability culture” that has emerged in the Netherlands in recent decades leads to a fear of making mistakes at administrative level. Paradoxically, that fear often actually leads to mistakes and consequently delays in implementation. The tendency of administrators to thoroughly investigate and strictly regulate everything in advance (juridification) slows down implementation.

What would seem to help?

As regards policy implementation, much would seem to depend on (a) the culture of cooperation and (b) the knowledge and expertise of the people involved. The solution is therefore not to introduce more or different rules. Rather, the challenges in the living environment call for a culture in which professionals are not immediately called to account because they have made (unavoidable) mistakes. Instead, there should be more room for openness about dilemmas, doubts, and uncertainties.

It also helps for there to be proper arrangements within organisations (and between cooperating organisations) about dealing with tense situations. How do we deal with opposition?

Finally, it is essential to invest in training professionals in the actual practice of implementation and ensuring that they exchange knowledge and experience. That means not only knowledge and experience as regards policy but also the competences needed to deal with political and media pressure, i.e. political sensitivity, boldness, discussion skills, and the ability to link up objectives and solutions.

2.3 Inadequate organisation of implementation

Collaboration on an objective in the living environment often begins on only a small scale. The process is then gradually expanded, without too much focus on professionalising the collective organisation or on defining roles and responsibilities. The resulting improvised approach quite often



leads to inefficiency and a loss of commitment as regards implementation. Collaborative relationships then suffer too. This applies both to area developments and to collaborative relationships within the chain.

What impedes implementation in actual practice?	What would seem to help?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• no adequate organisation for an integrated approach to objectives in the living environment• lack of clarity about the mandate and power to take decisions• no work organisation dealing specifically with the objective, so that commitment on the part of subsidiary organisations is not a matter of course	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• investing in organising collaboration• utilising instruments to improve and accelerate the approach to tackling objectives and streamlining processes• focusing on a culture of cooperation regarding specific objectives

What impedes implementation in actual practice?

In our discussions with implementation professionals, there were complaints about amateurish improvisation when organising processes, a lack of professionalism, and an inefficient way of working, with “everyone just reinventing the wheel”. There is often insufficient knowledge of the objective or area in question and of the interests and parties involved. A lot of work is uncoordinated, making it difficult to tackle objectives in an integrated manner.

Implementation is also regularly hampered by a lack of clarity regarding the precise objective and the associated mandate: who is supposed to take

the decisions? Failing to agree on these kinds of matters in advance can lead to consultations coming under serious pressure, with the division of roles being constantly under discussion. This then limits the leverage of the organisation. We noted that this problem is particularly prevalent when tackling challenges that transcend administrative boundaries, thus involving even more different parties.

Finally, our discussions revealed that there is often no work organisation that is specifically dedicated to tackling an objective. This means that the commitment and capacity of professionals must always be sourced and contended for from within the various subsidiary organisations.

What would seem to help?

Investing in organising collaboration is essential. Implementing organisations benefit from a clear division of roles and clear rules of the game. It helps, for example, if there is a single implementation office with follow-through power and direct access to the relevant administrators. This avoids decisions having to pass through several tiers of management.

What would also help would be for better use to be made of existing and new instruments for improving and accelerating how objectives are tackled. These include the Regional Investment Agendas (RIAs) for area processes. It would also be helpful to streamline processes by running process steps in parallel rather than serially. Instruments such as ‘incentive approaches’ and ‘acceleration days’ – which are used in actual implementation in all kinds



of policy areas – are also a useful means of supporting implementation of objectives in the living environment.

Finally, it is important to devote attention to the culture of cooperation. The fact that processes operate faster when tackling one objective than when tackling another is often associated with this. Mutual trust is a key concept here. One participant in our roundtable discussions noted that a shared history of cooperation helps because people have then already got to know one another and there is less mistrust. It is therefore important to invest in relationships so as to dispel preconceived notions about one another. That is how to organise cooperation based on trust rather than mistrust.

2.4 Unequal distribution of costs and benefits

When living environment policies are implemented, the benefits and burdens are often unevenly distributed. This may impede implementation because the implementing parties may become frustrated if, while they are performing the objective, the benefits “drain away” (for example because a high compensation fee must be paid in the event of a buy-out) or end up with local parties or partners in the chain that do not contribute to tackling the relevant objective. Moreover, this impedes a swift approach because it makes it difficult for the parties involved to meet the cost of their operations.

What makes the cost-benefit relationship a complicated one is that it is not only financial benefits and burdens that are involved but also social

ones – with the latter being more difficult to quantify. It is also sometimes difficult to take account of all the costs and benefits, for example because the benefits accrue outside an area or will only take effect at some point in the future.

What impedes implementation in actual practice?	What would seem to help?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• those that benefit do not bear the burden• a time lag between when costs are incurred and when benefits are generated• insufficient opportunities for taking account of the impact for society	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• deployment of innovative financial instruments focusing on financial and societal costs and benefits• financial leverage of local and regional authorities• knowledge of instruments and how to utilise them

What impedes implementation in actual practice?

Unequal distribution of costs and benefits can impede implementation of objectives in the living environment in a number of different ways. If those required to incur costs during implementation are not those that benefit (as is often the case), then tackling a objective can be jeopardised. Whether the objective can be achieved then depends on how the burden is shared when public-private parties are cooperating. This applies not only to area developments but also to how burdens and benefits are distributed within the chain, as in the household waste separation case.

In many cases, it does not help that the benefits to society usually outweigh the costs. This is because societal benefits are difficult to quantify and



cannot be attributed to traditional operating costs. For an initiating party, taking account of positive “external effects” does not, after all, produce a better business case, given that those effects do not carry a price in day-to-day economic terms. Moreover, short-term investment is often necessary to achieve benefits to society that only become apparent in the longer term. In addition, uncertainties regarding future (cyclical) developments always play a role.

The fact that the funds available from central government for implementing objectives in the living environment are earmarked on a sectoral basis also hinders integrated implementation by cooperating parties. Challenges in the living environment are also often paid for from non-recurring project funding, specific grants, subsidies, and deals. These forms of funding also carry a high burden as regards accountability.

What would seem to help?

Challenges in the living environment are difficult to tackle with the current financial and administrative mechanisms; they require different control, accountability, and funding mechanisms. During the case studies that we commissioned, various innovative forms of funding were discussed that would be more effective.

One example is the “socialisation of land payments”, with the focus being on participation rather than on compensation. To finance implementation of an objective, for example, shares are then issued or environment funds are set up. This could also be a way of addressing the problem that the

beneficiaries of policy for the living environment are often not those that bear the burden. Participation by local residents, and thus “socialisation” of the benefits, can also increase local support for a development.

Moreover, area-based development is a good alternative to traditional land utilisation. In the case of area-based development, all types of revenues and costs for a project can be taken into account, including ecological, economic, and social value creation. Usable forms of funding do therefore appear to exist if one looks beyond the usual range of available instruments.

Participants in the roundtable discussions also advocated increasing the administrative responsibility and financial leverage of local and regional authorities. Central government should finance structural challenges through the Municipalities or Provinces Funds and not through specific payments, non-recurring grants, and deals. This provides local and regional authorities with greater certainty, more scope for customisation, and less of a burden as regards accountability.

