

# *Wicked problems unraveled*

*Explaining the Dutch government's incremental approach to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals*



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**Abstract** – The in 2015 adopted United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda resembles the complexity and wickedness of problems that policy planners and governments face today. The last couple of decades, a growing number of academic articles has been written on these wicked problems, which are perceived as complex, contested, interdependent, and resistant to resolution. The literature on wicked problems recommends a holistic strategy to these kind of issues, but interestingly the Dutch government approaches the national implementation of the SDG Agenda with an incremental strategy. This research aims to explain why the Dutch government approaches the SDG Agenda with an incremental instead of a holistic approach. Wicked problem theory falls short when clarifying the explaining mechanisms leading to incrementalism. Therefore, an inductive case study research is employed to discover how the incremental approach taken by the Dutch government towards the SDG Agenda can be explained. Three theoretical perspectives will be used to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the case: partisan influence theory, garbage can theory, and network theory. This research argues that a lack of high-level interest in the SDG Agenda in the Netherlands provides the political space for an incremental approach to develop.

Key words: wicked problems, Sustainable Development Goals, holistic approach, incrementalism, shadow of hierarchy

***List of figures and images***

***Figure 1:*** List of interview respondents

***Figure 2:*** Image of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (UN 2017c)

***Figure 3:*** Conceptual model: Incremental decision-making towards wicked problems

***Abbreviations***

<i>CBS</i>	Central Bureau voor de Statistiek
<i>CDA</i>	Christen-Democratisch Appèl
<i>CEO</i>	Chief Executive Officer
<i>CSOs</i>	Civil Society Organizations
<i>DI</i>	Disciplined Interpretative
<i>DSGC</i>	Dutch Sustainable Growth Coalition
<i>EC</i>	European Commission
<i>EU</i>	European Union
<i>FMS</i>	Foundation Max van der Stoep
<i>GCNN</i>	Global Compact Netwerk Nederland
<i>IR</i>	International Relations
<i>MDGs</i>	Millennium Development Goals
<i>MD</i>	Ministry of Defense
<i>MEA</i>	Ministry of Economic Affairs
<i>MECS</i>	Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science
<i>MF</i>	Ministry of Finance
<i>MFA</i>	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
<i>MGA</i>	Ministry of General Affairs
<i>MHWS</i>	Ministry of Health, Welfare, and Sport
<i>MIE</i>	Ministry of Infrastructure and the Environment
<i>MIKR</i>	Ministry of Interior and Kingdom Relations
<i>MSAE</i>	Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment
<i>NGOs</i>	Non-Governmental Organizations
<i>NPP</i>	Nature Policy Plan
<i>PBL</i>	Planbureau voor de Leefomgeving
<i>PO</i>	Participant Observation
<i>PPPs</i>	Private Public Partnerships
<i>PvdA</i>	Partij van de Arbeid
<i>PVV</i>	Partij voor de Vrijheid
<i>RBZ</i>	Raad Buitenlandse Zaken
<i>SDGs</i>	Sustainable Development Goals

<i>SMART</i>	Specific, Measurable, Assignable, Realistic, and Time-related
<i>UN</i>	United Nations
<i>VROM</i>	Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning, and the Environment
<i>VVD</i>	Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie

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## ***Chapter 1: Introduction***

### ***1.1. Background***

17 goals, 169 targets, and 230 indicators. The SDG Agenda has provided the UN member states with a highly ambitious assignment that aims, among others, at eradicating poverty, and achieving sustainable development by 2030 (Kroll 2015). The implementation of the agenda is a challenging task since all the separate goals are based on wicked problems: problems that are hard to define, difficult to solve, and which can be approached in a large amount of ways (Rittel and Webber 1973). One should approach these policy issues with a holistic strategy to be able to take them seriously, according to wicked problem theorists (Rittel and Webber 1973; Clarke and Stewart 1997; APSC 2012; Morner and Misgeld 2014). A holistic strategy aims at grasping the bigger picture of a problem, therefore it uses an all-encompassing approach. Despite the existing consensus that wicked problems should be tamed holistically, governments are often still unable to deploy such a strategy (Head and Alford 2015). This also applies to the Dutch government, which did not make the decision to apply a comprehensive strategy but rather an incremental one.

The incremental approach of the Dutch government towards the SDGs is reflected in its avoidance of the creation of an all-encompassing strategic plan for the national implementation of the SDGs. As stated by Jan Pronk: “Nobody has even spoken about the urgency of creating a strategy between now and 2030 to realize the SDGs” (Vice Versa 2016). Even though the Dutch government issued a “plan of action” in October 2016, it did not contain any comprehensive policy vision (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016b). In a critical part of the policy note it was mentioned that the Dutch government might adjust already existing government policies when necessary. The Dutch government decided that current institutions and policies will stay in place and determined to give bottom up-stimuli to stakeholders of the SDGs to motivate them to make contributions themselves. The plan of action presented merely an enumeration of already existing initiatives (Ready for Change 2016).

The current Dutch government’s approach to the national implementation of the SDG Agenda thus shows the application of many small steps rather than large planned steps (Lindblom 1979, 517). Hence, this strategy conflicts with the scientific understanding that wicked problems should be approached holistically. However, what explains such an incremental approach towards wicked problems? Since wicked problem theory does not provide an answer to this question, this research aims to provide an answer through the in-depth analysis of the Dutch government’s approach towards the national implementation of the SDG

Agenda.

The UN members adopted the SDG Agenda on the 25<sup>th</sup> of September 2015 in New York (Kroll 2015). World leaders from 193 UN member countries gathered for a historical summit at which the SDG Agenda was adopted. A prominent Dutch delegation including the Dutch King and Queen, Prime Minister Rutte, and other high-level residents from the Netherlands were present at the Summit. With the new agenda, the UN members agreed upon achieving 17 goals focused on core values such as: human dignity, justice, and global solidarity, between 2015 and 2030. By adopting the agenda every single UN member made the commitment to implement the SDGs in their own country under the overarching motto of “leave no one behind” (United Nations 2015b). For the first time in the history of the UN a broad international consensus was established on how to approach and tackle a broad array of complex world issues (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016a).

While the predecessors of the SDGs, the Millennium Development goals (MDGs), gave developing countries the challenge to transform their developing plans into a national vision, an important novelty of the SDG Agenda is its broadened focus on all countries, including rich countries such as the Netherlands (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016a). The new SDG Agenda not only requires the Netherlands to increase its funding to developing countries, but especially demands fundamental national policy changes:

“From the high-income countries’ perspective, if the MDGs were the telescope through which they looked at the developing world, the SDGs are the mirror in which they see their own policies and performance reflected” (Kroll 2015, 4).

The SDG Agenda has overturned the old-fashioned paradigm of distinguishing developing and developed countries. All UN member countries are in the same boat, they are all expected to achieve the goals in their own countries by 2030. By adopting the ‘Transform Our World’ resolution, every single UN member state made the commitment to execute and implement the SDGs by taking new policy measures, by creating a national reporting on progress, and by organizing consultations with stakeholders in society (Kroll 2015; United Nations 2015).

The SDG Agenda is described as an ambitious and complex agenda to implement for several reasons. While the MDGs focused on a handful of key priorities, the SDG Agenda is much broader and more inclusive. The new UN framework covers a diversity of issues not only focusing on preserving the Planet, but also on People, Prosperity, Peace, and Partnerships, also named the 5 P’s (Interview 4, United Nations 2015b). What makes this agenda most complex is that all the goals are based on wicked problems. The policy issues underlying the goals are

difficult to define, barely comprehensible, and dependent on an endless array of perspectives from decision makers. Poverty, climate change, health, gender equality, and justice are all wicked problems that are part of the SDG Agenda. The lack of clarity on these problems, their broad range of possible solutions, their unpredictability, and interconnectedness in society pose governments with great challenges (Rittel and Webber 1973).

While government organizations are often good at implementing policies that are relatively “standardized, routine, and high volume”, they seem to be less suitable in responding to the complex policy issues they face (Kettl 2009; Head and Alford 2015, 712). Parliamentarians generally tend to focus on highly visible and feasible parts of a complex policy problem rather than proposing an all-inclusive approach to an issue. Furthermore, public administrations are often used to execute public policy issues in linear processes, working from problem to solution. However, setting up a policy strategy that is too narrow can lead to overlooking what is important when handling a wicked problem (Rittel and Webber 1973). Unforeseen consequences can especially lead to policy failures (Clarke and Stewart 1997; Head 2008).

The literature on wicked problems therefore argues that wicked problems should be approached with a holistic strategy (Rittel and Webber 1973; Clarke and Stewart 1997; APSC 2012; Morner and Misgeld 2014). Rittel and Webber (1973, 161) even stated that carving out a part of the problem and finding a rational and feasible solution to it would be morally deplorable. To make a serious attempt at solving the wickedness of issues, the synergies, trade-offs, and possible spillover effects should be considered as well. This means that the stakeholders involved should try to think in such a way that the bigger picture is visualized and taken into account. This could be done by incorporating the interrelations between all the causal factors and policy objectives. Different disciplines and dimensions should be included by involving the relevant stakeholders in the process (Rittel and Webber 1973; Head and Alford 2015).

Being a UN member state, the Dutch government also received the “supremely ambitious” and complex task of implementing the goals (United Nations 2015b). Looking at the current Dutch government’s strategy towards the national implementation of the SDG Agenda, such a holistic approach cannot be observed. Some crucial initial efforts have been made by the Dutch government by the establishment of a national report, the creation of an interdepartmental implementation network, and the appointment of a Coordinator National Implementation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016b). Even though some important steps are made, a clear Dutch government’s national vision and plan for the implementation is missing. The current Dutch government’s strategy is based on already existing policies and encouraging stakeholders in society in making contributions to the SDG Agenda. However, if the Dutch government does

not increase its SDG policy ambitions it will not achieve the goals by 2030, according to the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (PBL 2016). Despite the existing knowledge, the Dutch government is currently muddling through with the SDG Agenda. But what explains such an incremental approach? This research aims at discovering the driving forces that inhibit the Dutch government in devising a holistic strategy for tackling the SDG Agenda.

## ***1.2. Research question and theoretical framework***

As already mentioned, Rittel and Webber (1973) do not provide an explanation for why governments are often unable to devise a holistic strategy towards wicked problems. This research therefore aims to discover what the driving forces are behind the Dutch governments incremental approach towards the SDGs. For this purpose, the following research question will be answered:

*What explains the incremental approach taken by the Dutch government towards the national implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals?*

To answer this research question three middle range theories will be used which offer different explanations for why the Dutch government might devise the SDGs incrementally. The first theoretical perspective that will be consulted is partisan influence theory (Schmidt 1996), the second perspective is garbage can theory (Cohen, March, and Olsen 1972), and the third perspective is network theory (Scharpf 1997).

The first theoretical perspective, the partisan influence theory, originates from Political Science. The partisan influence theory assumes that party differences form a major determinant in shaping policy choices in constitutional democracies (Schmidt 1996). The theory is applied differently in countries where policymaking by multiple parties is very common, such as in the Netherlands. When using the partisan influence theory for a case that addresses a coalition government, policy outputs are expected to be an outcome of a negotiating and bargaining process between the incumbent parties in the coalition (Andeweg and Irwin 2014). When a coalition government faces conflicts over policy changes, the results are often a midway compromise between the ideological positions of the governing parties part of the coalition (Baron and Diemermeier 2001). Following these theoretical assumptions, an incremental approach towards wicked problems would be an expected result once the incumbent parties in a coalition government make compromises about them.

The second theoretical vision has its roots in Public Administration and is based on the garbage can model of organizational choice from Cohen, March, and Olsen (1972). Garbage

can theory tries to explain why institutions muddle through when they face complicated policy decisions (Peters 2002). The model looks at organizations as garbage cans filled with problems, solutions, participants, and choice opportunities. A policy issue makes it to the agenda in the organization once a policy window opens and all the four streams align in the garbage can. This is the moment when policy entrepreneurs inside an organization can propose their solutions to the salient issue. The adoption of an agenda can create such a window of opportunity for policy officers inside a government. With this theory, incrementalism would be explained by the variety of policy entrepreneurs that respond to the window of opportunity and grasp it to propose policy solutions that further their personal policy ends (Kingdon 1995).

The third theoretical lens deployed for this research originates from Public Administration and considers the emergence of networks. This theoretical perspective assumes that the governing arena has transformed in a more horizontal sphere in which policy networks have gained more importance (Rhodes 1997). In the discussion on wicked problems, policy networks are often perceived as a useful approach in tackling wicked problems. However, dysfunctions emerge when these networks do not operate under a ‘shadow of hierarchy’, according to Scharpf (1997). Following these theoretical assumptions, incrementalism towards would be explained by the lack of a shadow of hierarchy. The absence of a shadow of hierarchy would give policy networks too much freedom, leading to actors furthering their own interests and to a patchy wicked problem approach.

The above-mentioned theories will not be primarily used for theory-testing, but they will be deployed to derive variables from. These variables will be used to provide three theoretical explanations for incrementalism towards wicked problems. The inductive research design will allow for combining the different theoretical strands in acquiring a comprehensive understanding of the case. The concluding chapter will discuss to which extent the theories were complementary in providing an explanation for incrementalism towards wicked problems.

### ***1.3. Academic and societal relevance***

This research is scientifically relevant for several reasons. First, a knowledge gap exists regarding the Dutch governments implementation of the SDG Agenda. Due to its novelty the Dutch government’s implementation of the goals is still academically unexplored territory by scholars who study public policy. The relevant actors and dynamics regarding the SDG Agenda in the Netherlands will be exposed, which will contribute to a better understanding of the Dutch government’s strategy for the SDG Agenda. Second, this research will also shed a light on the broader discussion on wicked problems. Wicked problems as a concept of study has recently

attracted increasing attention in policy research by scholars from Political Science and Public Administration (Head and Alford 2015). How to tackle these wicked problems and what the role of governments should be in this are much debated issues regarding the topic (Clarke and Stewart 1997; Head 2008; APSC 2012; Morner and Misgeld 2014; Head and Alford 2015). The final research results might provide a relevant addition to the debate.

The societal relevance of this research stems from the difficulties that actors face when trying to grasp and tackle the complexity of wicked problems. Many of the issues that policy officers, lobbyists, volunteers, entrepreneurs, and other actors face today are characterized by deep-rooted disagreements about the significance of the problems and the solutions. These wicked issues often clash with traditional problem-solving systems and ask for far greater efforts than actors are often giving or able to give. Solving a wicked problem is rather the exception than the rule (Weber and Khademian 2008; Head 2008; APSC 2012; Korsten 2016). A closer examination of the Dutch government's approach to the SDG Agenda will create a better understanding of the practicalities and difficulties that actors face when dealing with wicked problems. This research will give insights into the functioning of parliament, the Dutch public administration, and of networks in affecting the implementation of the SDG Agenda.

#### ***1.4. Methods***

An in-depth case study of the Dutch government's approach towards the SDG Agenda is conducted, meaning that the study is qualitative by nature. An inductive approach is chosen to understand the case as an interrelated whole. The case study will be executed like a disciplined interpretative case study (DI), meaning that already existing theories will be used to explain the case (Odell 2001). The three presented theoretical perspectives serve as a heuristic to analyze the collected empirical evidence. To optimize the collected data for this research, the empirical evidence is acquired through the method of triangulation (Cohen and Manion 2000). The following three methods of enquiry are chosen: participant observation (PO), interviews, and document-analysis. The chosen research design is possible since I was an intern in the SDG team at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) from the beginning of July 2016 until the end of December 2016. During this period the required data for this research could be collected. The use of triangulation has allowed this research to get a "thick description" and holistic display of the collected evidence (Geertz 1973; Gerring 2007). Ultimately, this research design creates the opportunity to identify the underlying mechanisms of the Dutch government's incremental strategy towards the SDG Agenda.

### ***1.5. Structure***

This thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 2 discusses the theoretical considerations that form the basis for the analysis of the empirical evidence. This chapter gives a more extensive overview of the wicked problem concept, then elaborates on the decision for middle range theory, and finally describes the chosen theoretical perspectives in detail as well as how they are applied. In chapter 3, all the methodological choices made for this thesis are described, explained, and justified. This chapter discusses the three chosen methods of enquiry and the chosen resources, and shows the limitations of the research design. Chapter 4 gives an overview of the empirical findings and extensively discusses the Dutch government's approach to the SDG agenda. In this chapter the empirics will be analyzed, and the formulated hypotheses will be tested. Finally, Chapter 5 presents the key findings of this research and presents the answer to the research question. In this chapter it becomes visible how a lack of high-level interest in the SDG agenda has created the conditions for an incremental approach to be established. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the research results, methodological reflections, and makes recommendations for further research and for policy-making.

## ***Chapter 2: Theoretical framework***

In this chapter, a theoretical base is built for the empirical research that will be presented in chapter 4. First, this chapter elaborates on the nature of the wicked problem concept and why Rittel and Webber (1973) introduced it. They are the ones who argued that wicked problems need a holistic approach to be able to tackle them. However, they do not provide an explanation for why governments are often unable to devise such a holistic strategy to those problems. To find an explanation for why the Dutch government approaches the SDGs incrementally, this research makes use of three theoretical argumentations.

These theoretical perspectives stem from middle range theories instead of the grand International Relations (IR) theories. Why the decision has been made to use middle range theories instead of IR theory will be justified. Subsequently, this chapter provides a comprehensive explanation of the roots, central concepts, and applicability to the case of the following theories: partisan influence theory (Schmidt 1996), garbage can theory (Cohen, March, and Olsen 1972), and network theory (Scharpf 1997). The theoretical framework will form a base from which expectations are deduced towards the empirical evidence.

### ***2.1. Wicked problems in public policy***

Since all the separate seventeen goals of the SDG Agenda derive from wicked problems, it is necessary to first delve deeper into the concept of and theory on wicked problems. Rittel and Webber (1973, 160) made the interesting distinction between “tame” and “wicked problems” and argued that wicked problems demand a comprehensive approach. The authors did not provide an explanation for why it is so difficult for governments to approach wicked problems in a holistic manner. Wicked problem theory therefore falls short and cannot provide an explanation to the research question. In the following theoretical paragraphs, an attempt is made to formulate different explanations. First an overview will be given on the roots of the wicked problem concept and why their complexity poses so many challenges to governments.

In the last couple of decades, the wicked problem concept has become buzzing and attracted a great amount of attention in policy research (Roberts 2000; Ferlie et al. 2011; Morner and Misgeld 2014; Head and Alford 2015). An increasing number of articles has been written about these “complex, intractable, open-ended” problems (Head 2008, 101). To get a better understanding of where the wicked problem concept originated from, one must first find out how problem solving was approached in the industrial age. In this era, the solving of problems was guided by the idea of efficiency. A situation was solved efficiently when it was approached

with the least amount of resources. Finding a consensus on this basis was fairly easy during the industrial age, since most issues were of a technical nature. Problems could be relatively smoothly solved by those who had technical skills and those who systematically worked to a simplified end goal. The efficiency paradigm has been leading for a long time among civil engineers and scientists and is still used inside governments and industries. However, the last couple of decades, scholars and policy planners have come to think fundamentally different about policy planning (Churchman 1967; Rittel and Webber 1973).

The discourse on wicked problems emerged in the 1960s when several scholars came to the fore and started to criticize the dominance of rationalist-technical or also called “engineering” approaches towards complex problems (Head and Alford 2015, 713). These scholars argued that a technical approach would not give enough attention to all the perspectives and experiences from actors who are involved in solving a complex policy problem (Rein 1976; Schon 1983). They stated that an increase in scientific and technical expertise could not grasp the quality of the opinions of a wide variety of professionals who have more experiential knowledge. In this theoretical strand, the idea emerged that problems should be addressed through debating the nature of the problems and by discussing alternative approaches. This emerging idea of incorporating value frameworks is fundamentally different from the former top-down approaches in which instructions were often given by the higher ranks (Head and Alford 2015).

The most confronting critique on the technical way of rational planning came from Rittel and Webber (1973) in their famous paper ‘Dilemmas in a general theory of planning’. Building on the above-mentioned scholarly works, the two authors stated that the days of solving social problems with an engineering approach should end. They emphasized that the societal problems in modern society are fundamentally different from the problems that scientists and engineers deal with and that these complex issues are not suitable for top-down approaches.

