ANALYSING THE SDGS THROUGH DEGROWTH AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE LENSES

A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE DUTCH SDG POLICY CONTEXT

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Summary

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, consisting of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), aims to foster economic, social, and environmental development by ending poverty, improving the lives and prospects of everyone, and protecting the planet. However, in the past few years, scholars have become more critical of the SDGs. It is claimed that the attainment of economic development is at the detriment of the social and environmental pillars. The main critiques emphasise that although economic growth can foster social and economic development, it also goes hand in hand with environmental degradation as it is not possible to sustain infinite economic growth on a planet with finite resources. Hence, the focus on economic development exacerbates social and environmental injustices.

The concepts of degrowth and intersectional decolonial environmental justice address the shortcomings of the SDGs by opposing the aim of economic growth and the continued ecological and social injustices. Both share radical and transformative ideas to alter the socio-economic and political systems that uphold these injustices. Various worldviews have already incorporated the pillars and values underlying both concepts, Buen Vivir, Ubuntu, Ecological Swaraj, Sarvodaya, and Gross National Happiness respectively. These worldviews are used as illustrations of possible avenues that can lead to a more inclusive, diverse, and just conception of sustainability. Hence, this study shows how degrowth, through a focus on well-being, social equity, and ecological sustainability, and intersectional decolonial environmental justice, through a focus on intersectionality, multi-scalar approaches, embeddedness, and indispensability, are able to foster a more inclusive, diverse, and just conception of sustainability.

This study aims to provide a critical assessment of the SDGs through a combination of environmental justice and degrowth perspectives, which will be applied to the Dutch SDG policy context. This is done by examining to what extent a combination of degrowth and environmental justice discourses have been adopted in the *Fifth Dutch National SDG Report: Sustainable Development in the Netherlands*. Through critical discourse analysis, this policy report is examined for the presence of both mainstream and critical sustainability and environmental justice discourses, where the critical sustainability lens represents the concept of degrowth and where the critical environmental justice lens represents the concept of intersectional decolonial environmental justice.

The findings of this study clearly show that the majority of the references made can be related to the mainstream sustainability and environmental justice discourses. The study

examined various entities that compromise Dutch society and the results indicate that of these entities, civil society relates the most to the critical degrowth and intersectional decolonial environmental justice discourses, followed by the human rights sector, the private sector and financial institutions, the youth, the local and regional governments, the central government, and the knowledge institutions respectively.

This study thus concludes that although the *Fifth Dutch National SDG Report: Sustainable Development in the Netherlands*, representing the Dutch SDG policy context, refers to some extent to the critical discourses, the majority of the references are made to the mainstream sustainability and environmental justice pillars. Only through transformative changes based on the concepts of degrowth and intersectional decolonial environmental justice, the injustices of the SDGs can be addressed and truly inclusive, diverse, and just sustainability can be attained.

Preface

Dear reader,

With pride, I can state that in front of you lies the accumulation of six years of academic education. Throughout my Bachelor's in Economics and Business Economics and my Master's in International Economics and Development, my interest in sustainability and social development were sparked and after the completion of my previous Master's I decided to broaden my scope by pursuing a Master's in Environment and Society Studies. Throughout this academic year, I came across multiple challenges on both a personal as well as academic level, making this a challenging but worthwhile journey. Therefore, I am relieved and proud to present you with this thesis.

However, I could have not done this on my own. First of all, I would like to thank my supervisor, Cristina Inoue, for her patience, novel insights, and words of encouragement throughout this year. In addition, I would like to thank everyone involved in our collective supervision meetings for sharing their struggles, findings, and stories, they truly helped me in keeping on track. I furthermore would like to thank Christina and Mesh, the coordinators at Stichting Otherwise, as well as the board members and other interns. You kept me motivated, inspired, and showed me different ways of seeing the world, for which I will be forever grateful. Finally, I want to thank my friends, colleagues, and family, you know who you are, for listening to my contemplations, melt-downs, and struggles, providing me with support and reassurances, countless cups of coffee and glasses of wine.

This thesis marks the end of my academic education and the start of a new journey, for which I am beyond excited. For the reader, keep being open-minded and critical, and enjoy reading my thesis.

Rick Willemsen
Nijmegen, 23 July 2022

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List of Abbreviations

BECCS	Bioenergy with Carbon Capture and Storage
DSGC	Dutch Sustainable Growth Coalition
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HBO	Universities of applied science and practice-oriented research
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
IPO	Association of Provincial Authorities
MBO	Secondary Vocational Education
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
NVB	Dutch Banking Association
PBL	Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations
UVW	Dutch Water Authorities
VNG	Association of Netherlands Municipalities
VNO-NCW	Confederation of Netherlands Industry and Employers

1. Introduction

1.1. Research problem statement

In 2015, the United Nations (UN) adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in order to ''end poverty and hunger everywhere; to combat inequalities within and among countries; to build peaceful, just and inclusive societies; to protect human rights and promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls; and to ensure the lasting protection of the planet and its natural resources'' (UN General Assembly, 2015, p. 3). While there was optimism when the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted, the COVID-19 crisis has shown that it is unlikely that the 169 targets will be met by 2030 and that a different approach toward sustainable pathways needs to be taken in order to avert the climate crisis and to ensure a more just and equal society, ensuring that the UN's goal that ''no one will be left behind'' (UN General Assembly, 2015, p. 1) remains within reach (Naidoo & Fisher, 2020).

The scientific community has become more and more critical of the SDGs, especially since the SDGs are lacking an explicit focus on environmental and social justice throughout the goals, while the SDGs simultaneously remain focused on economic growth and therefore put growth at the forefront in contrast to development and well-being in general (Menton et al., 2020; Robra & Heikkurinen, 2019; Spash, 2021). In contrast, both the concepts of degrowth as well as intersectional decolonial environmental justice can be seen as critical approaches towards sustainability, as implied by the SDGs, as they ''share overarching aims of sustainability and justice and pursue them through radical social change and resistance'' (Scheidel & Schaffartzik, 2019, p. 330). Various studies have examined to what extent the movements related to both concepts form an alliance (Akbulut et al., 2019; Hanaček et al., 2020; Gerber et al., 2020; Martínez-Alier, 2012; Martínez-Alier et al., 2016; Scheidel & Schaffartzik, 2019; Rodríguez-Labajos et al., 2019) and can therefore address the aim of economic growth as well as the continued ecological and social injustices of the SDGs.