Finally, implementing development projects requires a sound knowledge of land policy and funding instruments. Respondents in our case studies indicated that more investment is needed in this regard. The government often lacks knowledge of the market; here too investment is needed.



2.5 Structural scarcity of human resources

Implementation of challenges in the living environment suffers from a structural shortage of qualified people. Ageing of the population plays a role in this, but so does the growing demand for staff to undertake challenges in relatively new fields of work. Moreover, implementation work is valued less highly than policy development work.

What impedes implementation in actual practice?	What would seem to help?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• a structural shortage of HR and structural underestimation of that shortage• exacerbation of the existing scarcity through competition and the way things are organised	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• shared organisation of implementation• more cooperation and coordination so as to share scarce know-how and capacity• innovation and standardisation• making implementation work attractive

What impedes implementation in actual practice?

The scarcity of human resources is currently a structural issue in the Netherlands (and elsewhere). This has to do with (a) retirement of the baby-boom generation (leading to a search for *replacement staff* for many positions) and (b) the growth in demand for labour in relatively new fields of work such as climate, energy, and nitrogen (leading to a search for expansion for new positions). The Social and Economic Council of the Netherlands recently concluded that the labour market will remain a

significant limiting factor as regards the implementation of government policy over the next 30 years (SER, 2023).

The scarcity of human resources leads to competition for personnel between government organisations and market parties, and also between different sectors. There is also increasing competition *between* government organisations, with larger organisations generally being able to offer better terms and conditions of employment. But even in larger organisations, the terms and conditions of employment for implementation work are not as good as those for policy-making positions. Right across the board, implementation work enjoys lower status than policy-related work, and there is consequently relatively high turnover of staff in the former. This turnover leads to a lack of continuity, to know-how draining away, and to work processes being delayed. Flexibilisation of the labour market also leads to a lack of continuity, which in turn impedes progress in implementation.

HR shortages also appear to be exacerbated by the way available capacity is deployed. There is, for example, hardly any regional cooperation or coordination as regards sharing scarce know-how and capacity.

Finally, in housing construction and civil engineering, there is a rapid alternation between HR surpluses and HR shortages, with demand for staff being determined by the peaks and troughs in the business cycle. This complicates (long-term) strategic HR planning in these sectors.



What would seem to help?

HR shortages in the field of implementation can be resolved in part by shared management of capacity within an area or region. This requires coordination and cooperation. It is necessary, however, to address various common objections, for example a partial loss of control or a (perceived) lack of democratic legitimacy (for example, because local councillors do not have oversight, influence, or control over the regional partnerships). Such objections will sometimes simply need to be accepted. Modern ways of employing staff, such as *shared service centres*, can also help manage the scarcity of human resources.

Better use can also be made of innovation and standardisation as a means of tackling HR shortages in implementation work. New technologies and digital solutions can be utilised to design processes so that they are more efficient and effective. This can ease pressure on the labour market and ensure better utilisation of available capacity.

Finally, it is important for implementation positions to be more highly valued and rewarded. This has to do not only with the existing salary differentials compared to policy-related positions but also the status and responsibilities of professionals in implementation positions.



WHAT IMPEDES IMPLEMENTATION IN ACTUAL PRACTICE?

1

Accumulation, and hence complexity, of policy

- the amount of (rapidly changing) policy
- the lack of substantive cohesion
- detailed elaboration in the form of sometimes conflicting goals, rules, and standards

2

Hesitancy about taking the necessary steps

- pressure from negative media coverage and public opposition
- lack of knowledge and expertise regarding specific instruments
- increasing uncertainties that could lead to a negative impact

3

Inadequate organisation of implementation

- no adequate organisation for an integrated approach to objectives in the living environment
- lack of clarity about the mandate and power to take decisions
- no work organisation dealing specifically with the objective, so that commitment on the part of subsidiary organisations is not a matter of course

4

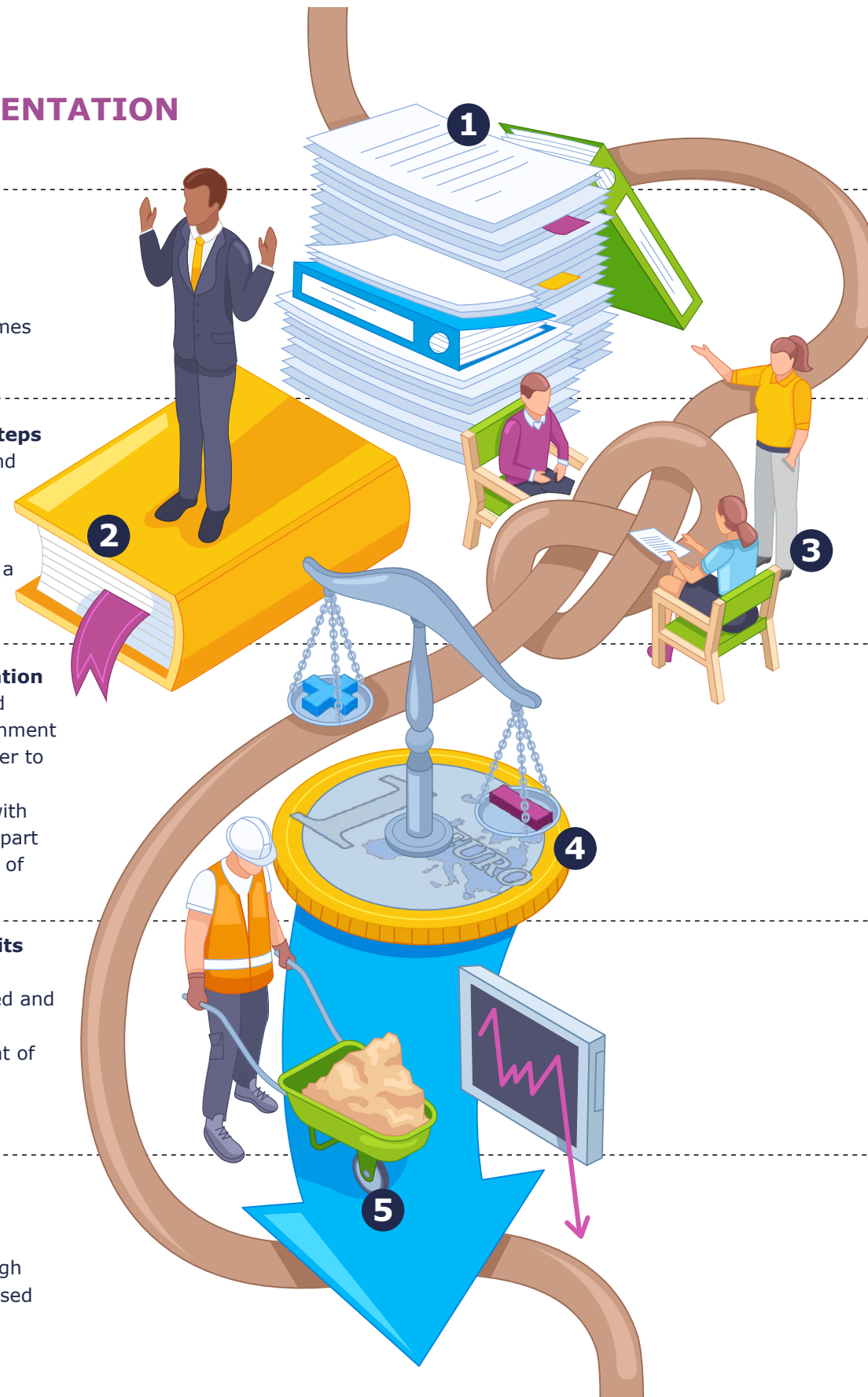
Unequal distribution of costs and benefits

- those that benefit do not bear the burden
- a time lag between when costs are incurred and when benefits are generated
- insufficient opportunities for taking account of the impact for society

5

Structural scarcity of human resources

- a structural shortage of HR and structural underestimation of that shortage
- exacerbation of the existing scarcity through competition and the way things are organised



WHAT WOULD SEEM TO HELP?