To be able to distinguish problems and emphasize the necessity to do so, Rittel and Webber (1973) proposed the useful distinction between “tame” and “wicked” problems. They explained that problems in the natural sciences are relatively “tame”, meaning that they are finite, separable, and have verifiable solution (ibid., 160). Contrarily, planning problems in governments are often “wicked”: they are difficult to define, interlinked with other problems, and dependent on a plurality of perspectives and judgements. Rittel and Webber argued that wicked problems are very difficult or impossible to solve because of their incomplete, contradictory, and changing nature. They are often heavily intertwined within society which makes them difficult to pinpoint. In addition, the interdependencies of these problems create

the risk for negative-side effects to occur when approaching only one specific part of the wicked problem. The authors concluded: “At best, they are only re-solved, over and over again” (ibid., 160).

Rittel and Webber (1973, 161) created a list of characteristics to describe wicked problems, which since then has been used by many scholars to explain challenges in a variety of policy areas (Freeman 2000; Salwasser 2004). First, Rittel and Webber (1973, 161) describe wicked problems as issues that do not have one single definition. Definitions of wicked policy issues will always be contested by the many involved actors. Additionally, wicked problems have no “stopping rule”, there is no definitive solution for them. There is also no true solution for wicked problems, there are just “good” and “bad” solutions according to the stakeholders involved. The two authors furthermore state that there is not an objective test to see whether a solution to a wicked problem works. Every possible solution to a wicked problem is a “one-shot operation”, and the effects on society cannot be made undone (ibid., 162). An exhaustive list of possible solutions exists for all wicked issues. In addition, wicked problems are interconnected and every single one of them can be perceived as a symptom of another problem. Despite the unstructured nature of wicked problems, Rittel and Webber (ibid., 166) conclude that policy planners are still held responsible for the consequences of failed operations and do not receive immunity for their attempts.

When looking at the SDG Agenda, all properties mentioned above are applicable to every single separate SDG. SDG number 10 ‘reduced inequality’ serves as an example (United Nations 2017b). Goal 10 of the SDG Agenda aims at the reduction of inequalities in income as well as those based on age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, economic or other status within a country. All these varieties of inequalities are wicked problems. However, to further clarify the wicked characteristics the focus will be on income inequality. Income inequality can be defined as a wicked policy issue, since no true definition exists of what income inequality exactly is. The definition is subject to perspectives from a variety of actors within for example public organizations, NGOs, inter alia. Many causes could lead to inequality of earnings, such as a lower education and changing dynamics on the labor market. These causes are often complex in their interactions and sometimes reinforce each other, which makes income inequality a difficult and wicked problem to trace and tackle (Keep and Mayhew 2014).

Coping with these wicked problem characteristics requires a certain strategy, which looks beyond a scientific or linear one, according to Rittel and Webber (1973). They argue that policy planners should be alert to the characteristics of wicked problems. It is not that these

wicked problems are “ethically deplorable”, but they use the concept of wicked in a meaning akin to:

“malignant”: (in contrast to “benign”) or “vicious” (like a circle) or “tricky” like a leprechaun) or “aggressive” (like a lion, in contrast to the docility of a lamb)” (Rittel and Webber 1973, 160).

It would not make sense to tame a lion in the same way as a lamb. The same would count for treating a tame problem the same as a wicked one. Rittel and Webber (*ibid.*, 161) even state that it would be “morally objectionable” for a policy planner to treat a wicked problem as a tame one. Therefore, Rittel and Webber (1973) argue that an incremental policy approach consisting of many small steps would not make sense as well. “Marginal improvement does not guarantee overall improvement”, as stated by Rittel and Webber (1973, 165). Such a policy strategy would not be able to grasp the bigger picture, would not secure comprehensive improvements in society, and can often not change the nature of the problem (Morner and Misgeld 2014, 5).

According to Rittel and Webber (1973) and other authors (Clarke and Stewart 1997; APSC 2012; Morner and Misgeld 2014), instead of an incremental approach, wicked problems ask for a more complex and holistic approach. The idea behind such a holistic strategy is that it approaches wicked problems as complex adaptive systems that need multiple solutions instead of one. By deploying a holistic strategy, one aims at grasping the bigger picture of a problem by also looking at interdependencies with other wicked problems. “There is an ever-present danger in handling wicked issues that they are handled too narrowly” (Clarke and Stewart 1997, 4). To grasp the complexity and the interdependencies between wicked problems, a wicked problem approach needs the perspective of multiple stakeholders and disciplines. Ideally, all actors that have a perspective on the wicked problem should be involved in the problem-solving process (Batie 2008). Only by acknowledging their complexity and treating them in an all-encompassing strategy, wicked problems can be “tamed” (Morner and Misgeld 2014, 5).

Despite the existing consensus in the literature on how wicked problems can best be approached, governments are often unable to devise a holistic strategy and keep holding on to incremental approaches (Lindblom 1959; Head and Alford 2015). The combination of traditional bureaucracy and a plurality of actors in governments often lead to incremental approaches to wicked problems. Such an incremental approach to wicked problems consists of taking many small steps in a reactive fashion rather than focusing on all-encompassing and optimal policy changes (Lindblom 1959). Governments do not address the whole wicked puzzle

but tend to “muddle through” (ibid). This also applies to the Dutch government’s approach to the national implementation of the SDG Agenda. To explain the Dutch government’s incremental approach, three middle range theories will be discussed in the following paragraphs that might provide an explanation for why the Dutch government approaches the SDG Agenda with an incremental strategy. First, an explanation will be given for the decision for middle range theories instead of the grand theories of International Relations (IR).

## 2.2. *Why middle range theories?*

To answer the research question, middle range theories will be consulted instead of the grand theories of IR, such as realism, constructivism, and neoliberalism. These big theories have shaped the study of international politics for a long time (Mearsheimer and Walt 2013). However, they will not be of use when explaining the research puzzle proposed in this research. This with the simple reason that the IR theories are unable to provide meaningful explanations for localization mechanisms. The grand IR theories explain broad patterns of state behavior. They do not account for how internationally made decisions are implemented on a domestic level (Dunne, Kurki, and Smith 2013).

In the study of IR, scholars have focused on writing about dynamics that lead to international agreements (Dunne, Kurki, and Smith 2013). These scholars thought that once states had already invested their time, costs, and efforts into negotiations, they would also comply after the adoption of the agreement. However, agreements made on a high international level do not automatically transform itself into an implementation of clear policies on the national level (Acharya 2004; Kersbergen and Verbeek 2007). Since the last couple of decades, various authors in the discipline of IR have made this observation. Once an international agreement has been signed, it is up to other processes that develop on the domestic level. This is also the case with the SDG Agenda (Vice Versa 2016).

To understand the decision-making process in the Netherlands that followed the adoption of the SDG Agenda this research thus uses middle range theory. While the big IR theories are single all-embracing theories of systems, the middle range theories proposed are merely an empirical generalization “an isolated proposition summarizing observed uniformities of relationships between two or more variables” (Merton 1949, 450; Dunne, Kurki, and Smith 2013). For this research, abstractions from three middle range theories will be deduced to create three explaining mechanisms that will be applied to the empirical findings in chapter 4.

## 2.3. *Partisan influence theory*

The first theoretical perspective being discussed concerns political parties; “the most cherished of all political variables”, as described by Blais, Blake, and Dion (1993). Political parties have always played an essential role in the study of Political Science since they are perceived as institutions that fulfill a fundamental role in democracies (Epstein 1986). One of these essential roles consists the adoption and implementation of policies towards political parties are committed. According to the partisan influence theory, the composition of political parties in a government forms a major determinant for policy choices and outputs in constitutional democracies

(Dye 1966; Wilensky 1975; Tufte 1978; Garrett and Lange 1991; Hibbs 1992; Blais et al. 1993; Schmidt 1996; Garrett 1998). This paragraph will elaborate on how the partisan influence debate evolved and how political parties can provide a useful explaining factor in understanding incrementalism towards wicked problems.

### 2.3.1. *Partisan influence*

The partisan influence approach has its origins in positive Political Science. Proponents of this theory argue that politics are comparable to a market in which politicians and governments create certain policies in exchange for political support. “Preferences, votes, office-seeking, and policy pursuit” are eventually key factors influencing policymaking (Schmidt 1996)<sup>1</sup>. Partisan influence theory is based on some basic premises which are described by Schmidt (ibid., 156). Firstly, partisan influence theory assumes that political parties hold different policy priorities and that political parties aim at influencing the process of policy formation with their policy preferences. These policy preferences reflect the different desires of the parties’ electorate. The theory furthermore expects that parties have multiple goals from which ‘getting into office’ and ‘creating policies’ are essential ones. Once parties are incumbent, they are expected to choose policies that are in line with the preferences of their voters which will be later implemented by governments. Moreover, when there are changes in party composition, scholars assume that this leads to changes in policy. These changes in party composition reflect changes of preferences among citizens in the nation state (ibid.).

Nevertheless, the extent to which the party composition is of influence is also dependent on more factors, such as: economic vulnerability towards international markets (Scharpf 1988), the division of resources among social classes (Stephens 1979), and the extent to which the incumbent party is in lead of the opposition party (Keeler 1993). To conclude, these propositions form the core of the study of partisan influence theory. However, this does not mean that scholars perceive all the propositions as valid statements. Whether and to what extent political parties are of influence on policy outcomes has been a heavily debated issue among scholars. The following paragraph provides an overview of the partisan influence debate.

### 2.3.2. *The ‘Do parties matter?’ debate*

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<sup>1</sup> According to partisan influence theory left wing political parties are, for example, assumed to be more in favor of an active state than right wing parties. Right wing parties are expected to be more active in market-making (Allers, de Haan, and Sterks 2001; H  ritier 1997).

When the discourse on partisan influence emerged, many scholars expressed their skepticism towards the theory (Dye 1966; Wildavsky 1974; Cameron 1978). Earlier studies on the topic often concluded that the party composition in a government is not of relevance. Dye (1966), for example, argued that differences in policy outcomes in the United States were economic consequences instead of attributable to political variables. Wilensky (1975) argued in the same line as Dye (1966) and stated that welfare expenses were dependent on economic growth instead of on the political climate. Other authors who thought that political parties were not of influence stated that parties do not differ much in their positions on a broad range of issues and would therefore not propose fundamentally different policies (Cameron 1978; Kirchhmeier 1981). Additionally, the complexities in office would make it also impossible for parties to influence policy. However, a considerable number of political scientists did not share this view, and a revisionist trend of scholarly works followed (Schmidt 1996).

Eventually the ‘parties-do-matter’ literature outnumbered the ‘the parties-do-not-matter’ literature (Schmidt 1996). Proponents of the partisan influence theory started to show evidence that parties do have an influence. Many of the arguments used by the opponents of the theory turned out to be invalid. The idea that there are no major differences between parties did not seem empirically true. Most studies showed, to the contrary, that political preferences of political parties do differ (Schmidt 1996, 163). Moreover, studies displayed that when government compositions changed, policy priorities changed as well. Wildavsky (1977) found that British budgets between 1964 and 1973 shifted when the Conservatives changed office with the Labor party. Hibbs (1977) discovered that leftist parties accepted higher increases in inflation than conservative parties did as a trade-off for a decrease in unemployment rates. Cameron (1978) demonstrated that when leftist’s parties were incumbent, public spending would increase. In addition, Castles and McKinlay (1979) researched welfare spending and showed how lower levels of welfare development were caused by a dominance of right-wing parties. These studies are just some examples among all the other scholarly works that made it evident that political parties do have an influence on public policy (Swank 1988; Blais et al. 1993; Schmidt 1996).

Despite the shown evidence, globalization provided a new context to the debate and made scholars revisit partisan influence theory. Several scholars started to argue that globalization caused an erosion of the national autonomy of the nation-state (Lindblom 1977; Cohen 1996; Rhodes 1997). Rhodes (1997) argued for a “hollowing out of the state” thesis and stated that the nation-state is losing its functions to other more powerful bodies. This movement, he argues, is not only going upwards but also downwards to the regions and sideways to other

agencies, such as the European Union (EU). Other scholars stated that the international integration of markets in goods, services, and capital took away the independency of the nation-state (Scharpf 1991). Cohen (1996, 1), for example, stated that:

“While politicians go through the motions of national elections – offering chimerical programs and slogans – world markets, the Internet, and the furious pace of trade involve people in a global game in which elected representatives figure as little more than bit players”.

Lindblom (1977) argued that business had taken in a privileged position over politics in capitalist economies. Simply because capital can leave the country when it does not offer economic policies. Furthermore, Piven (1991) argued that the importance of the welfare state had decreased because of a shrinking working class, which is assumed to vote more in favor of leftist parties. This would eventually lead to a more homogenous electorate and less differences in policy preferences.

Despite the emergence of critical scholars questioning the autonomy of nation-states in the globalized world, a new wave of researchers stood up with contrasting perspectives on what the domestic effects of globalization could be. Especially Garrett (1998) provided an interesting addition to the debate. He argued that the authors cited in the former paragraph have an exaggerated perspective on the effects of globalization. Garrett instead argued that the impact of party politics has increased in some instances. He explained that the unstable distribution of jobs due to market dislocations has led to the experience of economic security in society (ibid., 4). Garrett stated that the nexus between globalization and economic insecurity has caused the increasing focus of political parties on policies aiming at the redistribution of wealth. Pierson (1994) showed that while the working class was decreasing in numbers, the popular support for the welfare state increased. Additional research found higher expenditures under leftist governments (Blais et al. 1993). Thus, despite that globalization provided a different angle to the partisan influence debate, a wide variety of scholars still found evidence confirming partisan influence theory (Schmidt 1996). This meant that one of the most cherished variables could still be used for analyzing public policy outcomes (Blais et al. 1993; Schmidt 1996).

### *2.3.3. Coalition governments and partisan influence*

Scholars use partisan influence theory as an analytical tool when trying to understand a public policy outcome or approach (Cameron 1978). However, when doing this it is important to keep in mind that a comparative approach should be consulted when using partisan influence theory.

“... in contrast to most market theories, partisan theory is premised on the assumption that the structure, the process, and the outcome of the market are contingent on institutional and cultural circumstances which vary from country to country” (Schmidt 1996, 155). The paragraph below discusses some essential contextual cautions that must be considered when applying partisan influence theory.

A key factor that influences the moving space for politicians consists of the existing “institutional pluralism” in a country (Colomer 1995). When a country is more centrally organized it is often more sensitive to partisan influence than when it is constrained by counter majoritarian powers such as: “federalism, an influential constitutional court, and an autonomous central bank” (Schmidt 1996, 170). This implies that partisan influence is stronger in majoritarian governments and weaker in semi-sovereign democracies. Different scholars have designed indicators to measure the degree of counter majoritarian institutional pluralism, such as Colomer’s (1995) index of institutional pluralism or Schmid’s (1996, 170) index of institutional constraints on central governments. According to most of these indexes the room for maneuver is large in countries where the legislature and executive are sovereign. This is also the case for the Netherlands (*ibid.*).

Another determinant that influences the applicability of partisan influence theory consists of whether the government allows for co-governing of the opposition party, such as in coalition governments (Schmidt 1996). In an all-inclusive coalition the incumbent party has much more political leeway than when it must co-govern with another party. However, this is not the case in coalition governments. A coalition government is formed once there is not one single party that won the absolute majority during elections in a multiparty system. Co-governing structures are often established because of the social and political fragmentation of the electorate (Andeweg and Irwin 2014). This is often the outcome in Western European elections, and especially in the Netherlands. In such a case, it cannot be assumed that the policy outputs are a result of the incumbent parties’ policy preferences. In the case of a coalition government the policy outputs are a result of the compromises made between the incumbent party and the co-governing opposition party (Schmidt 1996).

How do such coalition governments solve conflicts over policy changes? Coalition government often face a considerable amount of challenges when making policy (Schmidt 1996). Since coalition governments stem from a fragmented electorate, the governing parties must deal with a diverse range of policy preferences. While juggling with all the policy preferences of the electorate, at the same time the coalition parties should cooperate with each other and make sure that the coalition remains intact. Thus, the will of the different parties must be respected in

some sort of way. However, political parties often have a considerable amount of veto points which creates blockades and cause that policymaking moves slowly (Tsebelis 1995). Consequently, political reform efforts are less likely to happen because high consensus thresholds restrain the parties. Empirical research has shown that the policy results are often a mid-way compromise between the ideological positions of the incumbent parties (Baron and Diermeier 2001; Martin and Vanberg 2014). Thus, policymaking has proven itself slow and incremental in countries where coalition governments reign (Czada 2009).

#### *2.3.4. Wicked problems and partisan influence*

This paragraph aimed at describing a first theoretical perspective that explains an incremental approach towards wicked problems. First, this chapter elaborated on the partisan influence debate which concluded that political parties do have an influence on public policy (Wildavsky 1974; Hibbs 1978; Castles and McKinlay 1979; Swank 1988; Schmidt 1996). Garrett (1998) revisited this conclusion from a globalization perspective and, once again, confirmed that parties do matter. Furthermore, scholars argued that partisan influence theory can be used as an analytical tool when trying to understand public policy. When applying partisan influence theory to coalition governments it must be considered that policy outputs are a result of negotiating, bargaining, and compromises (Andeweg and Irwin 2014).

An incremental approach towards a wicked problem would be an expected result under the above-mentioned theoretical assumptions. When a coalition government faces a wicked problem, intense debates and negotiations would be expected to arise between the incumbent parties of the coalition. Wicked problems are often contested policy areas that influence a significant amount of people and stakeholders who are also part of the electorate of the co-governing political parties. These wicked policy issues often create many blockades in the negotiation process (Rittel and Webber 1973, 168). Bargaining and compromising would follow between the political parties in the coalition government when approaching these wicked issues, to make sure that the coalition does not fall apart. This would eventually lead to incremental and non-comprehensive outcomes due to the made compromises. Thus, coalition government would be unable to approach wicked problems in a comprehensive way and will go for a muddling through approach instead.

#### *2.4. Garbage can theory*

In the former paragraph the plurality of perspectives of political parties in coalition governments was considered which leads to ad hoc approaches towards wicked problem solving. In

this paragraph the focus is on the diversity of ideas inside organizations, such as ministries, and how they can lead to incremental policy approaches when they have to tackle wicked problems. A wide variety of scholars from Public Administration has tried to grasp the complexity of governing inside political organizations. Cohen et al. (1972) provided the study of decision-making within organizations with an interesting addition with their ‘garbage can model’. Below, the academic roots of the garbage can model will be discussed and how the model can provide this research with a useful tool for explaining incrementalism towards wicked problems.

#### *2.4.1. The governance debate*

The garbage can model emerged from the governance debate which was held among scholars of Public Administration and Political Science (Olowu 2002). The use of the concept of governance in the academic literature of Public Administration symbolized a paradigm shift in thinking about how to manage societies (Peters 2002). In the early years of Public Administration and Political Science both disciplines mainly focused on the government and the nation-state as central institutions exercising power. However, the concept of governance went beyond the focus on the government and described how steering works out in society. This change in the literature runs parallel to a development observed within the public sector which moved away from the state-centered or authoritarian styles of governing. Scholars increasingly wrote about the declining public confidence in institutions from the government and in the politicians (Norris 1999). This swift led to comprehensive debates on the process of governing in the discipline of public administration (Peters 2002, 1).

While the discourse on governance existed for a while, the meaning of the concept remained a debated issue. On the one side of the conceptual continuum scholars still focused on a definition in which the government and state play a central role. However, on the other side scholars argued for a hollowing out of the state, meaning that the state has become an ineffective institution (Rhodes 1996; 2000). A last strand in the governance literature took the middle ground and considered that both governments and other actors are involved in governing. A much-used definition among these scholars is from Kooiman (1993, 2) who defines governance as: “forms in which public or private actors do not separately but in conjunction, together, in combination, tackle social problems through co-arrangements”. It is understood as “multi-organizational action” (Olowu 2002, 346). According to this perspective the public administration is also a governing entity in the policymaking process.

At first, the governance debate remained quite descriptive and mainly focused on what

governing entails. Subsequently, scholars emerged who went beyond the conceptual debate and who proposed analytical tools to study governance processes. Almond and Genco (1977, 489) cautioned Political Science scholars to not use single models when trying to understand governance, like scholars from the natural sciences do. They showed that the single analytical models inspired by the hard sciences could not explain the complexities seen in the political reality. Several scholars attempted to find simple and single models to try and explain the complexities of political decision-making processes. However, the more they tried to simplify the less they explained. Using a metaphor from Karl Popper (1966), Almond and Genco (1977, 489) argued that human societies should instead be perceived as a combination of the messiness, inconsistency, and unpredictability of “clouds”, and at the other end the structure, the orderliness, and predictability of “clocks”. The authors therefore asked scholars studying governance to look beyond regularities and acknowledge that elements of chance, human creativity, and choice play a significant role in the political arena. To both grasp the cloud-like disorder and the clock-like order from policymaking, the garbage can model of Cohen et al. (1972) will be considered in this research (Mucciaroni 1992).