By adopting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, all 193 member countries of the UN General Assembly committed to achieving the SDGs by 2030. In the Netherlands, the Dutch House of Representatives adopted the Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation's *2016 Plan of Action* on the implementation of the SDGs (Ploumen, 2016). The Dutch government (i.e. Rijksoverheid), together with other sectors constituting Dutch society, annually publishes its *National SDG Report* to evaluate the major developments and initiatives undertaken during the previous year while it simultaneously discusses the opportunities and

challenges the Netherlands is facing in the upcoming years by analysing these facets from various societal perspectives. It can therefore be argued that the report reflects on the Dutch SDG policy context. Due to the growing criticism of the SDGs, this study will critically examine the *Fifth Dutch National SDG Report: Sustainable Development in the Netherlands* through the concepts of degrowth and environmental justice (Rijksoverheid, 2021).

1.2.   Research aim and research question

The aim of this research is to provide a critical assessment of the SDGs through a combination of environmental justice and degrowth perspectives. This will be applied to the Dutch SDG policy context as reflected in the *Fifth Dutch National SDG Report: Sustainable Development in the Netherlands.* In this report, the Dutch government, together with the local and regional governments, the private sector and financial institutions, civil society, the knowledge institutions, the youth, and the human rights sector, reflects on where the Netherlands stand in terms of achieving the SDGs while relating this to achievements and initiatives from the foregoing year and to opportunities and challenges for the near future. In order to conduct this assessment, a thorough review of both the concepts of degrowth and environmental justice will be carried out in order to derive an inclusive, diverse, and environmentally just sustainability discourse which will subsequently be used to examine the following research question:

- *To what extent have a combination of degrowth and environmental justice discourses been adopted in the Fifth Dutch National SDG Report: Sustainable Development in the Netherlands?*

In order to examine this research question, the following sub-questions will be examined:
- *What are the Sustainable Development Goals and how have they been adopted globally and in the Netherlands?*
- *How have the Sustainable Development Goals been analysed within the environmental justice and sustainability literature?*
- *What do the concepts of degrowth and intersectional decolonial environmental justice entail and how are they related to the worldviews of Buen Vivir, Ubuntu, Ecological Swaraj, Sarvodaya, and Gross National Happiness?*
- *How can both concepts of degrowth and environmental justice be combined to provide a more inclusive, diverse, and just sustainability conceptual framework?*

- *To what extent can the Dutch SDG policy context be assessed through this combined degrowth-environmental justice conceptual framework?*

1.3. Scientific relevance

Over the past few years, more and more scholars have argued that the SDGs are ''promoting an intrinsically anthropocentric approach to sustainability that reinforce the longstanding criticism that sustainable development is an oxymoron'' (Adelman, 2018, p. 1) which will not lead to ''a ''win win'' when the very systems [i.e. global economic and geopolitical systems] which create poverty, hunger, inequalities, and unsustainable development are upheld'' (Menton et al., 2020, p. 1622). Recent studies show a growing awareness of the relationship between the concepts of degrowth and environmental justice (Akbulut et al., 2019; Scheidel & Schaffartzik, 2019; Menton et al., 2020). However, these studies often take a Western perspective and therefore too little attention is paid to critical perceptions such as degrowth and intersectional decolonial environmental justice, especially those originating in the Global South.

In order to achieve the underlying goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development within this decade, a critical approach, focusing on degrowth and intersectional decolonial environmental justice, is needed (Belmonte-Ureña et al., 2021; Kothari et al., 2014). While the debate around sustainability has evolved since the acceptance of the Agenda in 2015, a comprehensive examination and application of a more inclusive, diverse, and environmentally just sustainability discourse in relation to the implementation by nation-states has been lacking. This study will therefore address this gap by analysing to what extent a combination of degrowth and intersectional decolonial environmental justice perspectives has been adopted in the *Fifth Dutch National SDG Report: Sustainable Development in the Netherlands.*

1.4. Societal relevance

2020 and 2021 showed the world that humanity faces enormous challenges in the upcoming decades (Sultana, 2021). Not only does humanity have to deal with the COVID-19 crisis and its aftermath, but humanity, and especially Western countries, also have been confronted with the systematic injustices people of colour and minorities are facing all over the world, often as a result of colonialism (Andrews, 2021). While these crises already seem hard to solve on their own, they are heavily intertwined with ''the biggest threat … modern humans have ever faced''

(Security Council, 2021, para. 2), the climate crisis. Although the world is becoming more and more aware of these latter two crises and their implications and tries to tackle them through many UN conferences, progress is stalled (Naidoo & Fisher, 2020). As shown by the earlier critiques on the SDGs, humanity needs to critically reform the current sustainability discourse, which forms the basis for the SDGs, by basing it on critical and intersectional conceptions such as the concepts of degrowth and intersectional decolonial environmental justice. This paper will therefore examine to what extent a combination of these discourses has been adopted within the Dutch SDG policy context as reflected in the *Fifth Dutch National SDG Report: Sustainable Development in the Netherlands*.

1.5. Outline

Chapter 2 will first provide a critical review of the academic literature by examining the SDGs and their relation to economic growth, environmental and ecological justice, and the Dutch policy context. In Chapter 3, the theoretical framework will examine the concepts of degrowth and intersectional decolonial environmental justice and link them to various cosmovisions related to these concepts from which correspondingly the conceptual model will be derived. Chapter 4 will then discuss the research philosophy, strategy, and methods, as well as the process of data collection and analysis, and the corresponding quality of the study. Chapter 5 will provide the quantitative and qualitative results of the critical discourse analysis which will subsequently be discussed in Chapter 6. Finally, Chapter 7 will provide a conclusion based on the earlier chapters and the results.

2. Literature review

2.1. Sustainability and the SDGs

The last few decades have been characterised by an ever-growing focus on *sustainability*. As the concept can be defined in a multitude of ways, Brown et al. (1987) tried to define sustainability in the global context, which in its most narrow sense refers to ''the indefinite survival of the human species across all regions of the world'' (p. 717). This can be broadened by specifying that ''virtually all humans, once born, live to adulthood and that their lives have quality beyond mere biological survival'' (Brown et al., 1987, p. 717). However, this anthropocentric view can also be extended to include the natural world. The broadest sense of sustainability, therefore, refers to ''the persistence of all components of the biosphere, even

those with no apparent benefit to humanity'' (Brown et al., 1987, p. 717). However, in practice, sustainability mainly refers to the survival of humanity and the maintenance of their quality of life.