- a dedicated agenda for prioritising accumulated policy
- greater scope for customisation
- a robust implementation programme, overarching programmes, or a coordinating member of government

- a culture of learning and handling mistakes differently
- arrangements to deal with tense situations
- investing in training and sharing experience

- investing in organising collaboration
- utilising mechanisms to improve and accelerate the approach to tackling objectives and streamlining processes
- focusing on a culture of cooperation regarding specific objectives

- deployment of innovative financial instruments focusing on financial and societal costs and benefits
- financial leverage of local and regional authorities
- knowledge of instruments and how to utilise them

- shared organisation of implementation
- more cooperation and coordination so as to share scarce know-how and capacity
- innovation and standardisation
- making implementation work attractive



3 SYNTHESIS: LESSONS AND INSIGHTS

This advisory report is based on an exploration of implementation in actual practice. For the purpose of that exploration, we commissioned ten studies of examples of implementation, as noted above. We then conducted a detailed analysis of five impeding factors that appeared to be at play in many of the case studies. We listed some 15 causes of these impeding factors. In addition, we identified a similar number of interventions that would appear to enhance implementation. It should be noted that we do not claim to thus present an exhaustive overview.

The question is: what picture does this overview convey of policy implementation in the living environment, and what insights does that picture provide in order to improve implementation in actual practice?

3.1 There is no “silver bullet”

It is notable that the five impeding factors are of a rather disparate nature; apples and oranges, so to speak. As a result, they cannot be classified effectively. This diversity of impeding factors also shows why the problematic connection between policy and implementation has for decades been the object of theoretical analysis. There is no “silver bullet”

– no panacea that can, at a stroke, dispense with all the problems involved in implementation. Implementation of policy for the living environment is a complex matter and requires working on several different fronts. There is a recurring lack of knowledge of one another’s rationale, practices, possibilities, and limitations.

Convergence of factors

Our case studies showed that the five impeding factors often occur simultaneously, which increases the complexity as regards implementation. This convergence of impeding factors is particularly apparent at regional scale. To begin with, that is where the accumulation of policy is at its most, given that many challenges in the domain of the physical living environment transcend administrative boundaries. The best solution for a region will not work out positively for every municipality. As a result, there is regularly an hesitation about taking the necessary steps on the part of local administrators. How is an executive councillor supposed to defend a regional decision in the municipal council if that decision does not coincide with the municipality’s own interests?

Regions also often lack an adequate organisation for implementing policy for the living environment, and the distribution of costs and benefits is particularly problematic at a regional level. Moreover, HR shortages mean that municipalities are reluctant to second employees to a regional implementing organisation.

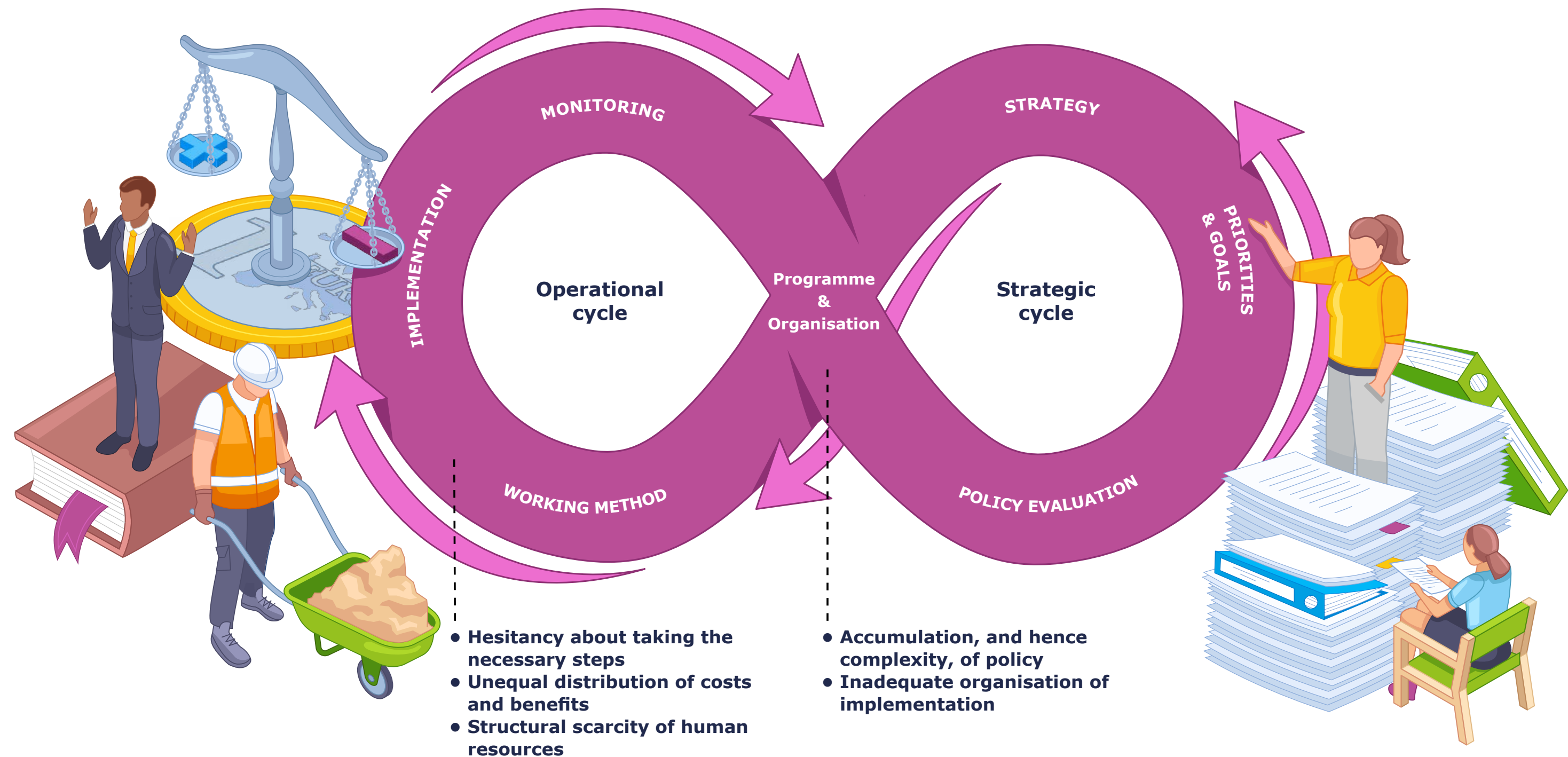
3.2 Desired relationship between policy and implementation: a model for ensuring implementation capacity

In the present advisory report, we have made use of the “policy eight”, i.e. a means of representing the relationship between policy and implementation in the form of the figure 8, with policy at the top and implementation at the bottom. We have tilted the figure 8 onto its side so as to reflect the fact that policy implementation should be on an equal footing with policy development and policy, rather than subordinate to them

We view this model of how to ensure implementation capacity as a better representation of the desired relationship between policy and implementation than the more traditional policy cycle, in which implementation follows on from policy and in which policy is also dominant as regards implementation. In that traditional way of thinking, it is policy that sets the direction and the frameworks, perhaps with a certain amount of input from the implementation side. With our horizontal representation of their relationship, we give expression to our view that policy and implementation are equal to one another. As our examples show, *both* are needed in equal measure so as to accomplish something. Any improvement in policy implementation must therefore commence from a conceptual model that ensures that they are placed on an equal footing.