#### *2.4.2. The garbage can model of organizational choice*

The garbage can model can be traced back to the thoughts of Herbert Simon (1947) on “bounded rationality”. Simon (ibid., 100) criticized the neoclassical conceptualization of rationality, which assumes that decision makers have perfect cognitive functions, know all the choice possibilities, can grasp all the advantages and disadvantages of choices that must be made, and choose the option that maximizes utility. Simon (ibid., 104) contrarily argued that full rationality towards decision-making cannot be asked from individuals inside organizations. He stated that individuals can only act rationally to a certain extent “within narrow boundaries”: determined by the organizations norms, routines, technologies, and interests. He furthermore argued that actors are “bounded” by limitations, such as incomplete knowledge, confined time, and cognitive constraints (Simon 1997, 17). This entails that individuals are not capable of making decisions with a maximal outcome. Instead, individuals will make decisions that are expected to be “satisfactory”, meaning that they will be content with outcomes that are good enough (Simon 1947, 109).

Both the literature on bounded rationality and the garbage can model designed by Cohen et al. (1972) rejected the fundamental rationalist perspectives and tried to find alternative ways to understand how institutions “muddle through” in complicated decision situations (Peters 2002). Cohen, March, and Olsen discovered the irrationality of decision-making through their

experiences with educational systems. They were all three somehow connected to education, and observed that the educational institutions they studied were characterized by ambiguous goal-setting processes. One of the key observations they made was that, rather than being expected, decisions in many instances were more an outcome of the fortuitous gathering of opportunities, individuals, and ideas. Only sporadically, a certain course of action could be traced back to a single goal. From these experiences Cohen et al. (ibid., 16) concluded that decision-making processes do not follow a linear logic and evolve much less rationally than they first expected it to. To better understand the process of agenda-setting in organizations, Cohen et al. (ibid.) designed the garbage can model.

The garbage can model looks at “organized anarchies”, which can be educational institutions or government institutions, such as ministries. Cohen et al. (1972, 2) describe organized anarchies as:

“A collection of choices looking for problems, issues and feelings looking for decision situations in which they might be aired, solutions looking for issues to which they might be the answer, and decision makers for work”.

An organized anarchy contains both the cloud and clock-like characteristics described by Popper (1966): it consists of both order and disorder. They can be characterized by three properties: “problematic preferences, unclear technology, and fluid participation” (Cohen et al. 1972, 1). The first property entails that many inconsistent preferences exist among the members of the organization. The second means that the processes through which organized anarchies sustain themselves are usually poorly understood by its members. Therefore, a “trial-and-error” strategy is often used. And third, the members inside an organized anarchy put varying amounts of time in different issues, which creates uncertainties about the organizational outcomes.

Cohen et al. (1972, 3) see a decision opportunity in an organized anarchy as a garbage can that consists out of “problems, solutions, participants, and choice opportunities” that constantly flow in and out. When all four streams meet in the garbage can, an issue makes it to the agenda. Each of these streams are not completely independent from each other, they are “independent and exogenous” to the system (ibid., 3). The ‘problems’ are the issues that people care about, inside and outside the organization. Such a problem becomes salient when a certain event makes that actors give attention to the issue (Mucciaroni 1992, 460). The ‘solutions’ that can be proposed towards the problem already exist among experts who have accumulated knowledge on a specific topic. Despite that solutions to problems already exist, they are only used once the political environment is ready for a change. This generally happens when there

are choice opportunities, which are moments when the authors expect that a decision is created within an organization. The political environment is, however, constantly changing and creates blocks and opportunities for issues to make it to the agenda (ibid.).

Issues make it to the agenda on critical moments described as “policy windows” (Kingdon 1995). A window of opportunity only opens for a short amount of time when all the conditions are right. When a certain issue is not salient, when the solutions are not available, or when the political environment is not ready, a problem will not make it to the agenda. Since all the streams are mainly operating independently from each other, the agenda is dependent on a serendipitous timing. This shows that the agenda-setting process is a rather “chancy process” dependent on time and luck (Kingdon and Thurber 1984, 3).

#### *2.4.3. Policy entrepreneurs*

It now seems that the garbage can model looks at agenda-setting as a fully random process. This is not the case. Once a window of opportunity opens, efforts should be made to push a certain problem on the agenda before the window closes again (Mucciaroni 1992, 461).. This task is executed by policy entrepreneurs, who often have expert knowledge of a topic and who are devoted individuals that want to propose their solution when a certain problem floats by. Policy entrepreneurs are, for example, politicians, policy officers or leaders of interest groups. They are the ones who decide which solution they want to propose and which political strategy they want to use to bring the issue to the agenda. They can push their ideas in the policy space they have received from politicians. This space is often quite big in nation-states that are not highly centralized, such as the Netherlands (Daalder 1966). Policy entrepreneurs can be perceived as the couplers in the complex policy process. The coming together of all the four streams in the garbage can is heavily dependent on the right entrepreneur that shows up at the right time (Roberts and King 1991).

Policy entrepreneurs possess a considerable amount of decision-making power, since they can influence whether and which problem will be dramatized (Mintrom 1997). The efforts of policy entrepreneurs are therefore often used as a factor explaining changes in policy (Roberts and King 1991; Kingdon 1995; Crowley 2003; Mintrom and Norman 2009). As described by Mintrom and Norman (2009): “they are individuals who through their creativity, strategy, networking, and persuasive argumentation are able to bring new policy ideas into the open and promote policy change”. However, the policy changes caused by policy entrepreneurs are not expected to follow the organizations’ ambitions (Kingdon and Thurber 1984). Kingdon (1995) stated that policy entrepreneurs make use of the policy windows to further their own policy

ends. Motivated by their personal interests and agendas, they communicate with others in the hope that other policy entrepreneurs also support their policy preferences. Different views often exist among policy entrepreneurs, which makes it difficult for them to collectively come up with a coherent policy strategy to a problem. Consequently, policy outcomes are often scattered, which is a result of policy entrepreneurs who choose to follow their own policy paths.

#### *2.4.4. Wicked problems in the garbage can*

The above paragraph gave an overview of the second theoretical perspective that explains an incremental approach towards wicked problems. The garbage can model shows how decision-making processes in organized anarchies often follow a random path dependent on fortuitous circumstances (Cohen et al. 1972; Mucciaroni 1992; Kingdon 1995). Once a window of opportunity opens up in these organizations and the problems and choice opportunities are aligned, a policy entrepreneur can attempt to push an issue to the agenda. This, however, often results in incrementalism since policy entrepreneurs can decide to pursue their own policy interests (Roberts and King 1991; Kingdon 1995).

When a government, e.g. a public administration, is presented with an international agreement consisting of wicked problems, incrementalism would be an expected policy outcome based on the above-mentioned statements. Once the policy preferences of one or several policy entrepreneurs align with the problem addressed by the international agreement, the agreement can be perceived as a window of opportunity to propose policy change. The international agreement can be used to substantiate the policy entrepreneurs' efforts for a change in policy. However, wicked problems are often heavily debated issues (Rittel and Webber 1973), which means that policy entrepreneurs are expected to have different views on these problems. It would be expected that these policy entrepreneurs will propose solutions that further their own policy interests. Consequently, the approach to the policy issue would be dominated by the policy entrepreneurs' varying policy preferences. This would contribute to incrementalism.

### **2.5. Network theory**

This paragraph discusses how incremental policy outcomes can be explained by the emergence of networks. This chapter will build on the governance debate, outlined in the former chapter in paragraph 2.4.1. In this debate, scholars from Political Science and Public Administration observed that the governing area has become very fragmented and that the traditional role of governments has changed in this context (Ferlie and Pettigrew 1996; Kickert et al. 1997; Godsmith and Eggars 2004; Bovaird 2007). This change in governing has created the space for

policy networks to arise in public policy making (Rhodes 1997; Scharpf 1997; Castells 2000). Below, the academic foundations of network theory will be discussed and how network theory can provide an explaining mechanism for understanding incrementalism towards wicked problems.

#### *2.5.1. From hierarchy to a network society*

A major shift in the international arena can be observed from 1658 when the Treaty of Westphalia ended three decades of religious war after the Reformation. With this treaty, an international system was based and got centered on the existence of nation-states: territorial fixed entities whose borders mark a domain of absolute control. “The nation-state was the pinnacle of power, with no authority, secular or religious above it” (Stalder 2006, 105). A clear separation was established between domestic and foreign politics. Interfering in the international affairs of another state counted as a taboo that should not be broken during this era. Nowadays, all these basic premises of the nation-state are challenged by an ever-changing and globalizing world. Many of the key processes, such as economic, social, and political are no longer located inside the nation-states’ boundaries. They now operate on a global scale (ibid.). McLuhan (1964) popularized the concept of “global village” to describe how people and processes have increasingly become interconnected around the world.

In this globalizing world, various authors observed a move away from large hierarchic public organizations (Ferlie et al. 2011). This observation has been made the last couple of decades in the UK (Ferlie and Pattigrew 1996), the USA (Godsmith and Eggars 2004), in European countries (Bovaird 2007), but also in the Netherlands (Kickert et al. 1997). Jessop (1993) stated that bureaucracies are becoming more horizontal and argued that public organizations resemble a “post-Fordist” character. Rhodes (1997, 6) argued that the state is “hollowing out” and stated that the nation state is losing its functions upwards, downwards, and sideways. Many aspects of national policy are determined on a EU level, and privatization has shifted some government responsibilities sideways to the private and non-profit sector. By using the governance concept, Rhodes emphasized the changed boundaries between the public and the private sector. As already explained in paragraph 2.4.1., the governance concept looks beyond the government as the only actor capable of making collective goals (Peters 2002). Governance resembles a broader concept, consisting out of a mix of bureaucracy, market, and networks steering society (Marinetto 2003).

Building further on the governance debate, van Dijk (1991) and Castells (1996) coined

the concept of the network society. Castells (2010, 500) argued that a network society has developed in which horizontal relations and networks have gained more importance than hierarchical power relations. He even stated that networks have become the basic units in modern society (ibid., 502). Despite the increased importance of other actors and organizations, the nation-state is still recognized as an important unit in the international system, according to Castells. It remains an essential institution that creates the platforms for discourse and political discussion. However, what Castells aims to emphasize is that the government has to execute its tasks within a context that is characterized by a plurality in sources of authority. The nation-state still has its influence on policy, but it is a weaker kind of power. “It is power that cannot act alone”, as stated by Stalder (2006, 2016). According to Castells (2010) the nation-state has become the “network state”. Instead of states being sovereign subjects, they are strategic partners nowadays.

Van Dijk (2012) wrote about the network society as well. However, he did not share Castell’s (2010) perspective that networks form the basic units in society. According to him, the central units in society still consist of individuals, groups, and organizations, which have increasingly become interlinked with each other through network structures. He argued that even in a society in which all relations would be structured through networks, they would still be based on all kinds of organizational bodies. This research builds further on van Dijk’s conceptualization of the network society.

### *2.5.2. Policy networks*

Rhodes (1997) was the author who brought the ideas of governance, networks, and public policy analysis together, and who pioneered the concept of policy networks. Policy network analysis focuses on doing research on the network relations that exist between governments and private actors who have shared interests in public policy areas (Rhodes and Marsh 1992). The last couple of decades an almost infinite amount of literature has been written about these policy networks and how they influence public policy (Kenis and Schneider 1991; Rhodes and Marsh 1992; Rhodes 1997; Scharpf 1997).

In the governance literature two schools can be distinguished that explain why organizations seek network behavior: the ‘power dependence’ school and the ‘rational choice’ school (Rhodes 2008). The first school explains the forming of networks based on a power dependence among actors. This strand sees policy networks as a specific form of governance that gives organizations the opportunity to exchange resources when they are divided among a variety of public and private actors (Kenis and Schneider 1991; Rhodes 1997). Organizations exchange

resources inside these policy networks because they are dependent on them to achieve the organizations' goals. This school of thought sees network relations between organizations as a "game" in which all the different organizations try to maximize their advantages. Through negotiations, the organizations create trust and develop rules on how the resources will be distributed (Rhodes 2008, 431).

The rational choice school tries to understand the emergence of policy networks by combining rational choice and the new institutionalism (Rhodes 2008, 431). Just as the power dependence school, this school stresses the relations between organizations and their dependency on resources (Kenis and Schneider 1991, 41). The rational school especially stresses that network structures create opportunities for actors to further their interests. Scholars from this school state that policy networks show a notable change in the governing structure and see policy networks as "structural arrangements" that are focused on creating public policy (ibid.). The actors interested in a certain public policy area use the policy network to communicate and exchange "information, expertise, trust, and other policy resources" (ibid.).

Scharpf (1997, 195) originates from the rational choice school and argued that policies are the outcome of "interactions of resourceful and boundedly-rational actors whose capabilities, preferences, and perceptions are largely, but not completely shaped by the institutionalized norms within which they interact". He stated that policy networks offer quite some advantages over hierarchy and market (Borzel 1997, 7). By only focusing on markets and hierarchies there is always the risk of defections (Scharpf 1997). For instance, markets cannot control how the markets evolve and whether a market failure is around the corner. The problem with hierarchies is that they produce "winners" who profit from a certain decision and "losers" who have to bear the negative consequences of a certain political decision. Policy networks do not inherently have these dysfunctional consequences in their decision-making structure, according to Scharpf (1997).

In the discussion on public policy and wicked problems, policy networks are often suggested as an effective approach in tackling wicked problems (Ferlie et al. 2011). Private actors, such as companies and NGOs have increasingly received governing roles in approaching wicked problems because they are expected to have more expertise in certain policy areas. A variety of scholars and policy officers assume that including multiple private actors fosters a better understanding of complex policy problems and creates a "collaborative advantage" (Chrislip and Larson 1994; Gunton and Day 2003; Huxham and Vangen 2005). Firstly, because the actors who are involved could have different knowledge backgrounds, interests, and values and thus could bring in a broad array of solutions (Chrislip and Larson 1994). Furthermore, it

is expected that collaboration will create a shared feeling of ownership over the policy area (Gunton and Day 2003). Despite these advantages, successful cooperation in networks only develops once the network operates under a so called “shadow of hierarchy”, according to Scharpf (1994, 1997).

### 2.5.3. *Shadow of hierarchy*

As argued by Scharpf (1997), dysfunctions will come to the fore once policy networks do not operate under a shadow of hierarchy. Scharpf (1994, 38) clarifies the importance of a shadow of hierarchy by describing the “vertical dialogue-model” which is used for policy processes inside ministries. Successful regulation in ministries follows from the very fact that outcomes of negotiations among lower-level actors have to be ratified by a head of the ministerial department or by the cabinet. The logic of the vertical dialogue-model can be extended outside the ministry to policy networks. In such a network, the shadow of hierarchy can be created by governments through governmental action, which consists of the initiation of steps to create certain legislation or executive action (Halfteck 2006; H  ritier and Lehmkuhl 2008). Legislators can threaten to enact legislation, unless actors in a certain wicked policy area change their behavior. The threat of legislation can create the incentive for private actors to engage in effective self-regulation (H  ritier and Lehmkuhl 2008, 2).

Once policy networks are not operating under a shadow of hierarchy, a bargaining dilemma is more likely to occur (Scharpf 1994, 45). The bargaining dilemma entails that actors decide to defer from cooperation because they think it is more beneficial to them than to comply to the policy. Being part of a policy network is a costly undertaking because transaction costs have to be made by the members to sustain the network. However, these costs increase exponentially with the number of actors that participate in the network. When an actor decides to not participate in the network it saves these transaction costs, but it also jeopardizes the collective action on the policy issue (Scharpf and Mohr 1994, 20). Furthermore, there is also the possibility that actors decide to free-ride and to not comply to the policy issue of the network, meaning that the parties which did search for cooperative positive outcomes are exploited by the other actors that want to maximize their own advantage (Lax and Sebenius 1986; Borzel 1998). Consequently, actors start to play “one’s cards close to one’s chest”, which means that they defer from collaboration and choose to withhold essential information to further their own interests (Borzel 1998).

To conclude, without the presence of a shadow of hierarchy, chances are more likely that actors will refrain from collaboration on a policy issue and start to further their own

interests. This would, in turn, lead to a scattered network approach to the policy issue at hand (Scharpf 1997).

#### *2.5.4. Policy network approaches to wicked problems*

This chapter elaborated on how the governing landscape has changed and subsequently discussed how policy networks have emerged as significant governing structure in this changed arena (Chrislip and Larson 1994; Gunton and Day 2003; Huxham and Vangen 2005). Scharpf (1997) stressed that policy networks can be successful in approaching policy issues once they operate under a shadow of hierarchy. Such a shadow of hierarchy can be created by governments who initiate steps to make certain legislation or executive action (Héritier and Lehmkuhl 2008). If a government does not create this shadow, it is more likely that a bargaining dilemma will emerge. When such a dilemma occurs it would be expected that actors will refrain from collective action on the policy issue and start furthering their own interests, which leads to incremental contributions to the policy issue (Scharpf 1997; Lindblom 1968).

Subsequently, the above-mentioned assumptions will be applied to a situation in which policy networks try to make contributions to a wicked policy issue. Without the existence of a shadow of hierarchy, incremental contributions would be expected from the policy networks. Wicked problems are often issues in which many stakeholders are involved, meaning that the members have to invest high transaction costs to sustain the policy network. Without a shadow of hierarchy, there are no consequences for the actors in the policy network for non-compliance. Under these circumstances it would be expected that actors will further their own interests, leading to an incomprehensive contribution towards policy issues. Hence, without the existence of a shadow of hierarchy, policy networks will expectantly contribute to an incremental strategy towards wicked public policy issues.

## **2.6. Conclusion**

In this chapter, three theoretical perspective were presented that might explain the Dutch government's incremental approach towards the SDG Agenda. The theoretical perspectives that were proposed provide this research with a multi-level analysis of the chosen case. The policy process is multilevel in nature, and therefore a multi-level theoretical approach has been used (Ballard and McVey 2014, 193). By using the three levels of analysis this research aims to avoid theoretical bias (Hammersley 2008). In the next chapter, hypotheses will be deduced from the theoretical mechanisms presented in this chapter. Additionally, the employed methods for this research will be further discussed. The empirical analysis will eventually show whether the

three theories are complementary in explaining the Dutch government's approach to the SDG Agenda.

### ***Chapter 3: Research design***

In this chapter the methods used for this research will be discussed. First, the inductive case study approach will be described as well as why the Dutch government's case was chosen. Subsequently, hypotheses will be formulated based on the theoretical chapter. This is followed by a comprehensive section which will elaborate on the method of triangulation and how it has been executed in this research. Lastly, the limitations of the chosen research design will be explained.

#### ***3.1 Inductive case study approach***

Before elaborating on what the inductive case study approach entails, the philosophical roots of this research will be examined. Positivism has been the philosophical paradigm in conducting research for a long time in the discipline of Political Science (Dunne, Kurki, and Smith 2013, 15). The positivist research philosophy is based on the ontological assumption that the objective truth or reality exists, and that this reality can be grasped by scholars by performing empirical observations. A positivist approach in Political Science falls under the behavioral approach, which is based on the idea that political behavior can be explained from a neutral point of view (Halperin and Heath 2012, 27). Behavioralism focuses on *erklären*, which consists of creating law-governed explanations for political phenomena (Weber 2002). It is thought by behaviorist scholars that these explanations can be created by making empirical observations and by testing evidence, falsification, and causal explanation (Halperin and Heath 2012, 27). However, a purely behaviorist approach would not be suitable in acquiring a full understanding of the Dutch government's approach towards the SDG Agenda. In addition to identifying general causes for incrementalism, this research aims at exposing the explaining mechanisms at hand.

This research thus aims at *verstehen*; acquiring an understanding of the internal mechanisms leading to Y (Weber 2002). An interpretive philosophical lens should therefore be used for this study. In contrast with positivism, the interpretative philosophy is based on a social ontology. It distinguishes the objective world from the social world and sees the social one as something subjectively created (Halperin and Heath 2012, 40). To research this social world, beliefs, meanings, and perspectives should be interpreted (Bevir and Rhodes 2006). Even though this research is focused on *verstehen*, it is not purely interpretative in nature. The orthodox interpretative approach argues that social science should only focus on interpreting the meaning of a social outcome and not on discovering causes of social outcomes. However, this

research focuses both on the general causes and explaining mechanisms of incrementalism towards the SDG Agenda. It aims at finding and understanding of the causal mechanism that made the Dutch government go for an incremental strategy.