The concept of sustainability from thereon evolved into the concept of *sustainable development*. Since the 1987 *Brundtland Report* coined the term sustainable development, which referred to ''meeting the needs and aspirations of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs'' (Brundtland, 1987, p. 292), sustainable development has become one of the main goals for many state and governmental actors. The concept was operationalised through three pillars, society, environment, and economy respectively, thereby going beyond the anthropocentric view of older definitions that mainly emphasised socio-economic development (Diaz-Sarachaga et al., 2018). This is also reflected in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) definition of sustainability, which defines sustainability as ''a dynamic process that guarantees the persistence of natural and human systems in an equitable manner'' (IPCC, 2015, p. 127). It is therefore argued that ''because of the interconnections among its factors and purposes, sustainable development is essentially about the effective integration of social, economic, and ecological consideration at all scales from local to global, over the long haul'' (Kemp et al., 2005, p. 14). However, in reality, the bias toward individual pillars hampers a truly global perspective as it promotes a ''continued separation of social, economic, and environmental analyses'' (Diaz-Sarachaga et al., 2018, p. 663). Although both concepts of sustainability and sustainable development can be seen as distinct concepts, this study does not delve further into this distinction as both concepts are used relatively intertwined throughout the literature on the SDGs, degrowth, and environmental justice.

The UN fostered the emphasis on sustainability and sustainable development through the adoption of the 2000 *United Nations Millennium Declaration* consisting of eight international development goals, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), aimed at reducing ''extreme poverty and its many manifestations: hunger, disease, gender inequality, lack of education and access to basic infrastructure, and environmental degradation'' (Migiro, 2007, p. 4). Although serious progress has been made during the 15-year period in which the MDGs were to be achieved, this progress was unevenly divided among the 191 nations that implemented the goals (Fukuda-Parr, 2016). In order to continue the process of sustainable development, the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development, i.e. the Rio +20 Conference, led to the *Future We Want* document in which nation-states committed to establishing the SDGs (UN General Assembly, 2012).

As a result of this commitment, the UN led talks on the Post-2015 Development Agenda which occurred between 2012 and 2015. Subsequently, the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* was adopted in 2015 by the 193 member states of the UN. Although the SDGs are claimed to be universal through the extensive multilateral negotiations among the 193 members of the UN (Menton et al., 2020), with the goals being integrated into one another producing synergies between them (van Norren, 2020), scholars and society at large alike increasingly oppose these claims (Dabashi, 2021; Johnson, 2020; Menton et al., 2020; Naidoo & Fisher, 2020; van Norren, 2020). Van Norren (2020) for example argues that ''the SDGs do not effectively address the human-nature-well-being interrelationship'' (p. 431) that are prominent in Global Southern cosmovisions, such as Ubuntu, Gross National Happiness, and Buen Vivir, although the SDGs do ''contain [some] language of all three worldviews'' (p. 431). Simultaneously, it is argued that ''the SDGs offer no conception of distributive justice – nor, for that matter, environmental or climate justice – although the aim of Goal 5 [i.e. *gender equality*] is to achieve 'gender equality and empower all women and girls''' (Adelman, 2018, p. 20), while Goal 10, *reduced inequalities,* also aims to achieve justice to a certain extent. It is furthermore argued that the emphasis on economic growth as is done through Goal 8, *decent work and economic growth,* fosters the oxymoron of sustainable development as ''continual … economic development on a finite Earth [is] biophysically impossible'' (Brown, 2015, p. 1028).

To combat the shortcomings of the SDGs, scholars have advocated in favour of an inclusive, diverse, and environmentally just sustainability discourse which addresses the strong bias toward economic growth which hampers the attainment of social goals and ecological sustainability (Adelman, 2018; Hope, 2020; Kopnina, 2016; Menton et al., 2020; van Norren, 2020; Robra & Heikkurinen, 2019). By including various perspectives on the concepts of degrowth and environmental justice, a more holistic approach toward the SDGs can be taken as will be made clear in Chapter 3. The next sections will first discuss the SDGs in-depth by relating them to economic growth, ecological sustainability, environmental justice, and the associated shortcoming

2.1.1. The SDGs, economic growth, and ecological sustainability

The SDGs thus consist of 17 goals that aim to enhance social, economic, and environmental well-being through sustainable development. However, there are inherent contradictions and tensions between various goals. This becomes particularly clear between the goals aimed at

enhancing economic and social well-being, which are among others pursued through economic growth and ecological sustainability. As Edwards (2021) argues, economic growth can be described as a two-edged sword. On the one hand, economic growth enables social and economic development, leading to improved living standards, better economic well-being, and higher levels of employment among others. On the other hand, the continued pursuit of economic growth has detrimental effects on Earth's ecological integrity and it, therefore, does not go hand in hand with the pursuit of ecological sustainability. The continued focus on economic growth only puts additional pressure on natural resources and fosters current inequalities which further exacerbates climate change, biodiversity loss, and social inequalities (Kopnina, 2020). Overall, ''the pursuit of economic growth is undermining the capacity of Earth's atmosphere and biosphere to provide a stable basis for economic and social development'' (Edwards, 2021, p. 3080).

This contradiction becomes especially clear between Goal 8 on the one hand, and Goals 6, 12, 13, 14, and 15 on the other hand. Hickel (2019) outlines how these goals conflict as Goal 8 emphasises infinite economic growth, while the latter Goals emphasise humanity living on a finite planet. Thus, although the SDGs recognise that ''human flourishing cannot be achieved and sustained on a planet in ecological crisis'' (Hickel, 2019, p. 873), thereby recognising that poverty, underdevelopment, and environmental concerns are inherently related, the SDGs still set out goals that contradict these recognitions. As a result, the contradiction between objectives related to sustainability and growth has been taken under examination by various scholars (Gupta and Vegelin, 2016; Hajer et al., 2015; Hickel, 2019; Pongiglione, 2015).

Goal 8, ''promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all'' (UN General Assembly, 2015, p. 19) as well as Goal 9, ''build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation and foster innovation'' (p. 20), thus focus on economic development. This can among others be achieved through Target 8.1, ''sustain per capita economic growth in accordance with national circumstances and, in particular, at least 7% gross domestic product (GDP) growth per annum in the least developed countries'' (UN General Assembly, 2015, p. 19) measured through annual real GDP growth per capita, Target 8.2, ''achieve higher levels of economic productivity through diversification, technological upgrading and innovation, including through a focus on high-value added and labour-intensive sectors'' (p. 19) measured through annual real GDP growth per employed person, and Target 9.2, ''promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation and, by 2030, significantly raise industry's share of employment and GDP in line with national circumstances, and double its share in least developed countries''

(p. 20). Despite the focus on economic and industrial growth, the rationale behind these goals and targets remains lacking within the framework (Esquivel, 2016; International Council for Science, 2015). The SDGs imply that both economic and industrial growth are needed in order to achieve human development, however, it remains unclear whether this growth is the means to an end, here human development, or an end in itself (Hickel, 2019).

