

Sustainability agendas can boost the regions

26 March 2019 – The Netherlands must transition to sustainability. Over the coming decades our energy supply, our food system and our economy will be radically transformed. We will also have to adapt to climate change. All tiers of government are working on these four development agendas, but implementation will be a regional affair. The regions are where these agendas will either reinforce each other or stand in each other's way. The Council for the Environment and Infrastructure has explored this issue by examining the case of the Southwest Delta region. In its report published today, 'The Sum of the Parts: Converging national and regional challenges', the Council concludes not only that an integrative approach in the regions is needed, but also that this can give a positive impetus to the regions themselves.

Early stages of implementation

In its study of the Southwest Delta the Council looked at the four sustainability agendas that will have a big impact on this region: the energy transition, the food transition, the transition to a circular economy and climate adaptation. These agendas will bring about major changes, including the transformation of the industrial base, the transition to large-scale generation of renewable energy, greening the housing stock and the recreation sector, the construction of flood protection works and adaptation to drought, and switching to circular agriculture. Various initiatives are already underway in the region, but most are still small scale and make a limited impact in relation to the long-term targets. Implementation is therefore still at an early stage.

Little sign of substantive linkages between agendas

The sustainability agendas in the region are still largely restricted to policy intentions and so the substantive interrelations between the agendas remain largely hidden. This will change as soon as implementation of the agendas starts to pick up. The Council expects it will not be long before the need for a coherent and integrative approach, both substantive and procedural, will come to the fore. Unique opportunities can be created by cleverly combining elements from different agendas. For example, upgrading a flood barrier can be combined with the construction of a tidal power plant. Conflicts can also arise, for example where different sustainability proposals compete for space, money, labour or political attention. Such difficulties can be averted by coming up with smart combinations.

Effective regional partnerships a must

The Council observes that an impetus is needed to inject vigour and decisiveness into regional decision-making. Work on the agendas must be expedited and scaled up. Moreover, the Council observes that the regions must respond more proactively to the growing convergence between agendas. To achieve both of these things, governments, market players, knowledge institutes and civil society organisations will have to work together at the regional scale on the basis of a shared vision.

Five strategies for stronger regions

An integrative approach can be established by pursuing five strategies:

1. Create stronger links between national government and the region: the regions will not be able to realise the sustainability agendas without the national government; conversely, national government needs the regions. The Council therefore argues for a more active role for national government in the region.
2. Society should be more involved in finding solutions to the challenges: the Council is in favour of an area-based approach in which government engages the public in an active dialogue on possible solutions.
3. Turn the sustainability agendas into an opportunity to tackle specific regional challenges: sustainability is often seen as a threat, but the Council observes that the sustainability agendas are actually an opportunity to tackle specific regional challenges.
4. Focus efforts on innovation and knowledge building for sustainability: to take the sustainability agendas forward, knowledge building and the educational offer must tie in with regional labour market policies.
5. Use the power of design to cement interrelations between the sustainability agendas: creating spatial scenarios for possible solutions helps uncover the linkages between agendas.

Note to the editor

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About the Council for the Environment and Infrastructure

The Council for the Environment and Infrastructure (*Raad voor de leefomgeving en infrastructuur*) advises the Dutch government and Parliament on strategic issues concerning the sustainable development of all aspects of the physical environment. The Council is independent and offers solicited and unsolicited advice on long-term issues of strategic importance to the Netherlands. The chair of the Council is Jan Jaap de Graeff. www.rli.nl.