Model for ensuring implementation capacity: the tilted figure 8 with two clusters of causes of stalled implementation



The model also shows that there are two cycles that are relevant for putting policy into actual practice, the strategic cycle and the operational cycle. Both these cycles are subject to the influence of political and societal forces that may affect interpretation of the different steps in the model. Society influences the various steps concerning effectiveness, namely through democratic processes, through public consultation, or as a cooperation partner during implementation.

3.3 Two clusters of factors that stall implementation

The implementation capacity model shows that there are two interfaces where the causes of stalled implementation are located that we identified in the previous section – as well as the possible solutions. What is striking is (a) that many of the causes of stalled implementation, and the possible solutions, can be found at the interface between the operational implementation cycle and the strategic policy cycle; and (b) that some of the other causes, and the possible solutions, are located around the interface between methodology and implementation. We believe that it is at these two interfaces that the greatest gains can be achieved as regards strengthening policy implementation in the physical living environment.

In the next section, we focus our recommendations on the two interfaces in the model that we have discussed. The “Programme & Organisation” interface concerns policy accumulation and inadequate organisation. When discussing the “Methodology & Implementation” interface, we deal in greater detail with an hesitancy about taking the necessary

steps, the unequal distribution of costs and benefits, and the structural scarcity of human resources. Overarching both the clusters is our main recommendation, which is to realign the relationship between policy and implementation.





4 RECOMMENDATIONS

As noted in the introduction to this advisory report, policy goals in the domain of the living environment are often achieved either too late or not at all. With the recommendations we offer in the present section, we present guidelines for strengthening the practice of implementation and achieving ambitions in the physical living environment. We adopt a tripartite approach:

- We first formulate our main recommendation, which focuses on placing policy and implementation on an equal footing (Section 3.1). This recommendation forms a kind of overarching umbrella above our other recommendations.
- We then offer recommendations that concern the connection between the operational and strategic policy cycles (Section 3.2).
- Finally, we offer recommendations that specifically concern the world of implementation (Section 3.3).

Given the agenda-setting nature of this advisory report, we have framed our recommendations in broad terms. They therefore require further elaboration and application by those directly involved in implementation and policy. We chose to do this for two reasons. Firstly, a degree of modesty is appropriate given that when providing its advice the Rli is usually positioned at a distance from actual implementation. Secondly, the variety of policies and implementation modalities is particularly large,

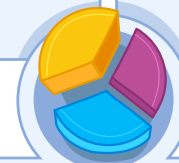
Main recommendation: radically reappraise the implementation of policy



Recommendations regarding working from the interface between policy and implementation



Recommendation 2
Give implementing parties a structural role in policy development



Recommendation 3
Work, organise, and draw up a shared agenda based on the objectives concerned



Recommendation 4
Divide up roles, tasks, and relationships based on the specific objectives concerned

Recommendations for dealing assertively with implementation dilemmas



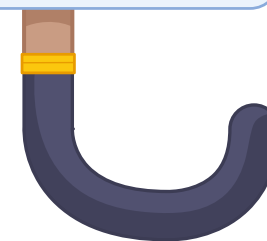
Recommendation 5
Organise cooperation in such a way that implementers feel confident about taking decisions, even in the face of uncertainties



Recommendation 6
Find ways to determine the costs and benefits of challenges in the living environment more accurately and to distribute them better



Recommendation 7
Adopt a smart approach to dealing with the structural scarcity of human resources



meaning that the situation will vary slightly from case to case. There is therefore little point in formulating recommendations with tailor-made solutions for every problem involved in implementing every policy for the living environment. What helps is a series of recommendations that can advance the necessary dialogue between policy-makers and implementing parties.

4.1 Main recommendation: radically reappraise the implementation of policy

Recommendation 1: Make policy and implementation fundamentally equal

Implementation in the Netherlands is at a structural disadvantage relative to policy development and policy. In our view, that disadvantaged position is undesirable.

The root of the problem lies in the one-way traffic that characterises thinking in the world of policy in the seat of government: policy deployment is discussed and decided upon, without serious consideration being given to the consequences and problems during actual implementation. At the very most, the following question is raised: how do we ensure that implementation adapts itself to the policy? The opposite route is not taken, i.e. identifying what is needed during policy development for implementation of measures to be feasible. Breaking away from

this attitude is an important component of the “new culture of public administration” whose importance is widely endorsed in political circles.¹

Ensure that policy and implementation are placed on an equal footing

We advocate a radical reappraisal of implementation, with policy-makers and implementing parties being placed on an equal footing. We term this “radical” because of the way implementation is persistently undervalued. The idea that policy and its implementation are equal to each other is not of course radical in itself, rather it is entirely self-evident, and also in line with the Dutch government’s response to the *Werk aan uitvoering* [Work on Implementation] reports (SZW, 2021). Equivalence of policy and implementation means that policy-makers should not hand over their plans to those whose task is to implement them. Rather, policy-makers and implementers should deliberate *jointly* about the plans and the feasibility of putting them into effect. The interface is therefore ideally not the point where the plans are handed over but the strategic core: that is the pivot point.

However, implementation does not currently have a strong shared voice. There are various reasons for this. The range of parties involved in implementation is diverse and fragmented, comprising local and regional authorities, provinces, municipalities, water boards, implementing organisations, environmental services, civil-society organisations, and

¹ The desire for a new culture of public administration was a major theme during the 2023 elections for the Dutch House of Representatives. This proposed new culture means that government should act more on the basis of trust in citizens and institutions, and not on the basis of the mistrust that has been prevalent in recent decades.



market parties. Those engaged in putting policy into actual practice cannot therefore speak with a single voice. Moreover, critical remarks on central government policy that are made by implementing parties are often viewed as lobbying. It is generally the central government’s policy-makers who – because the initiative for policy development happens to lie with them – choose what they wish to talk about, when, and with whom.

To disrupt this unequal relationship between policy-makers and implementing parties, various structural and cultural arrangements are needed so as to involve the latter equally in developing policy right from the initiation phase. Central government recently developed two instrument to align central government policy and implementation more effectively: the Policy Compass and the Implementation Feasibility Test for Local and Regional Authorities [*Uitvoerbaarheidstoets Decentrale Overheden*] (see box). The latter instrument is aimed specifically at ensuring the timely involvement of local and regional authorities. But for all other implementing parties, there is (as yet) no equal dialogue on how to approach a joint objective.

