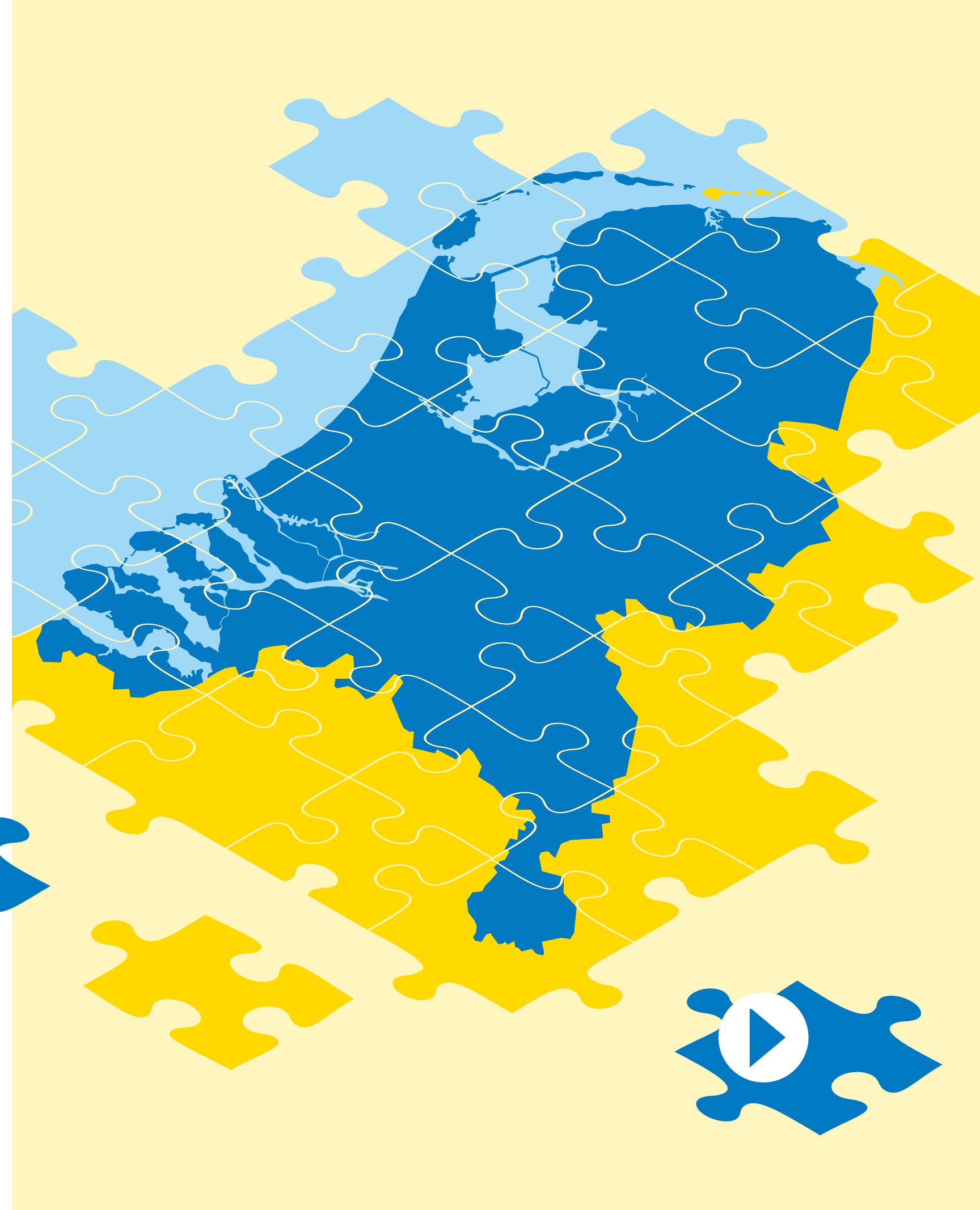
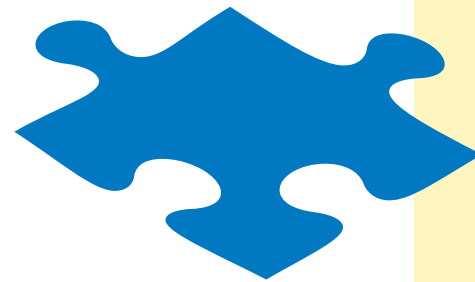


# EVERY REGION COUNTS!

A NEW APPROACH TO  
REGIONAL DISPARITIES

MARCH 2023



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Note: The Dutch version of the advisory report contains additional Appendices. There are several references to these appendices, but these are only available in Dutch.





# SUMMARY

## Regional disparities in wellbeing

Although the Netherlands is a relatively small country, it has significant regional disparities. There are differences between regions in terms of the landscape and culture, but also when it comes to people's chances of finding suitable jobs, getting an education in an easily accessible location and growing old in good health. Certain parts of the Netherlands, mostly outside the country's economic centres, face an accumulation of deficits in one or more areas. This situation is nothing new, but in recent years the inequality has increased further.

As industrial activity is now mainly concentrated in economic hubs such as the Randstad conurbation and the Eindhoven region, the same also applies to employment, the availability of services and facilities, and so on. Regions outside these economic hubs tend to be quieter and often have more space. The latter is part of what gives these areas their charm, as it is seen as a major positive. However, this plus point is increasingly outweighed by the widening disparities in wellbeing and mutually reinforcing negative developments. Essential facilities in the regions are crumbling all at once: primary schools are closing, GP surgeries are disappearing, shops are shutting their doors and bus stops are being removed. This downward spiral of decline has far-reaching consequences for community life in a region. Quality of life in villages, neighbourhoods and communities is coming under pressure, leading to deficits in various regions. This includes

disparities in terms of health (average life expectancy is seven years lower in some areas compared to others) and the level of average income. The availability of cultural facilities, public transport and meeting places is also poor in some regions.

We consider some of these regional deficits fundamentally unjustifiable, because they limit people's opportunities to live healthy lives and participate in society. However, these regional deficits and disparities also present a problem for the Netherlands as a whole, because the challenges associated with all kinds of national goals – such as the necessary energy, agricultural and economic transitions – need to be tackled nationwide. The Netherlands simply cannot afford these deficits.

Such undesirable disparities between regions in terms of wellbeing prompted three independent advisory councils to come together to publish joint advice: the Council for the Environment and Infrastructure (Rli), the Council of Public Health & Society (RVS) and the Council for Public Administration (ROB). We shone a light on the situation: what regional disparities exist, what is causing them and how are they experienced by people in the regions themselves? We then considered the following question: what should be done about this and by whom?

The concept of 'wellbeing' was used as a yardstick. Wellbeing covers everything that people consider to be of value: not just disposable income, but also health, education, the environment, social cohesion, personal fulfilment and security, for example. The purpose of our advisory report is to advise the government on what it can do (or refrain from doing) to ensure

public policy benefits wellbeing in every region of the Netherlands, and not just in those areas that are faring well economically.

### **Concerns in the regions**

To gain an insight into people's concerns in regions outside the country's economic hubs, we examined five 'sample regions': the Veenkoloniën, Parkstad Limburg, Twente, Kop van Noord-Holland and Zeeuws-Vlaanderen. We conducted interviews with local administrators and with people who live, work or do business there. A recurring theme during these interviews was the role played by central government. Many people in the regions feel overlooked when it comes to investment by the Dutch government in the economy, healthcare, infrastructure, public transport, cultural facilities and education. They get the impression that central government does not properly understand what is going on in their region and is too distant, in some cases literally: many regional branches of government agencies have left or even closed down altogether. As a result, the national government has lost its 'touch with the region'.

The people we spoke to also revealed that the support the regions receive from central government is insufficient. In their view, to properly address deficits in areas such as health, education, accessibility and economic prosperity, attention needs to be paid to these issues over the long term. However, the support programmes offered by central government are short-lived, ad-hoc arrangements and are too limited in their scope.

According to the people we spoke to, national policy strengthens those regions that are already strong in particular, with the unintended consequence of weakening others. This is noticeable in regions bordering

Germany or Belgium, for example. Regulations handed down by the government in The Hague often present an obstacle to seizing opportunities on the other side of the border. As a result, these regions are unable to attract staff from across the border or withstand ‘competition’ in the area of school transport, for example. Furthermore, opportunities for border regions are barely considered when it comes to the construction of public transport links, for example.

### **Is central government making the right choices?**

To gain an insight into the attention the regions are receiving from central government, we examined how much public money is flowing into the regions. Most of the money originates from the Municipalities Fund. These budgets are mainly intended for maintaining local facilities and providing care and support to residents. Through the Municipalities Fund central government tries to reduce disparities between municipalities, by giving those that are lagging behind a relatively larger payment. Little financial scope remains for making structural investments.

Central government also invests directly in the regions itself: in the construction of infrastructure, hospitals, educational and research institutions, housing projects, and so on. We noted that, in practice, these government investments mainly benefit the country’s economic hubs and urban regions; in other words, areas where there are plenty of opportunities, as they are hooked up to the global economy. These investments make regions that are already strong even stronger. This is a conscious choice by central government. It is based on the assumption

that increasing prosperity in regions with a strong economy will ultimately benefit weaker regions too.

But is that actually the case? Various studies suggest it is not. While the Netherlands’ economic hubs have grown steadily stronger over recent decades, regions that were already lagging behind have gradually seen their share in economic development shrink, and the deficits in terms of wellbeing have not diminished. Strong regions do not pull up those that have fallen behind. On the contrary, the latter are actually getting weaker, partly because young people and people with a theoretical education are leaving. One of the key assumptions on which central government policy is based is therefore incorrect.

### **Importance of trust and citizen engagement**

We consider the significant widening of disparities – in terms of various aspects of wellbeing – between regions inside and outside the country’s economic hubs to be undesirable, partly because they cannot be justified, but also because they present a problem for the Netherlands as a whole. After all, when wellbeing is distributed in a structurally imbalanced way, this inevitably has consequences for the trust that residents of less fortunate regions have in government and public institutions. Signs of such a loss of trust are already visible. Many people in the regions we surveyed barely feel represented any more by central government. They have a sense that the Dutch government is not taking into account what they consider important and what their region needs. These people feel as if they are not being seen, let alone understood. In the long run, a lack of trust and a lack of engagement among large groups of citizens can undermine the



democratic community and the authority of the Dutch government. At the same time, it can complicate the achievement of all kinds of national goals – such as the necessary energy, agricultural and economic transitions – while the growth in prosperity in economic hubs is reaching the limits of what is possible without affecting quality of life. The Netherlands cannot solve its national problems without drawing on the strength and potential of all its regions.

### **Our recommendations**

We think it is time to adopt a more balanced national policy with a greater focus on the regions. This will also require a change in behaviour on the part of decision-makers: they will need to consider the consequences for different regions in every decision they make. This will not be easy, as it will mean breaking away from firmly established patterns, routines and systems. It will be a lengthy process, but a necessary one. Not everything will go right first time, but the changes need to start right now. With this in mind, in this advisory report we make a number of specific recommendations. The main ones are summarised below:

#### *Rethink central government's conventional policy and investment logic*

Central government's policy and investment choices should no longer automatically lead to areas that are already strong becoming even stronger. The impact of the choices that the Dutch government makes on wellbeing in the regions should be much more carefully considered. After all, its decisions are not only about the economic strength of the nation as a whole, but also about achieving an acceptable level of wellbeing throughout

the Netherlands. This means that, as a minimum, the basis required to ensure vibrant communities must be guaranteed everywhere, but that this will not look the same in every region of the Netherlands. It will depend on the specific structure and character of the region, as well as on the needs of residents. To give substance to this changing investment logic, central government can align with the Code on Intergovernmental Relations (Rijk, IPO, VNG & UvW, 2023), which explicitly states that the Dutch government should provide an insight into the regional consequences of national policies.

#### *Invest in substantial, long-term regional development programmes*

Parties working together in the regions should create an 'opportunity agenda' with a view to the long-term development of wellbeing. They should jointly decide on priorities based on the opportunities, needs and challenges specific to the region. The 'opportunity agendas' should also tie in with the approach taken to address major future challenges at national and European level. On the basis of these opportunity agendas, central government should free up additional long-term finance (i.e. on top of regular budgets) to reduce undesirable disparities between regions. The impact of these agendas on wellbeing should always be independently assessed.

Adopting such a long-term investment strategy would represent a change of direction compared to the current strategy. At the moment, central government limits itself to contributions for short periods of time with the intention of rectifying deficits. In principle, the substantial, long-term budgets we are proposing to develop wellbeing represent an approach

that the Dutch government could adopt for all regions of the Netherlands. However, we think that priority should be given to the regions that are currently lagging significantly behind.

*Work to develop a strong relationship between regions and central government*

A greater focus on regional development in national policy calls for a strong relationship between central government and the regions, so that signals from a region can be picked up more clearly at national level and the Dutch government and region can enter into discussion more easily. In this advisory report we highlight several possibilities and recommend making choices in this area.

Furthermore, we believe that, when making choices about closing or establishing institutions, central government should make a more explicit effort to spread them around the country. This applies to knowledge and educational institutions, because of the essential role they play in regional ecosystems, as well as to government agencies and autonomous administrative authorities (ZBOs). The same also applies as regards the approach to the major national housing challenge, which we believe should be addressed in part through small-scale housing projects spread across the regions of our country.

**In conclusion**

In this advisory report we conclude that there is an accumulation of undesirable disparities in wellbeing between regions of the Netherlands. We therefore take the view that there needs to be a greater focus on and more scope for the structural development of regions across the full spectrum of public policy. Only then can a future characterised by wellbeing in every region of the Netherlands be achieved.







# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background

Although the Netherlands is a relatively small country, it has significant regional disparities. There are differences between regions in terms of the landscape and culture, but also when it comes to people's chances of finding suitable jobs, getting an education in an easily accessible location and growing old in good health. Certain parts of the Netherlands, mostly in outlying regions outside the country's economic centres, face an accumulation of deficits in one or more areas.

There are disparities in the area of health, for example: in some regions<sup>1</sup> average life expectancy at birth is as much as seven years lower than in others (RIVM, 2021). These health inequalities are largely the result of diverse factors that interact in a complex way, such as the labour market, education, social security and the environment (RVS, 2020b). Deficits include the level of average income, the quality of the environment, the availability of public facilities, such as education, healthcare and public transport, and the employment situation. In certain regions there are also few cultural facilities and meeting places available and maintaining active clubs and associations there is no easy task. These kinds of undesirable disparities between the regions of our country have existed for decades.

<sup>1</sup> In this advisory report we use 'region' to refer to cohesive areas that are larger than a municipality, but smaller than a province.



Although regional disparities are less pronounced compared to other countries, they are on the increase in the Netherlands. These regional disparities also present a problem for the Netherlands as a whole, as all Dutch regions are needed to tackle major issues, such as the nitrogen problem, the energy and climate challenge, changes in the healthcare sector and the shortages in the housing market.

This advisory report considers the nature and extent of regional disparities and deficits and aims to contribute to a new approach to tackling regional disparities in wellbeing, thereby strengthening the Netherlands as a whole. Three advisory councils have come together to draw up this report: the Council for the Environment and Infrastructure (Rli), the Council of Public Health & Society (RVS) and the Council for Public Administration (ROB). They have each previously addressed the issue of ‘the region’ and ‘regional disparities’,<sup>2</sup> but in this advisory report we bring the perspectives of the three different bodies together.

We set out to ascertain what is going on, what disparities exist, what is causing them and how people experience them. Here we used the concept of ‘wellbeing’ as a yardstick. Wellbeing covers everything that people consider to be of value. Besides material prosperity, it also covers aspects such as health, education, the environment, social cohesion, personal fulfilment and security (Evenhuis et al., 2020).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the essay ‘De regio als redding’ (‘The region as salvation’) (RVS, 2022), the advisory report ‘Give direction, make space!’ (Rli, 2021c), the study ‘The sum of the parts’ (Rli, 2019) and the advisory report ‘Rol nemen, ruimte geven’ (‘Assume a role, give space’) (ROB, 2021a).

During the interviews we conducted in various regions for the purposes of this advisory report, it struck us that many people said they cherished their region because of its pleasant environment, the sense of togetherness and the regional identity, but at the same time were disappointed with the government and institutions, as more and more facilities are disappearing from their area. There is a feeling in these regions that all the attention is being focused on other areas of the country, particularly urban ones. The dissatisfaction people experience also stems from the fact that the regional perspective is poorly represented in national political debates and the fact that national newspapers and public broadcasters give limited coverage to regional issues, for example.

The picture outlined above bears some similarities to the findings described in the *Atlas van afgehaakt Nederland* (Atlas of the disaffected Netherlands) (De Voogd & Cuperus, 2021) and the report *Regionaal maatschappelijk onbehagen* (Regional social discontent) (Van den Berg & Kok, 2021). In the report *Wat wel kan* (What can be done), which was recently commissioned by the government, Johan Remkes also points out that people in rural regions are increasingly facing a loss of facilities and prospects, and that they have a sense of being abandoned by the government and no longer feel represented by it. Remkes also attaches a cultural component to this: ‘People in rural areas are experiencing a widening gap in terms of cultural



values' (Remkes, 2022, p. 18). Recently, national political parties have also focused on the issue of regional disparities within the Netherlands.<sup>3</sup>

In our view, the accumulation in geographic regions of mutually reinforcing deficits that hamper people's self-reliance and opportunities for development cannot be justified – not in the current situation, and certainly not if the inequality continues to grow. The increasing regional inequality is felt directly in the regions concerned, but is also detrimental to the Netherlands as a whole; firstly, because this inequality undermines the 'spatial and political' community that makes up the Netherlands (Van den Berg & Kok, 2021) and, secondly, because it complicates the process of effectively tackling pressing national issues, such as the energy transition, the housing challenge and climate adaptation. All regions are needed if the Netherlands is to emerge stronger from these various crises. While this advisory report focuses on the situation in the regions, this is something that affects the Netherlands as a whole.