Besides the focus on economic and industrial growth through Goals 8 and 9, the SDGs also focus on ecological sustainability by achieving ''''harmony with nature'', to protect the planet from degradation, and to take urgent action on climate change'' (Hickel, 2019, p. 873) among others through sustainable resource use. As mentioned, this can be achieved through Goals 6, 12, 13, 14, and 15, which Hickel (2019) coined the sustainability objectives. However, these seem to be at odds with Goals 8 and 9 as continued and infinite economic growth goes hand-in-hand with environmental degradation, the exact opposite of what the sustainability objectives aim to achieve. **Table 1** thus shows how Goals 8 and 9, here coined the growth objectives, contradict the sustainability objectives. In order to empirically examine whether it is indeed possible to pursue both the objectives set for economic and industrial growth as well as the sustainability objectives, Hickel (2019) examined:

> whether it is possible to achieve 3% annual global GDP growth through 2030, as Goal 8 demands, while at the same time upholding the SDGs' commitment to the sustainability objectives, specifically (a) achieving sustainable use of natural resources and (b) reducing greenhouse gas emissions rapidly enough to keep us within the carbon budget for 2°C. (p. 875)

Table 1

Sustainable Development Goals at odds with one another.

Growth objectives		Sustainability objectives	
Goal 8	''Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all'' (UN General Assembly, 2015, p. 19).	**Goal 6**	''Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all'' (UN General Assembly, 2015, p. 18).
Goal 9	''Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation and foster	**Goal 12**	''Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns'' (UN General Assembly, 2015, p. 22).

	innovation'' (UN General Assembly, 2015, p. 20).		
		Goal 13	''Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts'' (UN General Assembly, 2015, p. 23).
		Goal 14	''Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development'' (UN General Assembly, 2015, p. 23).
		Goal 15	''Protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and biodiversity loss'' (UN General Assembly, 2015, p. 24).

Note. Table by the author, based on Hickel (2019).

First, in order to examine whether Goal 8 can be aligned with sustainable resource use, it is examined whether the material footprint, i.e. ''a measure of resource use that covers all of the resources consumed by a nation'' (Hickel, 2019, p. 875), can be achieved while also achieving an increase in global GDP of 3 per cent per year. In order to achieve this, absolute decoupling rates of 3.01 per cent to 6.88 per cent per year need to be achieved (Hickel, 2019). Hence, the amount of resources used should decline in absolute terms with the aforementioned percentages while global economic output should rise by 3 per cent. Although there have been some countries, such as Ireland, Finland, France, the Netherlands, Italy, Japan, and the UK, that have achieved relative decoupling in the past, i.e. a situation in which the amount of resources used in terms of economic output declines, thus far there has been no country that has achieved any rate of absolute decoupling (Bringezu et al., 2004; Hickel, 2019). It is thus

questionable whether it is possible to reach a rate of absolute decoupling within these bounds in the upcoming years.

Hickel (2019) outlines three studies that examine whether it is indeed feasible to achieve rates of absolute decoupling between 3.01 and 6.88 per cent on a global scale. First, Dittrich et al. (2012) show that by 2050, it is possible to achieve relative decoupling with a material footprint stabilising at 93 billion tons. However, this is almost double the sustainability threshold set at 50 billion tons (Bringezu, 2015; Dittrich et al., 2012; Hoekstra & Wiedmann, 2014; UN Environment Programme, 2014). Thus, Goal 12, *responsible consumption and production*, would be violated. Second, Schandl et al. (2016) examine whether sustainable levels of the material footprint can be achieved through policy measures aimed at improving resource usage, among others through increasing material efficiency and carbon pricing. They also find that, even in the best-case scenarios, it is impossible to achieve absolute decoupling in terms of material footprint, and that the material footprint achieved through relative decoupling exceeds sustainable levels by far. Finally, the UN Environment Programme (2017) shows that material footprint will continue to increase to 132 billion tons in 2050, even with moderate economic growth rates of 1.75 per cent. They emphasise that some relative decoupling can be achieved, but absolute decoupling remains out of reach. Hence, empirical studies thus far show that it is not possible to reconcile the global economic growth rates set in Goal 8 with the targets set in Goal 12. In order to reconcile these goals, ''absolute decoupling of GDP from material footprint'' (Hickel, 2019, p. 876) should be achieved which is not possible on a global scale while maintaining the scenario of continued economic growth.

It should however be noted that Hatfield-Dodds et al. (2015) have shown that it is possible to achieve absolute decoupling at a national level through the implementation of a wide array of policies aimed at resource efficiency, specifically in Australia between 2015 and 2050. However, Ward et al. (2016) show that these results only hold for this specific period and that material footprint will resume rising by 2050 as resource efficiency improvements are ultimately bound by physical limits. Hence, once this point is achieved, continued rates of economic growth will go hand in hand with increasing rates of resource usage. Thus although it is possible for some countries to achieve absolute decoupling by 2030, this only holds for some of the richest nations and not for the globe as a whole, while evidence also shows that it is not possible to maintain absolute decoupling in the longer term thus once again showing that Goal 8 and 12 are incompatible.

Second, Hickel (2019) examines whether it is possible to reconcile Goal 8 with Goal 13, *climate action*, by empirically studying whether continued economic growth of 3 per cent

per annum can be achieved within the carbon budget left to keep temperature increase below 2 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels. The rate of decarbonisation should reach at least 7.29 per cent a year in order to keep emissions within the carbon budget, based on a reduction of 4 per cent CO_2 emissions per year. Multiple studies examining a wide range of scenarios show that it is empirically unfeasible to align Goal 8 with Goal 13 as potential rates of decarbonisation are outweighed by the emissions coming along with the economic growth target of 3 per cent per year (IPCC, 2000; Raftery et al., 2017; Schandl et al., 2016).

Nonetheless, there is one way through which Goals 8 and 13 can be reconciled. The IPCC (2015) shows that in 101 of 116 mitigation scenarios it is possible to reconcile both goals. However, in order to achieve this, a technology which is known as bioenergy with carbon capture and storage (BECCS) is needed in order to capture excess CO_2 emissions from the atmosphere. Climate scientists, however, emphasise that it is highly unlikely that the promises of BECCS can be fulfilled as it would require a surface area of India multiplied by three (Heck et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2016), it is not yet economically viable at the scale needed (Peters, 2017), and the storage capacity needed to capture such extensive amounts of CO_2 does likely not exist (de Coninck & Benson, 2014). Thus, despite the promises of BECCS and the ability to reconcile both Goals 8 and 13, it is not likely that this can be achieved in the upcoming decades.