The Policy Compass

The Policy Compass ("*Beleidskompas*")² is the central working method for policy-making within central government and replaces the Integral Assessment Framework for Policy and Regulation (JenV, 2022). The policy cycle comprises four phases that form part of a quality cycle (*plan, do,*

check, act). The *plan* phase involves careful policy preparation. In the *do* phase, sufficient time needs to be taken for the proper implementation of legislation and regulations and for providing information about them. In the *check* phase, the government searches – far more than previously – for problems regarding implementation. In the *act* phase, the policy process resumes.

Implementation Feasibility Test for Local and Regional Authorities (UDO)³

With the Implementation Feasibility Test for Local and Regional Authorities (UDO), central government and local and regional authorities proceed jointly through the process of developing new policy. Is it possible for municipalities, provinces, and/or water boards to implement that policy effectively; does the objective fit in with their existing range of objectives and their expertise; and will they receive enough resources for tackling it from central government? This involves the administrative and financial aspects of new policy or changes in tasks and powers. The UDO links up with the requirements set in the Policy Compass for creating policy and regulations. The UDO and its framework of standards for inter-authority relations were adopted by the Dutch government on 20 January 2023.

2 Only available in Dutch.

3 *Uitvoerbaarheidstoets Decentrale Overheden* (UDO). Only available in Dutch.



Although instruments such as these are developed on the basis of sound intentions, and are in themselves sound attempts to bring policy and implementation closer together, they do not actually alter the underlying problem. They are about *taking better account* of implementation when drawing up policy, but are not yet sufficiently about developing policy *in consultation with* implementing parties. The initiative still lies unilaterally with the policy-makers, who first draw up their plans and only once they have done so enter into discussions with the implementing parties. This modus operandi leads to a recurring pattern of excessive expectations as regards implementation, complex and difficult to implement regulations, inadequate funding and instruments to achieve what is required, conflicting governance philosophies, unrealistic schedules, and conflicting policy measures.

Establish regular “feedback loops”

There needs to be a process of constantly switching back and forth between implementation and policy-making. The policy that is under development is then amended based on know-how and experience gained during actual implementation work, or in response to a changing context or new insights. The process thus ideally takes place at the interface between the strategic and operational cycles. Policy is not only designed there, but as it is implemented the insights and experience gained are also incorporated, so that strategic and operational adjustments can be made.

Properly functioning feedback loops between policy and implementation are needed so as to monitor whether the policy is indeed being implemented and whether the goals are being achieved. Specifically, this means that policy development professionals should regularly ask parties involved in implementation for improvement suggestions as regards scheduling, finance, or instruments. And those suggestions must be heeded. Social developments, market developments, social initiatives, or political interventions (such as motions in the Dutch House of Representatives) can also be reasons to proceed via the feedback loop, in other words to engage with the implementing parties.⁴

Ensure that implementation functions are valued equally, and fund implementation on a structural basis

Policy-making positions are currently valued higher than the positions of those engaged in implementation. This has to do not only with how they are valued as regards status and authority, but also quite simply with financial and material remuneration. This difference in valuation is not justified. Excellence is needed for both aspects of policy: development and also implementation. Implementation is complex and demands highly specific knowledge and expertise. After all, organising area development processes, granting complex permits or deploying (land policy) instruments is no picnic. That specific, top-quality expertise must be valued and rewarded.

⁴ A risk-regulation reflex needs to be avoided here. See Appendix 1 (Section 1.2).



We therefore advocate allocating greater value to the positions of those engaged in implementation. It is important to place implementation on an equal footing with policy development in this regard, so that top-class people can choose to work in implementation without sacrifices or reservations. This can be encouraged by ensuring that the terms and conditions of employment for implementation work are equal to those for people working in the policy departments of central government, in terms of both remuneration and career prospects. After all, for the two-way traffic between policy and implementation to work well, the quality on both sides needs to be up to scratch.

At the same time, the financial leverage of local and regional authorities and implementing organisations themselves will need to be improved. Here, too, there is an imbalance: in the current situation, policy for structural challenges in the living environment has to be implemented largely with non-recurring funding, such as specific payments, temporary grants, project financing, and deals. To ensure that policy for the living environment can be properly implemented, structural funding is needed; that is a better way to guarantee progress. Moreover, a disadvantage of non-recurring funding is that at the implementation level, a great deal of time and effort is lost in justifying how the various flows of funds are spent.

4.2 Recommendations regarding working from the interface between policy and implementation

Recommendation 2: Give implementing parties a structural role in policy development

Implementing parties currently do not have a structural place at the table where policy is drawn up. In our view, that table lies at the centre of the implementation capacity model in the previous section of this advisory report. It is there that local and regional authorities and parties working in implementation should have their place, so that they can contribute insights gained from implementation to policy development. They can then indicate authoritatively the conditions subject to which policy can be implemented.

In short, we believe that implementing parties should have, and undertake, a much more explicit role and voice in policy-making. Only then can maximum use be made of the insights, know-how, and also dissent that those parties can provide. In making this recommendation, we offer three suggestions for a specific approach.

Enable central government implementing organisations to be represented, as standard, within the Senior Management Board

We believe that central government implementing organisations should always be represented within the Senior Management Board [*Bestuursraad*], the highest civil-service body at which decisions are made. Within that Board, they can provide input, fine-tune matters, and issue



weighty advice – which may perhaps be negative – if they consider that policy proposals and measures are unworkable. In many ministries, the larger – although not all – central government implementing organisations are already represented within the Senior Management Board.

However, there are also civil-society and private implementing organisations, and their voice is not currently heard within the Senior Management Board. The same applies to input from provinces, municipalities, and water boards (i.e. local and regional authorities). It should be noted that our concern is not that all implementing organisations should *have a seat* on the Senior Management Board, but that they should have a representative voice within it. Ministries can interpret this in their own way; the point is to systematically ensure that the views of implementing parties are heard when policy proposals are being drawn up. This requires some form of structural representation so that the culture of equality can thus be given further shape.

SGs: utilise your power to convene

To ensure that civil-society and private implementing organisations and local and regional authorities are also involved in policy development at an early stage, the Secretary-General (SG) of each policy department should make more active use of his or her *power to convene*. By this we mean that the SG should ensure that implementation is not involved in policy-making only *after* the policy priorities have already been set. If that situation does threaten to arise, the SG should proactively convene the relevant implementing parties to participate in consultations on the proposed policy.

In our opinion, the SG is the appropriate official to fulfil this role because he or she is positioned above the more content-oriented directors-general (DGs), and from that position can best assess whether proper account is taken of the implementation perspective. With this suggestion, we are incorporating an explicit “safety valve” for the eventuality that those in the policy column fail to ensure that discussion with the implementing parties takes place as a matter of course, adequately, or sufficiently broadly. Ideally, of course, such a safety value would not be necessary, but the reality of implementation in recent years has shown that in actual practice it is *indeed* necessary. That is why we are explicitly entrusting it to the SG within each ministry.