To be able to approach the Dutch government's case as an interrelated whole instead of only understanding the separate predetermined variables, an inductive case study approach will be used (Blanche et al. 2006, 47). Induction is a research approach that starts with the observation of a social phenomenon and is followed by an attempt of formulating explanations that can be used as an abstract rule or guiding principle. These explanations can be used for theory-building and subsequently to predict other experiences and cases (Kolb et al. 1979). Since theory-building is not the primary aim of this research, it cannot be seen as purely inductive. This research first and foremost aims at finding an extensive understanding of the case and its explaining mechanisms.

Since this research solely focuses on the Dutch government's approach to the SDG Agenda, the case study design can be described as a single-case study. A single-case study design offers the possibility to zoom in on a specific phenomenon, which helps to create a comprehensive understanding of the explaining mechanisms (George and Bennett 2005; Gerring 2007, 5). The Dutch government's approach to the SDG Agenda can be described as a "typical case". Firstly, since the Dutch government forms one of the many governments that struggles with devising a holistic approach towards wicked policy issues. Secondly, because the SDG Agenda provides this research with a typically "wicked" agenda (Gerring 2007, 91).

Due to the novelty of the chosen case, the inductive case study will be executed like a disciplined interpretive case study (DI) (Odell 2001). To provide an explanation in a structural manner, the DI case study applies already existing theories to a new terrain of research. It mainly shows that one or more already existing theories apply to a new event. In this case, partisan influence theory, garbage can theory, and network theory are the already existing theories that will be applied. The DI case study then examines the theories and selects those elements that are helpful in answering the research question. Several explaining mechanisms are deduced which might work out differently in reality and which are therefore not finite. The hypotheses and concepts deduced from the theories will serve as nuts and bolts when analyzing the empirical findings. However, the chosen hypotheses are not simply deployed for theory-testing or deduction. They serve as a heuristic in answering the research question (Goddard and Melville 2004). Whether the three chosen theories are complementary in explaining the dependent variable, the incremental approach towards wicked problems, will be discovered in

the empirical research. Once the research question is answered, the DI case study aims to make more general conclusions about the application of the theories (Odell 2001, 163).

### ***3.2 Hypotheses and operationalization***

Below, the dependent variable, independent variables, and hypotheses will be defined. All the hypotheses below present expectations with regards to the dependent variable: an incremental policy approach.

#### ***3.2.1. Dependent variable***

The Dutch government's incremental approach towards the national implementation of the SDG Agenda forms the dependent variable in this research. The Dutch government's approach is incremental for several reasons. Kingdon (2014, 79) describes the incremental decision-making process as: "Instead of beginning consideration of each program or issue afresh, decision makers take what they are currently doing as given, and make small, incremental, marginal adjustments in that current behavior". Decision-makers avoid a comprehensive analysis of all the policy options and instead create a much more bounded process through "successive limited comparison" (Lindblom 1959). In other words, this means that decision-makers mainly focus on already existing policies and consequently narrow their policy decisions on the already existing and narrow policy scope (Lindblom 1959). An incremental policy approach thus consists of two essential factors. Firstly, it consists of the avoidance of creating an encompassing strategy and secondly it consists of taking many small steps, rather than taking many extensively planned steps (Lindblom 1968; 1979).

Based on these factors it can be concluded that the Dutch government is taking an incremental policy approach to the national implementation of the SDG Agenda. Firstly, the Dutch government has been avoiding the creation of an all-encompassing strategic plan for the national implementation of the SDGs (Vice Versa 2016; Ready for Change 2016; Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016b). There will be no national SDG implementation program, as stated in the plan of action. The Dutch government has instead chosen for a "pragmatic implementation" of the SDG Agenda. This strategy entails that no top-down dictations are given by the government, but only bottom-up stimuli for other stakeholders to make contributions. Secondly, the Dutch government intends to change national policies when there is a gap with the SDGs. However, no concrete policy commitments are made. This means that contributions towards the SDG agenda are currently merely side-effects of the already existing policies and initiatives, which are not integrated into one comprehensive approach. To conclude, the result is that the

national implementation of the SDG Agenda is evolving very gradually in small steps, showing its incremental nature.

### 3.2.2. Independent variables

#### Partisan influence theory

Partisan influence was the first theoretical perspective discussed in the theoretical framework. According to the hypothesis of partisan influence theory, policy outcomes are dependent on the party composition of a government (Schmidt 1996). Policy outcomes from coalition governments are assumed to be a result of negotiating, bargaining, and compromising (Andeweg and Irwin 2014). When a coalition government is confronted with a wicked policy issue and has conflicting perspectives on the issue, mid-way solutions would be expected to sustain the coalition. These mid-way solutions would hinder a holistic approach to be established by the incumbent parties and would lead to small and marginal policy adjustments. Partisan influence theory would thus explain incrementalism based on the inadequacy of coalition governments in creating a holistic approach towards wicked problems. From the statements of partisan influence theory it can be deduced that:

H1: *An incremental approach towards wicked problems will be more likely to occur when there are conflicting interests inside a coalition government*

To confirm the hypothesis, the evidence should first show that a coalition government has been governing in the Netherlands during the SDG policy cycle. A short look at the Dutch government's webpage would confirm this pre-condition, since the Netherlands knows a long history with coalition governments. Then, the empirical research must find evidence on the existence of diverging perspectives on the national implementation of the SDG agenda between the political parties inside the coalition government. Such a diverging perspective can come to the fore in the form of disputes, conflicting interests, or stalemates within the government coalition. Evidence for the existence of conflicting interests might be found in the party programs of the incumbent parties in the coalition, in policy notes, or in newspaper articles. The documentation might show diverging perspectives on issues that are related to the SDG Agenda. Furthermore, evidence for disputes or stalemates might be discovered in the documentations of parliamentary consultations on the SDG Agenda or might be expressed or mentioned in the interviews by the policy officers or the PvdA representative. The hypothesis will be rejected when evidence is found on the existence of a coherent position of the members inside the coalition government.

### Garbage can theory

The second theoretical perspective, the garbage can theory of Cohen et al. (1972), discussed how goal-setting evolves in organized anarchies. The adoption of an international agenda based on wicked problems can create a policy window in an organized anarchy. Multiple policy entrepreneurs can respond to this window of opportunity by proposing their solutions and ideas to the wicked policy issues. The policy entrepreneurs are assumed to have different policy interests they can pursue by proposing specific solutions to the wicked policy issues (Kingdon 1995). When a variety of policy entrepreneurs propose their individual solutions, furthering their own policy interests, it expectantly contributes to incremental policy outcomes (Mintrom and Norman 2009). Garbage can theory would thus explain incrementalism with the emergence of multiple policy entrepreneurs proposing incoherent solutions to the wicked problem. These separate solutions are expectantly not integrated into one comprehensive approach, which makes that the policy entrepreneurs merely contribute with incoherent small steps to the wicked problem. The following hypothesis can be deduced from these theoretical assumptions:

H2: *An incremental approach towards wicked problems will be more likely to occur when policy entrepreneurs try to seize opportunities to further their individual goals*

To confirm this hypothesis, the empirical evidence should show that decision-making on the national implementation of the SDG Agenda is taking place inside an organized anarchy. This evidence can be found in the form of problematic preferences, unclear technology, and fluid participation that exist in a certain organizational structure, such as a ministry department (Cohen et al. 1972). In other words, the evidence must show that different perspectives exist on the national implementation of the SDG Agenda, that there is ambiguity among policy entrepreneurs on how to approach the implementation of the SDG Agenda, and that an inconsistency in efforts is put into the SDG Agenda by policy entrepreneurs. Evidence for this might be found in the interviews held with the policy officers inside the Dutch government. The evidence should subsequently show multiple policy entrepreneurs proposing different approaches to the national implementation of the SDG agenda. Policy officers and other societal actors are potential policy entrepreneurs that could be identified in the empirical evidence (Kingdon 1995). The hypothesis can be confirmed, if the implementation of the SDG Agenda in the Netherlands is demonstrably shaped by the policy interests of particular individuals in the decision-making arena. Evidence should show that that these separate efforts are not integrated into one encompassing approach. Evidence for this could be found in the interviews with the policy officers who might make statements about projects that are not part of an overall

Dutch strategy. The hypothesis will be disconfirmed, if no influence of individuals can be observed, or if the preferences of the individuals are clearly coordinated by a superordinate institution.

### Policy networks theory

Network theory provides this research with a third possible explaining mechanism for the research question. The network literature discussed how decision-making processes around policy have changed and showed that policy networks are increasingly influencing policy making (Kickert et al. 1997). The plurality of stakeholders in policy networks provide many challenges for collective action on a wicked policy issue. These difficulties can be overcome once cooperation is taking place inside a shadow of hierarchy (Scharpf 1997). When a shadow of hierarchy is non-existent in an area in which policy networks operate, dysfunctions arise such as the bargaining dilemma. The stakeholders of the policy issue would further their own interests, hindering the establishment of a comprehensive policy approach (Lindblom 1968). Policy networks theory would thus explain an incremental policy approach based on the emergence of multiple policy networks making incoherent contributions to the wicked problem. The following hypothesis can be deduced from the above-mentioned statements:

H3: *An incremental approach towards wicked problems will be more likely to occur in a structure of policy networks without the existence of a shadow of hierarchy*

First a necessary pre-condition should be met to be able to confirm the hypothesis. Evidence should be found on the existence of policy networks that contribute to the national implementation of the SDGs in the Netherlands. This can be proven by any evidence suggesting that these policy networks exist, for example, found in interviews, documents or at SDG related events. Once this pre-condition is met, the hypothesis can be confirmed when no institution can be observed that uses its authoritative power to coordinate the decision-making process of the policy networks. The hypothesis can also be confirmed when the existing institution does not make use of its coordinating power. For example, evidence might be found in policy notes, or in the interviews with the policy officers, suggesting that the Dutch government abstains from having such a coordinating role of contributing policy networks. The hypothesis will be disconfirmed once such an institution exists and makes use of its power to coordinate the policy networks in the decision-making process.

### 3.3. *Method of enquiry*

To increase the validity of the data used in this research, triangulation will be used as the method of inquiry. Cohen and Manion (2000) have defined triangulation as: “an attempt to map out, or explain more fully, the richness and complexity of human behavior by studying it from more than one standpoint”. The method of triangulation is based on the principle that the use of overlapping data gives better insights in a certain phenomenon. The underlying pragmatic idea is that the overlap in methods will filter out most of the weaknesses that come from only using one research method. Deploying this method will help in preventing making false interpretations and conclusions (Hammersley 2008). When multiple sources point at the same evidence the empirical evidence presented will be more credible. Triangulation thus gives the opportunity to create a more convincing and complete empirical base than when only using one source (Nachmias and Nachmias 2007).

Four types of triangulation can be distinguished: triangulation of sources, method, investigators, and of theories (Baxter and Eyles 1997). This study will make use of triangulation of source, method, and of theory. Different types of sources have been used to cross-variate the found information. Three theoretical perspectives are used and the following three methods of gathering data are used: participant observation (PO), interviews, and document analysis. What these methods entail and how they are performed will be thoroughly explained in the following paragraphs.

Triangulation is perceived as the best fit for this research, since it provides a solution to cases for which poor or insufficient data exists (Downward and Mearman 2006, 6). The accessible information on the Dutch government’s approach towards the SDG Agenda is currently limited to policy notes, parliamentary consultations, and several reports. Triangulation enhances the chances of acquiring a more complete and honest perspective on the case. This is especially relevant for cases that consist of political events. Public organizations do not always want to broadcast all details on a political decision, which means that official documents might not provide all the information needed to build a case that reflects the political reality (Halperin and Heath 2012, 289). To overcome this issue, the research will be supplemented with PO and interviews in order to grasp the experiences of actors that are involved in the implementation of the SDG Agenda.

#### 3.3.1. *Participant observation*

PO research has provided an essential component of primary source for this research. From the beginning of July 2016 until the end of December 2016, I was part of the SDG team at the MFA

where I could do PO research. During the internship I observed the inner workings of the MFA regarding the SDG Agenda. Furthermore, I could attend a variety of relevant meetings and events for the SDG policy process.

Having a background in the discipline of Cultural Anthropology, I already got to know the method of PO. This method consists of one of the principle research methods of Cultural Anthropology. The cultural anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1922) was one of the founding fathers of the PO method and made it a recognized method of inquiry by using it for his study of the ceremonial trade of necklaces among the Trobriand islanders in the Western Pacific (Malinowski 1922). He discovered the essence of doing participatory observations and concluded that researchers can best understand a group of people by interacting with them closely over a long period of time.

“I have spent over 8 months in one village in the Trobriand and this proved me, how even a poor observer like myself can get a certain amount of reliable information, if he puts himself into the proper conditions of observations” (Malinowski 1916).

At that time, Malinowski and other cultural anthropologists began to study small non-western groups of people. Although PO research was first mainly an anthropological undertaking, the PO method became appropriate for all studies aiming at discovering peoples’ perspectives, also called the “emic perspective” (Hart et al. 2009). Ethnographic fieldwork can thus be performed in the Western Pacific with the Trobriand Islanders, but also among policy officers inside the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA).

Political ethnographies are increasingly carried out by scholars of Political Science (Schatz 2009; Barnett 2006). They have been executed in a variety of political contexts, such as inside political parties (Fenno 1978), and inside international organizations (Weaver 2008). In the discipline of Political Science, PO, ethnography, and fieldwork can be defined in a variety of ways. Delamont (2004, 218) provided a useful summary describing the methods: “they all mean spending long periods watching people, coupled with talking to them about what they are doing, thinking and saying, designed to see how they understand their world”. A plurality of methods can be deployed by the researcher to get a deep understanding of the political group under study, such as PO, document-analysis, and interviews in this case.

PO research is especially suitable for this case since it is a relatively new one. There is not that much information on the Dutch government’s approach to the SDG Agenda apart from some policy notes. The PO method provides the opportunity to get first-hand information. This is especially useful in a political context in which “what people say they do, and what they

actually do, can be, and frequently are different” (Halperin and Heath 2012, 289). The data that can be acquired while doing PO research, such as “the perceptions, the interpretations, and the behavior of working politicians”, creates the possibility to discover sensitivities (Fenno 1986, 3). The gathered data can subsequently be transformed into thick descriptions of the SDG policy cycle, which helps in providing a holistic overview of the political events (Geertz 1973).

Before the internship started, there was no clear-cut plan on how the research would ultimately look like. The internship at the SDG team did provide a “foreshadowed problem”, which is a problem or topic of interest: the implementation SDG Agenda (Malinowski 1922). By spending a considerable amount of time working together with the policy officers on the SDG Agenda, I was able to obtain a clear picture on how the Dutch government approaches the SDGs (Hart et al. 2009). Based on these experiences, some initial observations, and document-analysis, a research puzzle could be formulated. After the research puzzle was defined, I tried to understand the perspectives of the policy officers on the SDG Agenda by closely interacting with them, asking questions, and taking notes (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, 3). I made sure that I could attend the meetings with relevant actors, such as the Coordinator National Implementation and the Focal Points. Furthermore, I tried to attend all the SDG related events that touch upon the national implementation of it, such as the ‘Transform Your World’ event on the 8<sup>th</sup> of December 2016. In addition, I contacted relevant actors in the field to invite them for an interview, and I collected documents.

### *3.3.2. Semi-structured interviews*

Interviews have provided an essential method of inquiry in gathering a considerable part of the empirical evidence. During the internship at the MFA and in the months after, semi-structured interviews have been held with 19 actors involved with the SDG Agenda.

Interviews form a prominent method of collecting evidence in Political Science. When trying to answer an open-ended ‘what explains’ research question, face-to-face and semi-structured interviews are ideal in acquiring an in-depth exploration of actors’ perspectives (Halperin and Heath 2012, 253). While questionnaires give the opportunity to discover patterns among large populations, interviews create the possibility of gathering more extensive information on the respondents’ perspectives, thoughts, and actions (Kendall 2008). “The fundamental principle of qualitative interviewing is to provide a framework within which respondents can express their own understandings in their own terms”, as stated by Patton (1990, 290). By holding interviews face-to-face, extra information can be received from the respondents by the use of voice, intonation, and body language (Emans 1986).

For this research, the interviews have been selected based on nonprobability sampling. This means that the sampling process did not involve random selection (Kemper et al. 2003). At the start of the internship I planned some more explorative interviews with the policy workers who were part of the SDG team. These interviews were held to better understand the relevant processes inside the Dutch government regarding the SDG Agenda and to identify the key actors in this process. For this purpose, I interviewed the Coordinator National Implementation, the head of department of the SDG team, and the policy officers of the SDG team. Purposive sampling was deployed by identifying relevant actors from the explorative interviews and the documents I read. These interviewees consisted of the SDG Focal Points, representatives of several SDG initiatives, such as the SDG Charter, and a higher representative of the PvdA, inter alia. In figure 1 an overview can be found of all the interview respondents.

All interviewees received an overview of the questions that would be asked before the interviews took place (Appendix 1). The actual interviews did not follow a strict line of questioning, but followed the principles of a semi-structured interview. Based on the responses of the respondents the interviews were adjusted to get a deeper understanding of certain subjects (Schatzman and Strass 1973). This type of interview gave the respondents the space to express their vision, attitudes, feeling, and values towards the SDG Agenda. To make sure that no valuable information would get lost, the interviews were recorded with an audio recorder with the respondents' consent. In advance, the respondents were told that their anonymity would be guaranteed when possible.

**Figure 1:** List of interview respondents

1. Policy officer SDG team	01-11-2016	11. Representative <i>Woord en daad</i>	15-12-2016
2. Policy officer SDG team	02-11-2016	12. Focal Point MD	06-01-2017
3. Policy officer SDG team	02-11-2016	13. Focal Point MIE	10-01-2017
4. Coordinator National Implementation	11-11-2016	14. Focal Point MSAE	16-01-2017
5. Focal Point MHWS	16-11-2016	15. Focal Point MF	20-01-2017
6. Focal Point MEA	17-11-2016	16. Representative FMS	01-03-2017
7. Focal Point MIKR	23-11-2016	17. Representative SDG Charter	01-03-2017
8. Focal Point MFA	24-11-2016	18. Representative Philips	14-04-2017
9. Focal Point MGA	07-12-2016	19. Higher representative PvdA	25-04-2017
10. Focal Point MECS	13-12-2016		

### 3.3.3. Document analysis

The third method employed for this research is document analysis. There are some advantages when using document analysis that makes it an indispensable method to incorporate in this research. Firstly, document analysis provides the opportunity to verify the information given by the respondents in the in-depth interviews and acquired through PO. Secondly, it is not obtrusive, which is sometimes the case when conducting PO or in-depth interviews (Yin 2002, 86). The documents that were consulted for this research consist of primary sources and secondary sources (Vromen 2010, 261; Halperin and Heath 2012, 329). Primary resources refer to those documents that are written by the actors who witnessed the event described. A large range of primary sources were analyzed for this research, such as: policy notes, reports from the Dutch *Tweede Kamer* (parliament), reports from advisory agencies such as the PBL, AIV, and Kaleidos Research, and website articles from initiatives such as the SDG Charter, Ready for Change, and the DSGC (DSGC 2017a). Secondary sources are sources that are produced a while after an event happened. They interpret and analyze the event (Halperin and Heath 2012, 329). The secondary sources that were used mainly consist of online articles from newspapers such as the *Volkskrant* and the *Parool*, and other webpages such as *Vice Versa*.

### 3.4. Policy cycle and empirical findings

The empirical evidence in the next chapter will be structured according to the order of the policy cycle. First the agenda-setting stage, then the policy-formulation phase, and finally a tentative-output phase will be discussed.

The ‘agenda-setting phase’ is one of the initial stages in policymaking (Jann and Wegrich 2007). This is the phase in which a certain issue makes it to the agenda. Before an issue makes it to the agenda it first needs to be recognized as something that should be solved through state intervention. Problems requiring governmental action can be brought forward by a variety of actors who constantly try to influence the agenda, such as: policy officers, legislative leaders, interest groups, and the media. Major challenges that influence large numbers of people are usually the issues that make it to an agenda to be considered for public action (Ferguson 2006; Jann and Wegrich 2007). To acquire an overview of this phase in the policy cycle, the empirical chapter will elaborate on how the SDG Agenda came into being before it was adopted by the UN. Despite the research questions’ focus on the Dutch government’s approach towards the SDG Agenda, it is still relevant to analyze events before the SDG Agenda was adopted. Decisions made before the adoption might have influenced the Dutch government’s strategy.