The increasing deficits that have arisen are not natural phenomena. Regional disparities stem partly from autonomous economic developments, but during our research for this advisory report we noticed that choices made by central government also have an impact. Companies usually cluster, for example, in places where conditions are favourable, that is where infrastructure, knowledge and labour are present. The government

<sup>3</sup> In February 2023 the CDA parliamentary party published *Voor heel Nederland* (For the whole of the Netherlands). The D66 party also published *Nederland Regioland* (The Netherlands, Country of Regions) in February 2023.

can influence these conditions, for example through its choice of construction sites, locations for educational institutions and the building of roads and railways.

Ultimately, regional deficits are largely a product – partly intended and partly unintended – of national policies. In recent decades, policy choices by the Dutch government have led directly or indirectly to the disappearance in various areas of all kinds of facilities that people value, such as GP surgeries, bus services, libraries, local swimming pools or primary schools. Secondary, vocational and higher education establishments are now also increasingly at risk of being lost in various regions. Furthermore, emergency, obstetric and hospital care is being organised at ever greater distances from villages and residential communities. Police stations have closed and people are increasingly having to leave their own region to access the justice system.

It also seems as if central government itself has withdrawn from certain parts of the Netherlands. Regional offices of the Tax and Customs Administration have closed down and regional agencies, such as the Directorate-General for Public Works and Water Management (Rijkswaterstaat), have been scaled up to cover larger areas of the country. As a result, government has become unrecognisable for many residents of these regions. Here we are talking about well-meaning, or in the words of Johan Remkes, 'reasonable' people who are committed members of society but are concerned about their area and the fact that the government is becoming less and less visible to them. Such a lack of visibility damages

people's trust (Tjeenk Willink, 2022); many residents feel they 'don't count' in the eyes of central government. This feeling is reinforced by the fact that (semi-)public institutions (such as schools and healthcare institutions) and companies (such as supermarkets and bank branches) have also pulled back from the regions and are making the same move as the government, partly driven by national funding streams. The creation of larger municipalities has also contributed to a decline in engagement with government as a whole (Allers et al., 2021).

During our research we also came across initiatives that actually improve quality of life and the strength of communities. Enterprising people and creative organisations are coming up with all kinds of ways to organise healthcare and education, get homes built or alleviate poverty in their own region. Often they do not need (or want) any government intervention to do this. However, it is clear that, taken together, such residents' initiatives are not enough to achieve an acceptable level of wellbeing in all regions of our country.

## **1.2 Three advisory councils, one advisory report**

The disparities that exist between the regions of our country manifest themselves in many ways. We are talking here about disparities that can interact with and reinforce one another. Such accumulated deficits are reflected in health inequalities, for example. After all, a person's health is strongly correlated with factors such as education, social standing and income. It is a known fact that people with little education are more likely to

live in poverty and that people living in poverty suffer from more frequent and a greater number of physical and psychological complaints. However, a person's health is also influenced by factors such as the environment and social cohesion: clean air and the presence of green spaces that encourage people to exercise and meet up with each other benefit people's physical and mental well-being.

To pinpoint these kinds of connections, you need to take a broad perspective that transcends the boundaries of policy areas. That is why the Rli, RVS and ROB decided to work together on this topic. Rather than making separate recommendations in our own specialist fields, the aim was to outline a single approach capable of strengthening wellbeing throughout the Netherlands and reducing undesirable disparities between regions.

As we noted above, the deficits in certain regions and the adverse effects that people experience in their daily lives as a result are often directly or indirectly linked to policy choices made by central government. National interests are also at stake here. Our recommendations therefore focus mainly on central government policy. In addition, we address the role to be played by local and regional authorities in their relationship with society and the opportunities this presents for the Netherlands.

### 1.3 Question to be addressed in this advisory report

The main question addressed in this advisory report is:

*What is needed to prevent or reduce undesirable disparities between regions and thereby promote wellbeing in all regions of the Netherlands?  
And what role should central government and other entities play in this?*

The two key concepts in this main question, ‘undesirable disparities’ and ‘wellbeing’, are the lenses through which we look at the Netherlands in this advisory report. We explain this briefly below.

In our view, whether disparities between regions are undesirable depends to a large extent on how central government policy shares out benefits and burdens between areas of the Netherlands. In doing so, the Dutch government can aim to maximise wellbeing for the whole country, ensure sufficient or equal wellbeing for all, or prioritise the wellbeing of certain groups. In practice, these approaches coexist. If undesirable outcomes arise, it is important to look at what is causing this imbalance.

We have identified several undesirable outcomes. Firstly, there may be unjustifiable differences in the opportunities that citizens in certain regions have to participate in society (for example, by getting an education or earning sufficient income) or form a community. Secondly, there may be disparities between regions that are undesirable for the Netherlands as a whole, because they lead, for example, to the erosion of our democratic state under the rule of law, to lower economic prosperity or to a reduced

ability to deal with major changes, such as climate change, the energy transition or the ageing population.

In this advisory report we have mapped out, using a range of indicators, how wellbeing is distributed across the regions of the Netherlands. These indicators relate to aspects of wellbeing such as life expectancy, (perceived) health, employment, education level, trust in institutions and other people, security, the living environment, the availability of and distance to facilities and green spaces, the impact of environmental problems, and so on. The same regions consistently score poorly in relation to many of these aspects. Our starting point in this advisory report is to try to obtain a better understanding of this issue. We want to figure out where things are going wrong: why, despite the good intentions and policy efforts of central government (see, for example, BZK, 2022a), has it been unable, for some decades now, to share wellbeing among all the regions, with some disparities even increasing. We would also like to outline a number of possible solutions.

### 1.4 Approach

Based on available data on wellbeing in the Netherlands, we analysed disparities between regions and the extent to which they are affected by government policies and interventions.

If you look closely at the distribution of various aspects of wellbeing across our country, you can see that, apart from the metropolitan areas

of the Netherlands (which we discuss further below), a number of regions outside the country's economic centres are also faced with an accumulation of deficits.<sup>4</sup> This is shown in Figure 1. The darker the municipalities are coloured on the map, the higher the number of wellbeing indicators for which they achieve a low to very low score.

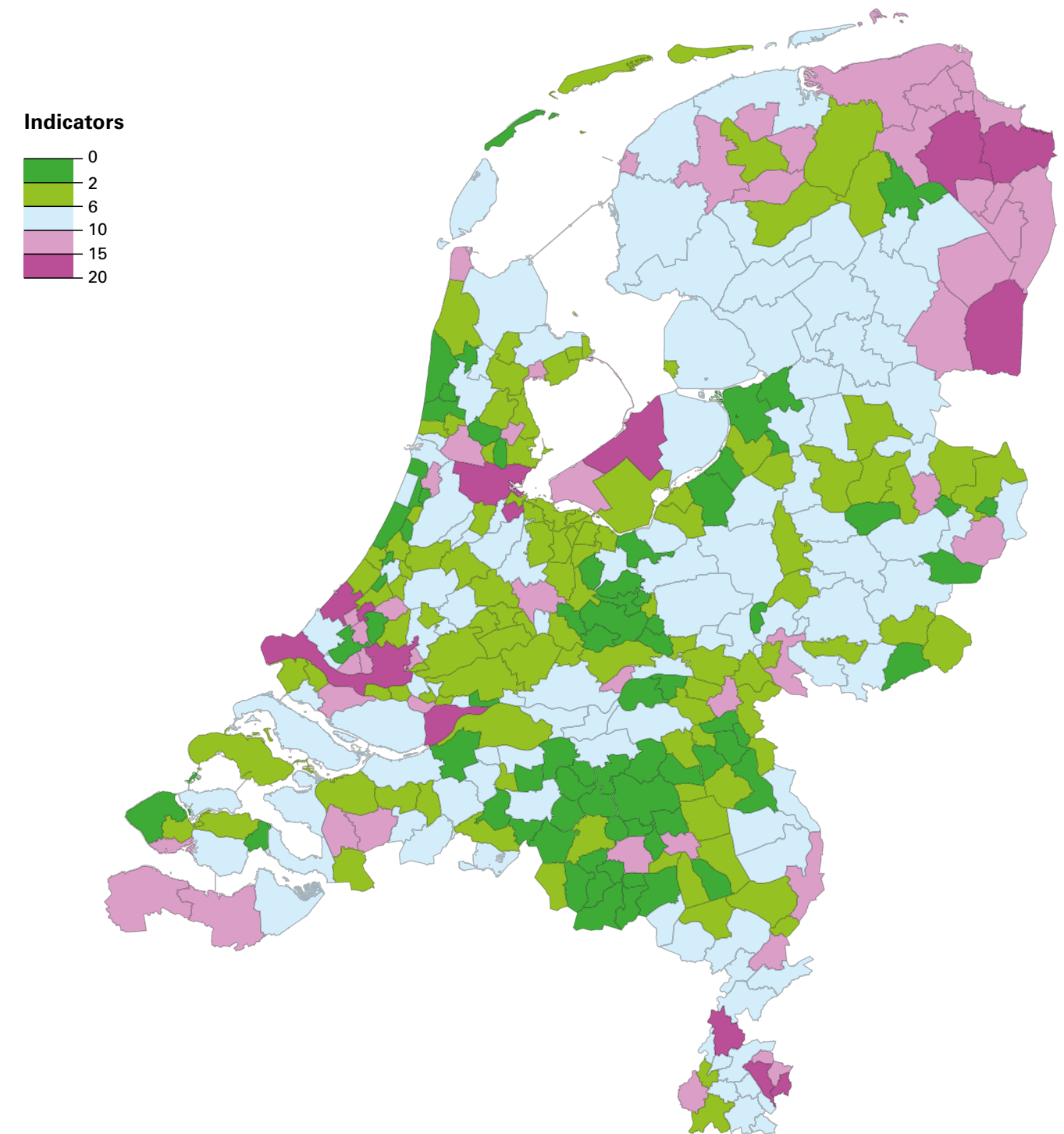
The same regions consistently achieve a low to very low score for a significant number of aspects of wellbeing. Moreover, in these regions there are hardly any opportunities to derive wellbeing from neighbouring areas (for example, from the presence of a healthcare institution, a local supermarket or an ATM in neighbouring municipalities), simply because similar issues apply there too.<sup>5</sup>

Based on the overall picture emerging from the wellbeing figures in the Netherlands, we selected five regions to analyse in more detail for this advisory report: Zeeuws-Vlaanderen, the Veenkoloniën, Kop van Noord-Holland, Twente and Parkstad Limburg. These are examples of regions where wellbeing is lagging behind significantly in key areas and that belong to what Van den Berg & Kok (2021) have called 'peripheral regions', because they are located far outside the Randstad conurbation.

<sup>4</sup> We explain our analysis of aspects of wellbeing in more detail in Appendix 1 (only in Dutch).

<sup>5</sup> In Appendix 1 (only in Dutch) we provide a further explanation of how wellbeing can be derived from neighbouring regions.

**Figure 1: Wellbeing by municipality, measured in numbers of indicators with a low or very low score**



Source: Statistics Netherlands (CBS), 2022 (adapted by Rli)

We noted that, because of this Randstad-centric perspective, ‘peripheral’ is something of a loaded term; from a European perspective, many of these regions are actually centrally located. Nevertheless, for want of a better term, from time to time we use the word ‘peripheral’ in this advisory report, while being aware of the one-sided perspective that it implies and always recognising that it does not sufficiently do justice to the issues addressed here.

For each sample region we examined the figures on wellbeing in greater depth. In addition to this quantitative analysis, we enhanced and supplemented our findings in each of the five regions through interviews conducted in the field. We spoke to around 120 people in total: administrators, active residents, entrepreneurs and people who have direct professional contact with residents and businesses.<sup>6</sup> We talked to them about their experiences of and feelings relating to wellbeing in their region. Together with them we also examined opportunities, problems and possible solutions. In this way, we tried to understand more about the dynamics behind the numbers, what people themselves consider important and how they view their region.

In this advisory report we use the interviews conducted in the five sample regions to try to get a better grasp of the issues. We do not therefore present tailor-made solutions for each of the regions visited. Rather, the sample regions serve as sources of information from which we can learn,

<sup>6</sup> Although the people we spoke to did not form a representative sample of the residents of the five regions, we did obtain useful information and gain clear impressions from these interviews.

in a general sense, (a) why, despite central government’s recognition of the problems, it has so far not managed to improve the skewed distribution of wellbeing and (b) how something could be done about this. Other regions with similar profiles will recognise some or all of the issues outlined. The possible solutions we propose in this advisory report are also intended for those regions.

In addition to visiting the regions, we also carried out literature studies and held interviews with several dozen researchers and experts in the field of wellbeing (for an overview, see the appendices ‘References’ and ‘Responsibility and acknowledgement’).

## 1.5 Scope

In principle, in this advisory report we are talking about all regions of the Netherlands, with a particular emphasis on those where there is an accumulation of deficits in terms of wellbeing and that receive relatively less attention from central government. We have disregarded the major cities; not because there are no deficits or undesirable disparities there, but because, in many cases, the composition and structure of the population is different and because there are different issues at play as regards access to facilities and transport. Moreover, vulnerable neighbourhoods in big cities have been in the political spotlight for decades and have received a great deal of policy attention, which also translates into substantial budgets. Examples include the big-city policy of the Kok governments, the neighbourhood approach of the fourth Balkenende government and the

‘National Programme for Quality of Life and Security’ under the current government (BZK, 2022b).

We have left the Caribbean part of the Netherlands out of our analysis, as this region is administratively and geographically very different from the rest of the Kingdom.

## **1.6 Structure of the report**

The remainder of this report is structured as follows. In Chapter 2 we discuss the insights and impressions we gained during our visits to the five selected sample regions. In Chapter 3 we examine how central government financially supports the regions outside the Netherlands’ economic centres and how it invests in these regions. We also look at how these investments compare with European Union (EU) regional support. In Chapter 4 we then present the conclusions we have drawn from our findings. Finally, in Chapter 5 we set out our recommendations. Here we offer specific advice on how to achieve a stronger focus on wellbeing in every region.





## 2 ANALYSIS OF FIVE REGIONS

For the purposes of this advisory report we examined five regions that serve as a good example of regional disparities. In each of these regions there is an accumulation of deficits in relation to various wellbeing indicators. We provide a brief summary of our findings in section 2.1 of this chapter.<sup>7</sup> In the five regions we conducted interviews with administrators, residents, entrepreneurs and professionals. We talked to them about current issues facing the region, their attachment to the region, quality of life in the region, the changes that have taken place in the region and the region's future prospects. In section 2.2 of this chapter we discuss a number of salient points that emerged from the interviews.<sup>8</sup>

### 2.1 Measured differences in wellbeing

#### 2.1.1 Health

In the sample regions – with the exception of Kop van Noord-Holland – serious health inequalities can be seen. The number of overweight people in these areas is high, as is the number of people with chronic conditions. Life expectancy, especially in the Veenkoloniën and Parkstad Limburg regions, is among the lowest in the Netherlands. In Zeeuws-Vlaanderen life expectancy

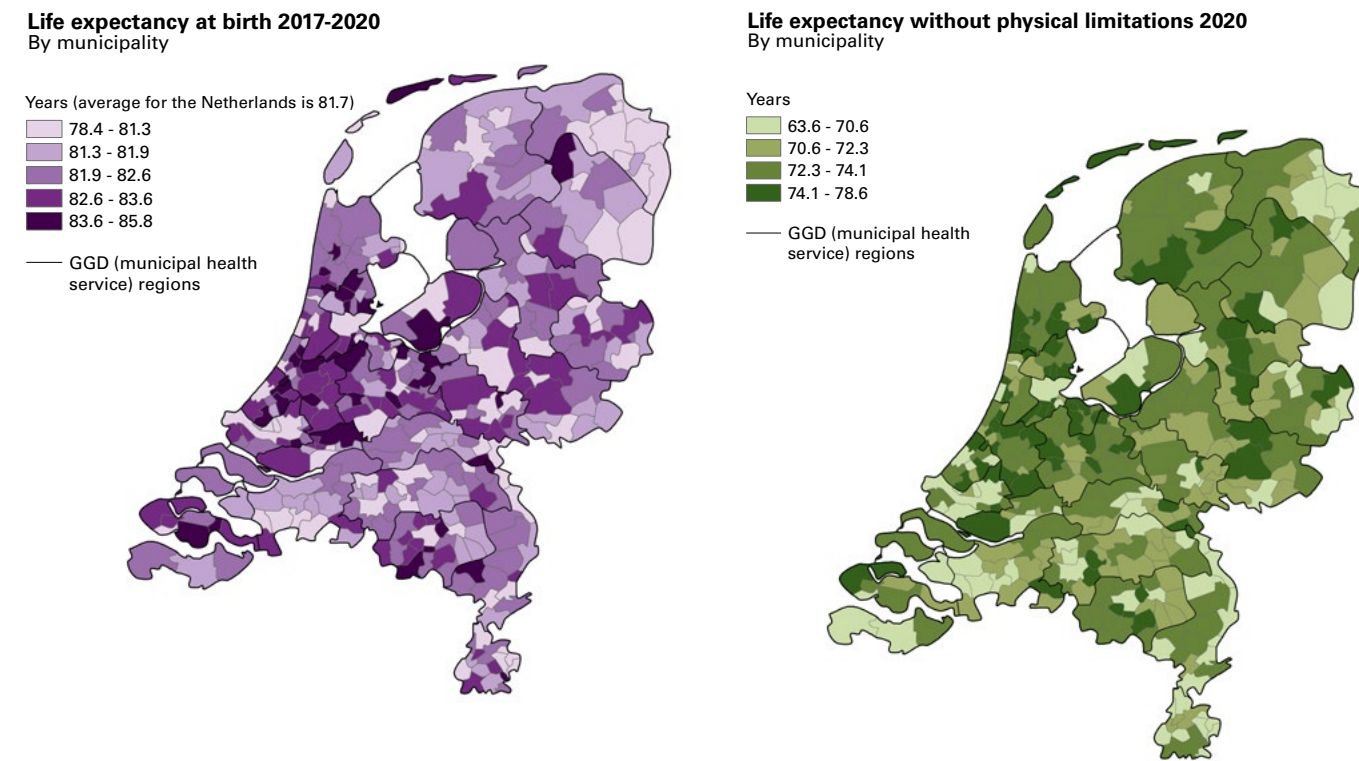
<sup>7</sup> We discuss the disparities in more detail in Appendix 1 (only in Dutch).