Through his empirical analysis, Hickel (2019) thus shows that Goal 8, specifically the target aimed at achieving GDP growth rates of 3 per cent per year, is incompatible with the sustainability objectives, specifically those on resource use and climate action. It is therefore argued that in order to achieve the sustainability objectives of the SDGs, the current development strategy aimed at GDP growth needs to be rethought as is also advocated by earlier mentioned scholars (Gupta and Vegelin, 2016; Hajer et al., 2015; Pongiglione, 2015). Section 3.1. will therefore examine how multiple perspectives on degrowth are able to contribute to a new development strategy which enables the transformative changes needed to reach the social, economic, and sustainability objectives in order to ''reach the broader aim of the SDGs: to leave no one behind'' (Menton et al., 2020, p. 1621).

2.1.2. The SDGs and environmental justice

Besides a focus on the economic pillar of sustainable development, the SDGs also aim to bring about change among the social and environmental pillars in order to eradicate poverty and inequality while simultaneously protecting Earth itself. However, the term environmental

justice, which reflects both goals of achieving environmental protection as well as social equity, is not directly mentioned in any document on sustainable development, including in the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (Gellers & Cheatham, 2018). This section aims to set out the mainstream approach toward environmental justice and examines its relation to the SDGs.

Although environmental justice can be defined in a multitude of ways, the term originates from the concept of *environmental racism* (Gellers & Cheatham, 2018). The concept of environmental racism stems from the 1980s, a period in which people of colour living in the United States ''have been (1) deliberately targeted in the placement of toxic waste facilities; (2) discriminated against in both environmental policymaking and regulatory enforcement; and (3) excluded from assuming leadership roles in the environmental movement'' (Gellers & Cheatham, 2018, p. 279) setting in motion a plethora of studies showing that marginalised communities are disproportionally harmed by among others environmental conditions. At the end of the '80s, environmental racism transitioned into *environmental equity*, which ensured that both gender and social class were included in the concept, with the concept evolving into *environmental justice* at the start of the '90s in order to become more inclusive by focusing both on equality as well as equity.

The mainstream approach to environmental justice revolves around the principles of distribution, recognition, procedure, and capabilities (Gellers & Cheatham, 2018; Menton et al., 2020; Schlosberg & Collins, 2014). First, *distributive justice* revolves around a ''fair distribution of environmental costs and benefits, the allocation of material goods, such as resources, income, and wealth, or on the distribution of social standing'' (Menton et al., 2020, p. 1624). Hence, the principle refers to the ethically just distribution of a wide array of aspects and takes into account both environmental bads and goods (Gellers & Cheatham, 2018). Second, *recognitional justice* refers to ''the recognition of, and respect for, difference'' (Menton et al., 2020, p. 1624). By not recognising certain groups within societies, the agency of these groups is neglected which makes less fortunate groups more vulnerable, ultimately leading to more inequity and inequality. Third, *procedural justice*, also known as *participatory justice* (Gellers & Cheatham, 2018), ''addresses the fair and equitable institutional processes of a State'' (Menton et al., 2020, p. 1624) thereby reflecting how social and political processes uphold systems of injustice, for example by prohibiting certain groups from participating in institutional processes. Procedural justice revolves around the connection between lacking recognition of certain groups and corresponding unjust distribution patterns. Furthermore, procedural justice is closely connected to recognitional justice as groups that are not recognised cannot participate and are therefore more vulnerable to the unfair distribution of

(environmental) goods and bads (Gellers & Cheatham, 2018). Fourth, *capabilities* link the distributional principle to the capability of individuals to flourish, based on Sen's capability approach (Gellers & Cheatham, 2018; Menton et al., 2020; Sen, 1999). It links justice to the capacity of individuals to flourish, with justice leading to more freedoms and thus higher levels of well-being. All in all, these four principles, distribution, recognition, procedure, and capabilities respectively, are highly interlinked with one another and all together constitute environmental justice.

While environmental justice can be achieved through the attainment of the four pillars of distribution, recognition, procedure, and capabilities, environmental justice can also be subdivided into three cognate forms of justice, these are climate, energy, and food justice (Gellers & Cheatham, 2018). All together these seven elements constitute environmental as well as social justice as depicted in **Figure 1**. The first, *climate justice*, refers to the global scope of environmental injustices as ''marginalized people across the world have suffered the consequences of climate change while waiting for the international community to act, and they demand that responsible parties be held accountable'' (Gellers & Cheatham, 2018, p. 284). Pursuing climate justice entails that a well-functioning environment is seen as a prerequisite in order to obtain any form of justice. The second, *energy justice*, mainly revolves around the distributional inequity of energy between the Global North and the Global South as well as between developed and under-developed nations. In order to obtain energy justice, developed nations will have to supply financial as well as technical support to energy-poor countries through the aforementioned pillars of distributional, recognitional, and procedural justice. Finally, *food justice* ''refers to the conditions under which communities can eat, grow, and sell affordable, culturally appropriate, and nutritious food that is locally cultivated and sensitive to the well-being of animals, land, and workers'' (Gellers & Cheatham, 2018, p. 285). Food justice thus focuses on food sovereignty, thereby addressing inequities in the global food system leading to malnourishment, food price volatility, and harmed livelihoods of small farmers. All in all, *social justice* is an umbrella term capturing a wide array of justices, among which environmental justice, which in turn is constituted from climate, energy, and food justice, as well as capabilities, distribution, participation, and recognition (Gellers & Cheatham, 2018).

However, as argued earlier, the SDGs do not incorporate the concept of environmental justice directly in their goals (Menton et al., 2020). Within the 2030 Agenda, ''the terms just/justice/injustice only occur 12 times'' (Menton et al., 2020, p. 1626). When examining the four pillars of environmental justice, the SDGs mostly refer to distributive justice through the

inclusion of terms like inclusive, equity, and equality. They also refer to the pillar of procedure by including terms such as access and participation. The lack of the explicit inclusion of environmental justice is mostly due to the state-based focus of the SDGs. Although civil society and stakeholders were included in the drafting of the 2030 Agenda, state actors ultimately decided on the phrasing of the goals as well as on the targets and indicators included in the SDGs. Therefore the SDGs mainly frame justice around human and legal rights in contrast to a more direct inclusion of environmental justice and its components.