We regard connecting up policy development with actual implementation as an essential component of the new culture of public administration that is currently the topic of political, public, and also civil-service discussion. Implementation capacity is a component of that culture and at the same time a prerequisite. It is a broad process in which everyone must be involved, but that is precisely why it is important to also make someone explicitly responsible for it. In our view, the SG is therefore an important custodian of this new culture – including vis-à-vis his or her political superiors. It is up to the SG to prevent the Council of Ministers adopting a policy decision if the preconditions regarding people, funds, and feasibility cannot be met. If that situation looks likely to arise, the SG will need to discuss with his or her political superiors the conditions under which the preconditions can indeed be met. The Secretaries-General Consultation Committee (SGO), as an assembly of individual SGs, can also take up a



position on this. Here too, DGs should ideally take action themselves in such situations, or involve the SG. But if that ideal situation does not arise, then we believe that the SG should be proactive in his or her own capacity.

Safeguard the interests of local and regional authorities

The role and position of local and regional authorities in the implementation of central government policy deserve extra attention. Safeguards are needed to prevent local and regional authorities being assigned implementation objectives without adequate funding, for example. It should be noted that such safeguards have been included in the Implementation Feasibility Test for Local and Regional Authorities since 2023 (see Recommendation 1).

A great deal of implementation takes place at a regional level. Challenges and solutions on which authorities collaborate increasingly coincide at regional level. Regions potentially have a great deal of implementation capacity, although this must be accompanied by democratic scrupulousness. Elzinga already drew attention to this in an advisory report to the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations (2021). In our view, he rightly argues for a local and regional governance policy framework, which should also provide regional administration with sufficient leverage without sacrificing properly authorised governance. This need for decisive regional governance is also a finding from our analysis. Dialogue sessions were held in 2022 and these showed that local and regional authorities also need such a policy framework (Berenschot, 2022). It should be noted that in our view

that is a policy framework that supports the implementation capacity of regional alliances, not the other way around.

We also believe, in line with the advice of Elzinga and others, that the Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations should be given stronger coordinating powers as regards allocation of objectives in local and regional governance. A safety valve is needed to prevent local and regional authorities being overburdened or under-represented in policy development. The most heavy-handed interpretation of this role is to assign structural co-signing power to the Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations as regards such plans drawn up by the relevant ministries. This is because actual practice shows that the relevant ministers sometimes treat the interests of local and regional implementing parties in a careless or selective manner. This also applies to the “sufficient funding” standard. Safeguards are needed to prevent, on the one hand, the autonomy of local and regional authorities from being encroached on or, on the other, those authorities being saddled with the implementation of unrealistic (political) ambitions.

Recommendation 3: Work, organise, and draw up a shared agenda based on the objectives concerned

The interviews that we conducted with experts for the purposes of the present advisory report revealed, among other things, that policy accumulation is less of a problem if the implementing parties have a clear



idea of the shared ambitions and goals. One is then better able to deal with the bulk of central government policy in a targeted and selective manner. And because it is then clear which issues merit priority as regards time and attention, one can work more successfully on implementation. We conclude from this that the problem is not so much the accumulation of policy as such but rather the ability to detect a coherent line in that accumulation and then to determine priorities. That line and the resulting prioritisation can be best achieved if we succeed in creating a unified narrative about the objective at hand, and on that basis draw up a shared agenda: what are we going to tackle first and what action will then follow?

Such an approach is consistent with the Environment and Planning Act, which comes into force on 1 January 2024. That legislation in fact requires municipalities, provinces, and water boards to develop an integrated long-term vision for the living environment. In that strategy on spatial planning and the environment, they must set out their substantive choices regarding the development, management, protection, and preservation of the living environment. In other words, the vision can in many cases articulate the narrative of an objective, area, or region and set priorities.

We provide three specific suggestions below that implementing parties can utilise when ranking and prioritising the policy goals and rules emanating for them from central government.

First formulate the strategy, and only then prioritise action

We already touched on our first suggestion above: create a narrative (i.e. a strategy for the area or region) and set a shared agenda based on it. For example, part of such a narrative might be: “This area has the goal of improving water quality and constructing housing.” That narrative, or strategy, can then provide guidance as regards (a) making choices on how to implement and prioritise action and (b) selecting the partners that should be assigned a more prominent, or less prominent, place during consultations and in the process. We recommend using the same approach for individual implementation objectives also.

The sequence of steps is, however, crucial. It is important to first articulate the narrative of the objective(s) and only then, on that basis, to initiate follow-up action, in the right order. So don’t schedule the action first and then look for the narrative to go with it. With the latter approach, you run the risk that the partners involved will eventually become less committed to working on the objective. It is difficult, after all, to perform an objective in the living environment credibly and with authority if the underlying strategy has obviously only been tacked on afterwards.

Make use of coordinating and programmatic structures

One of the things that emerged from our discussions with the various implementing organisations was that the work of implementation would benefit from an overarching programme, a coordinating member of government, or from working with wide-ranging central government programmes, such as the Delta Programme. These would appear to help



in ranking and prioritising different policy goals and rules.⁵ This would create more scope for the implementing organisations to deal efficiently with accumulated policy, based on their own prioritisation of the various policy goals and rules. It should be noted that the current sectoral structure of central government and central government policy makes this difficult because, in the current constellation, each minister or DG is judged according to how far they achieve their own goals.

With that in mind, we find it important for there to be increased and more frequent interministerial cooperation at central government level. This can be arranged, for example, by jointly managing and distributing budgets.⁶

We consider the “programme” instrument as defined in the Environment and Planning Act to be eminently suitable as the interface between policy and implementation. A programme-based structure lends itself well to addressing complex multi-level objectives (involving several tiers of government) and multi-sectoral objectives (involving several policy fields). In line with this, we view programme-based working as an important aid to shaping goal-based implementation. In the context of programme-based working, mutually dependent parties commit to jointly achieving results for one or more goals. Ideally, commissioning should be shared between

⁵ The National Rural Areas Programme (N&S, 2022) and the NOVEX areas (BZK, 2022a) can also be viewed as attempts to create greater coherence in central government policy. Central government has now initiated a large number of programmes within the domain of the physical living environment, with an appendix to the NOVEX programme listing 25 different programmes (BZK, 2022b).

⁶ It should be noted that the Minister of Infrastructure and Water Management and the Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations already do this. They decide jointly, for example, on the budget for neighbourhood access and alterations to the main road network.

the authorities concerned. It is also important to have clear mandates and arrangements in place for scaling up in the event of problems.

Make customisation possible

One finding that emerged from our case studies is that policy can play out very differently at local or area level. Local and regional differences are often considerable, and the local context can determine the effectiveness of policy measures. There is therefore a need for customisation as regards implementation. After all, the way policy measures interact is somewhat different in each particular situation. One should therefore ensure that policy and legislation allow as much scope as possible for doing what is necessary at local and regional level when tackling a specific objective or area. It should be noted that the Environment and Planning Act also offers greater scope for this. The right balance between economic, social, and natural capital is highly context-specific. Considering the matter from a broad prosperity perspective can help bring about the desired balance, locally or regionally, between different sectoral policy ambitions.

Recommendation 4: Divide up roles, tasks, and relationships based on the specific objectives concerned

The underlying problem in many implementation failures is that it is not clear to policy-makers and implementers which of them is in charge when it comes to making tough choices about substantive priorities and budget allocation. As a result, these choices end up not being arrived at either centrally or locally/regionally.



Agree on what is most important

In our view, it is crucial that where policy and implementation meet, choices are made on an issue-by-issue basis as to where to place the emphasis.