<sup>8</sup> Appendix 2 (only in Dutch) contains more detailed information on the interviews.



is relatively high. By contrast, healthy life expectancy is low in parts of all the regions surveyed, with Parkstad Limburg showing the lowest level in the country (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Life expectancy and healthy life expectancy: regional disparities**



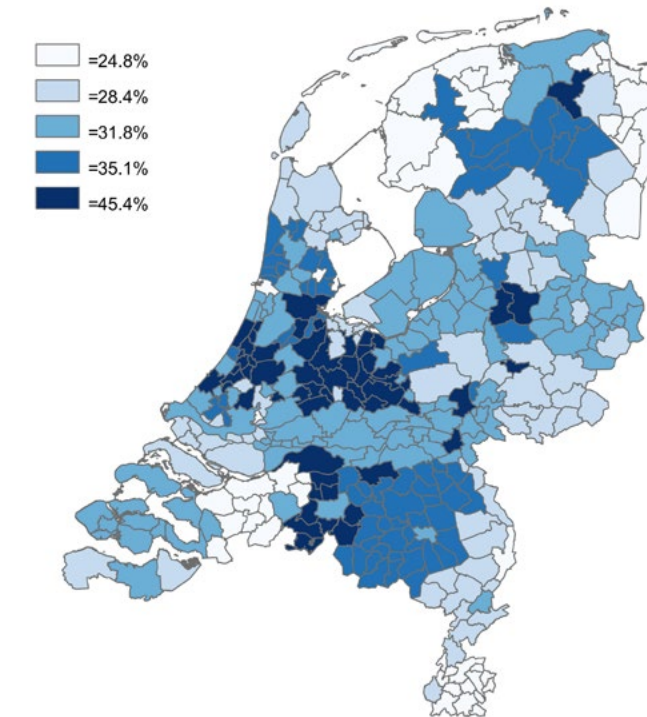
Source: National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM); figures 2017-2020

### 2.1.2 Trust in institutions

It is notable that in all the regions surveyed, with the exception of Twente, trust in institutions is relatively low compared to the rest of the Netherlands.

Figure 3 illustrates this with data on the trust people have in the House of Representatives (political trust).

**Figure 3: Political trust**



Source: De Voogd & Cuperus, 2021; figures 2013-2016

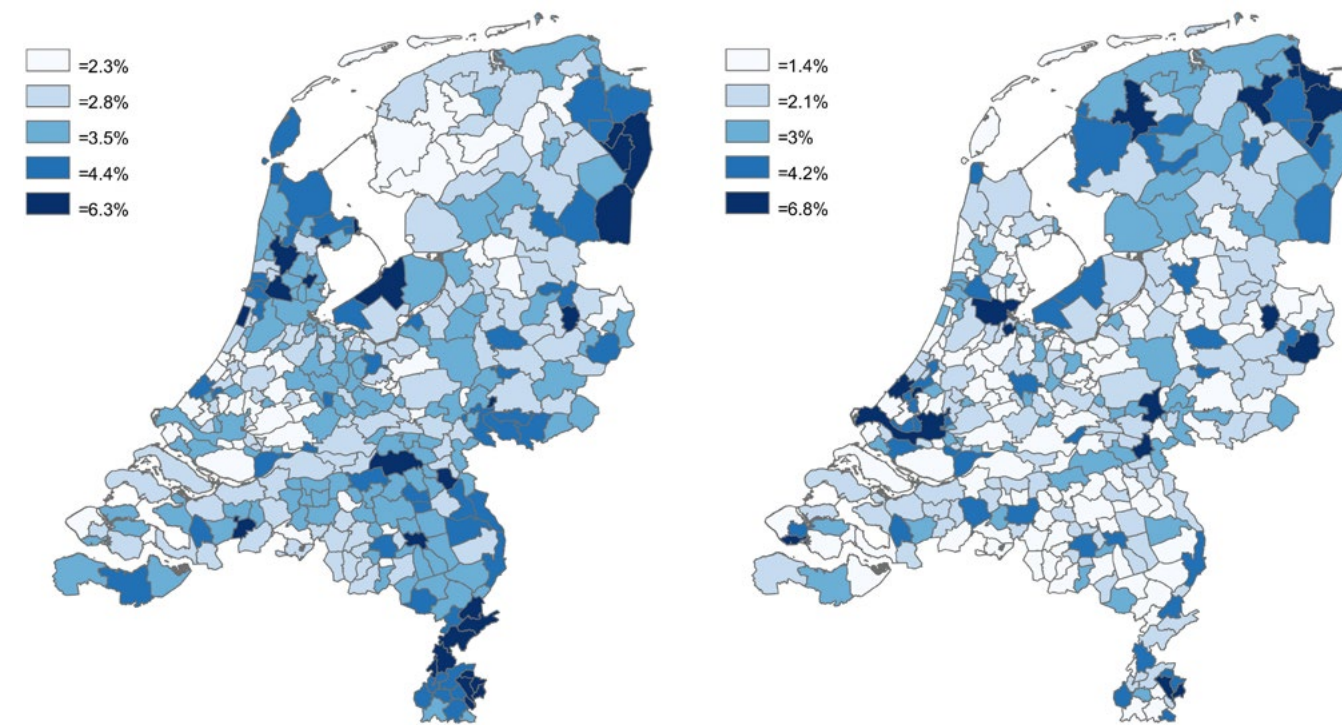
### 2.1.3 Income and labour force participation

Economic development and material prosperity in the five sample regions is low compared to the rest of the Netherlands. However, the picture differs considerably between the regions studied. Disposable income in these regions is among the lowest in the country, except in Kop van Noord-Holland. With the exception of the Twente region, we also see low labour



force participation rates in all regions. Figure 4 shows, for example, that all the regions examined have a relatively high proportion of people who are unfit for work. In a number of sample regions there also appears to be a high degree of reliance on social assistance, while in Zeeuws-Vlaanderen and large parts of Kop van Noord-Holland and Twente this is much less the case.

**Figure 4: Proportion of people who are unfit for work and proportion of people receiving social assistance**



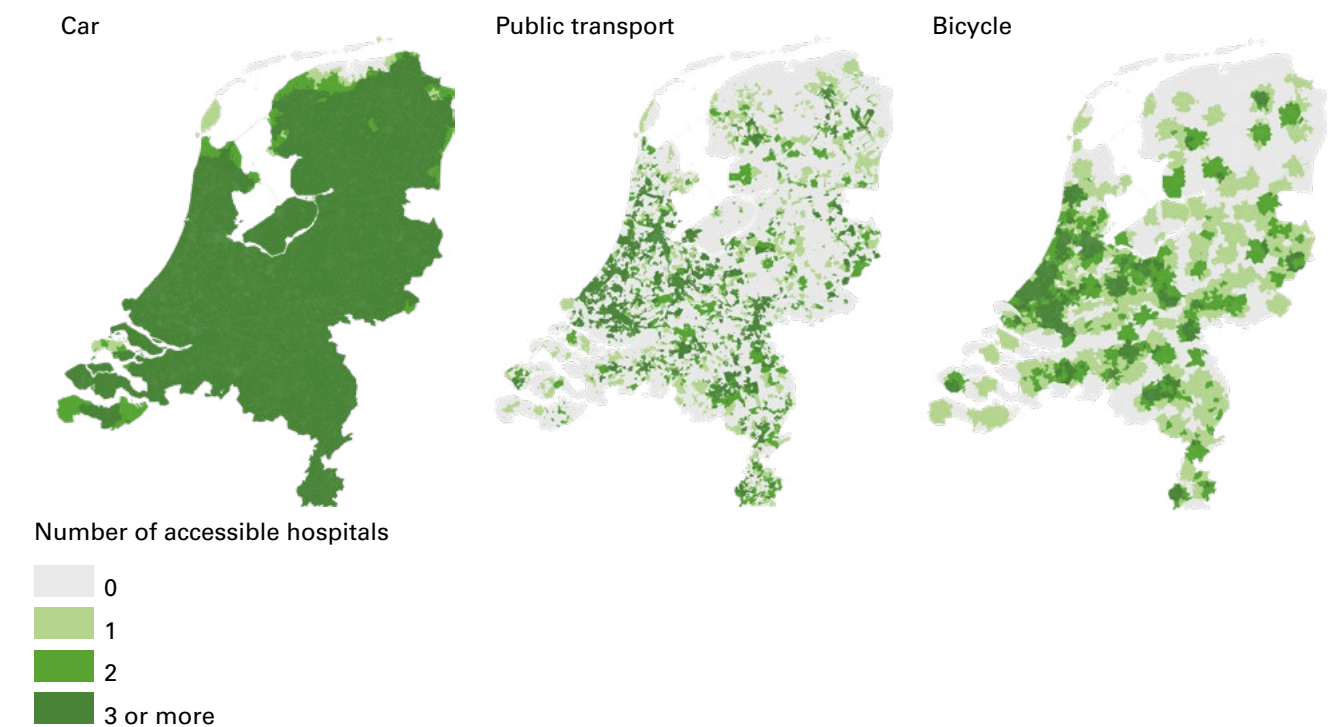
Source: De Voogd & Cuperus, 2021; figures 2018

### 2.1.4 Accessibility of facilities

Except in Parkstad Limburg and Twente, both distances and journey times to workplaces and facilities such as healthcare institutions, schools, sports

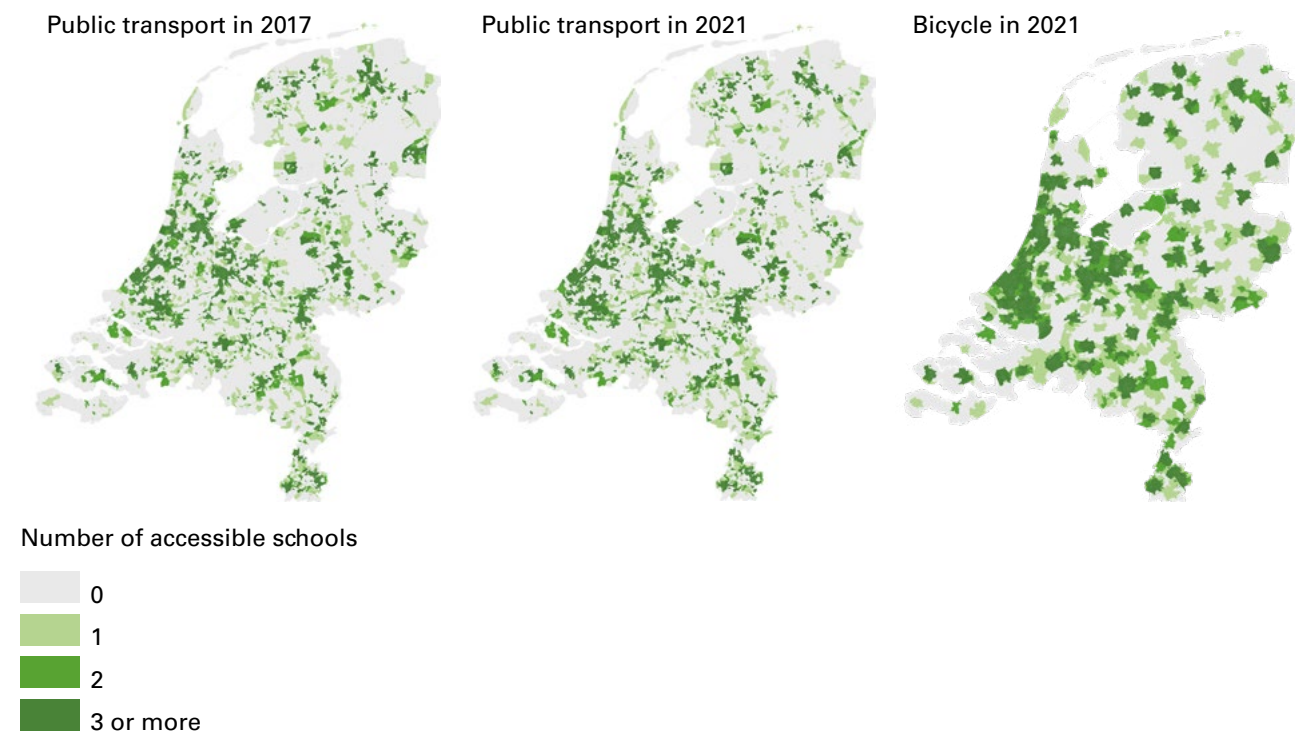
facilities and shops are relatively long. The Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (PBL) mapped this out carefully in 2022. By way of illustration, in Figure 5 we show that hospitals in the sample regions are generally far away, compared to the situation in the rest of the country. Figure 6 provides an insight into the accessibility of secondary schools and how this has developed over time. The PBL concludes that, in particular, educational institutions in urban areas that were often already easily accessible have been made even more accessible by public transport in recent years. However, young people in more rural areas are finding it increasingly difficult to get to school.

**Figure 5: Hospitals accessible within a 45-minute journey time by transport mode**



Source: PBL, 2022

**Figure 6: Senior general secondary/pre-university education (HAVO/VWO) institutions accessible within a 30-minute journey time, 2017-2021**



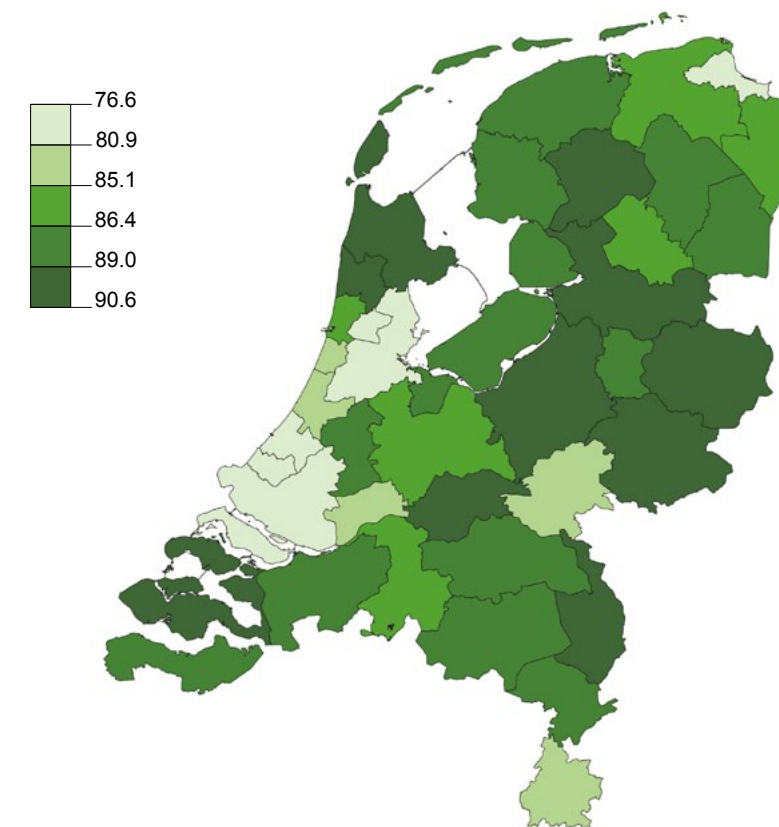
Source: PBL, 2022

### 2.1.5 Quality of the environment

When it comes to the quality of the environment, the different sample regions do not reveal a uniform picture. Swimming water quality in Zeeuws-Vlaanderen is among the best in the Netherlands, for example, but in certain parts of the region particulate emissions are high. The total area covered by nature areas and woodland in Zeeuws-Vlaanderen is low, but that is also the case in many other parts of the Netherlands. Of the sample regions, Twente and Parkstad Limburg are a positive exception to this general picture. Both score poorly in relation to particulate matter, however.

People in the sample regions – with the exception of Parkstad Limburg – are fairly satisfied with their lives. Figure 7 shows that in Kop van Noord-Holland, Zeeuws-Vlaanderen and Twente this also includes being satisfied with their home.

**Figure 7: Satisfaction with home (percentage of private households satisfied or very satisfied), 2021**



Source: CBS, 2022

## 2.2 Results of in-depth interviews in the regions

### 2.2.1 Accumulated decline

In all the sample regions, the people we spoke to mentioned the simultaneous decline in all kinds of social facilities as a major problem for wellbeing in their region. Primary schools are increasingly having to close in village centres, while GP care is becoming concentrated in a limited number of places within the region. Consequently, essential social facilities like these are getting further and further away, with people sometimes having to travel tens of kilometres to access them. As bus services are also being cut further, little by little, at the same time, people are becoming increasingly reliant on cars. For people who do not, or no longer have, access to a car, such as the elderly or schoolchildren, this is even more of a problem.

When so many different facilities crumble in a short space of time this has far-reaching consequences for community life in a region. This accumulated decline limits people's opportunities for development and erodes communities. Quality of life in villages and communities comes under pressure. Residents are doing their best, but they are often facing an uphill battle. They cannot reverse or compensate for the trend of losing facilities on their own.

In many cases a domino effect of negative developments can be seen. For instance, secondary school students, as well as students in senior secondary vocational education (MBO), often have to travel long distances

in the sample regions. However, unlike MBO students, who often consciously choose a career in the region, a large proportion of senior general secondary education (HAVO) and pre-university education (VWO) students leave to study elsewhere, as higher professional education (HBO) institutions and universities are generally located far outside the region. As a result of this outflow, villages do not have enough active members to keep music societies and sports clubs alive, for example. Only a small proportion of students return to the region after completing their further education. There is also a growing shortage of volunteers. Because of these developments, several of the regions studied have been labelled as 'shrinking regions'. This has led to a restrictive housing policy being pursued in recent years, following the maxim 'don't build for vacancy'. The housing stock has become outdated and now no longer properly meets current housing needs.<sup>9</sup> Living in the region is becoming less and less attractive for young families due to all these factors.