Figure 1

Relationship between elements of EJ [Environmental Justice] and cognate forms of justice.
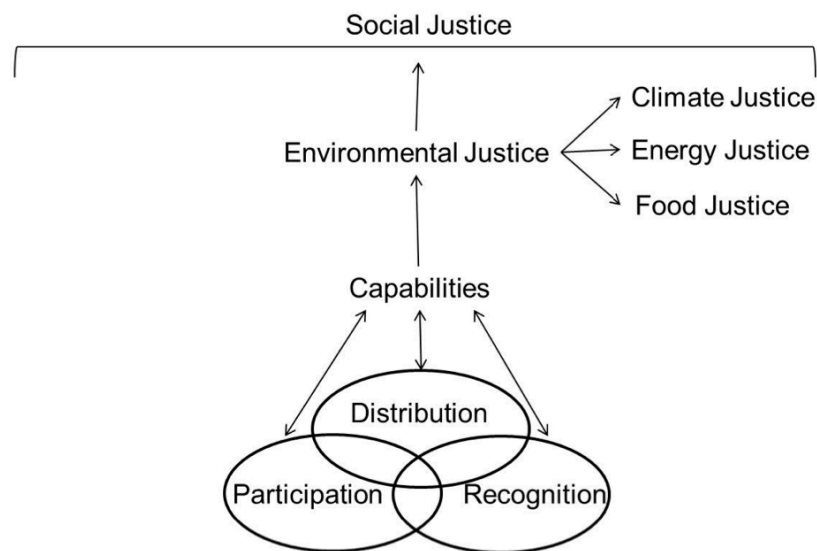
Note. Reprinted from ''Sustainable Development Goals and environmental justice: Realization through disaggregation'', by J.C. Gellers and T.J. Cheatham, 2018, *Wisconsin International Law Journal, 36*(2), p. 287.

Gellers and Cheatham (2018) examined to what extent environmental justice, albeit indirectly, is reflected in the SDGs while they also empirically examined to what extent countries are achieving environmental justice since the implementation of the SDGs has started. In order to do this, they conducted a systematic analysis in which the 169 targets corresponding to the 17 SDGs were assigned to one or more of either the four pillars of environmental justice, distribution, participation, recognition, and capabilities respectively, or the cognate forms of environmental justice, climate, energy and food justice respectively. In doing so, they found that 86 targets could directly be related to one or more of the seven

components constituting environmental justice. The second column of **Table 2** shows to what extent each pillar and cognate form of environmental justice is represented within these 86 targets (Gellers & Cheatham, 2018).

Table 2

Representation of pillars and cognate forms of environmental justice in the SDGs and voluntary national reports.

	Global level	**National level**
Distribution	34 %	27 %
Participation	12 %	12 %
Recognition	4 %	5 %
Capabilities	38 %	41 %
Climate justice	4 %	3 %
Energy justice	3 %	3 %
Food justice	4 %	8 %

Note. Table by the author, based on Gellers and Cheatham (2018).

The SDGs thus primarily rely on capabilities as well as distribution. As the SDGs are building on the MDGs, the reliance on capabilities makes sense as the MDGs mainly focused on social inclusiveness at the detriment of ecological inclusiveness, with social inclusiveness mostly relying on human capabilities and participation (Gupta & Vegelin, 2016). The relatively large emphasis on the pillar of distribution can be attributed to the fact that it is the earliest pillar within the concept of environmental justice. Thus although the SDGs do not explicitly include environmental justice in their goals, components of environmental justice can be traced back to 86 of the 169 targets.

Besides an examination of the SDGs and the corresponding targets themselves, Gellers and Cheatham (2018) also examined to what extent the way in which environmental justice was conceptualised in the SDGs has been present in voluntary national reports, which ''detail how states have translated, integrated, and implemented the SDGs in light of national circumstances'' (p. 292). In order to do this, 49 of the 62 voluntary national reports submitted in 2016 and 2017 were analysed based on the 86 targets that could be related to environmental justice. They found that 38 per cent of the targets related to environmental justice were directly mentioned in the voluntary national reports, with this percentage ranging from 81 per cent in

Belgium to 8 per cent in Egypt. The third column of **Table 2** shows to what extent each pillar and cognate form of environmental justice is represented within these voluntary national reports (Gellers & Cheatham, 2018). Based on both analyses, it can be concluded that the distribution between the components is more or less the same on global and national levels, with an exception for distribution which took on a significantly larger role in the SDGs themselves compared to the voluntary national reports.

Menton et al. (2020) furthermore examined the interactions between the SDGs, as well as within the Goals themselves, in relation to environmental justice. In doing so, they found various ''synergies, gaps, and contradictions'' (p. 1633) which need to be addressed in order to establish a truly just and sustainable society by transitioning from the current Goals to goals that incorporate and emphasise values, solidarity, and diversity. Only by doing so, the SDGs will be able to address the trade-offs and power asymmetries that currently hamper the pursuit of well-being, justice, and sustainability. When examining the Goals in-depth, it can be argued that SDG 16, ''promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels'' (UN General Assembly, 2015, p. 14), is the only goal that has an explicit focus on justice. However, the goal mainly revolves around legal justice, human rights, and the rule of law and because of this narrow focus it ''fails to address the power dynamics and structural conditions that impede environmental and social justice and, therefore, constrains its ability to support EJ [i.e. environmental justice]'' (Menton et al., 2020, p. 1626). It is furthermore argued that although SDG 16 focuses on countering physical violence and pursuing peace, it neglects to focus on a broader understanding and the root causes of other forms of violence which are often experienced by activists in the field of environmental justice, such as slow, structural, and psychological violence in the form of threats and intimidation.

Besides a more explicit reference to justice in SDG 16, it is argued that various other goals also relate to environmental justice as well as a lack of the inclusion of environmental justice. Goal 2, ''end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture'' (UN General Assembly, 2015, p. 14), can be linked to distributive justice through the focus on equal access to land and resources (Menton et al., 2020). However, it fails to address the power relations and structures common in agriculture which lead to the inequitable distribution of production between the rich and poor. Besides, the focus of SDG 3, ''ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages'' (UN General Assembly, 2015, p. 14), on water-borne diseases as well as water and soil pollution can be related to environmental justice, and distributive justice more specifically, as the environmental justice

movement finds its roots in the fight against the disproportioned harming of marginalised communities by environmental conditions. The same holds for SDG 6, *clean water and sanitation*, which addresses water pollution, excessive water usage, and water-based ecosystems, thus focusing on the availability of clean water but in doing so, it fails to take procedural justice as well as intragenerational considerations into account (Lele, 2017). Although the SDGs try to address these problems, inhabitants of low-income countries are still disproportionally affected by the negative effects on their health and environmental degradation, as high-income countries often outsource polluting activities to lower-income countries. Therefore, Menton et al. (2020) argue that ''health impacts of environmental degradation are a distributive justice issue with particularly multi-scalar implications and intersectional manifestations of injustices linked to colonial pasts (and presents)'' (p. 1627). Hence, the SDGs still uphold environmental justice as they do not address the root causes of the problems, which can be ascribed to power asymmetries and the global economic as well as political systems that uphold them (Osborn et al., 2015; Weiland et al., 2021).