The agenda-setting phase is followed by the ‘policy-formulation phase’. In this stage of the policy cycle, objections and actions are defined by the actors who are involved in the decision-making process on the policy issue (Jann and Wegrich 2007). This part of the empirical chapter aims at understanding what happened after the adoption of the SDG Agenda on the 25<sup>th</sup> of September 2015. Although the SDG Agenda was adopted on the highest political level, the international adoption of the framework does not automatically lead to a national implementation in every UN member state (Kroll 2015). New policy processes will follow in which the Agenda is discussed and examined. This part of the empirical chapter elaborates on events and decisions made after the adoption of the SDG Agenda, which might have influenced the Dutch government’s incremental approach.

The last phase in the policy cycle usually consists of an implementation phase. This is the phase in which a certain policy is executed (Hogwood and Gunn 1984; Jann and Wegrich 2007). This stage is very critical since political and administrative action at the frontline is difficult to control by objectives, in this case the SDGs (Hogwood and Gunn 1984). An ideal policy implementation process would clarify how an agreement will be executed, how it will be interpreted, how the resources will be allocated, which personnel will execute the agreement and determines which parts of the organizations are in charge (Jann and Wegrich 2007). What a government decides to do with an agenda is often different from the process mentioned above. Since the Dutch government does not present concrete policy decisions in this phase, it will be defined in the empirical chapter as the ‘tentative-output phase’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016b). This part of the empirical chapter will thus elaborate on some of the steps taken by the Dutch government to implement the plan of action for the SDG Agenda.

### ***3.5. Limitations***

The above outlined research design has its weaknesses and limitations. Firstly, the case study method used in this research is a heavily debated research method among scholars (Gerring 2007; Yin 2009; Bennett and Checkel 2012). It is argued that case study research suffers problems of representativeness because it includes, by definition, only a small number of cases of a general phenomenon (Gerring 2007, 43; Yin 2009, 21). Whether general conclusions can be made about government approaches towards wicked problems based on the Dutch government’s case is questionable. The other side of the medal, however, shows a higher internal validity because case studies can incorporate a broader historical sequence and a wider context (Heath and Halperin 2012, 172). It therefore still provides one of the best options in trying to unravel complex social phenomena (Yin 2009).

Even though the method of triangulation accounts for the internal validity of this research, the three employed methods still have some inherent weakness that should be mentioned. When doing PO research, it is essential to take in mind that its nature is subjective. PO research is executed by a human being who might be biased or has access to different kinds of information (De Walt and de Walt 2002). This means that me being in my twenties, a Dutch female student, and intern at the MFA can both have helped me and restricted me in receiving the relevant information for this research. Furthermore, the risk of “going native” also arises when doing PO research in the same setting for a long period of time (Eriksen 2001). In my case, I spent 6 months with the same group of policy officers with whom I build up a professional and sometimes a friendship-based relationship. The intensive contact I had made it sometimes challenging to keep an objective perspective on the SDG policy process and to not be influenced by my colleagues’ views on the issue.

Face-to-face interviews are perceived as a “gold standard” in survey research but they also have their disadvantages, such as “interviewer effects” (Halperin and Heath 2012, 253). When taking interviews, the possibility exists that respondents give socially desirable answers (Hart. et al 2009). The respondents in this research, for example, knew that I was an intern part of the SDG team in the MFA. This might have the effect that some respondents did not share all their thoughts on the implementation of the SDG Agenda in my presence. There are furthermore some limitations regarding the sampling of the interviewees. While many government officials and representatives of multi-stakeholder initiatives were interviewed and spoken with, I considerably talked less with actors from companies.

Document analysis also has its limitations. As already mentioned, the Dutch government’s approach towards the SDG Agenda is a relatively new case which has the consequence that the existing documentation is still limited (Yin 2009). Another limitation of document analysis is provided by selection bias. Selection bias means that a certain document is cherry-picked because it can back up a pre-fixed argument (Heath and Halperin 2012, 330). To avoid such a bias, all used policy notes and consultations will be presented in the bibliography to allow the reader to assess the information deduced from the documents. Significant effort was put into gathering all the essential government documents to create an as complete as possible empirical timeline. This has been a challenging undertaking, since the SDG Agenda is discussed under an endless variety of indications in the Dutch government: Post-2015 Development Agenda, 2030 framework, SDG Agenda, Global Goals, and more. This could have had the effect that some documents were overlooked.

In spite of the above stated limitations, it can be still concluded that a comprehensive

account of evidence will be presented in the empirical chapter. The wide variety of methods and sources used will make sure that the results will be cross-verified and that most biases will be overcome. This research design thus provides a pragmatic approach in providing an account of the political reality regarding the policy cycle of the SDG Agenda.

#### ***4. Empirical findings***

In this chapter, the empirical findings of the case will be presented and analyzed in order to test the formulated hypothesis. Inspired by the theories of the policy cycle, the empirical evidence will be structured in three phases: agenda-setting, policy-making, and tentative-output (Jann and Wegrich 2007). To provide a clear overview of the empirical evidence and the policy process, the three phases will be linked to periods in time when relevant events happened related to the SDG Agenda.

The agenda-setting phase of the SDG Agenda will describe multiple negotiation processes, internationally by the UN and in the Netherlands. The 1972 UN Human Environment marked the pivotal beginning of UN negotiations-related principles and goals (Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform 2015a). The empirical evidence will start by describing important political events that happened from this moment onwards. The negotiation phase ends on the 25<sup>th</sup> of September, when all the UN member states adopted the SDG Agenda at the Sustainability Summit (Kroll 2015).

The empirical evidence will subsequently elaborate on the policy-formulation phase, which started after the adoption of the SDG Agenda. This part of the empirical evidence mainly describes the Dutch government's response to the adoption of the SDG Agenda, abroad and in the Netherlands. It furthermore presents which decisions were initially made by the Dutch government on the implementation of the SDG Agenda. This phase ends before the 30<sup>th</sup> of September 2016, when the Dutch government issued a plan of action for the SDG Agenda (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016b).

The tentative-output phase starts with the Dutch government's issuance of the plan of action for the SDG Agenda (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016b). It primarily describes the initial steps taken by the Dutch government and other stakeholders to execute the SDG Agenda. The tentative-output phase ends when the implementation of the agenda was discussed in the Foreign Affairs Council (RBZ) by Dutch parliamentarians (Tweede Kamer 2017).

## ***4.1. Agenda-setting phase: abroad and at home***

### *4.1.1. Case description*

This section provides an overview of the SDG-related political events that took place between the UN Human Environment Conference in June 1972 and the UN Financing for Development conference at which the SDG Agenda was presented in July 2015.

#### *International dynamics*

The roots of the SDG Agenda can be traced back to different negotiation processes held among the UN member states (Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform 2015a; Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016b). The ‘Human Environment’ summit in 1972 is the first UN conference organized on the topic of human interactions with the environment. At this conference the UN members agree on 26 principles related to the environment they are expected to meet. Most of these principles have been incorporated into the SDG Agenda, such as the principle that natural resources must be safeguarded. At the UN General Assembly of 1983, the UN establish the World Commission on Environment and Development. In one of its first reports named ‘Our Common Future’, also known as the Brundtland report, the commission introduces the concept of ‘sustainable development’. In this report the Commission defines sustainable development as the creation of a balance between the three following P’s: “People, Planet, and Profit” (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987). These three P’s are also incorporated in the SDG Agenda and added with two P’: “Peace, and Partnerships” (United Nations 2015b). In 1992 at the Earth Summit in Rio the Janeiro the ‘Agenda 21’ is adopted, which is the first action plan created by the UN member states targeted towards sustainable development (Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform 2015b).

Parallel to the UN negotiations related to sustainability, the UN member states begin to discuss more social pressing issues, such as the eradication of poverty and the undernourishment of people in developing countries (Kroll 2015, 13). In 1998, a two-year consultation process starts in which UN member states agree upon several values and principles targeted at improving the lives of those people who were most in need. The UN decide to adopt an action framework in the form of eight goals, ‘the MDGs’, that address pressing international issues such as poverty, hunger, and primary education. In 2000, the UN members adopt the agenda and make the commitment to collectively achieve the goals in 2015. In Rittel and Webber’s (Webber 1973) sense of the concept, the MDG agenda is an agenda based on wicked problems. All the separate goals aim at solving parts of complex issues that are interlinked with each other,

for example poverty and health issues (Kroll 2015, 13).

When the 15-year period of the MDGs comes to an end, world poverty is reduced by half, the number of children going to school is 90 percent, infant mortality is reduced by half, the spread of malaria and TBC has stopped, and 2,3 billion people have access to clean drinking water (Millennium Development Goals Report 2015; Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016a). Despite the improvement of many lives of people worldwide between 2000 and 2015, not all MDGs are achieved. There are still many challenges left on themes such as: poverty, sustainability, safety, gender, and rights. The maternal mortality rate is still high, as well as the unemployment rate among women and youth, one billion people still do not have access to sanitation, and the worldwide emission of greenhouse gases is still too high (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016a). With all these remaining challenges in mind the UN member states decide to create a new and more ambitious agenda (Kroll 2015).

While the MDGs counted as the internationally recognized framework for development, a broader negotiation process on sustainable development continues (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016b). In this negotiation process, the UN member states increasingly recognize that sustainable development requires collective action. Big UN conferences, such as the Earth Summit in 2002 and the Rio +20 Summit in 2012 are centered on the topic of sustainable development. At the Rio +20 Summit, world leaders decide to unite because they have observed how the world has been facing immense challenges to sustainable development, such as the hot topic of climate change. At this summit it is decided to bring both UN processes together: the Post-2015 Development Agenda and the process that addresses sustainable development. The Rio +20 Summit marks the moment at which it is decided that the UN are going to develop a set of Sustainable Development Goals.

### *Transnational dynamics*

While preparations are made for the Rio +20 Summit, the Netherlands is governed by coalition government Cabinet Rutte I (Vossen 2011). As usual in Dutch politics no party has achieved a majority in the elections. The coalition is formed between the liberal party VVD (*Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie*) and the Christian democrat party CDA (*Christen-Democratisch Appèl*). The coalition partners form a minority cabinet together and are supported by the Populist Party for Freedom (PVV) to acquire a majority in the House of Representatives. Mark Rutte, party leader for the VVD is the Prime Minister of the Netherlands at the time.

The VVD and the CDA align on the most fundamental policy principles, both being

right-wing and liberal parties. The cabinet is described as: “the most right-wing coalition agreement the Netherlands had seen in recent decades” (Vossen 2016, 72). The liberal policy ideals of the parties in Cabinet Rutte I are also reflected in the set of policy priorities presented in the coalition agreement (Rijksoverheid 2010). The coalition mainly aims at restoring the financial situation of the Dutch state and plans to do this by making budget cuts that reach up to 18 billion euros in policy areas, such as development aid, social security, and climate policy (Vossen 2016). These budget cuts on climate policy already show that sustainable development does not count as a policy priority for Cabinet Rutte I.

The cabinet’s reserved attitude towards sustainable development becomes evident during a consultation held on the Dutch input for the Rio +20 Summit (Tweede Kamer 2012). The consultation is organized in response to a policy note in which State Secretary Knapen communicates what the Dutch government’s input for the Summit is going to be (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2012). Both State Secretary of the MFA Ben Knapen and State Secretary Atsma of the Ministry of Infrastructure and the Environment (MIE), who are politically affiliated to the CDA, attend the consultation (Tweede Kamer 2012). A wide variety of parliamentarians from the CDA, VVD, PVV (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*), PvdA (*Partij van de Arbeid*), Green Left and (*Groen Links*) also participate in the consultation.

Weeks before the consultation, Mark Rutte already communicates that he will not lead the Dutch delegation to the Rio +20 Summit (Tweede Kamer 2012). The spokesperson of the VVD states during the consultation that the VVD holds a skeptical stance towards these kind of UN conferences. However, a collective feeling of skepticism exists towards UN conferences, such as the Rio +20 one, among the parliamentarians that participate in the consultation. Parliamentarians from both the VVD and PVV, and State Secretary Knapen express their hesitations about the effectiveness and results of these conferences. The spokesperson for the VVD states that: “With the Rio +20 conference we once again release a paper tiger, while we have an economic crisis to tackle”. Both spokespersons of the PVV and VVD communicate that they are highly critical of the high amount of money these conferences cost and question whether the ambiguous outcomes are worth the effort. State Secretary Knapen shares the VVD’s and PVV’s doubts about the usefulness of these conferences, in spite off, he stresses that these conferences are the only way through which big issues can be internationally approached. To reflect the cabinet’s opinion the State Secretary makes the decision to send a modest delegation to the conference (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2012b).

The Dutch government eventually decides to focus its input for the conference on the concept of green economy and the significant role that the private sector can play in sustainable

development. This policy perspective comes to the fore in the policy note that is issued by the MFA, during the RBZ consultation, and at the ‘*Rio aan de Maas*’ event in preparation of the summit where State Secretary Knapen speeches on the topic (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2012; Tweede Kamer 2012; Rijksoverheid 2012). State Secretary Knapen explains during his speech that the private sector will be indispensable in making the economy sustainable:

“Sustainability is not a government monopoly ... To really make a difference, citizens and companies are necessary” (Rijksoverheid 2012).

The State Secretary argues that companies should be approached by a bottom-up approach without top-down directions given by the government (Tweede Kamer 2012). In the first place, the frontrunners should be stimulated. Subsequently, the bigger group that still expresses some doubts, should be convinced, according to the State Secretary. A spokesperson of the democratic party D66 confronts him with his perspective and states that both a “carrot and stick” are needed. However, the State Secretary once again emphasizes that he foresees a stimulating role for the Dutch government in making the private sector contribute to sustainable development.

Cabinet Rutte I thus aims to foster the creation of markets and involvement of corporate actors in achieving sustainability. This aligns with the right-wing tradition in the Netherlands that is based on the values of free trade, liberalism, and limiting the state’s role in the economy (Héritier 1997). Both the policy priorities of the CDA and VVD stem from these principles (VVD 2010, 7, 37; CDA 2010, 24, 87). Consequently, no stalemates arise on the input for the Rio +20 Summit between the incumbent parties. Despite Cabinet Rutte I being a coalition government, no essential disagreements can be found between the co-governing parties. It so far seems that the coalition partners have worked in unison on the Dutch government’s input for the Rio +20 Summit.

#### *The Rio +20 Summit: a private sector party?*

As decided in the RBZ consultation, a modest delegation of the Dutch Kingdom led by State Secretary Knapen participates in the Rio +20 Summit (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2012b). State Secretary Atsma, the Prime Ministers of Aruba and St. Maarten, a delegation from Curaçao, and policy officers from the Ministry of Economic Affairs (MEA) attend the conference as well. Dutch Prime Minister Rutte does not join the delegation to the conference, which reflects the VVD’s critical stance towards the conference.

As discussed in the RBZ (Tweede Kamer 2012), State Secretary Knapen participates in several panel discussions at the conference and emphasizes the vital role of the private sector

in sustainable development during his interventions (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2012b). To emphasize the indispensable role of the private sector, State Secretary Atsma launches a couple Public-Private Partnerships (PPP's) related to sustainable transport and biofuels in the aviation sector. With this measure, the Dutch government shows that it aims to work together with and stimulate the private sector in making contributions to sustainable development.

Not only governmental actors participate in the Rio +20 Summit. Attention goes as well to the role of the private sector and civil society towards sustainable development during the People's Summit and the Sustainable Development Dialogues (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2012b). During these sessions it becomes visible that a new generation of Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) from the private sector believe that social and environmental related investments provide an opportunity for business to create more long term economic security. Feike Sijbesma from the Dutch chemical company DSM is one of those CEOs and leads a panel discussion at the Sustainable Development Dialogues. Sijbesma states that he foresees a special role for the private sector in making contributions towards sustainable development. DSM is perceived as one among others of the frontrunners in sustainable entrepreneurship in the Netherlands by the Dutch government (SER 2012).

DSM is part of the Dutch Sustainable Growth Coalition (DSGC), which is a collaborating network of Dutch multinational companies (MNCs) that aims to actively contribute to sustainable business plans and sustainable growth (DSGC 2017a; 2017b; interview 18). The CEO's of the Dutch multinationals Akzo Nobel, DSM, Friesland Campina, Heineken, KLM, Philips, Shell, and Unilever launched the Dutch Sustainable Growth Coalition just before the Rio Summit. Former Prime Minister of the CDA, Jan Peter Balkenende, is chairman of the DSGC (SER 2012). As stated by the MNCs, they have a stake in sustainable development because they believe that sustainable growth is economically rational and offers them the opportunity to improve their competitive position (VNO- NCW 2012). It is questionable whether these commitments to sustainable business models are shared equally by all the companies of the DSGC, and is not merely a greenwashing marketing strategy for some of them. Ike Teuling, a representative of the *Milieudefensie* (Environmental Defense), for example, describes the DSGC as a case of greenwashing", since Shell, which is known as one of the most polluting Dutch MNCs, is part of the coalition. Unilever, DSM, and Philips are, however, more often mentioned as successful frontrunners (Terlingen 2013; Volkskrant 2014; Interview 18).

In conjunction with Dutch MNCs, Dutch NGOs also participate in the Rio +20 Summit. Multiple NGOs attend, such as *De Schone Kleren Campagne* (The Clean Clothes Campaign), *Milieudefensie*, Both Ends, Greenpeace, and Oxfam Novib. The NGOs hold a meeting with

State Secretary Atsma and State Secretary Knapen and collectively express their discontent with the central role that the private sector played during the summit (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2012b). As tweeted by the Dutch environmental organization *Milieudefensie*: “The summit has been hijacked by business” (Milieudefensie 2012; Parool 2012). The NGOs state that multinationals are getting a hold on the UN through their lobby activities. They question the green intentions of several companies that are part of the DSGC. Greenpeace mentions, for example, that the oil company Shell has intensely lobbied against sustainable goals. The Dutch NGOs also express their criticism towards the public sector. Greenpeace and *Milieudefensie* state that the Dutch politicians did not show much interest in the summit. They observe that remarkably little world leaders were attending the summit, such as Mark Rutte who was absent (Baidemann 2012). Thus, while the Dutch government mainly aims at including the private sector in sustainable development, Dutch NGOs seem more hesitant about some of the companies’ intentions.

At the end of the Rio +20 Summit the ‘Future We Want’ end resolution is adopted. The resolution does not show any concrete action plans with corresponding deadlines for sustainable development (SER 2012). The Dutch government is, however, still content with the results, since it concludes that the UN will recognize the green economy and acknowledges the private sector as an important partner in sustainable development. The resolution also announces the intentions of incorporating sustainable goals into a post-MDG framework (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2012b, Griggs et al. 2013). The Rio +20 Summit thus marks a pivotal moment in anticipation of the SDG Agenda.

### *Towards the Post-2015 Agenda*

While first steps are set in motion after the Rio +20 Summit for the Post-2015 Agenda, Dutch political parties are preparing themselves for the parliamentary elections that will be held on the 12<sup>th</sup> of September 2012 (Volkskrant 2012). The VVD once again wins the elections, and Mark Rutte remains the Dutch Prime Minister. To obtain a governing majority inside the Dutch parliament, the VVD and social democrat party PvdA decide to co-govern in Cabinet Rutte II. The composition of the co-governing parties in the new cabinet is radically different from the former fully right-wing cabinet (Rijksoverheid 2012; Volkskrant 2012). The combination of the VVD and PvdA is generally perceived as a contested merger (Volkskrant 2012b). Both parties hold contrasting perspectives on the most fundamental political principles (Volkskrant 2013c). While the VVD aims at maintaining a limited Dutch government without “unnecessary rules and taxes”, based on its liberal principles, the PvdA intends to create a more egalitarian

society with a “welfare state for everyone”, based on its social democratic principles (VVD 2012; PvdA 2012). Despite these expressed differences, both parties still decide to unite and to create a governing majority in parliament. In the coalition government they write: “The country needs cooperation and that is what the voter asked for on the 12<sup>th</sup> of September” (Rijksoverheid 2012b).

Despite this statement, the Post-2015 Agenda does not seem to be an issue on which both parties unite. During the conceptual phase of the agenda, the upcoming framework receives a lukewarm response from the PvdA and an even colder one from the VVD (Tweede Kamer 2013; Interview 19). While the members of chamber from the VVD do not show much interest in the SDG Agenda, the spokesperson for development, international trade, and Kingdom for the PvdA attempts to discuss the SDGs with the spokesperson of the VVD in the RBZ and states:

“...We often sat together with the spokesperson from the VVD who did not want to know anything of them” (Interview 19).

The spokesperson adds that the lack of interest in the Post-2015 Agenda is not only something seen within the VVD, but is shared by all the parliamentarians of Cabinet Rutte II.