As most of the sample regions have a rather lopsided labour market – in Zeeuws-Vlaanderen, for example, tourism, industry and the agricultural sector account for a particularly large share of employment – there is a perception that young people 'need to move to the Randstad to get a serious job'. However, our interviews revealed that this is not always true. If regional educational institutions manage to establish good links with the business community, this can be beneficial for job retention.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> In specific cases, such as in Zeeuws-Vlaanderen and part of Kop van Noord-Holland, there is the additional problem of many properties being used as second homes or holiday homes.

<sup>10</sup> Attention is being paid to this issue within the MBO sector, including via the MBO Regional Investment Fund.



Notable examples are the University of Twente and Saxion University of Applied Sciences, which manage to bind people to the region as well as give a boost to regional entrepreneurship. The interaction between education, entrepreneurship and public policy is important for the strength of the regions.

### 2.2.2 Lack of consistent focus on the regions

The problems experienced in the regions we visited are nothing new. Deficits in the areas of health, education, economic prosperity or lifestyle often date back generations. Moreover, one disparity, such as poorer population health, may stem in part from other inequalities, such as economic decline. In many cases, the situation can be traced back to some extent to the decline of a specific economic activity, such as peat extraction and the strawboard industry in the Veenkoloniën region, the textile industry in Twente and mining in Parkstad Limburg.<sup>11</sup>

Our interviewees stressed that long-term commitment is needed to address the deficits in their region, but that support from central government generally takes the form of short-lived, ad-hoc arrangements of insufficient scope. For example, the Dutch government is funding pilot projects in certain regions aimed at preventing the need for healthcare. Such projects often go well, but the necessary follow-up is lacking. Moreover, these specific projects do not address the underlying social inequalities. It is distressing to see that the savings sporadically achieved are often

<sup>11</sup> See also ROB, Background study on South Limburg and East Groningen, 2022. <https://www.raadopenbaarbestuur.nl/actueel/nieuws/2022/10/25/onderzoek-rob-zuid-limburg-en-oost-groningen>

not passed on to the region with a view to enabling further investment and ensuring success, and instead benefit health insurers or central government.

When speaking about the overly ad-hoc nature of the support and investment from the Dutch government, our interviewees repeatedly made reference to the 'Regional Deals'. According to those directly involved, these collaborative projects between central government and regional partners are valuable, but too short-lived and too small in scale to have a lasting impact. The challenges that the money is used to address often require attention on a much greater scale and over a much longer period than the four-year term of the Deals. Residents feel that all kinds of facilities that are important to them are disappearing. In their place they see only occasional, project-based and short-term efforts by central government to support and strengthen wellbeing.

### 2.2.3 Absence of central government

During the interviews we held in the sample regions, the relationship with central government provoked much discussion. The general thrust of the comments was that the national government does not understand what is going on in the regions and passes over 'peripheral' regions when important choices are made. We collected statements such as:

- 'National policy seems to be based on a Randstad-centric logic.'
- 'When investments are made in new motorways and railways, everything ends up in the Randstad.'
- 'If the secondary school here also closes, students will have to travel up to 50 kilometres to go to school.'

- ‘Look at the arts: museums, orchestras, art schools – there is no investment in the region.’
- ‘For GP care at night you now have to travel over 25 kilometres by car. What are you supposed to do if you don’t actually have a car?’

According to the people we spoke to, national policy does not take into account the regional situation. In their view, the sheer size of rural areas and the impact of other facilities being lost are not taken into account sufficiently in the standards the Dutch government employs when making decisions about public transport and the road network, as well as about ensuring the survival of primary and secondary schools and various healthcare facilities, for example. The very fact that the loss of these facilities also affects other areas leads to a decline in facilities in a general sense, thereby creating a downward spiral.

In almost every region we visited, the interviews revealed that residents feel underserved when it comes to infrastructure investment. This is a general problem, but one that is experienced even more acutely in border regions. In the east and south of the country, cross-border public transport connections are lacking in particular, such as a bus service from Twente to the German hinterland and an intercity rail link between Heerlen and Aachen. These kinds of routes are invariably ignored when public money is being allocated. Elsewhere, it is mainly the regional road infrastructure that is not being well maintained. For example, in Zeeuws-Vlaanderen there are concerns about the significant increase in pressure on the road network, especially during the tourist season. Roads to coastal villages like Cadzand

are still single-carriageway routes, and those through villages are becoming congested, while public transport is not a realistic alternative. In the Veenkoloniën region too, getting around by road is becoming more difficult in some places – in this case due to bridges being demolished because of high maintenance costs, as in Pekela for example.<sup>12</sup>

People feel that central government has literally become more distant too: regional offices of the Tax and Customs Administration are closing,<sup>13</sup> courts in the regions no longer deal with all cases, regional agencies such as the Government Service for Sustainable Rural Development and the Housing Inspectorate have been abolished, regional departments of Rijkswaterstaat have been scaled up to cover larger areas of the country, and, according to our interviewees, the police have also become more remote since the creation of the National Police in 2013 resulted in the replacement of 25 regional police forces with ten regional units. They say that, by pulling back in this way, the national government has increasingly lost its touch with the region.

This is a trend that continues today. For example, politicians in The Hague regularly propose cutting costs by concentrating facilities offering specialist care (such as paediatric heart surgery (see box)), or by reducing the number of and concentrating courts, prisons or military barracks. Such plans,

<sup>12</sup> See <https://www.rtvnoord.nl/nieuws/933778/actiegroep-haalt-bakzeil-21-van-de-34-bruggen-in-pekela-verdwijnen>

<sup>13</sup> In Zeeuws-Vlaanderen the Tax and Customs Administration’s Terneuzen office was closed in 2012. In 2021, however, as many people appeared to have a need for personal contact and because of the long distance to the nearest branch (in Middelburg), the decision was taken to open a support centre in Terneuzen.

which would have an irrevocable adverse impact on regional facilities and regional jobs, affect the trust of residents living in the areas concerned, even if they ultimately do not go ahead. They confirm the perception that the region does not matter.

### Paediatric heart surgery

In late 2021 the government announced its intention to concentrate centres for paediatric heart surgery in two locations: Rotterdam and Utrecht. The centres in Leiden and Groningen would have to close. The main argument for this was that medical expertise would become too fragmented and this could be detrimental to quality of care. Around 1,200 children are born with a congenital heart defect in the Netherlands every year.

It soon became clear that (partially) concentrating highly specialist care, and in this particular case potentially doing so specifically in the Randstad region, was a highly sensitive issue. A petition organised in the north of the country garnered over 260,000 signatures. Parents of young heart patients sent a letter to the Health Minister. For them, travel distance was a concern, but the urgent letter drawn up by political parties within the provincial and municipal councils highlighted the broader impacts: the erosion of academic medical care and science in the northern regions.

The Dutch Healthcare Authority (NZa) subsequently conducted an impact analysis at the minister's request (NZa, 2022). This analysis outlines the impact of the Groningen and Leiden closures. In it the NZa examines the effects that concentrating healthcare would have on patients, healthcare professionals, healthcare organisations, educational institutions, research and society. After the four affected centres themselves failed to come up with a proposal, the government decided to keep the paediatric heart surgery centres in Groningen and Rotterdam open and close those in Leiden and Utrecht. A key argument here was the importance of regional distribution.

Our interviews revealed that people living and working in 'peripheral' regions feel that they lack a good relationship with central government. They feel overlooked when the Dutch government invests in the economy, healthcare, infrastructure, culture and education. Contact in both directions is poor. According to the people we spoke to, the Dutch government knows exactly where the region is when problems need to be solved, for instance concerning reception facilities for asylum seekers and residence permit holders, the restoration of nature or the generation of renewable energy. However, ministers and senior officials rarely visit the region to maintain 'ordinary' contact. They only make the journey when issues arise. People are also aware of exceptions and at a lower level there is always contact with central government. Ultimately, however, the perception prevails that, seen

from the region, The Hague is a long way away, and that, seen from The Hague, the region is further away still.

Finally, we noticed an impression in the regions that the quality of local and provincial governance is insufficient in view of the major challenges to be addressed at regional level. According to our interviewees, this can be attributed, among other things, to the salaries and allowances paid to civil servants, municipal administrators and municipal councillors. The level of such payments is linked to the population of the municipalities. This means that salaries and allowances in 'peripheral' regions are often significantly lower than in densely populated urban areas. Nevertheless, even municipalities with relatively small populations are keen to provide young people, families, single people and the elderly with a proper basis for leading a good and healthy life. And these authorities, just like large municipalities, need to be able to act in response to businesses that are damaging the environment and criminals who are undermining communities.

#### **2.2.4 Specific risks of border locations**

Almost all the regions we visited are border regions. Sometimes this location close to a border presents opportunities to increase the region's wellbeing, but in practice, in most regions, all kinds of formal barriers prevent such opportunities from being exploited.

This is the case in Parkstad Limburg, for example, which is part of a cross-border conurbation, and in Zeeuws-Vlaanderen. In these regions people

use facilities on the other side of the national border on a daily basis. In many areas, however, they encounter barriers to doing so, as a result of differences in laws and regulations. National policies often give little or no consideration to the needs of border regions. From an administrative perspective, the region stops at the border. Anything that happens beyond the border and between areas on both sides of the border is not a matter for national laws and regulations.

As a result, people in the Twente region, for example, feel that they have only half a labour market, as they 'can only look west'. Twente residents cannot take advantage sufficiently of the opportunities that present themselves to the east of their region, due to differences in national tax regulations or coronavirus rules and differences in procedures on either side of the border. According to our interviewees, the labour market in Zeeuws-Vlaanderen is also too limited, as working in Belgium is subject to legal restrictions.

In Parkstad Limburg the border presents an obstacle in another way, namely in terms of energy. This region is affected by congestion in the electricity grid (EZK, 2022). Such congestion hinders economic development in the region, 'whereas in Germany there is more than enough infrastructure capacity, but we are not able to use it'.

In addition, the border location of some regions poses risks when it comes to the availability of healthcare and educational facilities. This can be seen in Zeeuws-Vlaanderen, for example, where residents (and also tourists) are increasingly travelling to Belgium to access healthcare. Ghent has a

university hospital and Knokke a general hospital. For many residents (and tourists) these places are closer than Terneuzen or Goes. However, as a consequence, the medical care available in Zeeuws-Vlaanderen itself continues to decline. Similar developments can be seen in the area of education (see box).

### Quality of education in Zeeuws-Vlaanderen under pressure due to 'school competition' from Belgium

Many young children from Zeeuws-Vlaanderen go to school in Belgium, as there children can attend school from the age of two and a half.

This means parents can save themselves the cost of eighteen months of paid childcare in the Netherlands. Once they are in the Flemish education system, children often go on to attend the nearby primary school. They also then complete their secondary education across the border. According to our interviewees, this has advantages for parents, as Flemish schools are allowed to provide school transport, while Dutch schools are not.

As a result, around 1,200 children from Zeeuws-Vlaanderen are now attending school in Belgium. The downside of this is that schools in Zeeuws-Vlaanderen are seeing pupil numbers decline. This is putting the quality of education at various schools under pressure.

### 2.2.5 Positive contribution of social connection and networks

During all the interviews we held in the sample regions, both with residents and with administrators and professionals, people stressed the

importance of good cooperation within the region. Various good examples of cooperation at different levels were brought to our attention: social partnerships between residents, citizens' initiatives based around caring for each other, and administrative partnerships between municipalities (or between municipalities, businesses and educational institutions) geared towards promoting economic development in the region. Stakeholders in the regions are making a concerted effort. They are trying to make the best of things and improve the situation.

Participants told us that often 'almost everyone knows everyone else' and that this forms the basis for strong social and business ties within the region. The neighbourliness (*noaberschap*) for which Twente is renowned can also be seen, sometimes in slightly different forms, in many other regions. For example, citizens' initiatives manage to forge ties with entrepreneurs from the region or connect with scientists from the region who measure and publish the results of the initiatives. There is also close cooperation within networks of municipalities, police forces and educational, residential, healthcare and welfare institutions.

In some of the regions we visited, our interviewees pointed out that the Regional Deals act as a catalyst in getting administrative cooperation off the ground in the region. However, they also noted, as we mentioned above, that these deals are too short-lived to have a lasting effect. Once the term of the Regional Deal expires, 'the chances are that everyone will go back to looking at their own local problems.' Instruments such as Regional



Deals provide a temporary boost, but, according to stakeholders, cannot compensate for the loss of permanent facilities.

Where public authorities, regional parties and residents manage to work together as equal partners in a cross-sectoral way, things often turn out surprisingly well. At street, neighbourhood, village and regional level, people are energised to support each other, strengthen their community or tackle specific challenges together. Even in places where facilities are disappearing or at risk of doing so, powerful networks of residents frequently emerge and come up with solutions in partnership with entrepreneurs and/or civil society organisations (see box).

#### **Cooperation within 'Kans voor de Veenkoloniën' programme**

Within the framework of the 'Kans voor de Veenkoloniën' ('Opportunity for the Veenkoloniën') programme, 11 municipalities are working together with residents and organisations from the region to improve the health of the 450,000 people who live there. The programme consists of projects based around eight themes: poverty, lifestyle, illiteracy, young people, participation, loneliness, work and funding.

In two villages, residents have invested, together with the local welfare organisation, in informal care, referred to as 'neighbourly assistance'. It was clear that a large number of residents were willing to offer help to their neighbours, from walking the dog to doing little chores in and around the house.

This neighbourly assistance and the numerous other activities organised within the programme aim to contribute to social cohesion and the mutual engagement of residents, but also to a reduction in the demand for primary care and in loneliness among the elderly. Neighbourly assistance helps to create a connection between residents themselves, between residents and care providers and between care providers and the municipality.

In places where parties have already been cooperating for some time, extending this collaboration to the area of wellbeing often works well. We refer to the cooperation between different parties, including companies, civil society organisations, public authorities and (organised) residents, as a 'regional ecosystem'. Various examples of effective regional ecosystems were encountered, including in the Twente region (see box).

#### **Regional ecosystem in Twente**

Entrepreneurs, educational institutions and public authorities have been working together closely for some years now within the Twente Economic Board. Municipal councils in the Twente region are also cooperating within the Twente Council, a platform that helps municipal councillors to exchange information and form opinions. In the area of health, the region has established SamenTwente (Twente Together), an umbrella organisation that brings together parties including GGD Twente (Twente municipal health service), the domestic violence organisation

Veilig Thuis Twente and the Organisatie voor Zorg en Jeugdhulp in Twente (Organisation for Care and Youth Aid in Twente). SamenTwente creates links between the partners' fields of activity to improve service delivery and the performance of care tasks. The cooperation therefore takes place across a range of different areas and is mutually reinforcing.

We noted that effective regional ecosystems can give a powerful boost to the development of wellbeing in a region. It is important that the parties cooperating within such an ecosystem have a shared vision that is aligned with the character of the region and also that local and provincial governments, knowledge institutions, companies and residents are actively involved. Other crucial factors are the sustained commitment of significant parties (such as mayors of core municipalities, a hospital, a university or university of applied science, and leading entrepreneurs and employers) and long-term funding to ensure a good support base (such as a campus management team or a regional or programme office) that can link the content of the challenges to be addressed to the different networks.





### 3 SUPPORT FOR REGIONS FROM CENTRAL GOVERNMENT AND EU

How is central government dealing with the deficits in ‘peripheral’ regions described in the previous chapter? To gain an impression of the extent of policy attention being paid to the different regions of the Netherlands, we analysed the flows of funds from central government to the Dutch regions. We also examined how these financial flows compare with the support that the EU provides to regions within EU Member States.

#### 3.1 Central government investment in regions

##### 3.1.1 Payments from Municipalities Fund

The main flow of funds from central government to the regions takes the form of payments to municipalities, which, in principle, are intended to fund the provision of basic municipal services. Most of this funding is provided via the Municipalities Fund (see Table 1).



**Table 1: Income sources of municipalities in 2021**

Source of income	Amount in billions of euros	Percentage share
Municipalities Fund	<b>35.1</b>	<b>51.8%</b>
• General payment	29.2	43.1%
• Decentralisation payment	5.9	8.7%
Specific payments	<b>10.9</b>	<b>16.1%</b>
• Combined payments	6.4	9.5%
• Other specific payments	4.5	6.7%
Other income	<b>21.9</b>	<b>32.1%</b>
• Property tax	4.7	6.9%
• Other taxes	1.7	2.7%
• Levies/duties/charges	5.1	7.2%
• Other income	10.4	15.4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>67,9</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: based on BZK (2021a), BZK (2022f), BZK (2022g) and CBS (2022)

Part of the income from the Municipalities Fund and the specific payments is earmarked for the management, maintenance and operation of local public facilities. Another part is intended for providing care and support to residents, businesses and organisations. On average across the Netherlands, there is roughly a 50/50 split between spending to maintain facilities and spending to provide care and support to residents.