SDG 13, *climate action*, and SDG 7, ''ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all'' (p. 14), both tackle justice issues arising from a climate and energy perspective. Through a focus on clean energy, it is possible to create more inclusive, just, and resilient communities that are able to face climate change. However, the goals and targets mainly focus on distributive justice, among others through a focus on the ''inequitable contribution to anthropogenic climate change and the inequitable distribution of its impacts'' (Menton et al., 2020, p. 1628) and ''to issues of energy poverty […] and energy vulnerability'' (p. 1628). It thereby neglects to incorporate aspects of procedural and recognitional justice, such as behavioural aspects and unequal ownership and control of energy.

SDG 14, *life below water*, and SDG 15, *life on land*, both aim to ''address pollution, overexploitation of species, and habitat degradation and loss'' (Menton et al., 2020, p. 1629). Within the targets of both goals, an emphasis is placed on the unequal distribution of the aforementioned problems. However, they remain ambiguous in addressing how the environmental justice principles of procedure and recognition can contribute to solving these problems which mainly can be ascribed to the anthropocentric focus of the SDGs. Therefore, Kopnina (2016), as well as Menton et al. (2020), argue in favour of the inclusion of inclusive ecological justice, as well as a true environmental justice and sustainable development perspective, in order to ''acknowledge the indispensability of non-humans as well as marginalised people'' (Menton et al., 2020, p. 1629). It is furthermore argued that the focus of SDGs 14 and 15, although being beneficial for the natural environment, could be detrimental

in terms of an environmental justice perspective as some of the measures and policies aimed at protecting nature might harm minorities (Suich et al., 2015). Therefore they could strengthen justice for nature, but at the same time weaken justice for humans.

SDG 1, ''End poverty in all its forms everywhere'' (UN General Assembly, 2015, p. 14), and SDG 10, ''Reduce inequality within and among countries'' (p. 14), both aim to address inequalities through a focus on decreasing poverty in terms of income. However, they do not incorporate the external costs coming along with increased income, such as the depletion of natural resources and the degradation of ecosystems (Menton et al., 2020). It is argued that marginalised people often benefit from healthy ecosystems and that an increase in their income does not weigh up against the rise in environmental injustices arising from an increasing income. Poverty cannot be addressed through income alone, in order to truly address the problem, world-system dynamics need to be altered with a shift from a focus on GDP as the sole measure of well-being to a broader understanding of well-being in order to create a more just world (Gonzalez, 2014).

Menton et al. (2020) also emphasise that SDG 8, *decent work and economic growth*, inherently contradicts many of the other SDGs. It is argued that the SDGs need to step away from a focus on economic growth in order to achieve social and environmental justice as economic growth is only exacerbating inequalities and injustices. Singh (2019) therefore argues that degrowth and environmental justice perspectives both ''aspire for other ways of being and belonging to the world and open possibilities for post-capitalist futures'' (p. 1), thereby aiming for ''profound socio-ecological transformations towards justice and sustainability'' (Akbulut et al., 2019, p. 7).

The aforementioned paragraphs examined the relationship between environmental justice and various SDGs in-depth, while also exemplifying the shortcoming of the SDGs. All in all, the SDGs do not explicitly incorporate the concept of environmental justice. However, as this section has outlined, the various components of environmental justice can be allocated to almost half of the targets of the SDGs, thus making environmental justice an implicit part of the SDGs. The analysis by Gellers and Cheatham (2018) showed that current development policies based on the SDGs primarily focus on the pillars of capabilities and distribution in order to enhance environmental justice, as emphasised by the examination of Menton et al. (2020). However, in doing so, the SDGs fail to embed environmental and ecological justice, as well as social justice, in the language of the SDGs and they are therefore not able to address the economic and geopolitical systems that currently lead to the injustices faced by many (Menton et al., 2020). Hence, a wide array of scholars advocate in favour of a more critical

intersectional decolonial approach towards environmental justice in order to establish a truly inclusive, diverse, and environmentally just sustainable society for humans, non-human beings, and nature (Hope, 2020; Kopnina, 2016; Menton et al., 2020; O'Manique & Fourie, 2016; Svarstad & Benjaminsen, 2020).

2.2. SDGs in the Netherlands

When the UN General Assembly adopted the SDGs in 2015, each member state committed to the implementation of the SDGs in order to foster the SDGs' pillars of people, prosperity, planet, peace, and partnerships. Although the obligation to achieve the SDGs is not legally binding, all member states are expected to make the effort to implement the global SDGs within national policies and objectives (Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (PBL), 2016). Correspondingly the Dutch government published its *Plan of Action* for the implementation of the SDGs in 2016 (Ploumen, 2016). Due to the highly complex nature of the problems tackled by the SDGs as well as the intertwinement between these problems, it is argued that a holistic approach is needed in order to effectively achieve the Goals (Head & Alford, 2015). However, the Netherlands' *Plan of Action* is characterised by an incremental approach toward the implementation of the SDGs (Ploumen, 2016). Each actor within society, from business, finance, and knowledge institutions to civil society and governmental actors, has to take on its own role in order to achieve the Agenda. Therefore, the Netherlands opt for a so-called pragmatical implementation, in which there is no hierarchical structure dictating how the implementation should be conducted. In contrast, the implementation is characterised by a goal-oriented approach in which each actor can determine for themselves what has to be done in order to achieve the targets. Hence, there is no national programme that has been implemented in order to achieve the Goals.

However, the PBL (2016) argues that the Dutch government should focus on the creation of a long-term vision in which the goals and objectives that specifically hold for the Netherlands are outlined. It furthermore argues that a decentralised, incremental approach as proposed by the Dutch government might work, but only if responsibilities between the ministries and non-governmental actors are clearly demarcated, if policy coherence is ensured, and if all actors, including civil society, are included in the drawing of a national vision and objectives. As this is not the case, the PBL argues in favour of a more holistic approach, in which the central government takes the lead.

Although the implementation of the SDGs is thus not concentrated within one actor, the Dutch government does take on a coordinating role as the government is ultimately responsible for the achievement of the SDGs by 2030 (Kenniscentrum voor Beleid en Regelgeving, n.d). This entails that the Minister of Foreign Affairs is responsible for the coordination of the Dutch SDG implementation, which is mainly done through annual reports to the House of Representatives on the progress towards achieving the SDGs. Besides, each ministry is responsible for the implementation of the SDGs within its policy area. A core team consisting of the National SDG coordinator and a few co-workers has been created in order to foster collaboration between ministries. All in all, the Dutch government stresses that the implementation of the SDGs can only be achieved through mutual cooperation between all actors in society (Ploumen, 2016). The government does not take on a leading role, it believes in the benefits of a decentralised approach and it believes that current institutions can develop themselves further in line with the SDGs.