Do we opt for local and regional implementation of national, central frameworks and ambitions, or do we shape policy as a local and regional process that adds up to implementation of national frameworks? Both are possible, but it is important to be clear as to where the emphasis lies. With regard to certain matters, for example compulsory purchase, the competent authority is of course predetermined.

If local and regional dynamics are decisive, it will mean that policy implementation will not be the same everywhere, and less national and supra-regional direction will be possible. A local and regional approach to energy infrastructure construction, for example, can lead to the acceleration of specific local projects but will simultaneously make it difficult to achieve national optimisation and coordination.

Conversely, national direction of the construction of energy infrastructure means that local and regional implementation may involve dealing with centrally determined priorities and choices that turn out to be inappropriate in the specific on-site situation. This can then lead to opposition and delay. These are inherent dilemmas, in the sense that they cannot be avoided. Emphasising one of them automatically means a lack of attention to the other. It is possible, however, to avoid the inertia that can arise during actual implementation if absolutely no choice is made for the one or the other. We offer two specific suggestions below that can help with this.

Talk to one another in advance about who has the actual power to take decisions

It is essential for all parties involved at the interface between policy and implementation to discuss in advance what scope the local and regional implementing parties will have: who has the power to take decisions and how much scope is there for local negotiation and deviation? Choices about this should not just be left open. If they are, there is a major risk that goals will be set centrally that are then delegated to local and regional implementing parties with the relevant mandates and responsibilities being unclear. The implementing parties will then not know what they can and cannot do. As a result, they will be unable or unwilling to make use of their power to take decisions, even though addressing major issues in the living environment in fact requires strong, expert, and authoritative organisations to take charge of implementation.

Because objectives in the living environment are ultimately always about scarce resources and scarce space, there is always an allocation issue. That is precisely why it is important for it to be clear what everyone's responsibility is, what substantive choices are left to the parties actually involved in implementation, what budgetary allocations they can make during the process, and what portion of the funding has already been earmarked centrally.



Allow the specific objective to determine how implementation is structured

It is not only important for roles, objectives, and mandates to be clearly divided when shaping policy, but also for a shared choice to be made about this *based on the specific objectives in the living environment*. It is characteristic, after all, of many issues concerning the physical living environment that local circumstances can vary greatly and can also be highly decisive as regards the best form that implementation should take. This applies in particular to how regional challenges should be tackled. The regions are an often rather neglected but important scale when it comes to implementation of much central government policy.

4.3 Recommendations for dealing assertively with implementation dilemmas

In the cases we examined we came across numerous recurring problems that seem to be inherent to the work of implementation. In this section, we offer recommendations for how to deal with three dilemmas that we believe impede progress in implementing policy for the living environment.

Recommendation 5: Organise cooperation in such a way that implementers feel confident about taking decisions, even in the face of uncertainties

Whether the implementation of policy for the living environment goes well appears to depend, among other things, on the culture within which the

professionals involved collaborate to carry it out. That does not go well all by itself. We noted in the case studies that many policy implementers lack the boldness needed to carry out certain measures. Anxiety, self-censorship, and procrastination play a role. This is a serious matter because it hampers a dynamic approach to tackling challenges in the living environment.

Political and/or public opposition sometimes plays a role in this hesitancy on the part of implementers. In other cases there is insufficient knowledge and expertise as regards the issues and the available policy instruments. The latter is not an easy thing to admit. We see in practice that when reference is made to statutory or financial constraints, it is in reality often more a matter of not wanting or daring to utilise the possibilities that are in fact available. It is not usually just a single individual who is hesitant about making use of the available policy instruments; this is also determined by the setting. There is therefore no question here of anyone being to blame. The way in which collaboration is organised determines whether individuals also make use of their various options, or whether they refrain from doing so due to an hesitancy about taking the necessary steps.

We offer two suggestions below for improving the decision-making decisiveness of policy implementers based on better-organised cooperation. This involves a paradigm shift in which trust and transparency, rather than control, are central, thus allowing dilemmas, doubts, and uncertainties to be raised for discussion unhindered.



Make arrangements regarding the culture of cooperation

In order to ensure effective implementation, it is important to develop a setting in which parties feel confident enough – even when the situation becomes stressful – to seek solutions and take difficult decisions. This means that arrangements are needed regarding the culture of cooperation. How do we move from an accountability culture to a learning culture if mistakes are inevitably made? How do we act together when someone is caught up in a media storm, or has to deal with serious public uproar? Arrangements need to be made on how to deal with such tense situations (Fijbes, 2017). The Council for Public Administration (ROB) recently advised in this regard that accountability processes should be designed with a focus on recovery or improvement rather than on holding people to account. Improvement processes should also be designed according to the principles of “learning evaluation” (ROB, 2023).

At the same time, it is important for individuals within a culture of cooperation to stay focussed and be able to express opposing views when discussing possible solutions. It is precisely then that the joint response can become stronger. The art of effective cooperation during implementation is for differences of opinion to first be raised for discussion forcefully, after which the necessary choices are made within a collaborative process. A culture of cooperation therefore also means a culture of productive confrontation, one in which parties enter into a difficult discussion in a timely manner rather than avoiding such discussion for as long as possible – until it finally manifests itself outside “on the spot”.

Deal productively with inherent uncertainties

Central government policy for the living environment is based on an assumption of certainty as regards planning. The reality of policy implementation in the physical living environment is, however, that the work almost always involves uncertainties. This means that implementing measures turns out to be different in practice to how they have been laid down in the various plans and blueprints.

The fact that policy is implemented differently to what was foreseen is often viewed as a shortcoming, but that is neither realistic nor productive. It is important to recognise that there will always be uncertainties, and for implementers to confront those uncertainties jointly and support one another in doing so.

Recommendation 6: Find ways to determine the costs and benefits of challenges in the living environment more accurately and to distribute them better

The benefits of working on challenges in the living environment often “drain away” (for example because a high compensation fee must be paid in the event of a buy-out) or revenues end up with parties that do not contribute to (area) development. This is not only frustrating for the parties that are working on implementation; it also hampers a proactive approach.



We offer three suggestions below for productive ways to calculate and distribute the costs and benefits of living environment objectives in a different manner.

Share knowledge and expertise about (innovative) financial arrangements

Greater attention needs to be paid to sharing knowledge and expertise about the application of land policy instruments, such as the establishment of municipal preferential rights, cost recovery, and compulsory purchase. After the financial crisis, many municipalities switched from an active to a facilitative land policy, thus forfeiting land policy expertise. While land policy instruments are very useful when financing projects in the living environment.

Greater attention also needs to be paid to improving knowledge of innovative financing arrangements; such knowledge does not seem to be spreading very fast. In our view, the umbrella organisations IPO, VNG, and UvW should assume a bigger role in this regard, together with the Netherlands Enterprise Agency (RVO). The Regional Investment Agendas (RIAs) would seem to offer a promising means of achieving greater regional control of investment. In our case studies, we also came across positive examples involving the financial participation of residents in area cooperatives (including in wind energy projects) or with parties committing to a development in the form of co-ownership or shareholdership (including in projects for natural gas-free neighbourhoods).