Some disagreements between the co-governing parties come to the fore during the RBZ consultation held on Dutch government’s input for the Post-2015 Agenda (Tweede Kamer 2013). Minister for Foreign Affairs and Development Cooperation, Ploumen, who is affiliated to the PvdA, already communicated in a policy note that she is a proponent for a new Post-2015 framework that includes both sustainable and development related themes. The spokesperson for the VVD presents its concerns towards this plan. According to the spokesperson of the VVD the goals will not be SMART (Specific, Measurable, Assignable, Realistic, and Time-related) when combining sustainable goals with development and social rights. As also displayed in the VVDs party program, the VVD spokesperson mentions that economic development forms a policy priority for the VVD’s in the input in the agenda (VVD 2012, 52). In contrast with the VVD, the spokesperson for the PvdA underlines its social policy priorities and points out that the PvdA would like to see that all groups of people will equally benefit from the new framework. This matches with the policy perspective of the PvdA that social justice should be prioritized over economic profit as expressed in its party program (PvdA 2012, 61).

Minister Ploumen also emphasizes during the RBZ that the Post-2015 goals ask for joint efforts with a role and responsibility for governments, companies, NGOs, knowledge institutions, and citizens. She adds that the private sector will play a bigger role in the sustainable

transition and states that the Post-2015 policy framework should incorporate the efforts of the private sector (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2013b). This last idea aligns well with the expressed policy priorities of the VVD (VVD 2010, 7, 37). Thus, both the VVD and PvdA are not completely at odds with each other on the topic.

### *17 goals and 169 targets*

At the UN General Assembly in September 2015, it is decided that the Post-2015 Development Agenda will include economic, social, and sustainable policy themes in the form of 17 goals (See figure 2) and 169 targets (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2014; 2015a; Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform 2015c).



**Figure 2:** The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (UN 2017c)

Co-governing parties PvdA and VVD differ in their enthusiasm about the news (Tweede Kamer 2015). The spokesperson for the PvdA welcomes the agenda during a RBZ meeting and states: “The PvdA supports the efforts of the cabinet in the Post-2015 Agenda, the new development goals in which, tackling inequality and extreme poverty, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and food security are priorities of the Netherlands” (ibid.). The VVD’s response is more critical. “A ridiculous number to be honest”, is one of the first comments given on how the Post-2015 Agenda will look by a spokesperson of the VVD. Despite that the large amount of goals and the broadness of the agenda provide a setback for the VVD, the spokesperson for the VVD still sees a bright side to the agenda:

“More economic subjects are addressed in the SDG Agenda, and there is more room for active involvement of private parties. That will be music to the ears of the VVD” (ibid.).

However, how the goals should be nationally implemented does not become a topic of discussion during the consultation. The spokesperson for the PvdA does shortly touch upon the subject and states that the Netherlands is still far behind on the topic of gender equality, but mainly focuses on the development cooperation side of the agenda in his statements.

When a final version of the SDG Agenda is presented at the ‘Financing for Development’ conference in July 2015, the MFA issues a policy note on the agenda (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015a). The Dutch government does not ascribe much urgency to the national implementation of the framework in the Netherlands. While the policy note extensively elaborates on the Dutch government’s international contributions, it remains vague about the national implementation. In the policy note it is mentioned that:

“The Netherlands, being a developed country, already complies to most of the SDGs. Yet there is also for the Netherlands work to do” (ibid.).

Some policy areas, such as sustainable consumption and production, gender equality, inter alia, are mentioned as issues where the Dutch government could consider more action (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015a). Carefully chosen words are used in the policy note to avoid implying concrete actions from the Dutch government. Instead, it is emphasized that the agenda should be approached with multi-stakeholder efforts:

“... with a role and responsibility for governments, companies, civil organizations, knowledge institutions and civilians in developing, emerging, and already developing countries” (ibid.).

What the exact role of the Dutch government will be in relation to the other organizations does not become evident in the policy note.

#### *Initiatives within the Netherlands*

Before the SDG Agenda is adopted by the UN, several initiatives and partnerships already begin to pop up that aim at making contributions to the agenda in the Netherlands (Kaleidos 2015). Several actors from NGOs, companies, and other kinds of organizations begin to establish partnerships with the aim of collaborating on achieving the upcoming SDG Agenda. In addition to the Dutch government, these actors also play an essential role in the implementation of the SDG

Agenda because they are eventually the ones implementing the goals through their projects and activities. The SDG Agenda has provided a strong impetus for new forms of collaborations, since the SDG resolution literally states that achieving the goals requires a multi-stakeholder approach (United Nations 2015b). Since the new agenda consists of social, economic, and sustainable goals, the implementation of the framework concerns actors from many different policy areas (Interview 4; Kaleidos 2015; Kroll 2015).

In response to the upcoming SDG framework, a group of Dutch NGOs existing out of Partos, Woord en Daad, and FMS (*Foundation Max van der Stoel*) launch the ‘Ready for Change’ initiative (Ready for Change 2016). They establish a broad collaborating network of over forty organizations that want to contribute to policy coherence in the implementation of the SDG framework. “We consider the implementation of the SDGs as a unique opportunity for more coherence and fairer policies towards developing countries”, as stated by the organizations (Partos 2017). Policy coherence entails that not only the Dutch development policies contribute to the poor in developing countries, but that other government policies, such as policies on tax, migration, security, and agriculture contribute to the eradication of poverty as well (Interview 11, 16; Partos 2017).

In September 2014 another initiative, ‘the SDG Charter’, has been established. In this collaborating network, actors from business, NGOs, and government organizations, inter alia, have signed a charter on what the role of cross-sector partnerships could be in achieving the SDG Agenda (SDG Charter 2014; interview 17). Almost all members of the DSGC are part of the SDG Charter as well, except for Heineken. As mentioned by the SDG Charter (2017): “Without the contributions from businesses, financial institutions, NGOs, union, knowledge institutes, philanthropists, and citizens the Agenda will fail”. The SDG Charter aims to contribute to achieving the SDG Agenda by facilitating the formation of SDG Solution Partnerships. These partnerships are targeted at finding solutions for SDG related challenges. One partnership has been launched in the area of health between Philips and Unicef (SDG 3), and another one on human cities with Akzonobel and 60 other organizations (SDG 11) (Interview 17; SDG Charter 2014).

The DSGC, the Ready for Change initiative, and SDG Charter are all structural arrangements that can be defined as policy networks. They use their initiatives to collaborate with other stakeholders to make contributions to particular goals of the SDG agenda. However, implementation of the goals by these networks will be difficult across all the 17 SDGs. It will require understanding and coordination across all the policy issues (Ready for Change 2016).

#### 4.1.2 Analysis

The empirical evidence shows that hypothesis 1 on partisan influence can be partially confirmed. On the one hand, both coalition governments Rutte I and Rutte II express a coherent view on the national implementation of the Post-2015 Agenda by giving it minimal attention during the agenda-setting phase. On the other hand, some controversies can be observed regarding the urgency of UN conferences in Cabinet Rutte I. Nevertheless, State Secretary Knapen presents a coherent Dutch government's vision at the Rio +20 Summit with a focus on private sector involvement. The emphasis on the importance of the private sector is a vision shared by both the VVD and the CDA. Thus, no decisive controversies or differences in perspectives on the post-2015 agenda can be found in Cabinet Rutte I. The lack of differences in the coalition makes that no compromises are made on the Post-2015 Agenda. Hence for this cabinet, hypothesis 1 on partisan influence can be rejected.

Controversies regarding the Post-2015 Agenda emerge more clearly in Cabinet Rutte II when the cabinet is governed by the VVD and PvdA. This is not surprising considering the change in composition of parties after the elections from a full right-wing cabinet to a cabinet in which a liberal and social democratic political party are governing. Despite that the PvdA and VVD express different opinions on the SDG Agenda, both parties do not pay much attention towards the SDG Agenda and towards the national component of the Post-2015 UN negotiation process. It does become visible in the empirical evidence that the VVD and PvdA hold opposing views on the Post-2015 Agenda as a whole. The diverging views that the VVD and PvdA hold resemble the different interests that both parties communicate towards their electorate in their party programs.

Despite the different views on the SDG Agenda in Cabinet Rutte II, the partisan hypothesis will only be partially confirmed. The coalition still presents a coherent view by not giving much attention to the national implementation of the Post-2015 Agenda. The 'wait-and-see' approach from the Dutch government to the national implementation of the Post-2015 Agenda is reflected both by the parliamentarians of Cabinet Rutte II and in the policy notes issued by the MFA. The Dutch government does not present a comprehensive plan on how it aims to achieve the Post-2015 Agenda in the Netherlands. It does communicate and stress in a variety of policy notes and at conferences that it perceives the Post-2015 Agenda as a multi-stakeholder responsibility.

Both the awaiting attitude and the multi-stakeholder emphasis communicated by the Dutch government, create a window of opportunity for other organizations and actors that want

to organize themselves to make contributions to the Post-2015 Agenda. Policy entrepreneurs cannot be identified in the negotiation phase, disconfirming hypothesis number 2. However, emerging policy networks can be seen in the empirical evidence. Several policy networks can be observed: consisting of only companies, consisting of NGOs, and multi-stakeholder networks. The Dutch government does not provide these networks a shadow of hierarchy; it does not give clear directions to the networks, and it does not communicate intentions for future governmental action in case of the actors' non-compliance. There are thus no intended hierarchical interventions announced by the Dutch government, meaning that hypothesis 3 can be confirmed.

## ***4.2. Policy-formulation in the Netherlands***

### *4.2.1. Case description*

This section makes an overview of the political events that happened between the moment that the SDG Agenda got adopted on the 25<sup>th</sup> September 2015 and when it got discussed by parliamentary member during the RBZ on the 15<sup>th</sup> of June 2016.

#### *A wicked agenda*

Following the Rio +20 summit and an intense international negotiation process, the 193 UN member states conclude upon the SDG Agenda in September 2015 at the UN General Assembly (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016a). The UN world leaders adopt an ambitious framework with 17 goals at its core, accompanied by 169 targets, and 230 indicators. The ambitions of the 2030 Agenda are clear. The UN members have committed to: ending poverty and hunger, delivering sustainable development from an economic, social, and environmental perspective, while leaving no one behind. All the UN governments are expected to monitor progress made towards the goals, to organize consultations with stakeholders in society, and to transform the goals into national implementation plans. Urgency for the agenda is created with a pending deadline set in 2030.

The magnitude and high level of ambition of the agenda confronts governments with an overwhelmingly challenging task, since all the goals are based on wicked problems (Ready for Change 2016). The SDG Agenda presents problems that go beyond the responsibility of single organizations or sectors. There are many stakeholders involved with these wicked policy issues that form the foundation of the agenda. Furthermore, the SDG Agenda consists of a broad spectrum of integrated issues. Consequently, goals and targets are often interconnected, meaning that when one target is addressed this could have consequences for other SDG targets (Kroll

2015; Ready for Change 2016).

Even though the UN have tried to make the goals comprehensible by transforming them into measurable targets, the SDG resolution does not provide specific guidelines on how governments can implement these goals (United Nations 2015b; Observation August 22, 2016). It is eventually up to the national governments as the primary implementers of the SDGs to determine how to implement the goals. They are the legal entities that have adopted the SDGs (Ready for Change 2016). The SDG Agenda, however, does not provide legally binding targets. It is an international norm-setting framework and not a legal framework. However, high-commitments are still expected from governments, and countries do risk international loss of face when they do not adhere to the agenda (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016a).

### *The UN Sustainability Summit*

At the UN Sustainability Summit in September 2015, all UN members gather and adopt the SDG Agenda. A large number of heads of state, the Vice-President of the European Commission (EC), and many other high-level leaders from business and civil society show interest in the SDG Agenda by participating in the summit (Rijksoverheid 2015). The Dutch Kingdom also participates in the conference and sends a prominent delegation to the Summit, including the Dutch King and Queen, Dutch Prime Minister, Aruban Prime Minister, Sint Maarten Prime Minister and Curacao Prime minister. Also included in the delegation are: the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister for Foreign Trade and Development cooperation, Minister of the Infrastructure and the Environment, and the Mayor of Rotterdam.

Mark Rutte, Prime Minister of the Netherlands, signs the SDG Agenda and welcomes the agenda with a speech during the summit (Rijksoverheid 2015b). He stresses that to make a difference, the approach of the SDG Agenda should be a “collective effort”. Prime Minister Rutte argues that it is of the essence to involve the private sector in the achievement of the goals on the SDG Agenda. Inspired by the SDGs and the idea of corporate social responsibility, a large amount of companies are becoming more interested in productive public-private partnerships, according to the Prime Minister. “They believe the ‘S’ in SDG offers opportunities for investment and innovation”. Rutte further states that innovative partnerships between a variety of stakeholders will play an indispensable role in achieving the goals in the coming fifteen years. He mentions the Dutch SDG Charter as a good example of such an innovative collaboration (Volkskrant 2015).

It becomes evident that the Prime Minister Rutte does not foresee a particularly significant role for the Dutch government in providing directions on how to tackle the SDG Agenda

(Rijksoverheid 2015b). He does not mention anything in his speech about the role of the Dutch government in the Dutch national implementation plan. He instead gives much of the responsibility of achieving the agenda to other actors in the field, above all to the private sector. The Prime Minister's perspective aligns well with the VVD's focus on promoting economic innovation, creating markets, and preserving a limited government (VVD 2017).

Minister Ploumen also welcomes the SDG Agenda during the Sustainability Summit and states:

“The new Global Goals for 2030 are wide-ranging and meaningful... The chief goal is to eradicate poverty worldwide within the next fifteen years. We can do it. But only if everyone plays their part and we all work together” (Rijksoverheid 2015).

The eradication of poverty is one of the Minister's policy priorities, which is a theme especially important for the Dutch international implementation of the SDG Agenda. Such a statement coming from the Minister of Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation is not unexpected. However, the Ministers' focus on poverty might have the effect that the SDG Agenda will be mainly interpreted as an agenda focusing on development cooperation as stated by a higher representative of the PvdA (Interview 19).

#### *At home*

The first of January 2016 marks the day on which the SDG Agenda counts as the new leading UN framework for development (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015b). Even though the Dutch Kingdom sends a prominent delegation to the UN summit in September 2015, it is still rather vague at that moment what the Dutch strategy will be towards achieving the goals. Immediately after the Sustainability Summit, Minister Ploumen provides the Dutch parliament with a response from the perspective of the MFA towards the SDG Agenda. It lasts until the 24<sup>th</sup> of May 2016, more than half a year later, until Minister Ploumen issues a policy note on how the Dutch government will nationally approach the SDG Agenda. The policy note is named: ‘Global Goals: implementing, monitoring and reporting’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016a). In the above-mentioned policy note it is stated that, “as expected”, the Dutch government has already achieved most of the SDGs (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016a). A referral to the Bertelsmann Stiftung is made, which shows that the Netherlands is doing well on goals regarding health care, fair work, and economic growth (Kroll 2015, 39). There are some issues in the policy note that the Dutch government could act upon, such as traffic in cities, participation of women in leadership functions, integration of the energy market, and sustainable production and consumption

(Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016a). Even so, no governmental action is announced in the policy note. Thus, little to no high-level urgency is ascribed to the SDG Agenda in the period immediately after the adoption.

*Ministry of Foreign Affairs' light coordinating role*

In the policy note of the 25<sup>th</sup> of May, the MFA also elaborates on some of the Dutch government's procedural steps in the execution of the agenda (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016a, 3). In the policy note it is stated that the execution of the SDG Agenda will be a government-wide responsibility, meaning that all the separate ministries are equally responsible for achieving the goals. Despite this statement, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Development Cooperation will hold the "light" coordinating role over the SDGs until the cabinet formation in 2017 at least (Tweede Kamer 2016, Interview 2, 3). As stated by Minister Ploumen during a RBZ meeting on the SDGs and coordination of them: "The most important thing is that there is some kind of central point and that the SDGs not get shattered among the different ministries". The Dutch structure can be distinguished from other chosen implementation structures among UN member states. Some have put the responsibility under the MFA just as the Netherlands, such as in Belgium, Poland, and Slovenia. Some other states have put the responsibility under the highest political level, such as in Germany with the Federal Chancellery, and in Sweden at the level of the Prime Minister (Ready for Change 2016; Interview 1, 4).

The current chosen government structure is not ideal in approaching the SDGs in a comprehensive manner, according to several actors (Interview 6, 13, 16, 19). Organizing the coordination under the MFA, such as is the case in the Netherlands, can have the consequence that mainly policy officers at the MFA will be committed to contributing towards the SDG Agenda (Interview 6, 13). "There seems to be no leadership beyond that of the Minister of Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation", which is stated in a research executed by Kaleidos Research based on interviews held with CSOs (Kaleidos Research 2015). A higher spokesperson representing the PvdA (Interview 19) states that if the coordinating structure does not change that:

"... the SDGs will eventually be a hobby of the Minister of Foreign Affairs. And if the prime minister would really be behind the goals he could have given the agenda a political stimulus".

To make all the ministries equally responsible, he and other policy officers argue that a coordination structure under the Ministry of General Affairs (MGA) would be a better alternative (Interview 6, 13, 19).

### *The Coordinator National Implementation*

To support the Minister of Foreign Affairs in coordinating the SDG Agenda, a ‘Coordinator National Implementation’ has been appointed who takes seat from the 1<sup>st</sup> of February 2016 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016a). The Coordinator National Implementation holds the responsibility of monitoring, implementing, and reporting on the SDGs in the Netherlands. The coordinator will also write a plan of action for the execution of the SDGs in the Netherlands. He is a central leading figure and is often described by his colleagues of the SDG team as the “spider in the web” for the SDG Agenda in the Netherlands (Observations August – December 2016). He could be perceived as the Dutch government’s diplomat for the SDG Agenda, not internationally focused but aimed at the Dutch interior. To do so, the coordinator attends a multiplicity of meetings where new SDG related initiatives are launched. The coordinator is someone who is very passionate about his task as coordinator, since the SDG Agenda reflects his own longstanding convictions (Interview 4).

The Coordinator National Implementation plays a key role in stimulating the creation of cooperation networks among stakeholders of the SDG, such as NGOs, companies, and financial institutions. He does this by speaking at conferences and by imitating the establishment of cooperating networks. He makes sure that he attends the majority of initial meetings of initiatives that aim at contributing to the SDG Agenda. For example, he has played an essential role in the establishment of the Dutch SDG Investing (SDGI) agenda in the financial sector. When the Coordinator National Implementation attends the Impact Summit Europe on the 22th of March 2016, he invites investors, banks, and other private actors to recommend ways in which they can help to advance a transformative SDG Agenda through investments. In response to this request, a group of insurance companies, banks, and pension funds establish the SDGI Agenda. All signatories of the SDGI agenda have made the commitment to contribute to the SDGs by making financial investments. ABN Amro, Aeogon, Delta Lloyd, Triodos, and PGGM are some of the organizations that take part in the collaboration (SDGI 2017).

The coordinator also speaks at the ‘*SDGs als kompas voor bedrijven naar 2030*’ (SDGs as compass for companies to 2030) event (MVO Nederland 2017). Amongst others, the event is organized by the networking organization Global Compact Network Netherlands (GCNN), which is signed by 124 companies. GCNN is a policy network that consists of companies that

cooperate with each other to contribute to sustainable development and the SDGs (GCNN 2016). The GCNN tries to achieve this by gathering stakeholders that want to contribute to sustainable development and by creating partnerships. Part of the network are small companies, NGOs, academic institutions, municipalities, inter alia. However, not all members have a good reputation when it comes to sustainable development. Shell is, for example, also part of the GCNN and has often shown up in the media being linked to greenwashing (Volkskrant 2017). However, the GCNN does not have the enforcing power to force Shell to make contributions to the SDG Agenda, meaning that Shell can free-ride in the GCNN if it aims to do so.

The Coordinator National Implementation has stressed that he is not in charge of the other stakeholders in the implementation of the SDG Agenda (Interview 4). Once SDG initiatives are established, such as the SDGI Agenda, the GCNN, and the SDG Charter, and an opening session has been organized, they are expected to operate independently from the government. As stated by the coordinator:

“Some say that I am a conductor of a large symphony orchestra, but that is not my role at all. There are actually some smaller orchestras that have their own conductors, and I sometimes have meetings with those conductors” (ibid.).

With this statement, the coordinator emphasizes that the Dutch government did not give him the enforcing capabilities of making top-down directions towards the stakeholders of the SDG Agenda (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016a). The policy networks mentioned above have received a considerate amount of political space to contribute to the SDG Agenda to their own likes. However, this does not put much pressure on a company such as Shell to actually cooperate with other stakeholders to make contributions to the SDG Agenda.