Regions a long way from the Randstad conurbation receive relatively large sums of money from the Municipalities Fund, mainly because of the high costs of care and support they are faced with in the social domain (Divosa, 2021) (see Figure 8). Besides these higher costs, the distribution of the

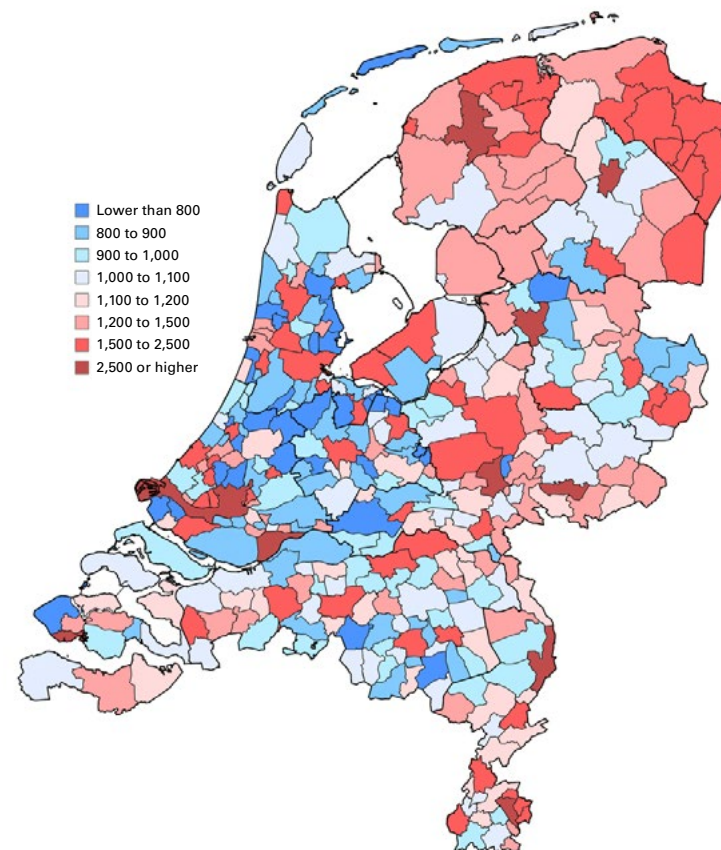
general payment also takes into account the ability of municipalities to raise their own revenue through taxes (in particular property tax).<sup>14</sup>

The fact that ‘peripheral’ regions receive relatively large amounts of money from the Municipalities Fund is not surprising. That is because the allocation formula that central government uses for the Municipalities Fund is designed to take into account differences in costs between municipalities that result from factors including socio-economic characteristics. Municipalities confronted with multiple deficits in the areas of labour force participation, income, care for the elderly, youth aid, target group transport, cultural facilities, and so on, logically face higher costs and therefore receive higher contributions from the Municipalities Fund. The distribution thus reflects the deficits experienced in those regions: because they are lagging behind structurally, the municipalities concerned are given more money to provide care and support and to compensate for the negative impacts of these deficits. Moreover, the value of property in these

<sup>14</sup> Figure 8 includes the following payments: from the general payment: the Young people, Social support, Cohesion and civic participation, and Public health clusters; from the decentralisation, integration and specific payments: the Combined payment (Participation Act + Older and Partially Disabled Unemployed Workers Income Scheme Act + Older and Partially Disabled Former Self-Employed Persons Income Scheme Act + living expenses for newly self-employed persons under 2004 Social Assistance (Self-Employed Persons) Decree), Guardianship/18+, Sheltered accommodation, Participation, Civic integration, Tackling discrimination and promoting coexistence, Tackling illiteracy, Tackling the teacher shortage in the four major Dutch cities, Action programme for homeless young people, Fighting child poverty, Comprehensive approach to homelessness, Sports and culture in community schools (combination function), Healthy in the city, Enforcement of self-isolation (COVID-19), Young people, Young people’s activities scheme, Youth assistance for children in asylum seekers’ centres, Client support in pioneering municipalities, Social guidance, Shelters, Social domain programme office, Strengthening of labour market regions, Pre-school provision for toddlers, Women’s shelters, Educational disadvantages policy, Education budget.

areas tends to be lower, resulting in a higher general payment from the Municipalities Fund.

**Figure 8: Payments received by municipalities in 2021 to support residents, calculated in euros per capita**



Source: COELO, 2022

As mentioned above, the money that municipalities receive through the Municipalities Fund and the specific payments is intended to be used, in part, to *maintain* the local level of facilities, not to *invest in their expansion*

with a view to permanently enhancing the socio-economic structure and enabling municipalities to structurally and systematically make up the deficits they are facing. In addition, the decentralisation of tasks to municipality level, in particular in the social domain in 2015 (a process that was accompanied by substantial spending cut targets), and the cuts made to the organisation of municipalities in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, have seen care and support costs account for an increasingly large share of municipal budgets (BDO, 2021; Verhagen, 2019). When the Municipalities Fund is distributed, the accumulation of needs in the area of care is mainly addressed by recognising the hub function of cities. Rural municipalities facing an accumulation of care needs seem to be less well served as a result. Consequently, municipalities have scaled back their investments and started to draw on their reserves. Investments aimed at tackling new housing, climate and energy challenges have been put off for some years now. And although municipalities are making every effort to avoid drastic cuts to the level of facilities and to postpone increases in the tax burden on citizens for as long as possible, less and less money is available for maintaining local public facilities, and the provision of sports facilities, libraries, community centres, and so on, is steadily declining (CEBEON, 2021). This is a nationwide phenomenon, but in regions where the level of facilities is being constantly eroded in other areas too, it has a much greater impact on regional wellbeing. The State Secretary for Culture and Media recently announced a policy change to counter this downward trend as far as library facilities are concerned by making accessibility for all a central consideration (see box).

### Focus on accessible library facilities

The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science wants every resident to have access to a full public library facility within a reasonable distance. Municipalities receive a specific payment for this purpose. This money is allocated as a priority to (1) municipalities without a physical library, (2) municipalities facing major social challenges and (3) non-urban regions. Municipal co-financing at an indicative level of 20% is, however, required. Municipalities can use this specific payment to prepare for the duty of care in terms of access to libraries that will apply from 2025. As of 2025, € 53.7 million will be made available on a structural basis through the Municipalities Fund to meet this duty of care (OCW, 2022).

### 3.1.2 Other payments to the regions

Besides the direct flows of funds from central government to municipalities in the regions, provinces also receive money that benefits the regions. In addition, various facilities and civil society organisations with a regional focus are funded directly as part of regular government policy. These include healthcare institutions, educational institutions, police forces, etc.

Many of these national budgets are distributed across the Netherlands on the basis of general characteristics and norms. Generally speaking, they are allocated in a way that compensates for the differences in the costs incurred in different areas of the country to provide the relevant facilities. However, some of the regions we examined suffer from unique structural characteristics, such as the large area they cover, the absence of a central

city, their location near a border, etc. It strikes us that the national allocation formulas give little consideration to such special characteristics.

### 3.1.3 Investments in economic structure, growth and accessibility

For many years, policy on investments aimed at improving the country's spatial-economic and socio-economic structure has focused on creating *maximum prosperity for the Netherlands as a whole*. In this light, it is notable that investments to improve economic structure are mainly concentrated, in practice, in urban regions, especially those in the west of the country. The Eindhoven region is a recent addition to this group of focus regions.<sup>15</sup> This situation seems to be linked to the narrow interpretation of the phrase 'maximum prosperity' within national policy. Because prosperity is understood to mean national prosperity, regardless of where that prosperity comes from or ends up, maximising it automatically implies investing in places where one euro generates the most euros in return – in other words, in areas where there are already plenty of opportunities, often because they are hooked up to the global economy. Examples from past decades of looking at efficiency from such a 'macro perspective'<sup>16</sup> are the Mainport Policy and Top Sector Policy.

A consequence of this approach is that regions that are already strong economically benefit greatly from public investment in structural

<sup>15</sup> In Appendix 3 (only in Dutch) we discuss some examples of such central government investment.

<sup>16</sup> With the term 'macro perspective' we are referring to an approach centred around the goal of maximising national financial and economic prosperity, where costs and benefits are only considered within this 'narrow' (i.e. purely financial and economic) framework.

improvement, while areas that are lagging behind economically struggle to access such funds.

For other investment decisions too, central government frequently applies criteria based on a financially oriented maximum wellbeing approach that is centred around building on existing strength. When assessing applications for a contribution from the National Growth Fund, for example, the government looks first at the impact that submitted projects are expected to have on gross domestic product (GDP) (Rli, 2021a). Such a criterion penalises regions confronted with multiple deficits. After all, substantial positive impacts on GDP can be expected to be achieved more quickly in economic hubs than elsewhere.

A third example in this context are the infrastructure investments made under the ‘Multi-Year Programme for Infrastructure, Spatial Planning and Transport’ (MIRT). Politicians have chosen to base investment decisions in this area on the expected bottlenecks in the national infrastructure network. The so-called Integrated Mobility Analysis (IMA) provides insights that in themselves are policy-neutral. Besides assessing mobility and the capacity and robustness of networks, the IMA also makes forecasts relating to the accessibility of jobs and facilities and the impacts of mobility on road safety and emissions. The climate sensitivity of the networks is also analysed (IenW, 2021). In an earlier advisory report, the Rli noted that, in practice, the results of the IMA – in particular regarding the question as to where congestion or other bottlenecks are expected within the infrastructure network – are used as a basis for drawing up a political priority list for

investment decisions (Rli, 2021b). Despite the broad scope of the IMA, the reference point for decisions in this regard does not seem to be wellbeing, but the facilitation of mobility, partly in view of the current housing challenge. As a result, the available budgets mainly end up in economically strong and densely populated areas, while there is underinvestment in developing the socio-economic structure of regions that are already lagging behind. On 14 November 2022 the government announced the distribution of the MIRT infrastructure budget for the next 10 years (IenW & VRO, 2022). As much as 65% of the € 7.5 billion available appears to be going to the Randstad. If the Eindhoven region is added to this, the figure rises to around 72%. Following this news, on 18 November 2022 social geographer F. Milikowski wrote a critical opinion piece in national newspaper NRC entitled *Transport poverty is now a problem in the Netherlands too*. In it, she aptly articulates the consequences of the government using a narrow assessment framework when investing in accessibility:

*‘Who decides whether a good train and bus service is worth the money and effort? [...] In practice, decisions on major infrastructure projects are taken on the basis of a Social Cost-Benefit Analysis [...]. This sets the cost of construction against the revenue the new infrastructure will generate. [...] The outcome of the calculation depends on which factors are taken into account. Currently, the main focus is on clearly identifiable economic growth and job creation. Factors such as health, equality and justice, and the feeling of being able to develop and flourish [...] and participate fully in society, do not play a role in these calculations. [...]*



*Because good public transport is no longer seen as a fundamental part of a dynamic, fair and future-proof society, but merely as a marketable product, a calculation of evident costs and benefits is the only assessment framework. This approach has a self-reinforcing effect whereby the focus is increasingly placed on the most profitable routes and the strongest national and regional networks, while vulnerable villages, towns and regions with few inhabitants, few facilities and little economic dynamism lose more and more of their connections to the outside world.'*

The assumption underlying the investment choices described above is that maximising growth in the economic prosperity of the Netherlands as a whole will ultimately also benefit weaker regions indirectly. However, as can be seen from studies including that by Oevering & Raspe (2020), this assumption is incorrect. The researchers show that the Netherlands' major economic regions have grown ever stronger in recent years, while smaller regions have seen their share in the economy shrink. Strong regions do not pull up those that have fallen behind, but actually suck the life out of them. This process is reinforced by the fact that similar choices are made in the private sector. Companies are increasingly concentrating their branches in urban areas, where they are easily accessible to their customers and can attract well-trained staff more easily. This further widens the disparities between regions.

### **3.1.4 Establishment of (semi-)public institutions and services**

A similar trend can be observed when it comes to the establishment of (semi-)public institutions and services. Here a steady, continuing process of upscaling and concentration can be seen, at the expense of the presence of public services in 'peripheral' regions. Examples include the formation of the National Police (and, with it, the dissolution of the 25 regional police forces), cuts to public transport services, the formation of large school networks with a joint governing body, and the concentration of specialist hospital care (see also section 2.2.3 on the concentration of paediatric heart surgery).

Moreover, all kinds of incentives have been built into national policy to promote market forces and increase efficiency in operations, often in combination with decentralisations and budget cuts. Central government makes its assessments about the quality and efficiency of (semi-)public services in a generic way for the country as a whole, looking primarily at the costs and benefits of the primary function of the public service in question. In other words, in this area too there is a tendency to look at efficiency from a 'macro perspective', without considering the social value of public services – against the background of the local or regional situation – in the decision-making process. As a result, government policy contributes to what we referred to in Chapter 2 as an 'accumulated decline'.



### 3.1.5 Promoting wellbeing in the regions

As we outlined in the previous two subsections, many elements of policy are having an unfavourable impact on our country's 'peripheral' regions. On the other hand, in recent years central government has taken a closer interest in improving (aspects of) wellbeing from a regional perspective. Examples include the 'National Programme for Quality of Life and Security', the 'Mooi Nederland' ('Beautiful Netherlands') programme, the approach to the NOVEX areas<sup>17</sup>, the Regional Deals and the MBO Regional Investment Fund.<sup>18</sup> In the field of health too the Dutch government has recently launched or financially supported a wide range of programmes. These are mostly being implemented locally or regionally, such as 'Kansrijke Start', ('Promising Start'), 'GezondIn' ('HealthIn'), 'Vitaal ouder worden voor iedereen' ('Vitality in Old Age for All'), 'Eén tegen eenzaamheid' ('United Against Loneliness') and 'Een rookvrij leven voor iedereen' ('A Smoke-Free Life for All'). Financial resources are also sometimes available under these programmes, in addition to the funds that municipalities receive from the Municipalities Fund to carry out tasks under the Youth Act, the Social Support Act and the Participation Act.

The Regional Deals that we touched on in section 2.2 are collaborative projects between central government and regional partners. These projects

<sup>17</sup> NOVEX stands for 'Nationale Omgevingsvisie Extra' ('National Environmental Vision Extra'). NOVEX areas are areas facing a number of urgent national spatial planning challenges. Central government and the regions are working together on a development strategy and an associated implementation and investment agenda for these areas.

<sup>18</sup> The MBO Regional Investment Fund aims to better connect the senior secondary vocational education sector with regional labour markets by encouraging cooperation between educational institutions, public authorities and regional businesses.

focus explicitly on increasing regional wellbeing. Investments are being made over a four-year period in regional opportunities to improve quality of life and work for residents and entrepreneurs in the various regions. Each region can come up with its own plans and ideas, which can cover a range of policy areas. In 2017 the third Rutte government made € 950 million available for Regional Deals over the 2018-2022 period. The current government has set aside an additional € 900 million for new Regional Deals between 2022 and 2025.

Table 2 shows the national distribution and size of the Regional Deals concluded in the first four tranches.

Compared to the regular flows of funds from the Municipalities Fund, as discussed above, these are limited budgets. In the next section we show that the EU allocates significantly more money to helping disadvantaged regions of the Netherlands to catch up. National governments in other European countries are also opting for a more active approach towards their regions. France, for example, concluded an agreement with the French regions in 2020, making € 44.6 billion available for this purpose. Over the 2014-2020 period Italy released over € 95 billion to support regional development across the country, especially in regions that are lagging behind (OECD, 2020). Italy has also had a minister for regional affairs for several decades now.

**Table 2: Size of Regional Deals in sample regions**

Region	Regional Deals in millions of euros tranches 1 to 3 (2018-2022)	Regional Deals in millions of euros tranche 4 (2023)
De Veenkoloniën	15	
Kop van Noord-Holland	5	
Twente	30	25
Zeeuws-Vlaanderen	7,5	30*
Parkstad Limburg	40	25

\*The € 30 million in tranche 4 concerns the Regional Deal for the North Sea Port District, which covers a wider area than the sample region of Zeeuws-Vlaanderen. This relates to the international port area extending from Vlissingen and Borssele, via Terneuzen, to Zelzate, Evergem and Ghent in Belgium.

### 3.2 EU investment in regions

The EU pursues targeted investment policies to help regions within EU Member States to develop wellbeing and to reduce regional disparities. For Dutch regions affected by an accumulation of deficits these are substantial investments and complement the programmes contributing to specific aspects of wellbeing that were discussed in the previous section. Under EU regional policy, funds are allocated to local and regional authorities, private parties and knowledge institutions, which can spend the money on projects focusing on regional development.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> We have included an overview of various European programmes and funds in Appendix 3 (only in Dutch).

#### 3.2.1 EU policy aimed at reducing regional disparities

EU regional policy (also known as cohesion or structural policy) explicitly aims to improve the economic well-being of all regions within EU Member States.<sup>20</sup> In this way, the EU aims to reduce ‘disparities between the levels of development of the various regions and the backwardness of the least favoured regions.’<sup>21</sup>

In the eighth Cohesion Report (Europese Commissie, 2022), the European Commission writes that regional disparities in the EU have decreased. Nevertheless, inequalities are still present. Over the next 30 years, three developments will jointly determine the course of regional inequality in the EU, according to the European Commission: the green transition, the digital transition and demographic change (see box).

#### Green transition, digital transition and demographic change

- By ‘green transition’, the European Commission is referring to its policy goal of making Europe climate neutral by 2050, boosting the economy through the use of clean technology, creating sustainable industry and transport and reducing environmental pollution. Within this context, one of the questions arising in the Dutch regions is: what resources can we deploy to actually make the transition to a clean circular economy?

<sup>20</sup> ‘Regions’ in this context refers to so-called NUTS regions. NUTS stands for ‘Nomenclature des Unités Territoriales Statistiques’. This is the regional classification system of the European statistics office Eurostat. It was introduced to ensure comparable regions across the EU.

<sup>21</sup> Cohesion policy comprises various structural funds that financially support projects in all EU Member States: the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), the European Social Fund (ESF), the Cohesion Fund and the Just Transition Fund (JRT).

- By 'digital transition', the European Commission is referring to its ambition to make a new generation of technologies available to businesses and governments in all Member States, thus creating a digital economy in which everyone can participate on an equal footing. Currently, the EU (and to some extent the Netherlands) is still 'digitally divided', with the elderly and people in less developed regions in particular at a disadvantage.
- By 'demographic change', the European Commission is referring to trends in various European regions that could lead to problems. In the Dutch situation, this mainly concerns the shrinking and ageing of the population, resulting from the migration of young people to urban areas. Regions experiencing a significant decline in their population may be affected by a poorer level of social facilities, such as healthcare, transport, IT connections, education and employment.

According to the Commission, the green and digital transitions not only present opportunities, but also entail changes that could give rise to new regional inequalities. Demographic changes, such as the ageing and shrinking of the population, also pose a potential risk: if ignored, they could undermine both cohesion and growth in regions.