Deploy land value increase for spatial development

For a better distribution of costs and benefits in area development, we find it important that better use is made of land value increase so as to make spatial developments affordable and reduce public deficits. To that end, the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations has commissioned a study on how to improve the betterment levy for recouping the costs of servicing and infrastructure [*baatbelasting*] and the options for introducing a levy to prevent speculative land transactions (track 3 of “Modernisation of Land Policy”, BZK, 2023).

Also take account of non-financial benefits, costs that are avoided, and potential future benefits

We find it important to not only consider the direct financial costs and benefits of (area) developments. Account must also be taken of non-financial benefits, costs that are avoided, and potential future benefits. As Isaac Roeterink (2023) aptly puts it: it’s about an area development and not a land development. The area team should therefore visualise both the financial and non-financial costs and benefits right at the start, and then formulate principles on which those costs and benefits will be shared between the parties involved (“we weigh up both the financial and non-financial costs and benefits”; “we aim for financial and non-financial benefits to remain in the area”; “we aim for stakeholders to share proportionally in the costs and benefits”). It is important to also make arrangements for factoring in external costs and allowing for or “socialising” revenues, and to make sound arrangements about these matters.



In this context there are five interesting lessons that were used by the Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis (CPB) in a recent publication to illustrate how, in area development, the broad prosperity perspective can complement and strengthen the social cost-benefit analysis. Viewing matters from a broad prosperity perspective produces a more balanced analysis of the effects of integrated area development. That perspective takes account not only of financial-economic but also socio-cultural and spatial-ecological effects. The distribution effects for the here and now, for future generations, and in other regions and countries are also taken into account. An analysis from a broad prosperity perspective presents the various different effects side by side, making explicit the associated dilemmas for decision-makers (CPB, 2023).

Recommendation 7: Adopt a smart approach to dealing with the structural scarcity of human resources

The problem of scarce human resources makes itself felt in all areas of implementation, and that is a problem that will increase rather than decrease in the years ahead. It is therefore necessary to focus energy on dealing with that scarcity in a smart manner, whereby the scarcity itself can be alleviated somewhat and it also becomes possible to greatly reduce its negative impact. We offer three specific recommendations in this regard.

Utilise pooling and expertise representation

An effective way of dealing with structural HR shortages is by *pooling* expertise more intelligently and working with *expertise representation*.

Pooling involves assembling expertise that is scattered here and there within individual implementing organisations in a shared (national or regional) *pool* of experts. Organisations struggling with vacancies that they are unable to fill and needing a specialist in land policy, for example, can hire in someone from such a pool for specific projects. This makes it possible to eliminate shortages that often cause immediate and insurmountable problems as regards implementation work.

Expertise representation is a way of avoiding unnecessarily deploying too many experts simultaneously for a given project. The idea is, for example, not to include five ecologists in a project team (i.e. one from each implementing organisation involved) but just one, who then represents the specific area of expertise on behalf of all the various organisations and who incorporates and contributes the perspectives of those organisations.

Alleviate HR shortages by designing work in a smarter manner

Scarcity of HR is often partly a consequence of how work is organised. It is therefore important that implementing parties are critical of the way they have organised their work processes. These are often unnecessarily labour-intensive. All kinds of consultations would seem merely to encourage the struggle between organisations as regards their interests rather than the ultimate outcome for society in the living environment.

That outcome must always be the touchstone for the meaningfulness of any process, consultation, or other use of precious time. From that perspective, asking simple, critical questions can help alleviate the scarcity: Can we cut



down on the number or frequency of consultations? Can we shorten the duration of consultations by ensuring that we have a clear agenda, together with the relevant documents? and can we avoid repeatedly having the same items on the discussion agenda by keeping a better record of what has been agreed on and following it up?

Implementers feel a pressing need for a reduction of the burden as regards accountability. Accounting for non-recurring funding and specific grants is particularly labour-intensive. Working with structural funding through the Municipal or Provincial Fund contributes significantly to reducing the accountability burden.

In a discussion about our case study on implementation of the High-Frequency Rail Transport Programme, it was noted that a great deal of HR is needed to manage procurement processes. This is because of the way such processes are organised. Some market parties devote around 30% of their time and expenditure to submitting tenders. Costs and HR could be saved by making greater use of framework contracts and the like. Subcontracting could also be restricted in procurement by setting explicit requirements that it must meet. Moreover, concluding subcontracts entails administrative hassle and leads to an unnecessary loss of time and quality.

Make use of opportunities for standardisation

The discussions that we had with implementing parties as part of the case studies also revealed that far more use could be made of standardisation.

We often act as if every project is unique, but a great deal of work is in fact repetitive in nature.



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Roundtable discussions – phase 1

Terrestrial Wind – 23 February 2023

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Energy-saving obligation – 2 March 2023

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Frans Heerens, Albert Heijn

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Household waste – 2 March 2023

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Ilse van der Grift, NVRD

Jacob Vermeulen, ARN

Johannes Lijzen, RIVM

Rik Hardenberg, ROVA

Rob Versfeld, Milieu Centraal

Mobility as a Service – 6 March 2023

Joep van Ewijk, Gemeente Helmond

Chrétienne Hoek, Rebel Group

Caspar de Jonge, Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat

Martijn van de Leur, Mobycon

Marcel van Lieshout, Gemeente Amsterdam



Henk Meurs, Radboud Universiteit

Eric Mink, Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat

Hans Stevens, Gemeente Rotterdam

Jaap Sytsma, MuConsult

Marjon van der Valk, PON

High-frequency rail transport – 7 March 2023

Jaap Balkenende, Prorail

Paul Bolt, Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat

Bonny Donders, Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat

Jaap de Groot, Nationale Spoorwegen

Koen Ingels, Movares

Marc Maartens, Dagvoorzitter en OV-magazine

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Netherlands Nature Network – 7 March 2023

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Simon Hofstra, Brabantse Delta

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Sludge and sediment policy – 9 March 2023

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Jaap Willem Hutter, SGS-labs

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Natural Gas-free Neighbourhoods Programme – 14 March 2023

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Anti-water depletion policy – 14 March 2023

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Urban densification – 28 March 2023

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Discussions – phase 2

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Policy accumulation – 31 May 2023

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Poor area-specific organisation – 6 June 2023

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Annius Hoornstra, Zelfstandig adviseur gebiedsontwikkeling
Ruben Vlaander, Omgevingsdienst Regio Arnhem

Structural scarcity – 30 May 2023 and 8 June 2023

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Action inertia – 6 and 7 June 2023

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Original title

De uitvoering aan zet: omgaan met belemmeringen bij de uitvoering van beleid voor de fysieke leefomgeving

Text

Tim Zwanikken, Tim Zwanikken Advies

Copy editing (dutch version)

Saskia van As, Tekstkantoor Van As, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Infographics

Optima Forma, Voorburg, The Netherlands (pages 5, 24, 27, 30)

Photo credits

Cover: Robin Utrecht / ANP

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Page 44: Ton Toemen / ANP / Hollandse Hoogte

Graphic design

Jenneke Drupsteen Grafische vormgeving, The Hague, The Netherlands

Publication Rli 2023/07

December 2023

Translation

Acolad, Maastricht, The Netherlands

Preferred citation

Council for the Environment and Infrastructure (2023). Bridging the Implementation Gap: Tackling Factors Impeding Policy for the Physical Living Environment. The Hague.

ISBN 978-90-77323-46-5

NUR740