#### *The interdepartmental SDG working group*

In the policy note on the Dutch implementation of the SDG Agenda it is furthermore stated that the cabinet has chosen for an interdepartmental coordination structure for the SDGs (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016a). This entails that every ministry department will be responsible for achieving the SDGs. Since the ministries do not perfectly fit the 17 SDGs, the 169 targets are divided among the ministries (Interview 4). Every ministry department has an appointed ‘Focal Point’. This is a policy officer who represents its ministry in the working group which is led by the Coordinator National Implementation.

The SDG working group has received the assignment to oversee the monitoring of the national progress on the goals (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016a). It has also received the task

of fostering cooperation between stakeholders of the SDGs. The working group must also analyze whether Dutch or European policies will be sufficient to achieve the SDGs in 2030 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016a; Observations August – December 2016). However, decision-making on the Focal Points' tasks and approach to the national implementation of the SDG Agenda has proven itself to be complex in the SDG working group. Goal setting in the working group shows the characteristics of an organized anarchy; there exists ambiguity on how to approach the SDGs, there are many different views on the SDG Agenda, and a clear Dutch government's action plan is missing.

The Focal Points have been struggling with finding a consensus on how to best approach the SDG Agenda and implement it due to its wicked nature. Most of the Focal Points experience the SDG Agenda as a broad and complex framework. They describe the SDGs as: “all-encompassing” (Interview 8), “difficult” (Interview 14), “interrelated” (Interview 5) and “all equally important” (Interview 6). The agenda can be approached from an international, national and local perspective, but also from single SDGs or multiple SDGs which are interconnected. “The SDGs can be about anything, it is so diverse”, as stated by the Focal Point from the MIE (Observation November 11, 2016). The many perspectives from which the SDGs can be approached hinder the Focal Points in effectively discussing them.

Decision-making in the SDG working group is also complex since all the Focal Points hold different views on the urgency of the national implementation of the agenda. While some of the Focal Points have received the SDG Agenda with open arms, others are rather skeptical about the agenda. “There are believers and non-believers of the SDG Agenda” according to the SDG Focal Point of the Ministry of Economic Affairs (MEA), who states to be one of the believers (Interview 6). A difference can be observed between Focal Points who perceive the SDG Agenda as an opportunity to make extra efforts on certain policy themes (Interview 6, 8, 13), and Focal Points who think that the current Dutch policies are already sufficient (Interview 5, 9, 15; Observation November 9, 2016).

Furthermore, several Focal Points have expressed that they are doubtful as to what the Dutch government's vision is on how the SDG Agenda should be approached by them (Interview 5, 6, 14). The SDG Agenda has been adopted in the middle of the governing term of Cabinet Rutte II, which means that they are not incorporated in the coalition agreement and budgetary plans of the ministries. In addition, the SDG Agenda did not receive sufficient political backing from the Ministers of Cabinet Rutte II. Therefore, Focal Points suspect the Ministers to not be interested in the agenda (Observation November 11, 2016). The national implementation of the SDG Agenda is not presented as a very salient issue to the Focal Points. The

absence of the SDGs in the coalition government has as a consequence that no Focal Point will be judged for putting in minimal efforts (Interview 13). The lack of high-level interest does not create a stimulus for the Focal Points to put efforts into the national implementation as well.

The absence of a Dutch government's vision on the national implementation of the SDG Agenda has provided the Focal Points with an unofficial policymaking space which they can use to their own likes. While some Focal Points have grasped the SDG Agenda as a window of opportunity to create ownership for the goals in their ministry (Interview 8, 10, 13), others experience the SDG Agenda as a burden for their working schedule and have showed minimal efforts (Interview 5, 9, 15).

The SDG Agenda provided, for example, a window of opportunity for the Focal Point of the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science (MECS) (Interview 10). Before the SDG Agenda was adopted by the Dutch government, the Focal Point of the MECS was already interested in the policy themes that the SDG Agenda consists of. He knew that after the adoption of the SDG Agenda, a policy officer would be needed to work on the topic. On his own initiative he asked whether he could fill this role. As stated by the Focal Point:

“I already knew that the SDG negotiations were going on when I started at the MECS. So I asked, who is working on this? ... Subsequently, I and a colleague from the MFA took the responsibility to give them a stimulus ...” (Interview 10).

The SDG Agenda aligns with the personal convictions of the Focal Point, which is reflected in his efforts to stimulate the implementation of it inside the MECS. The Focal Point has been actively participating in the SDG working group, and has put effort into creating ownership for the SDG Agenda inside the MECS, by appointing policy officers that bear responsibility over the goals for their department (*ibid.*). However, not all the Focal Points have been putting in the same efforts in their ministry.

The lack of clarity on how to approach the SDG Agenda and the absence of clear directions provided by the Dutch government, currently thus create a complex situation for the national implementation by the Dutch government's public administration. It seems that the Focal Points have free reigns as to how to implement the SDG Agenda, leading to a variance in efforts put into the national implementation.

### *The coalition's disinterest in the SDG Agenda*

Despite the fact that all Dutch political parties have communicated their political support for the SDG Agenda, this does not mean that they are actually willing to put political effort into the implementation of the framework (Interview 3). After the adoption of the agenda, the parliamentarians of Cabinet Rutte II seem rather disinterested in the national implementation of the SDG Agenda (Interview 19; Tweede Kamer 2016). A higher spokesperson for the PvdA states that a general skeptical feeling exists towards the UN and that the SDGs are not a hot topic in Dutch politics (Interview 19). He states:

“We never talk about them. We do nothing with them. If we would do anything with them, then it would be a subject that accidentally touches upon the SDG Agenda. But it would not be because of the existence of the SDGs” (ibid.).

The SDG Agenda mainly attracts attention from parliamentarians that focus on development cooperation and the “poorest of the poorest”, instead of on the national implementation of the agenda (Interview 4). The international focus of the parliamentarians might be a consequence of the fact that all official SDG related discussions between members of parliament have been held during the RBZ consultations, which is focused on the Dutch government’s Foreign Affairs (Interview 19).

It also becomes evident during one of the RBZ consultations that the discussion on the SDG Agenda does not go beyond a trifle between the spokespersons of the VVD and PvdA on the recognition of the SDG Agenda (Tweede Kamer 2016). Leading members from the PvdA and VVD kick the consultation off with a heated discussion. The PvdA member asks the following question to the member of the VVD: “If the VVD would be a country, would she have put its signature under the SDGs?”, which shows that the spokesperson of the PvdA is skeptical about the VVD’s commitment towards the agenda. The higher representative of the VVD does not provide a clear answer, so the PvdA spokesperson concludes that the VVD is not interested in achieving the SDG Agenda. How the SDG Agenda should be implemented in the Netherlands does not become a topic of discussion during the consultation.

#### *4.2.2. Analysis*

The empirical findings of the policy-formulation phase show that the coalition partners of Cabinet Rutte II hold different views on the SDG Agenda. The differences in perspectives can be attributed to the party differences between the VVD and PvdA. Despite the expressed differ-

ences by the incumbent parties towards the SDG Agenda, hypothesis 1 cannot be fully confirmed. The differences are not defining, since the national implementation of the SDG does not attract much attention from the members of parliament of both the PvdA and VVD. The lack of interest in the agenda by both parties does not create a momentum for making compromises. Nevertheless, the VVD's more skeptical perspective towards the agenda could have created a lowest common denominator effect, withholding the entire coalition from achieving a more concrete national implementation for the goals. This is, however, difficult to verify. To conclude, hypothesis 1 can only be partially confirmed.

In the policy-formulation phase it becomes visible that the Dutch government does not plan to present a comprehensive or holistic approach for the national implementation of the SDG Agenda. More high-level interest goes to the international implementation of the SDGs, the national implementation seems to be perceived as less urgent. There is a lack of high-level interest among the parliamentarians of Cabinet Rutte II which seems to prevent a shadow of hierarchy to be established. The Dutch government foremost communicates that the SDG Agenda will be a multi-stakeholder effort. However, it is unclear as to how the Dutch government will relate to the other stakeholders. There are no communications implying that the Dutch government intends to enforce its hierarchical competencies in nationally implementing the SDG Agenda, which creates the absence of a shadow of hierarchy. The lack of a shadow of hierarchy and the absence of a clear Dutch government's vision creates an ambiguous situation for other actors who want to make contributions to the SDG Agenda, both inside and outside the Dutch government.

Decision-making on the SDG agenda has been taking place inside an organized anarchy: the Focal Points hold different points of view with regards to the SDG Agenda, there is much ambiguity as to how the SDGs should be approached, and the Focal Points put different amounts of efforts into their contributions to the agenda. The absence of a shadow of hierarchy creates the space for Focal Points in the SDG working group to act as policy entrepreneurs who can steer the Dutch government's policy course towards the SDG Agenda in the direction they prefer. Some see the SDG Agenda as a window of opportunity and use their decision-power to catalyze the implementation of the agenda in their ministry. Motivated by personal interests and the urgency of the SDG Agenda, a variance in efforts is put into the national implementation of the SDG Agenda by the Focal Points. Consequently, the presence of multiple policy entrepreneurs with different stances leads to an imbalance in efforts across the different ministries. These different efforts are eventually not integrated into a holistic approach to the SDG Agenda. Garbage can hypothesis number 2 can thus be confirmed for the policy-formulation phase.

Several policy networks can be observed in the policy-formulation phase, such as the SDGI and GCNN. These policy networks are not operating under a shadow of hierarchy. Even though the Coordinator National Implementation has been playing a stimulating role in the emergence of these kinds of networks, he does not have much enforcing power due to a lack of high-level political backing by the Dutch government. The absence of a shadow of hierarchy gives the participating stakeholders of the policy networks a considerate amount of political space to determine how they want to contribute to the SDG Agenda. This means that stakeholders who think they can pursue their interests by contributing to the SDG Agenda will comply to the agenda, while others will show free-riding behavior. Shell is an example of a company that is part of an SDG policy network, but seems to be free-riding. Due to the absence of a shadow of hierarchy this behavior cannot be prevented, leading to a misbalance in efforts of the stakeholders to the SDG Agenda. This leads to the confirmation of hypothesis 3.

### ***4.3. Tentative-output phase***

#### *4.3.1. Case description*

This section describes the SDG related events that took place between the issuance of the plan of action for the SDG Agenda by the Dutch government on the 30<sup>th</sup> of September 2016 and when the plan was discussed by parliamentarians in the RBZ consultation on the 8<sup>th</sup> of February 2017.

#### *The initial Dutch results*

Several reports on the progression of the Dutch implementation of the SDG Agenda are published in the course of the first year after the SDG Agenda is adopted (CBS 2016; PBL 2016; AIV 2016). The Central Bureau for the Statistics (CBS) publishes a statistical report on how the Netherlands is progressing on the SDG Agenda. The report is meant to provide the Dutch government and other stakeholders of the SDG Agenda with an objective starting base from which the debate on the implementation can be continued (CBS 2016, 2017). The CBS (2016, 26) shows in its report how the Netherlands is doing on the SDGs in comparison to other EU member countries. It is stated in the report that the Netherlands is doing relatively well. The Netherlands is doing well on themes such as the economy, the constitutional state and institutions, health, and education. However, there are also several “points of concern” as stated by the CBS (ibid., 27). These are policy areas on which the Netherlands scores a relatively low EU ranking, such as climate, energy, inequality, nature, and the environment.

While the CBS provides the statistics for a discussion to start, other reports have provided the Dutch government with advice. The Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (PBL 2016, 9) shows in its report that the Dutch government will not achieve the SDG Agenda without an intensification of the government policy efforts. Both the PBL, and the Advisory Council on International Affairs (AIV 2016) recognize the importance of the involvement of other organizations such as business, NGOs, knowledge institutions, and financial institutions in achieving the goals. However, they do stress that increased efforts from the Dutch government are needed to make the multi-stakeholder efforts successful. The PBL states that a clear and recognizable vision from the Dutch government can catalyze the participation of other stakeholders. The AIV (*ibid.*, 6) also argues that: "... solving sustainability related issues cannot be done only through the self-regulation of companies and other players. Regulation and effective supervision are indispensable". Both the PBL and the AIV advise the Dutch government to create a long-term vision on how it aims to strategize the agenda.

#### *The Dutch plan of action*

One year after the adoption of the SDG Agenda, the Coordinator National Implementation issues a plan of action for the Dutch national implementation of the framework (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016a, 2016b). Despite the advices of the PBL and AIV presented above, the Dutch government's vision in the plan of action seems rather loose. It becomes evident in the policy note that the Dutch government is aware of the wicked character of the SDG Agenda. It is emphasized in the policy note that the SDGs are indivisible, since they are all interdependent and interlinked with each other. Some interdependencies are mentioned to stress the indivisibility of the goals: "bad education (goal 4) leads to social exclusion (goal 8) and an inadequate approach of climate change (goal 13) leads to an increase of diseases (goal 3)" (*ibid.*). The coordinator subsequently states that every policy initiative should be analyzed for contradicting sub goals. In addition, attention is given to the many stakeholders of the SDG Agenda.

Even though the complexity of the agenda is recognized in the policy note, no holistic action plan for tackling the SDG Agenda is presented (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016b). In the policy note it is announced that the Dutch government will approach the SDG Agenda in a "pragmatic" fashion. This pragmatic approach entails that no top-down directions will be given by the Dutch government on how to implement the SDG Agenda. The already existing government institutions, working divisions, and policy initiatives will be maintained and used. A national sustainable development strategy will not be of added value, since a large amount of actors are already working on sustainability and social responsibility, as argued in the policy

note. The Dutch government has instead made an overview of how the government-wide policies contribute to the 169 SDG targets, with the aim of discovering where the Dutch policies do not contribute enough in achieving the SDG Agenda (Rijksoverheid 2017). Subsequently, it is written that the Dutch government aims to create additional sub goals where the Dutch policies are not ambitious enough (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016b). “A new approach, more on the content, less on the structure”, as described by the Coordinator National Implementation (Interview 4).

Not everyone is enthusiastic about the current Dutch government’s pragmatic strategy towards the SDG Agenda. On the one hand, the current approach creates flexibility and efficiency to a challenging undertaking. On the other hand, the loose government’s approach also leads to uncertainty among several actors, and especially among policy officers and NGOs (Kaleidos Research 2015; Observation December 12, 2016). According to a spokeswoman representing the Ready for Change initiative, the plan of action lacks vision. “Contrarily to earlier commitments, the cabinet does not present a comprehensive plan of action, but the execution of the SDGs is limited to an enumeration of initiatives that were already going on” (Stokkum, van 2016). Since the Dutch government does not provide much clarity on what its vision is on how it will implement the agenda, NGOs are quite hesitant in self-implementing the agenda. They expect the Dutch government to come up with a clearer vision first. Subsequently, NGOs will be able to determine their own roles in the implementation process (Kaleidos Reserach 2015, 9; Observation December 12, 2016). Criticism can also be heard from inside the Dutch government. Several policy officers and Focal Points mention that the implementation process would go easier if there would be a clear vision and high-level interest in the agenda (Interview 13, 19).

#### *A horizontal SDG approach*

In the plan of action, the Dutch government acknowledges the importance of incorporating a plethora of actors, such as companies, financial institutions, knowledge institutions, NGOs, and other government organizations in achieving the goals of the SDG Agenda (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016b). This perspective is also emphasized by the Coordinator National Implementation who argues that the achievement of the SDGs will not happen without leadership from other organizations (Interview 4). Instead of focusing on creating new policies or building more institutions, the Dutch government will include a variety of actors that are interested in the agenda. This will be done by focusing on already existing initiatives and by stimulating the

emergence of new multi-stakeholder collaborations. The policy note moreover states that co-operation among government actors and the other stakeholders should take place in network structures and should not be hierarchically organized. Among all these actors, the Dutch government has ascribed itself a “partner role”, being a stakeholder standing side-by-side with the other actors and organizations focusing on the SDG Agenda (Interview 4; Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016b).

The SDG Charter is mentioned by the Coordinator National Implementation as a good example of this multi-stakeholder cooperation (Interview 4). The MFA partly funds the SDG Charter, ‘in kind’, by providing a head of secretary and by funding the creation of an SDG Charter website ‘the SDG gateway’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016b; SDG Gateway 2017). The head of secretary provided is a former policy officer of the MFA. The SDG team is in contact with the SDG Charter on a weekly basis during the SDG team meetings. The SDG Charter contributes to the SDG Agenda by stimulating the creation of SDG partnerships, however, it does not have any decision-making or enforcing competencies.

Despite the Dutch government’s intentions of involving a diversity of actors in achieving the goals of the SDG Agenda, the efforts do not always have the intended effect. This becomes visible during the regularly held SDG cafés. The SDG café is a concept that has been introduced by a policy officer who is seconded to the SDG team by the MIE. This policy officer is dedicated to his task of supporting the SDG team and aims to further catalyze contributions to the SDG Agenda by organizing SDG cafés. The SDG café is a regularly held informal meeting where stakeholders, such as NGOs, companies, and government officials can meet. During the first held SDG café, a lack of diversity among the participants can be observed. However, the meeting is mainly filled with actors representing NGOs who focus on development cooperation. There are some policy officers who attend the meeting, but there are no representatives of companies who participate in the meeting (Observation December 12, 2017).

#### *Transform Your World event*

In contrary to the more informally held SDG café, a large number of actors from the Dutch government, businesses, CSOs, and knowledge institutions gather at the ‘Transform Your World Event’ on the 8<sup>th</sup> of December 2016 (Observation December 8, 2016). This event is organized by the Dutch government, the SDG Charter, the DSGC and Erasmus University Rotterdam. A whole range of high-level actors attend the event, such as David Nabarro UN advisor for the SDGs, Minister Ploumen, the Coordinator National Implementation, Paul Polman CEO

of Unilever, other CEOs of members of the DSGC, and the director of Partos, the Dutch umbrella organization for international collaboration. The event aims at uniting all kinds of organizations and individuals to collectively work on action plans for the national and international implementation of the agenda (SDG Nederland 2016, One World 2016).

A multi-stakeholder approach in tackling the complexity of the SDG Agenda seems to be the leitmotif during the conference. As stated by minister Ploumen:

“We will only achieve the SDGs when all stakeholders cooperate. Therefore, I invite all participants to actively search for collaborations, whether it is about improving health, or tackling gender discrimination or improving labor circumstances for the poor”. (Observation December 8, 2016).

Other high-level actors also emphasize the responsibility that should be carried by the variety of stakeholders of the SDG Agenda. Bart Romijn, director of Partos, stresses the role that NGOs should play, and Paul Polman addresses the role of companies and describes how the SDG Agenda provides a profitable business model.

The focus on collaboration becomes tangible during the workshops that are organized at the event. These workshops are organized in order for the participants to create action plans and to find partners with which they can cooperate on the SDGs (SDG Charter 2016; One World 2016). However, when taking a closer look at the participants of the workshops, it becomes visible how a SDG hard core can be identified. This hard core consists of actors that were already contributing to the SDG Agenda in many ways before its adoption. Participants of the SDG café, some of the SDG focal points, actors from the always devoted organizations Partos, *Woord en Daad* and FMS, and employees from the MNCs part of the DSGC attend the workshops (Observation December 8, 2016). To approach the SDG in a holistic manner, partnerships should especially be made among the actors that are “needed” to effectively address a goal. This asks for the inclusion of new stakeholders (Ready for Change 2016). The conference seems to be a meeting of the “willing” and the frontrunners of the SDG Agenda (Observation December 8, 2016).

The shared aims and joint actions that are made by the actors who participate in the workshops eventually end up in a document which is managed by the SDG Charter (SDG Charter 2016). The document will serve as a basis for further collaborations. The SDG Charter has designed a website, ‘the SDG gateway’, where participants can find online and offline ways to continuously share their existing and new activities on the SDGs (SDG Gateway 2017). The

outcome of the workshop on gender and health and wellbeing, for example, concludes to: “Facilitate follow-up meeting(s) for concretizing actions and recommendations to implement SDG 5 in the Netherlands and internationally” (SDG Charter 2016). Due to the informality of the document no concrete steps are eventually taken and no further multi-stakeholder collaboration on the topic is established (Observation December 2016). There is a lack of concrete commitments, which can be confirmed at the ‘SDG Gateway’ which seems to have become a virtual organized anarchy (SDG Gateway 2017).

#### *Contribution of policy officers inside the Dutch government*

Several policy officers come to the fore in the tentative-output phase, who come up with SDG related initiatives and ideas among different ministries (Observations September – December 2016; Interview 2, 19). As already mentioned before, one of the policy officers of the SDG team has been organizing SDG cafés to catalyze the establishment of more multi-stakeholder collaboration with regards to the SDG Agenda. Another policy officer of the SDG team has been putting effort into creating more ownership for the SDG Agenda inside the MFA. With his networking capabilities he has been trying to sell the SDG Agenda in a persuasive manner to high-level policy officers of the MFA. This policy officer has been trying to give the SDG Agenda a more permanent place in the policy priorities of the MFA (Interview 2).