Without a clear vision of how to deal with all these changes, there is a danger, in the European Commission's view, that people may feel that their voices are not being heard and that the impact of the transitions on their immediate environment is not being taken into account. This could

fuel dissatisfaction with institutions. The Commission therefore considers it essential to promote more jobs in green and digital sectors and address any skills shortages, taking into account the regional context (European Commission, 2022; 2021a).

To complement EU cohesion policy, in June 2021 the European Commission presented a long-term vision for the EU's rural areas (European Commission, 2021b). If residents of rural areas are also to benefit from the green and digital transitions, the Commission says that area-based policies are needed that take into account the diversity of the EU's regions, their specific needs and their relative strengths. The Commission is currently developing a rural pact and an EU rural action plan. These initiatives will be linked to European agricultural policy, as well as to cohesion policy and related EU funds. In the EU action plan the Commission also wants to include concrete projects that support the long-term vision for rural areas.

### 3.2.2 European funding for regional projects

In recent years Dutch regions have received substantial contributions from the EU. Table 3 shows the total amount of European grants awarded over the 2014-2020 programming period to the five sample regions that we examined for this advisory report.<sup>22</sup> It is notable that these contributions are much higher than those provided to the regions by central government under the Regional Deals. While the contributions that regions receive

<sup>22</sup> More detailed information on the European payments to the sample regions is provided in Appendix 3 (only in Dutch).



under Regional Deals range from € 5 million to a maximum of € 40 million (BZK, 2022e), EU support is many times greater.

**Table 3: EU funding amounts per sample region, 2014 - 2020 period**

Region	European funding (€)
Kop van Noord-Holland	43,951,847
Parkstad Limburg	97,509,453
Twente	379,113,654
Veenkoloniën	89,883,958
Zeeuws-Vlaanderen	73,866,198
<b>Total</b>	<b>684,325,110</b>

Source: ERAC, 2022

The European funding received by the Dutch regions is distributed from various EU programmes and funds. Each European programme focuses on a certain type of objectives and a certain type of recipients. In the Netherlands, European contributions are geared towards 'the economy and innovation' in relation to research and knowledge, towards 'education and the labour market' and towards 'mobility and infrastructure'. Provinces play an important role in attracting European contributions towards regional projects and programmes.

### 3.3 Conclusion

Central government investment in the structural development of the regions we studied lags behind investment in areas where the economy is already strong. Moreover, national investment in the sample regions falls well short of the European investment allocated to those areas. While the support the Dutch government provides to local authorities takes existing deficits in terms of wellbeing into account, it does not focus sufficiently on systematically countering such deficits. Other European countries take a different approach.





## 4 CONCLUSIONS

In the previous chapters we noted that many regions of our country are having to contend with deficits, being affected both by a decline in the standard of facilities and the limited exploitation of these region's strengths. We also found that some of these deficits stem from national policies and the role played by central government.

In our opinion, these regional disparities are problematic not only for the disadvantaged regions themselves, but also for the Netherlands as a whole. After all, when wellbeing is distributed between regions in a structurally imbalanced way, this can have consequences for the trust that residents of less fortunate regions have in government and public institutions (OECD, 2018). The picture in the Netherlands is slowly but surely becoming skewed.

We spoke to many people in the five regions who barely feel represented any more by central government and have a sense that 'their' government is not taking into account what they consider important and what they need in their region. These people feel as if they are not being seen, let alone understood. This was highlighted previously in reports on the 'disaffected Netherlands' (De Voogd & Cuperus, 2022) and 'regional social discontent' (Van den Berg & Kok, 2021). In this analysis we would like to add that they actually have every reason to feel like that. 'Peripheral' regions are areas that are struggling with deficits in many areas and are undeniably being



disadvantaged further by sectoral national policies in a number of different fields. These accumulated deficits are therefore a phenomenon resulting in part from government policies that make strong economic centres even stronger and thereby further weaken regions.

All this is worrying for the regions concerned, the people living there and the companies doing business there, but also for the Netherlands as a whole. After all, in the long run, a lack of trust and engagement on the part of large groups of citizens can (a) undermine the democratic community that makes up the Netherlands and (b) seriously complicate the achievement of all kinds of national goals, such as the necessary energy, agricultural and economic transitions. The Netherlands cannot solve its national problems without drawing on the strength and potential of all its regions. Viewed in this way, an investment in regions that are lagging behind is an investment in the whole country. Such investments are also much needed: to ensure our future national unity and to increase the chances of successful transitions linked to the challenges we are facing as a nation.

Our findings have led us to five conclusions, which we will discuss in this chapter.

#### **4.1 National policy gives insufficient consideration to social importance of facilities in regions**

The opportunities people have to participate in society and the wellbeing people experience depend to a large extent on the presence of facilities in their immediate environment. Being able to go to school, go shopping, see a GP or visit the library in your own neighbourhood, train with your team at your local sports club, rely on someone being there to take care of you if you can no longer look after yourself – all these things are very important factors that contribute to the quality of life and attractiveness of a region. Whether, as a business owner, you can still fill your vacancies with well-trained staff, how far you have to drive to visit a sick parent or partner, how long you have to wait for the bus, and whether you can even get home in the evening at all, are daily concerns that define life in the regions. They determine how people plan and organise their day and, in the longer term, they affect entrepreneurs' decisions on whether or not to move out of a region, young people's decisions on whether or not to relocate, people's health, the employment situation and the associated social, mental and physical consequences. Facilities are one of the foundations underpinning people's lives; if that foundation keeps getting smaller and weaker, it impacts their lives now and in the future, as well as quality of life in the region.

The value that public facilities have in terms of the social life of a community is actually greater than that of the primary function they fulfil. In non-urban areas, public facilities are also the places where 'little meetings' happen between people, which has an impact on the mutual engagement



and resilience of communities. If people come into contact with each other more, they are more willing to help each other and they become more engaged as volunteers, for example in clubs, the volunteer fire brigade or local politics (Rli, 2020). Public facilities are therefore important both in a physical sense (easy access to schools, shops, sports clubs, and so on) and from a social perspective (residents' engagement with each other).

In the policies pursued by central government in various sectors, the community perspective we have just described barely comes into the equation. The Dutch government assesses the quality and efficiency of (semi-)public services primarily by looking at efficiency from a 'macro perspective' (see section 2.2). The primary function of the (semi-)public service in question is central here, while the specific, regional context is ignored (see box).

### **Concentration of healthcare facilities**

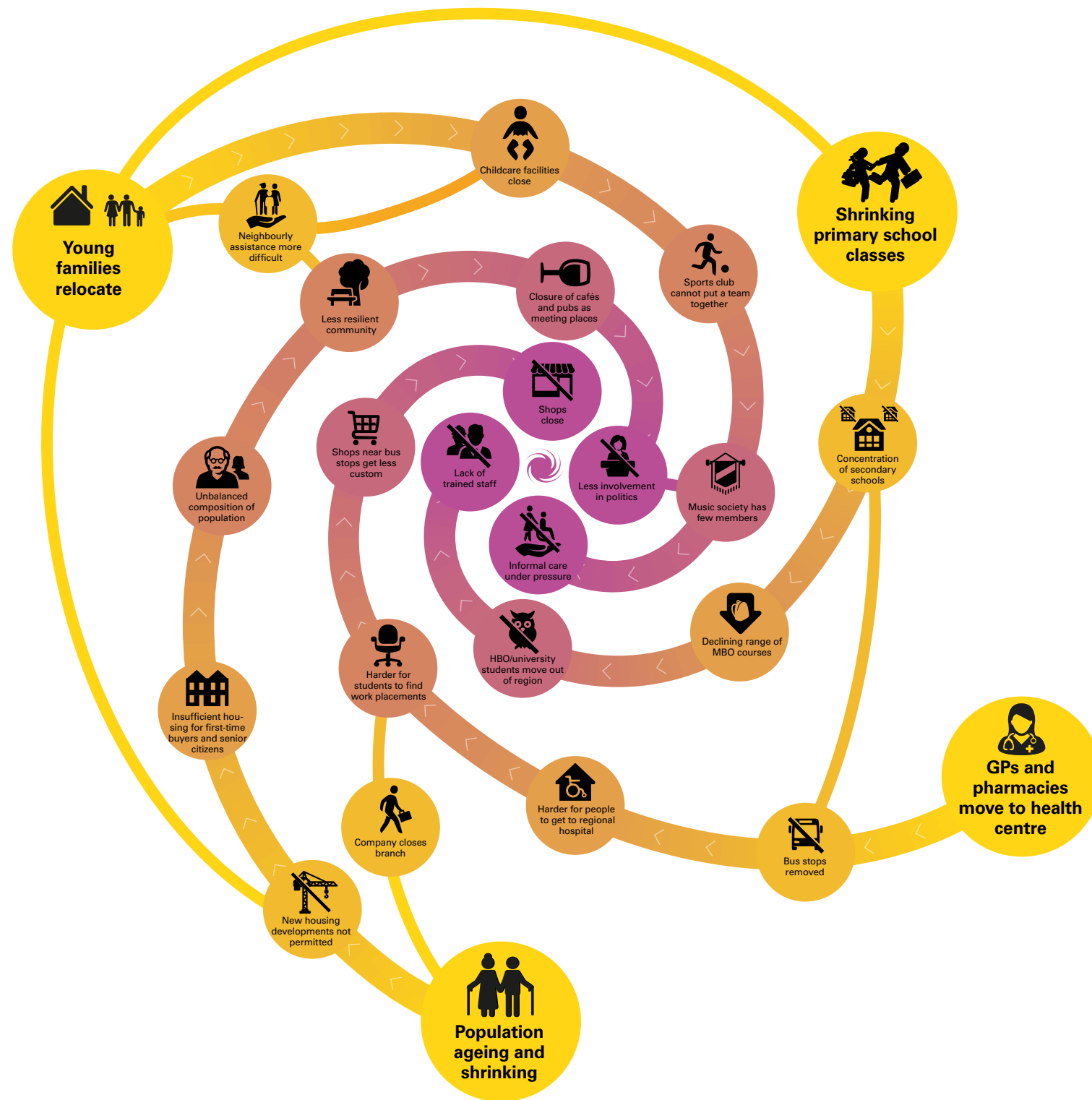
For many years now the question of how acute care in the Netherlands can be future-proofed has been the subject of political debate (RVS, 2020a). The combination of increasing demand for care and shortages on the labour market is putting the quality and accessibility of care under pressure. Care therefore needs to be organised in a smarter way. The key reference point for central government here is the quality of acute care: there should be no inequality in the Netherlands in this area and no concessions when it comes to quality (VWS, 2022). This inevitably leads to choices: which forms of acute care can be offered in which locations? Once a decision has been made to concentrate certain forms of acute

care, this almost always means that the relevant healthcare facilities will be located a long distance away, or further away, from less densely populated regions.

The question of whether, for citizens in 'peripheral' regions, 'good care' is the same as 'care of maximum medical quality' is not explicitly considered. Nevertheless, this is a relevant question. After all, care has a major social component and is often provided via a chain of care partners, often based in the citizen's own region. The concentration of healthcare facilities is also putting this chain under increasing pressure. Similar developments can be seen in the areas of GP care and obstetric care, for example.

The lack of attention paid to the specific interests at stake in the regions as regards the availability of public facilities has led to schools, GP surgeries, hospitals, and so on, deciding to close their doors, based on considerations that stem from looking at efficiency from a macro perspective. This has negative consequences for the other functions that such a public service performs in the region. Because similar efficiency considerations are made in sectors such as education, culture, infrastructure, mobility and healthcare, and because municipalities and other public authorities also make such assessments, these developments are mutually reinforcing. This leads to a pattern of sustained decline in facilities (see Figure 9). The impact all this has on social life and regional wellbeing mostly goes unnoticed in 'The Hague'.

Figure 9: Spiral of decline



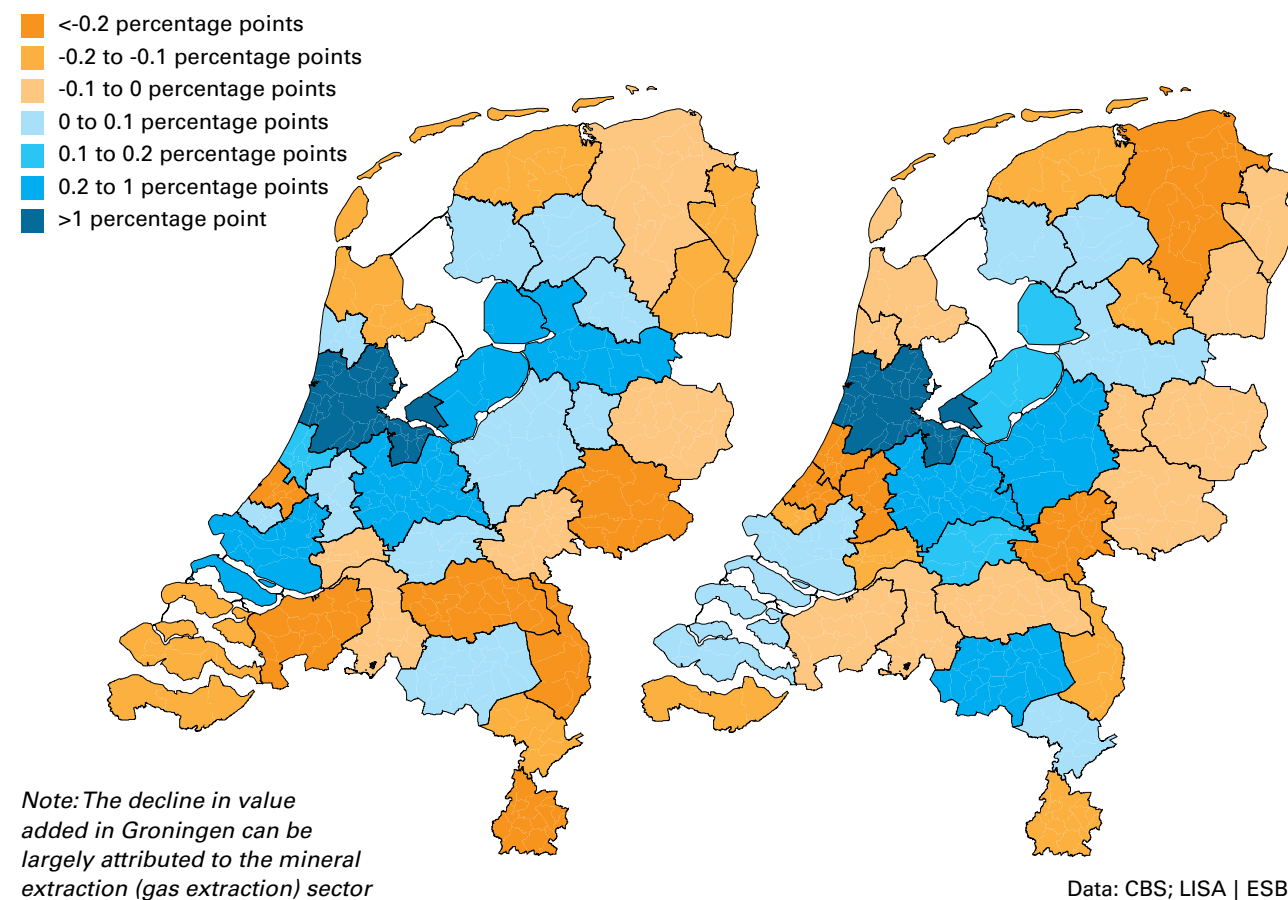
#### 4.2 Opportunities of ‘peripheral’ regions are hampered by policy focus on strong regions

In Chapter 3 we noted that central government invests relatively little in building powerful regions in ‘peripheral’ areas. For decades, major investments in spatial-economic and socio-economic structure have been concentrated primarily in economically powerful regions that are hooked up to the global economy, such as the Randstad conurbation and the Eindhoven region. This is based on the assumption that these strong regions will pull the surrounding areas and ‘the rest’ up with them. Research shows, however, that the opposite is the case and that strong regions actually drain other areas further. The policy focus on regions that are lagging behind in terms of wellbeing is mainly limited to allocating funds to deal with the consequences of existing deprivation. What is lacking are targeted investments in *structural* solutions and opportunities for regions outside economically strong areas, based on a coherent, forward-looking vision of the regional development of wellbeing. National policy offers limited sticking-plaster solutions, but does not close wounds and sometimes, unintentionally, actually opens them further.

As a result of this focus on strong regions, the distribution of wellbeing between regions is becoming increasingly skewed in our country; this is illustrated in Figure 10. The unbalanced approach from central government leads to stronger urban regions, but, at the same time, to the steady weakening of regions with deficits in terms of wellbeing. Moreover, due to the decline in economic dynamism in these regions, young people are increasingly moving away from them. In short, the disparities are widening

because the same sectoral considerations and patterns that cause them to grow remain unaddressed. This is a worrying situation.

**Figure 10: Share of regions in employment and gross value added, 1996-2017**



Source: Oevering & Raspe, 2020

An additional effect of the focus within national policy is that the continued growth and densification of highly dynamic urban regions is accompanied by increasing adverse impacts on quality of life in these regions, such as congestion, housing shortages and environmental pollution. Statistics Netherlands (CBS) also highlights this in the *2022 Regional Wellbeing Monitor* (CBS, 2022): according to CBS, the way in which the considerable economic prosperity currently enjoyed in the Randstad is being achieved will eventually put quality of life and the quality of the environment in this area under pressure.

As we described in Chapter 3 (see section 3.2.1), central government's decades-long focus on maximising the Netherlands' economic prosperity by investing in economically strong regions stands in stark contrast to the EU's policy for the regions of its Member States. The EU's territorial cohesion policy focuses much more on regional development and seeks to complement national policies. With its policy the EU is expressly targeting 'sufficient prosperity' for all regions rather than 'maximum prosperity' for the Netherlands as a whole. For regions, this sometimes offers a way forward, as it acts as a counterweight to lopsided national policy. At the same time, it is an insufficient basis for building a stronger region. To achieve this, a change in national policy is also required.