Beyond the MFA the SDG Agenda has also provided a window of opportunity to some policy officers. Initiatives related to the SDG Agenda have been popping up since the adoption of the goals (Observations September – December 2016). A policy officer from the Ministry of Interior and Kingdom Relations (MIKR) has, for example, been working on the organization of a conference on public sector innovation. After the policy officer was in contact with the UN, she decided to use the SDG Agenda to strengthen the political foundation of the conference. “We received the SDGs as a present”, as stated by the policy officer (Interview 19).

The absence of a Dutch government’s vision on the national implementation of the SDG Agenda, has created the space for the above mentioned policy officers to arise. However, their efforts remain separate efforts due to the lack of a vision, they are not integrated into one comprehensive implementation of the Dutch public administration.

#### *The Dutch coalition lags behind*

While the national implementation of the SDG Agenda has already attracted much attention and interest from Dutch businesses and CSOs since its adoption, attention among parliamentarians seems hard to find (Observations August – December 2016). The Dutch government’s

strategy to the national implementation of the SDG Agenda is discussed for the first time during a RBZ on the 25<sup>th</sup> of January 2017. This is already one and a half year after the SDG Agenda is adopted. Once again this shows the lack of interest from Cabinet Rutte II in the national implementation of the SDG Agenda (Tweede Kamer 2017).

The plan of action issued by the Coordinator National Implementation is discussed during a RBZ consultation with Minister Ploumen and parliamentarians representing the PvdA, VVD, and CDA. During the consultation it becomes evident that the VVD and PvdA are not on the same page regarding the SDG Agenda. While the spokesperson of the PvdA expresses criticism towards the Dutch government's "organic approach", the spokesperson for the VVD remains silent on the Dutch government's ambitions. The spokesperson of the PvdA asks Minister Ploumen whether the Dutch government's level of ambition could be higher. Minister Ploumen responds and says that she thinks that many steps have been taken already. The Minister states that future steps will be taken by the new cabinet after the new parliamentary elections. No further decisions are made during the consultation on the SDG Agenda (Tweede Kamer 2017).

#### *4.3.2. Analysis*

In the above shown empirical findings, it becomes evident once again that the parliamentarians of coalition government Rutte II do not show much interest in the national implementation of the SDG Agenda. Some differences in perspective on the topic can be observed between the coalition partners, however, the discussion regarding the national implementation remains superficial. Due to the parliamentarians' disinterest in the SDG Agenda, no opportunity arises for a more in-depth discussion and for making compromises on the national implementation. The conflicting interests in the coalition are thus not decisive in explaining the Dutch government's incremental approach. However, party politics does seem to be of influence. While the SDG Agenda does not provide Cabinet Rutte II with a salient issue, it seems to be of more importance to multiple policy officers of the Dutch government's public administration. The disinterest of Cabinet Rutte II seems to create an unofficial policy space for policy entrepreneurs to emerge in the public administration. Hence, hypothesis 1 can only be partially confirmed.

The Dutch plan of action does not provide more clarity on what the Dutch government's vision is for the national implementation of the SDG Agenda, which creates an ambiguous situation for policy officers inside the Dutch government. The absence of a clearly defined high-level strategy and the disinterest of the coalition creates a policy window for policy officers to propose their own ideas for the national implementation of the SDG Agenda. Several policy

entrepreneurs can be identified in the tentative-output phase who have strategically grasped this window to further their own policy ends. Since the SDG Agenda touches upon a variety of issues that appeal to policy officers government-wide, policy entrepreneurs from different ministries have emerged, such as from the MFA and the MIKR. However, their separate efforts are not unified into a holistic strategy by the Dutch government, meaning that hypothesis 2 can be confirmed.

The findings of the tentative-output phase furthermore show that multiple policy networks are making contributions to the SDG Agenda, such as the SDG Charter and the DSGC. However, these policy networks are not effectively supervised by a superordinate organization, since a lack of a shadow of hierarchy comes to the fore in the empirical findings. Several factors make that a shadow of hierarchy cannot be identified. Firstly, it is mentioned in the Dutch government's plan of action that the government does not intend to give top-down directions for the implementation of the agenda. Secondly, the lack of shadow of hierarchy is created by the weak institutionalization of the SDG Charter. The absence of a more authoritative coordinating structure has made Dutch implementation into an organic process, giving too much space for dysfunctions to arise. The lack of a shadow of hierarchy gives too much space for stakeholders to continue furthering their own interests and to refrain from collective action, which seems to have happened after the Transform Your World event. This means that hypothesis 3 can be confirmed.

## ***Chapter 5: Conclusions***

In this concluding chapter the key findings of this research will be presented, as well as an answer to the research question. This is followed by a discussion on the broader implications of the research findings and a reflection of the methodological strategy chosen. Lastly, some recommendations for both future research and policy-making are made.

### ***5.1. Summary of the findings***

#### *Key findings*

A variety of discoveries have been made in the analysis of the empirical evidence. Even though coalition governments have been governing the Netherlands during the entire SDG policy cycle, no empirical evidence has been found of compromises made between the coalition parties on the national implementation of the SDG Agenda. While party differences were barely visible in Cabinet Rutte I, party differences came clearly to the fore in Cabinet Rutte II. However, these disputes did not lead to a more substantial bargaining or negotiation process on the national implementation of the SDG Agenda. Due to an overall lack of interest in the national implementation of the SDG Agenda no momentum has been created to make compromises between the coalition partners. The absence of political interest did create an unofficial policy space for the emergence of an incremental approach. To conclude, party politics seems to be of influence, but the Dutch government's deployment of an incremental approach to the SDG Agenda cannot be ascribed to party differences in the coalitions. This means that partisan hypothesis 1 can only be partially confirmed.

The empirical findings furthermore revealed that the SDG decision-making space of the Dutch public administration has been showing the characteristics of an organized anarchy: policy officers hold different views on the SDG Agenda, they are struggling with how to approach the agenda, and they put different amounts of effort into the implementation of the agenda. These characteristics combined with the lack of a Dutch government's vision on the national implementation of the SDG Agenda have led to a disordered approach to the SDGs by the Dutch government's public administration. Due to the lack of a national vision and the absence of high-level political interest, the policy officers have received a considerate amount of policy space to propose their own solutions to the SDGs. Multiple policy officers have used this space as a policy window, proposing inconsistent solutions to the SDG Agenda that further their own policy ends. The separate efforts of the policy entrepreneurs are eventually not integrated into a holistic approach to the SDG Agenda by the Dutch government, which means that the garbage

can hypothesis 2 can be confirmed.

Lastly, both the wait-and-see attitude of the Dutch government in combination with the communicated multi-stakeholder focus in achieving the SDG Agenda, have created a policy space for policy networks to emerge in the Netherlands. Multiple policy networks that aim at making contributions to the national implementation of the SDG Agenda can be identified in the empirical findings. However, these policy networks are not provided with a shadow of hierarchy by the Dutch government. Even though some central coordinating structures have been established by the Dutch government, no authoritative coordinating power is exerted by them. The Coordinator National Implementation has only taken on a stimulating role towards the stakeholders, and the SDG Charter does not possess any enforcing competencies. Moreover, the Dutch government did not communicate any intentions for future governmental action. The lack of a shadow of hierarchy gives too much leeway for dysfunctions to arise in the network approach to the national implementation of the SDG Agenda. Firstly, because those who are “willing” have received too much leeway and can still decide to pursue their own policy ends. Secondly, the lack of a shadow of hierarchy creates the opportunity for stakeholders to free-ride inside the policy networks. These dysfunctions hinder a comprehensive approach to be established, meaning that hypothesis 3 can be confirmed.

*Answering the research question:*

*What explains an incremental approach in the Netherlands towards the national implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals?*

The Dutch government’s ‘wait-and-see’ approach to the national implementation of the SDG Agenda has created a policy vacuum that is filled by policy entrepreneurs and policy networks. Due to the lack of a shadow of hierarchy both the policy entrepreneurs and stakeholders of the policy networks can decide which course they would like to take in approaching the national implementation of the SDG Agenda. This leads to policy entrepreneurs pursuing their own interests, an imbalance in efforts put into tackling the SDG Agenda, and subsequently contradictory initiatives. By the same token, the lack of shadow of hierarchy creates the space for dysfunctions to arise in the policy networks, and for stakeholders to withdraw from collective action. The piecemeal policy priorities of the policy entrepreneurs and policy networks are not integrated into a holistic approach, which, in turn, explains the incremental approach of the Netherlands towards the SDG Agenda.

## 5.2. *Broader implications research findings*

This study aimed at explaining why the Dutch government approaches the SDG Agenda with an incremental approach instead of a holistic one. The absence of a shadow of hierarchy provided by the Dutch government came to the fore as one of the main explanatory factors. Following the research results, this paragraph will discuss what the results mean for the broader discussion on wicked policy issues and how to govern them.

The past two decades, the literature on wicked problem-solving has mainly focused on the positive attributes that networks have in contrast to hierarchies in handling wicked problems (Adler 2001; Kettl 2009; Ferlie et al. 2011; Morner and Misgeld 2014; Head and Alford 2015). The literature even stated that decentralized efforts combined with mutual monitoring would make a clearly-defined authority among the networks unnecessary (Adler 2001; Morner and Misgeld 2014). The results of this research, however, show that the sole deployment of a network strategy is insufficient to tackle wicked problems in a holistic fashion. Decentralized efforts in the form of a network strategy have been dominating the current Dutch government's approach in tackling the SDG Agenda. However, even though many stakeholders are interested in making contributions to the SDG Agenda, the absence of a centrally defined authority has led to an organic approach to the SDGs with contradictory and inconsistent outcomes.

Similar challenges in governing a complex policy issue have come to the fore in a recent study executed by Aarts and Lokhorst 2012<sup>2</sup> on the implementation of the Dutch Nature Policy Plan (NPP). These authors also discovered the dilemmas that governments face between choosing for “control” or “unpredictability” when steering a complex policy issue. Aarts and Lokhorst (2012) observed how the Dutch government took a considerate amount of control in the implementation of the NPP, which led to resistance to the policy by citizens. This approach contrasts with the strategy that the Dutch government has been taking towards the SDG Agenda, which is characterized by a lack of hierarchical control, which eventually led to a piecemeal SDG implementation. The balance between taking control and relying on self-organizing mechanisms can thus be very delicate when implementing complex policy issues and provides fertile soil for new debates to arise among public policy scholars.

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<sup>2</sup> Aarts and Lokhorst (2012) executed a study in the Drentsche Aa on the implementation of the NPP on environmental land use, a wicked problem. They observed how citizens received the opportunity to be involved in the implementation process of the NPP, but were eventually not properly listened to when they had opposing views from the policy-makers. This eventually resulted in the self-organization of citizens who resisted against the NPP.

However, based on the results of this research it would be expected that self-organizing networks would be more successful in implementing a complex policy issue under a shadow of hierarchy, than without the existence of a shadow of hierarchy (Scharpf 1996). Such a network approach would ask for an alternative role of the Dutch government, a role in which it presents itself more as a central coordinator among the policy networks. Some of the government's vertical capacities could be coupled with the use of a more horizontal network strategy. "This commitment projects a government and managerial in networks that is both less and more" (Weber and Khademian 2008). This would not entail that the Dutch government would carry the entire responsibility of the implementation of the SDG Agenda. It would still include the different understandings and capacities of the stakeholders, combined with a more centrally organized coordination strategy.

### ***5.3. Methodological reflections***

The inductive case approach proved to be a helpful tool in acquiring a comprehensive overview of the Dutch government's approach towards the SDG Agenda. Not all the mechanisms proposed in the hypotheses worked out as expected. However, the chosen hypotheses and concepts made sure that alternative explaining mechanisms were exposed. The formulated hypotheses were thus successfully used as a heuristic in this research. Furthermore, the use of triangulation offered a convenient approach in acquiring a comprehensive case description. If participant observation, interviews, or document-analysis would have been left out, some explaining mechanisms would not have been revealed.

Nevertheless, there are also some methodological nuances and implications that should be addressed. The ethical implications of using semi-covert PO should be shortly touched upon. Even though the aims of this research were discussed with the internship supervisor and head of department of the SDG team on forehand, not all the observed actors were aware that they were observed for this research. The actors that were invited for an interview knew about the research, however, actors that were not interviewed did not. It is important to mention that this research has considered the ethical implications of semi-covert PO, being a heavily debated issue among ethnographers (De Walt and de Walt 2002). Steps have been made to assure anonymity when possible, and by limiting the display of results that can be traced back to single persons, thus ensuring the proper execution of the research.

Another nuance that should be addressed considers the found empirical evidence. A substantial amount of empirical evidence was gathered for every single one of the explaining mechanisms. However, the amounts were not always equal, meaning that some mechanisms

are more thoroughly backed by evidence than others. The most information was found for the partisan influence and garbage can explaining mechanism. However, the explaining mechanism on networks provided a bigger challenge to the research. It was easier to identify the relevant actors and phenomena for describing the first two explaining mechanisms, because they could be found in more bounded spaces, such as political parties and the Dutch government. Networks proved to be much more omnipresent and complex, which made them more difficult to grasp in a comprehensive overview.

#### ***5.4. Academic relevance and recommendations for future research***

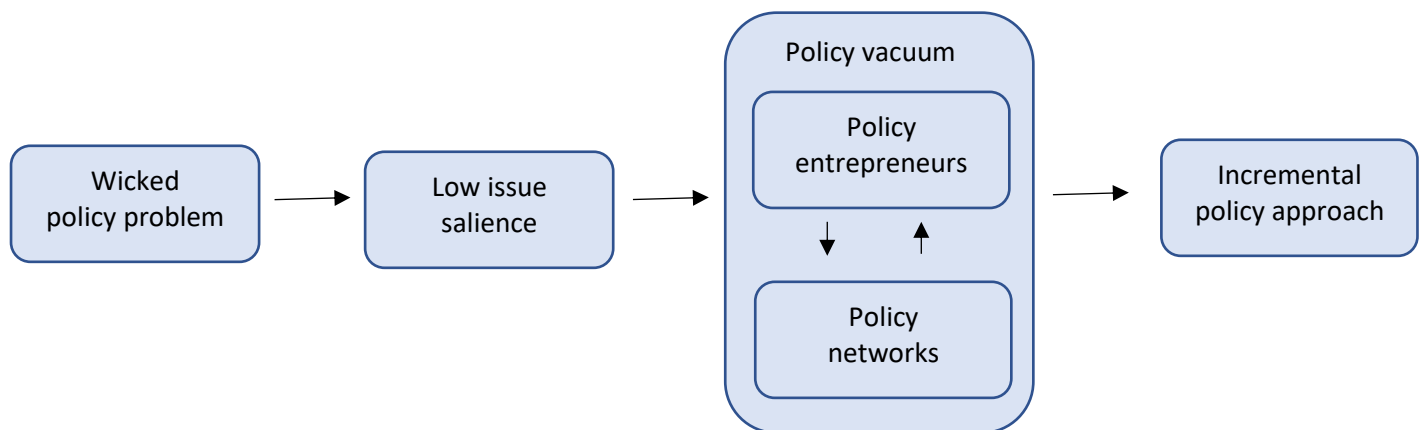
As mentioned before, the DI case study method deployed for this research aims at making some more general conclusions about the used theories. Before the empirical research was executed it was not yet clear to which extent the theories would be compatible in explaining incremental approaches towards wicked problems. After the analysis of the case description, the three theories deployed proved themselves to be compatible in describing an incremental approach to wicked problems.

Partisan influence theory worked out differently than expected. The empirics did not present a clear link between coalition governments and incremental approaches to wicked problems as expected in the hypothesis. The use of partisan influence theory did however shed a light on how political parties are of influence when parliamentarians of the incumbent parties do not perceive a wicked policy issue as a salient policy problem. The empirics of this research suggest that a low level of issue salience enhances the likelihood that political parties do not take political action on the wicked policy problem, hindering a shadow of hierarchy to be established. Partisan influence theory thus highlighted how a policy vacuum emerges once political parties attach low issue salience to a wicked policy problem.

Garbage can theory and policy networks theory subsequently showed how such a policy vacuum is filled in by policy entrepreneurs and policy networks. Both policy entrepreneurs and policy networks perceive the policy vacuum as a window of opportunity that they can seize to further their own interests. However, when political parties avoid taking political action in the form of legislative or executive decisions these policy networks and policy entrepreneurs are not provided with a shadow of hierarchy. Due to the low issue salience attached by the parliamentarians there is no real window of opportunity for the wicked problem to be addressed in a comprehensive manner. The lack of issue salience makes that the policy entrepreneurs and policy networks receive an unofficial policy space they can use to their likes, which leads to piecemeal solutions to the wicked problem. These separate efforts are consequently not

integrated into one comprehensive strategy due to the lack of a shadow of hierarchy, which leads to an incremental policy approach.

To conclude, at least in this case, when combining the three theories in explaining incrementalism towards wicked problems there seems to be a significant link between a low level of issue salience attached to a wicked problem by political parties and the emergence of policy entrepreneurs and policy networks, which eventually seems to lead to an incremental policy approach (See figure 3).



**Figure 3:** Conceptual model: Incremental decision-making towards wicked problems

Several opportunities for further research arise from the research findings and the limitations of this research. This research has shown how the absence of a shadow of hierarchy gave the space for an incremental policy approach to be established towards the SDG Agenda. However, the question remains under which conditions such an absence of a shadow of hierarchy can be expected. Considering the research results, the reason might be the disinterest of the parliamentarians of Cabinet Rutte I and II in the national implementation of the SDG Agenda. The SDG Agenda did not provide the parliamentarians with a policy issue with high issue salience (Wlezien 2005). The empirics thus suggest that the establishment of a shadow of hierarchy might be dependent on the level of issue salience attached to the wicked problem. Democratic theory also states that the likelihood of a government taking action to a certain issue increases with the issues salience (Burden and Sandberg 2003).

To conclude, more research is needed to discover the exact mechanism that leads to the absence of a shadow of hierarchy. For this purpose, a comparative case study might be useful which compares a wicked problem case that first had low issue salience and over time gained a higher level of issue salience. Such a case could be provided by the wicked problem of localized earthquakes in Groningen that are caused by gas extraction in the region (van der Voort and Vanclay 2015). While Cabinet Rutte II attached low issue salience to the earthquakes

in Groningen, a sudden shift in issue salience could be observed in Cabinet Rutte III. On January the 16<sup>th</sup> 2018 Groningen was hit by the heaviest earthquake in the last five years which led to a higher prioritization by the parliamentarians of Cabinet Rutte III of the wicked issue (Tweede Kamer 2018). A comparative case study might provide insights in whether an increase in issue salience leads to a more comprehensive approach to the wicked problem.

### ***5.5. Societal relevance: recommendations for policy-making***

The research results showed how the lack of a shadow of hierarchy played a key role in the emergence of a piecemeal approach to the SDG Agenda in the Netherlands. These research results thus imply that a shadow of hierarchy is needed to avoid incrementalism, inconsistent policies, and eventually unintended negative consequences when approaching wicked problems. To create such a shadow of hierarchy, governments must do more than merely stimulating stakeholders to make contributions. A shadow of hierarchy could be created by governments by taking in a more pronounced coordinating role that includes: ambition-setting, coordinating the efforts of stakeholders, and considering policy change. Such a strategy could include both the advantages of a collaborative approach and of the more authoritative strategies.

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## **7. Appendix**

### **Appendix 1: interview**

- **Algemeen**
- Wat zijn volgens u belangrijke karakteristieken van de SDG's?
- Hoe zou u de politieke ontwikkelingen rondom de SDG's beschrijven?
- 1. Rol organisatie**
- Wat zijn belangrijke punten voor uw organisatie m.b.t. de SDG's?
- Wat zijn de activiteiten die jullie doen rondom de SDG's?
- In hoeverre werken jullie samen met andere organisaties?
- 2. Politieke context in Nederland**
- Hoe kijkt u naar wat de overheid doet met de SDGs?
- 3. Bedrijven**
- Hoe schat u de activiteiten in die bedrijven doen m.b.t. de SDG's?
- Hoe schat u de belangen in van bedrijven bij de SDG's?
- 4. NGO's**
- Hoe schat u de activiteiten in die NGO's doen m.b.t. de SDG's?
- Hoe schat u de belangen in van NGO's bij de SDG's?
- 5. Afsluiting**
- Hoe schat u de toekomstige ontwikkelingen in rondom de SDG's?