### 4.3 Central government support programmes for regions are too short-lived and of insufficient scale

In recent years, the need to pay greater attention to wellbeing in regions outside the Netherlands' economic hubs has gradually begun to be reflected more in policy. The Regional Deals discussed earlier in this advisory report (see section 3.1.4) and the 'Regions at the border' programme (BZK, 2022d) are doing so explicitly. Regions that are lagging behind in terms of wellbeing are also being increasingly considered as part of the approach to the NOVEX areas,<sup>23</sup> as well as in the 'National Programme for Quality of Life and Security' and the 'National Programme for Rural Areas'. However, we note that the attention the Dutch government is currently paying to the regions has shortcomings in a number of areas.

In many cases, the regional disparities in wellbeing have already existed for some time. In a number of regions they are linked to profound changes in the past that are still affecting society today, such as the decline of the textile industry in Twente, the disappearance of peat extraction and the strawboard industry in the Veenkoloniën region and the mine closures in Parkstad Limburg. Dealing with this kind of long-standing problem is a long-term process that requires significant intervention. This applies both to eliminating regional deficits and seizing opportunities in the regions. The changes envisaged usually take at least a generation to come to fruition.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> These are areas facing a number of urgent national spatial planning challenges, which the Dutch government and regions are tackling together. See also section 3.1.4.

<sup>24</sup> According to the Council of Public Health & Society, policies to address the societal causes of health inequalities and change unhealthy lifestyles, for example, must be maintained for at least 15 years (RVS, 2021a).

A long-term policy commitment is therefore needed, with large-scale investments that enhance wellbeing in the regions concerned in a sustained manner.

As part of its policy to promote wellbeing in the regions, central government is not currently opting for a long-term investment. The programmes are usually intended to run for no more than a few years. As a result, the policy interventions can simply disappear again in the event of a change of government. Regions therefore have no long-term certainty and sustained results fail to materialise. This is not only undesirable from the point of view of the intended results and the efficient and effective spending of public money, but there is also the risk that the momentum developed by the cooperating parties in the regions will be lost again after a few years.

The required large-scale scope of investment in disadvantaged regions is also lacking. Available budgets are relatively limited, not only compared to the regular financial flows from the Municipalities Fund (see section 3.1.1) and the national investments made in economically strong areas, but also set against the budgets made available by the EU (see section 3.2.2). Despite their relatively large size, European grants are not enough to eliminate the deficits encountered and develop regional wellbeing on a sustained basis. This is mainly because the sector-specific flows of funds resulting from national policy are much larger, while the fact that the efficiency of these funds is considered from a 'macro perspective' means that they actually reinforce the patterns described.

#### 4.4 Insufficient focus on specific challenges faced in border regions

Many of the regions affected by deficits in wellbeing are located at the national border. In some of the sample regions covered in this advisory report – Zeeuws-Vlaanderen, Parkstad Limburg and the Veenkoloniën region – the border location offers potential benefits. Here, the proximity to facilities, jobs and activities on the other side of the border presents additional opportunities (BZK, 2021b).

In practice, people’s ability to take full advantage of these opportunities ‘across the border’ is quite often hampered by differences in laws, regulations and decision-making processes. The resulting issues have been detailed in various publications<sup>25</sup> and have been receiving policy attention for many years now (BZK, 2022d).

At the same time, however, as we noted in the previous chapters of this advisory report, the focus on border regions is still limited when it comes to urgent issues of great importance to these regions, such as cross-border transport links, maintaining the level of education provision and controlling crime that undermines communities. Such themes are of only limited importance from a national perspective, as border regions often have relatively small populations and limited (macro)economic significance. As a result, targeted investments to make improvements in these areas in border regions have been lacking for many years. Central government’s

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, CPB (2015), Maastricht University (2019), *Werkgroep grensbelemmeringen* (2020) and Universiteit Utrecht, Universiteit Hasselt & LDR advocaten (2020).

considerations in this regard also include the fact that only ‘half’ of the social returns on an investment in a border region benefit the Netherlands. Consequently, their full value is not recognised by the systems used to assess investments.

One striking example in this context are the considerations behind the Dutch government’s decision not to allocate money from the Mobility Fund for a rail link between Ghent and Terneuzen. In April 2022 the National Growth Fund Committee (which decided that money for the rail link would have to be provided from the National Growth Fund) described this assessment as follows:

*‘[...] it has become clear to the committee that there is little likelihood of funding being obtained from the Mobility Fund, because the Mobility Fund [...] focuses on resolving the main bottlenecks, rather than on economic development and creating opportunities. The Ghent-Terneuzen rail link is not identified as a priority by the Integrated Mobility Analysis. [...] The committee concludes from this that the project will not be funded from the Mobility Fund.’ (Commissie Nationaal Groeifonds, 2022, p. 144)*

We conclude that border regions suffer from the fact that, in national policy, efficiency is considered from a ‘macro perspective’, as pointed out in Chapter 3. There is a lack of targeted investment in structural solutions to specific issues that put residents of border regions at a disadvantage.

#### 4.5 Authority of central government in regions is coming under pressure

In the previous chapters we noted that contact between central government and regional parties has declined sharply over the past two decades. The decentralisation of powers to municipalities and provinces has been accompanied by a withdrawal of central government from 'peripheral' regions. Branches of government agencies (such as Rijkswaterstaat and the Tax and Customs Administration) have been closed, along with barracks and courts. Agencies with a regional focus (such as the Housing Inspectorate and the Government Service for Sustainable Rural Development) have even been abolished. At the same time, as a result of increasing scale, municipal authorities have become ever more remote from citizens (Allers et al., 2021).

During our visits to the regions we found that people feel less represented by the government because of these developments. Many people living and working in these regions have the impression that politicians do not understand what is going on in their region and that national public debates are far removed from regional realities and values. This is causing large groups of people to become frustrated, lose faith in politics and sometimes even turn away from society.

In a recent publication, the Council for Public Administration argues that the government earns authority if it is 'competent, reliable and committed' (ROB, 2022). This has not been the case in the regions for some time. Political officials and civil servants at national level tend to visit these areas

only occasionally and, according to people on the ground, these visits are insufficient to be well informed about what is going on in the region. As a result, government authority in the regions is coming under pressure. In turn, the regions have to some extent lost their natural connection to national networks.

The distance between central government and the regions has been further increased by the way in which many national programmes and funds targeting the regions are structured. Budgets are often allocated in the form of a competition (as in the case of the Regional Deals, the National Growth Fund and the Housing Fund, for example). This creates rivalry between regions and places the Dutch government in the position of assessor. In this situation central government thus adopts a position above the regions, when in fact they should stand side by side.

The conclusions we have drawn in this chapter lead us to argue for a change in perspective when it comes to dealing with regional disparities in wellbeing. In the recommendations set out in Chapter 5 we suggest ways of addressing such disparities, based around the premise that undesirable disparities should be tackled for the benefit of the Netherlands as a whole.





## 5 RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1 New perspective needed: policy in which every region counts

Various regions of the Netherlands have been contending with deficits for some time now. This is partly because business activity is concentrated in areas such as the Randstad and the Eindhoven region, where there is a large supply of workers, knowledge and infrastructure. In the regions outside these economic centres life is quieter and less hectic. On the one hand, this is what gives these areas their charm. On the other, however, it is associated with deficits in relation to many aspects of wellbeing.

In recent years the disparities in wellbeing in our country have widened and government policies have contributed to this. Outside the Netherlands' economic centres, more and more facilities are in decline and disappearing, including those related to accessibility, healthcare, education and culture. This is leading to socio-economic deficits and also health inequalities. During our research we also saw and heard, of course, that many people appreciate and cherish life in the regions outside our economic centres for a variety of reasons: the space, the social cohesion, the landscape or the peace and quiet these places offer. Nevertheless, we encountered too many undesirable deficits in terms of wellbeing – undesirable because they undermine the vitality and quality of life of communities in the regions and lead to adverse impacts for the Netherlands as a whole.



In Chapter 4 we noted that national policy currently focuses on economic centres and that the government tends to look at the efficiency of investments and (semi-)public facilities from a ‘macro perspective’, without considering the specific, regional context. Issues that are urgent and of great importance in the regions outside economic centres, such as public transport links and maintaining the level of education and healthcare provision, are of only limited significance when efficiency is considered from a national ‘macro perspective’, as these regions are more sparsely populated and make a smaller contribution to national economic growth.

All in all, national policy does not currently focus on ensuring a basic level of wellbeing throughout the country. The limited attention paid to regions outside economic centres is additionally problematic when you consider that the Netherlands is confronted with a number of major, national social challenges, such as climate adaptation and the necessary energy, agricultural and economic transitions. These can only be addressed successfully if the entire country can contribute to this process and benefit from the outcome. This calls for resilient, vibrant regions and a good relationship between central government and the regions. Moreover, the growth of economically strong regions is reaching the limits of what is possible without affecting quality of life, with a resulting risk of new problems arising in areas including housing, the quality of the environment and health. We therefore believe that a new perspective is needed within national policy: one in which regional opportunities are valued and in which the people who live and work in the regions are taken fully into account.

## 5.2 Overview of our recommendations

In this advisory report we make a number of specific recommendations on how central government, in consultation with parties in the regions, could strengthen and increase regional wellbeing on a sustained basis. These are important recommendations that we hope will be embraced and implemented. At the same time, they are only part of a necessary, more fundamental shift in policy: the regional perspective needs to become an ever-present element in any considerations at central government level. This simply involves always asking whether a decision will have a balanced outcome for all regions; how will a decision at national level affect what is being considered and decided elsewhere? In that respect, advice, structures and programmes make explicit – but do not replace – something much more fundamental: the simple recognition and realisation that the regions are there, that they matter and that results of generic choices have specific consequences there. This recognition and realisation should become integral to the weighing up of options, but also to the way problems, challenges and solutions are formulated.

Changing the perspective and behaviour of decision-makers would appear to be a simple task. However, it is complicated by the fact that we are dealing with automatic behaviours and habits that are deeply embedded in everyday patterns, routines and systems. Nevertheless, such changes are necessary. We do not have to get everything right first time, but we do need to start the process now – in everyday considerations, in discussions about policy and in the way ‘The Hague’ views the country, and the regions in particular. This is a challenge to be taken up by everyone, for everyone.

In this advisory report we make three main recommendations, each of which is broken down into two sub-recommendations. An overview is provided in Figure 11.

Figure 11: Overview of our recommendations





With our recommendations we are advocating a stronger focus on the regions in national policy. A discussion as to what exactly should be understood by ‘the regions’ in administrative terms falls outside the scope of this advisory report. Such a constitutional discussion on administrative structure will be very time-consuming, both in terms of the preparation and decision-making. In our opinion, the large and complex social challenges covered in this advisory report cannot wait for this.<sup>26</sup>

Our analysis clearly identifies regions in which there is an accumulation of wide-ranging, mutually reinforcing deficits. Although these areas do not correspond to the administrative map of the Netherlands, the social challenge is clear. We have also already discussed this in a number of individual advisory reports (RVS, 2021b, 2022; ROB, 2010, 2021a, 2021b; Rli, 2019, 2021c).

We are calling on the government and Parliament not to shy away from the fundamental constitutional questions, but also not to delay in fleshing out and implementing the recommendations set out in this report. Our recommendations do not require any constitutional changes and, besides, the stakes are too high: we are talking about reducing undesirable disparities within our country.

<sup>26</sup> There are already a number of opinions on the administrative status of the regions: ROB (2010); ROB (2021b) and Elzinga (2022).

## 5.3 Our recommendations in more detail

### 5.3.1 Rethink central government’s conventional policy and investment logic

#### *Focus national policy on wellbeing in all regions*

In our view, the pursuit of efficiency from a national perspective should no longer take precedence in central government policy and investment choices. Central government must also take into account the impact that its policies may have on the cohesion of facilities, community life and structural development opportunities in regions outside economic centres. This implies that the assumptions and criteria that the Dutch government employs when making investment decisions also need to change. Investments should no longer automatically lead to ‘areas that are already strong becoming even stronger’. It is important to consider systematically what interventions will mean for wellbeing in every region of the Netherlands. Consultation with regional parties is crucial here. In the case of infrastructure investment, for example, this means that the tools currently used to determine which projects should be prioritised (see box) need to be rethought.

### Tools currently used by central government to prioritise infrastructure projects

To determine which infrastructure projects should be implemented first, central government currently employs two tools: an Integrated Mobility Analysis (which considers the potential long-term accessibility challenges) and a social cost-benefit analysis (in which the various effects of an investment decision are given a 'price tag').

In an earlier advisory report the Rli noted that, when the results of the Integrated Mobility Analysis are used, the emphasis is placed on a single aspect of accessibility: where do we expect congestion or other bottlenecks in the infrastructure network? In principle, the social cost-benefit analysis should shine a light on other aspects of accessibility, but in practice it has so far been difficult to express these aspects in monetary terms. As a result, there is a risk that they will fade into the background in the Dutch government's considerations (Rli, 2021b).

The rethink we are advocating here involves central government assessing the potential impacts of policies in advance on a cross-sector basis. In certain regions, choices made in relation to mobility and accessibility by public transport, for example, have far-reaching consequences for the accessibility of healthcare and education, as well as for opportunities to develop (new) business activity. Choices about whether or not to close educational sites can also have consequences of various kinds for villages and communities: relating to their population structure, their attractiveness as a place to live (or continue living in) and the opportunities available

there to meet people, join a sports club, participate in cultural activities, and so on.

To ensure an acceptable level of wellbeing throughout the Netherlands, a basic level of social facilities and social connections will need to serve as a reference point. Only if education, healthcare, work, cultural offerings and public meeting spaces are accessible to residents can regions develop in a healthy way and remain vibrant. This does not mean that the Netherlands needs to look the same everywhere, but it does mean that the basis required for vibrant communities should be guaranteed. What that basic level of accessible facilities looks like in each region may vary and depends on the specific regional structure, regional character and needs of residents. One possible approach is to specify a standard for the accessibility or availability of a particular basic facility, similar to the response times for the fire brigade and ambulances. What should be understood as a basic facility in a region and what standard should apply is a political choice.

Article 5 of the Code on Intergovernmental Relations (Rijk, IPO, VNG & UvW, 2023) explicitly stipulates that, when making policy plans, central government should provide an insight into the impacts of the intended policy on the various regions. The code therefore provides a means of giving effect to the desired change in 'investment logic'. After all, general policies can affect different regions of the Netherlands in an imbalanced way. In addition, focusing on region-specific and area-specific characteristics (e.g. border effects) can help make policies more effective. In other cases too, however, it is essential to assess in advance,

in consultation with regional parties, what effects policies will have in the regions and ensure that basic social facilities are maintained. This will require a change of focus on the part of politicians, administrators and civil servants.

*Allow sector budgets to be pooled to achieve cohesive solutions in the regions*

Although national budgets are occasionally pooled, policies, funding and accountability are generally sector-specific at central government level. This is an obstacle to developing cohesive solutions to the complex challenges that regions are facing. As part of the 'National Programme for Quality of Life and Security', the government is currently investigating whether 'national funds could be used in a less compartmentalised and more area-specific way' (BZK, 2022b). We think the government urgently needs to make a fundamental breakthrough in this regard, even in areas that do not come under this national programme but are nevertheless highly relevant to many 'peripheral' regions, such as accessibility.

We recommend creating a flexible spending envelope in regular national laws and regulations, so that sector budgets can be pooled in the regions to tackle interrelated challenges, for example in the areas of mobility and education. A good indication of the desired flexibility can be found in the evaluation of the 'Second Action Plan on Population Decline' (In.Fact.Research, 2021), which recommends a 10% flexible spending envelope. This also means that there may be differences in the way budgets are spent. Regional authorities and bodies deserve to be given the trust and

the mandate needed to implement a coherent approach. It is important, of course, that the national government and the local and regional authorities question each other critically about the rationale and effectiveness of the intended interventions.

**5.3.2 Invest in substantial, long-term regional development programmes**

*Develop regional opportunity agendas for wellbeing*

Residents, local and regional businesses, civil society organisations and public authorities should jointly develop regional opportunity agendas for the development of regional wellbeing. This will involve identifying the opportunities, needs and specific challenges that exist in their region. It is important, however, that the regions also indicate how this development of wellbeing can be linked to the addressing of major future challenges.

Regional partners can tailor their opportunity agendas to the specific characteristics, culture, identity and potential of their own region. This means that regions have the freedom to prioritise different focus areas. Not every region needs to aim to hook itself up to the 'global economy' or seek maximum economic growth. However, in each region, the intended development path must be aligned with the strategic goals and challenges defined at European and national level.

To develop regional opportunity agendas for the future, the following requirements must be met:



- The regional players must thoroughly analyse (a) the aspects of wellbeing that require priority attention and (b) the contribution that the region must or can make to national and European goals and challenges in the areas of climate, health, housing, digitalisation, acceptance of asylum seekers, and so on. These considerations must also form the subject of a public debate within the region. The opportunities and challenges that exist in a region will differ in terms of scale. After all, working to create thriving regional clubs and societies with the help of sufficient volunteers requires a different policy effort than developing a regional energy strategy. However, neither is any less important than the other in terms of regional wellbeing.
- In border regions a public debate must be conducted with regional partners from the neighbouring country on the opportunities and challenges presented by the border location. This will ensure that these topics feature prominently on the regional agenda.
- The regional partners must enter into a long-term strategic partnership with each other within which the quality of their collaboration and democratic legitimacy are guaranteed. Key participants in such a 'regional ecosystem' (see Chapter 2, section 2.5) are: municipalities, provinces, water boards, residents, companies and knowledge institutions. It is important to switch between and connect the different levels within such an ecosystem. The democratic legitimacy of the collaboration can be ensured in various ways, ranging from establishing cooperation agreements through to organising a review or evaluation of the partnership by administrators and residents.

- Central government must play a supporting and facilitating role in regional agenda-setting. This can be achieved by making knowledge, expertise and advice available. In the case of issues with a cross-border component in particular, support from and cooperation with central government is extremely important, to allow specific situations to be taken into account and alignment with neighbouring countries to be improved. The 'Equal partnership model' (ROB, 2021) can serve as a useful aid in building an equal relationship (see Appendix 4 (only in Dutch)).
- Provinces must be actively supportive of regional collaboration. This may involve bringing parties together, contributing knowledge and expertise and thereby supporting the revitalisation of the relationship between regions and central government (see also our recommendation in section 5.3.3).

The regional opportunity agendas we are proposing here must form the basis for the allocation of long-term budgets (see below).

*Make substantial, long-term budgets available to invest in developing regional wellbeing*

Central government should offer regions financial scope – on top of the regular flows of funds from the national budget – to increase regional wellbeing. We believe that regions in which wellbeing is structurally lagging behind the rest of the country and in which the level of social facilities is under pressure should have access to substantial, long-term

budgets to implement their regional opportunity agenda (see previous recommendation).

We advise central government to focus on a long-term investment strategy targeting structural improvement in the regions concerned. This will mean moving away from the current strategy where central government merely provides contributions for short periods, mainly with the aim of rectifying deficits. The structural improvement we are advocating relates to investments in areas such as infrastructure, education and research, healthcare, welfare and culture. It should be noted that this will require additional money being channelled to disadvantaged regions. This can be made available either through additional investment by central government or by means of reallocation within the national budget. National funding for the regional opportunity agendas should be made available after their impact on wellbeing development in the region has been independently assessed. Regional parties should then decide jointly how to spend the money.

In the case of border regions, steps should be taken to also allow investments across the border, where necessary. Such investments can sometimes deliver gains in wellbeing at a lower cost than if the investments are made domestically with the same aim in mind. Take, for example, investments in cross-border accessibility to open up healthcare or educational facilities to a larger group (people on both sides of the national border).

In principle, the approach we are proposing here, involving long-term regional budgets to develop wellbeing, is one that central government could adopt for all regions of the Netherlands. However, we believe that priority (in terms of both the size and availability of budgets) should be given to ‘peripheral’ regions that are currently lagging well behind in terms of wellbeing. To be clear, these are not just the sample regions that we examined in detail for this advisory report.

### **5.3.3 Work to develop a strong relationship between regions and central government**

*Work to ensure mutual representation: of regions at national level and of central government in the regions*

A stronger focus on regional development within national policy requires a strong relationship between central government and the regions. This is lacking at present. Changing this will require an effort on the part of both the Dutch government and the regions.

An important starting point is that regional players feel more connected to the national government and well represented at national level. This requires more than just administrative representation. It is crucial that residents, civil society organisations and other regional partners also become more involved in national decision-making on issues that are relevant to the regions.

Conversely, it is also important for central government to be actively involved in what is happening in various areas within the regions: political

and administrative developments, spatial planning processes, socio-cultural issues, health-related matters, and so on. It is all about ensuring that central government knows, at political, administrative and civil-servant level, what the concerns are in the various regions and what is needed.

In our view, there is a need to work on strengthening the relationship between the regions and central government. With this in mind, we recommend considering one or more of the following options:

- The representation of the regions within national politics could be strengthened by developing a national variant of the European Committee of the Regions.<sup>27</sup> This body could explicitly highlight the regional perspective when advising the government on proposed policy measures. This would help create a greater understanding of the regional impacts of national policies.<sup>28</sup> The provinces could also play a role in this, jointly or otherwise. However, this means that the provinces would need to commit more than before to the regional agendas. At the same time, it is important that individual regions appoint their own representatives who can act on behalf of the region.
- Central government representation in the regions can be given a ‘face’ by ensuring a greater physical presence in the regions. This should not only involve periodic working visits by policymakers, but also a structural presence for executive agencies such as Rijkswaterstaat or the Human

<sup>27</sup> Within the EU, the Committee of the Regions is a political body comprising representatives of local and regional government in the Member States. The European Commission, European Council and European Parliament are obliged to consult this Committee on proposed policies and legislation that will have an impact at local and regional level.

<sup>28</sup> See Article 5 of the Code on Intergovernmental Relations (Rijk, IPO, VNG & UvW, 2023).

Environment and Transport Inspectorate. Jointly picking up signals from the regions – working like a single governing entity – and translating them in a coherent way should become a fundamental part of the tasks for which government agencies are responsible. Apart from an active presence in the regions, this will also require robust interdepartmental coordination and cooperation.

- To avoid compartmentalisation of regional policy at central government level, a minister could be made responsible for coordinating regional issues at the national level and investments in regional opportunity agendas.
- A strong relationship between central government and the regions also involves the mutual exchange of relevant knowledge and insights. National knowledge institutions have access to knowledge that is of great importance to local and regional authorities. Conversely, the regions have valuable information at their disposal that national knowledge institutions (and, by extension, policymakers and decision-makers in The Hague) could put to good use. Investing in knowledge networks is therefore important (ROB, 2020).
- Provinces could carry out their role as links between central government and the regions more forcefully. This may mean, for example, providing support to municipalities in the form of knowledge and manpower when it comes to establishing contacts at national level or preparing and submitting applications for funding from national or European funds.
- To give the regions a greater voice in national decision-making, the system of proportional representation in the House of Representatives could be modified to better reflect the regional component. Proposals



to this end have been made in the past by the State Committee on the Parliamentary System and the Citizens' Forum on the Electoral System.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, political parties could give greater consideration to ensuring a regional spread when compiling their lists of candidates for elections to the House of Representatives.

*Consider locations in the regions for the establishment of (semi-)public institutions and link the tackling of national challenges to the regional agendas*

We believe that central government should more explicitly consider ensuring a spread across the country in the choices it makes regarding the closure or establishment of (semi)public services and the organisation of its approach to national challenges. Relevant questions that it should ask itself in this context are: Does this (semi-)public service require a presence in The Hague or the Randstad region? Can the tackling of this national challenge be linked to the regional opportunity agendas (see section 5.3.2)? Are there opportunities to take advantage of regional knowledge and networks when addressing these challenges?

In our view, there are at least three areas in which central government should consider a modern decentralisation policy:

- *Choice of location for branches of knowledge and educational institutions*  
Education and knowledge are an essential part of healthy regional ecosystems. Knowledge and educational institutions are where the

<sup>29</sup> Changes to the electoral system cannot be implemented in the short term due to legal constraints.

professionals of the future are developed and where exchanges can take place with companies. Central government should encourage knowledge and educational institutions to open or maintain branches in regions that are currently lagging behind in terms of wellbeing. Here we are talking about both a physical presence and a collaborative relationship, and therefore about more than just erecting buildings.<sup>30</sup> Creative solutions are possible, for example by organising university or higher professional education at regional senior secondary vocational education sites, and vice versa. Past experience has shown that the presence of and interplay between knowledge institutions and institutions of higher and senior secondary (vocational) education can significantly boost regional ecosystems, the connection to the labour market and, consequently, the prospects of the local population. The establishment of knowledge and educational institutions in the regions therefore also has an impact on the attractiveness of regions to young people and young households, and consequently on the make-up of the population.

- *Choice of location for branches of government agencies and autonomous administrative authorities (ZBOs)*

The establishment of government agencies and autonomous administrative authorities in the regions can also boost wellbeing.

When the location for such organisations is being chosen, it is necessary to look beyond the economic costs and benefits and the interests of current employees alone. The points considered should also include the

<sup>30</sup> The last time a new university opened in the Netherlands (Maastricht) was in 1976. Since then the number of students in university education has almost tripled (Statistics Netherlands StatLine) and a number of universities are facing space and capacity shortages.

contributions made to other aspects of wellbeing, the visibility of central government across the whole of the Netherlands, the development of regional networks, the contribution to regional employment, and so on.<sup>31</sup>

- *Tackling the housing challenge*

The government's ambition is to build 900,000 additional homes by 2030 (Coalition Agreement, 2021). A substantial construction effort will also be needed in the period after that. At present, it is mainly urban regions, especially the Randstad metropolitan regions, that are being considered for this. For the fourth tranche of 'housebuilding incentive funds' the joint submission of smaller projects will be possible. We think it makes sense to address part of the housing challenge by opting for smaller-scale housing projects and spreading them across the regions of the country. Such an approach not only contributes to national objectives, but, at the same time, boosts wellbeing in certain regions. One condition, however, is that smaller housing projects need to qualify more easily for support from central government. Such support will be needed to adapt the relevant Environmental Plans, and, in a financial sense, to help fund the specific housing projects and associated infrastructure investments.

<sup>31</sup> Such considerations prompted the Dutch government to establish various government agencies in 'peripheral' regions in the 1970s and 1980s (such as Statistics Netherlands, the RDW (Netherlands Vehicle Authority), ABP (the pension fund for employees in the government and education sectors) and what was then the PTT (state-owned mail, telegraphy and telephony company). At the same time, companies were encouraged to establish locations outside the Randstad. Over time, however, these companies moved away from the regions again, once government incentives had stopped, or they did not survive. By contrast, many of the government agencies stayed, although the nature of the organisations has changed.

## 5.4 Final remarks

We began this advisory report with the observation that there are significant regional disparities in the Netherlands. We identified differences in 'local colour' and in the nature of the environment and landscape – differences that make living in the Netherlands worthwhile. However, we find the accumulation of deficits in the area of wellbeing in some regions of the Netherlands alarming: here we see disparities in health and life expectancy, in public trust and confidence in the future, in the lengths people have to go to to get a good education or find a suitable job in their own area, and in the accessibility of social facilities that maintain quality of life in a region and form the basis of communities.

In our view, the fact that, to some extent, these disparities are caused and magnified by the assumptions underlying national policy and the knock-on effects of that policy in the regions is extremely undesirable. We conclude that there needs to be a greater focus on and greater scope for the structural development of regions across the full spectrum of public policy, and not only within the fields covered by the Rli, ROB and RVS. Only then can a future characterised by wellbeing across the whole of the Netherlands be achieved. After all, every region counts!

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## RESPONSIBILITY AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

### **Composition of the Council committee**

Jantine Kriens, Council member Rli and committee chair

Godfried Bogaerts, Council member RVS

Joris van den Boom, Council member Rli

Martiene Branderhorst, Council member ROB

Martijn van der Steen, Council member RVS

André van der Zande, Council member Rli

Peter Wilms, Council member ROB

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Bart Swanenvleugel, projectleader

Mirjam van Gameren, project assistant

Ineke Hoekstra, project staff member from August 1st, 2022

Pieter de Jong, project staff member

Dorle Kok, project staff member until August 1st, 2022

Gerber van Nijendaal, project staff member

Robert Vonk, project staff member

Douwe Wielenga, project staff member

### *Stagiairs*

Nicole Kuijf, trainee at Rli starting January 1st, 2023

Ruut Willemsen, trainee at ROB February – April, 2022

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Sharon Bartels, Board of Government Advisors (CRa)  
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Aafke Belterman, Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality  
Peter Bertholet, IBA-Parkstad  
Michèle Blom, Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management  
Bettina Bock, University of Groningen  
Richard van den Born, Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management  
Astrid Boeijen, Smart Service Campus (SSC), Heerlen  
Michiel Boots, Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate Policy  
René Bosscher, municipality of Eemsdelta  
Fons Bovens, GGD Zuid Limburg (Public Health Service)  
Adriaan Brouwer, Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport  
Marco van Burgstreden, CROW  
Kees van der Burg, Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management  
Natalie Burgers, Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations  
Tom Cordeweners, Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations  
Anne Çeta Blanksma, Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations  
Ruth Clabbers, Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management  
Monique van Dael, Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations  
John Dagevos, Tilburg University  
Koen Delanghe, European Commission  
Jaap van Delden, Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport  
Ellen van Doorne, Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations  
Jan Hendrik Dronkers, Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management

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Tim Hoek, Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport  
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Nicole van Iwaarden, Board of Government Advisors (CRa)  
Jannemarie de Jonge, Board of Government Advisors (CRa)  
Geert de Joode, Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations  
Marc Konings, Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management  
Koen Koolstra, Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment  
Raymond Kubben, Council for Culture  
Chris Kuijpers, Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations  
Petro Kuijpers, P10 (Vereniging van grote plattelandsgemeenten)  
Dennis Martens, Nationaal Programma Heerlen-Noord  
Marieke Meijer, Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations  
Ron Meijer, Nationaal Programma Heerlen-Noord

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Marijn Molema, Fries Institute for Social Research/University of Groningen  
Nico de Neeling, Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport  
Sjoerd van Ommelen, Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate Policy  
Ivka Orbon, BrabantAdvies  
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Karin van Steensel, BrabantAdvies  
Frank Stevens van Abbe, Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations  
Kees Terlouw, University of Utrecht  
Michel van der Veen, Province of Groningen  
Francesco Veenstra, Board of Government Advisors (CRa)

Wouter Veldhuis, Board of Government Advisors (CRa)  
Lotte Vermeij, The Netherlands Institute for Social Research  
Focco Vijselaar, Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations  
Mirjam Visscher, Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate Policy  
Ben Visser, mayor municipality of Eemsdelta  
Bjørn Vokerink, Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality  
Josse de Voogd, Tilburg University  
Dirkjan de Vries, Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management  
Mattheus Wassenaar, Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management  
Sjouke Wieringa, Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management  
Brigitte Zonneveld, Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management

*Expert meeting Province Agencies 8 June 2022*

Pieter Hooimeijer, University of Utrecht  
Marja Janssens, Kenniscentrum sociaal-maatschappelijke vraagstukken  
Groningen/Drenthe  
Fons van der Lucht, Hanze University of Applied Sciences  
Ivka Orbon, BrabantAdvies  
Ilse Schrijver, Neimed/Zuyd University of Applied Sciences Sittard  
Luc Verschuren, University of Applied Sciences Zeeland  
Edwin van de Wiel, Kennispunt Twente  
Truus de Witte, Fries Institute for Social Research/University of Groningen

*Region meetings Parkstad Limburg 15 June and 7 December 2022*

Liesbeth van Beek, housing association Heem wonen  
Peter Bertholet, Stadsregio Parkstad Limburg



Ron Bonekamp, Stichting Voortgezet Onderwijs Parkstad Limburg  
Jan Pieter Bovendorp, housing association Heem Wonen  
Issa Chebib, Student  
Noah Chebib, Student  
Petra Dassen-Housen, Mayor municipality of Kerkrade  
Raoul Deckers, Program manager Kunst en Cultuur in Kerkrade  
Anita Ebersson, Police Limburg  
Alexander Geers, deputy mayor municipality of Kerkrade  
Hennie ter Haar, Huis voor de sport Limburg  
Robin Hawinkels, Student  
Wil Houben, Mayor municipality of Voerendaal  
Kiki Huijnen-Becks, Onderwijsstichting MOVARE  
Tom Janssen, Onderwijsstichting MOVARE  
Peter Janssen, Residentsplatform Kerkrade Noord  
Monique Keune, housing association Heem Wonen  
Gitte Kroes, Höfke van St Antonius  
Mark Liedekerken, Zuyd University of Applied Sciences  
Dennis Martens, Nationaal Programma Heerlen-Noord  
Ton Meijs, police officer district Kerkrade  
Bart Mulkens, Designer  
Jordy Rijksen, Smart Service Campus (SSC)  
Sandra Spelthan-Prins, Impuls, Wijkpunt Noord  
Peggy Weelen, Stand-BY! en JENS  
Roel Wever, Mayor municipality of Heerlen

*Region meetings Veenkoloniën 28 June and 1 December 2022*

Chretien van den Akker, Preventie Overleg Groningen  
Rebecca Albers, Toverboom  
Paul Asbreuk, Projectleider Goede start  
Joke Bakker, chair residential board KVDVK  
Renée Broens, municipality of Stadskanaal  
Johan Brongers, Tinten Groep  
Annamaria Evers, Sterk uit Armoede  
Hieke Ferwerda, Province of Groningen  
Akke Groenewoud, Economic Board Groningen  
Auke van der Goot, resident Groningen  
Karin Kalverboer, Kansen voor de Veenkoloniën (KVDVK)  
Henk Jan Mollema, Zorgplein Noord  
René van der Most, Zorg Innovatie Forum  
Gerjan Navis, University of Groningen  
Be Schollema, municipality of Pekela  
Brigit Toebes, University of Groningen  
Michel Van der Veen, Province of Groningen  
Henk Veentjer, general practitioner Veendam  
Annemieke Visser, Procesmonitor (KVDVK)  
Maarten Wetterauw, Molendrift  
Jacob Zwinderman, Innovatiehub Oost-Groningen

*Region meetings Twente 7 September and 6 December 2022*

Linda van Asselt, Twenteboard  
Toon Bom, Resident Almelo

Jan den Boon, Medisch spectrum Twente  
Saskia Grobben, Resident Almelo  
Ton Harmsen, Wijkkracht  
Wilmien Haverkamp-Wenker, Mayor municipality of Tubbergen  
Annemarth Idenburg, Trendbureau Overijssel  
Ingrid Jansen, Stimuland  
John Joosten, Mayor municipality of Dinkelland  
Timo Kos, CvB Saxion University of Applied Sciences  
Melanie Maatman, housing association Mijande Wonen  
Frank Nijhuis, Stichting Katholiek Onderwijs Noord Oost Twente, Konot  
Mark Oude Luttikhuis, ondernemer en buurtschap Stokkum  
Bert Tijhof, deputy mayor municipality of Rijssen-Holten  
John van der Vegt, CvB ROC Twente  
Trudy Vos, CvB ROC van Twente  
Patrick Welman, Mayor municipality of Oldenzaal  
Jelle Wiegers, Young Twenteboard  
Edwin van der Wiel, Kennispunt Twente  
Maarten Witteveen, Pakhuis Oost  
Willibrord Woertman, Buurtschap Stokkum

*Region meetings Zeeuws-Vlaanderen 9 September and 14 December 2022*

Liesbeth Adam, ROOTZ  
Frits Baars, Dorpsraad Zuidzande  
Dominique Bakkers, Stadsraad Aardenburg  
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*Region meetings Kop van Noord-Holland 6 October and 13 December 2022*

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