Because of this decentralised approach, there is no specific budget allocated to the implementation of the SDGs (Sustainable Development Report, 2021). Hence, governmental organisations, such as ministries, can allocate a part of their budget to plans that foster the achievement of the SDGs. However, despite including the SDGs in the overarching narrative, there is no specific budget in the annual Ministry of Finances' Netherlands budget memorandum, nor in the budget of other ministries. Nonetheless, it should be noted that various ministries, such as the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management and the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, mention the SDGs in their annual budgets by reporting what has been done to achieve the SDGs (MVO Nederland, 2019).

Since 2017, the Dutch government annually published two reports on the progress towards achieving the SDGs (van 't Wout & Kaag, 2021). On Accountability Day, the third Wednesday of May, Statistics Netherlands, on behalf of the government, publishes the *Monitor of Well-being & the SDGs* which shows to what extent the SDGs have been achieved in the Netherlands, how this has changed since the past year, and how this relates to the rest of the European Union. Simultaneously, the central government publishes the *Dutch National SDG Report* in which the central government, together with the local and regional governments, the private sector and financial institutions, civil society, the knowledge institutions, the youth, and the human rights sector, reflects on the Dutch vision and commitment of achieving the SDGs from the perspective of all sectors involved. While the former report thus takes a more quantitative approach, focusing on the extent to which the SDGs have been achieved, the latter report takes a more qualitative approach, examining the effect of the SDGs on society as a

whole, while relating this to the policy initiatives undertaking during the preceding year and policy proposals for the near future. The *Dutch National SDG Report* can therefore be seen as a representation of the Dutch SDG policy context, qualitatively reflecting on policy-related developments concerning the SDGs.

It should be noted that when the *Monitor of Well-being & the SDGs 2021* and the *Fifth Dutch National SDG Report* were published, the central government acknowledged that the *2016 Plan of Action* was too incremental and decentralised and that a different approach was needed (Kaag, 2021). However, as the Netherlands were being led by a demissionary cabinet, no new plan of action could be submitted. The cabinet, Rutte III, therefore urged the new cabinet to update the *2016 Plan of Action* to a national SDG strategy that is supported throughout society, reflecting the increased societal engagement with the SDGs as well as the increased urgency to achieve the SDGs by 2030. This renewed plan of action could simultaneously provide a strategy to combine the attainment of the SDGs with ambitions in the pursuit of well-being, as reflected in the *Monitor of Well-being & the SDGs.* Thus far, the Dutch cabinet has not yet released an updated version of the *2016 Plan of Action*.

3. Theoretical framework

In order to overcome the shortcomings of the SDGs as outlined in the previous chapter, various scholars advocate in favour of a more inclusive, diverse, and just conception of sustainability, which can be attained through the inclusion of critical degrowth and environmental justice perspectives. This chapter will therefore critically examine the concepts of degrowth and intersectional decolonial environmental justice by providing an extensive and holistic overview of both concepts. First, both concepts will be examined, after which these will be related to the cosmovisions of Buen Vivir, Ubuntu, Ecological Swaraj, Sarvodaya, and Gross National Happiness.

3.1. Degrowth

The aim of SDG 8 is to ''promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all'' (UN General Assembly, 2015, p. 14). In order to achieve this, the goal consists of ten targets of which Target 8.1, ''sustain per capita economic growth in accordance with national circumstances and, in particular, at least 7 per cent GDP growth per annum in the least developed countries'' (p. 19), is argued to be the most

problematic as it embodies the need for ''linear growth which requires [unlimited] resource exploitation, posing a problem given that resources are limited'' (van Norren, 2020, p. 453), maintaining the obsolete rhetoric of economic sustainability (Kopnina, 2016).

Although Target 8.4, ''improve progressively, through 2030, global resource efficiency in consumption and production and endeavour to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation, in accordance with the 10-Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production, with developed countries taking the lead'' (UN General Assembly, 2015, p. 19), aims to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation, it still upholds the focus on economic growth. As mentioned, it is highly unlikely that the rate of decoupling needed will be achieved. It is therefore argued that ''our current economic system is both fuelling the climate crisis and actively preventing us from taking the necessary action to avert it'' (Klein, 2015, para. 16), which can only be addressed through a radical, transformative change of our economic system.

Therefore a small but growing number of scholars have been advocating in favour of the concept of degrowth, and its different conceptions, as of the early 2000s (Weiss & Cattaneo, 2017). However, the roots of the degrowth movement can be dated back to the 1970s (D'Alisa et al., 2014). It should furthermore be noted that ''similar alternatives to growth and development have been worked out under different names in other parts of the world'' (Sandberg et al., 2019, p. 137). Overall, *degrowth* can be described as the ''socially sustainable process of downscaling society's metabolism and throughput, i.e. a degrowth of material production and consumption'' (Kallis, 2011, p. 875) in order to preserve ''the environment and increasing human well-being and social equity'' (Sandberg et al., 2019, p. 137). However, it is more than a decrease in material throughput, it focuses on ''different forms of organizing social and economic relations towards 'an altogether new, qualitatively different world that will evolve through confrontation with the existing one''' (Singh, 2019, p. 138). Degrowth, therefore, aims to alter the socio-economic systems that uphold the current status quo in order to be truly transformative through a focus on well-being, social equity, and ecological sustainability (Cosme et al., 2017; Schneider et al., 2010).

Although the concept of degrowth focuses on the same pillars across parts of the world, all cosmovisions differ to a certain extent and therefore attribute to a more inclusive, diverse, and environmentally just conception of sustainability. Section 3.3. will therefore provide an overview of these cosmovisions which forms the basis for the inclusive, diverse, and environmentally just sustainability framework presented in the upcoming conceptual model. It should be noted that while degrowth and environmental justice are discussed as separate

concepts, the pursuit of environmental justice is an inherent part of the degrowth discourse through the focus on social equity and ecological sustainability. The next section will therefore discuss the concept of intersectional decolonial environmental justice in-depth. Subsequently, Section 3.3 will explore the worldviews of Buen Vivir, Ubuntu, Ecological Swaraj, Sarvodaya, and Gross National Happiness to exemplify how both degrowth and intersectional decolonial environmental justice perspectives are reflected within these notions.

3.2.   Intersectional decolonial environmental justice

As discussed, the concept of environmental justice was coined in the 1980s during a period in which Bullard (1990; 1993) showed that polluting activities in North Carolina were disproportionality affecting people of colour as well as low socio-economic households. This caused a series of studies which led to ''the emergence of a new type of movement where environment, anti-racism, and civil rights concerns were brought together [which is] in essence, an intersectional socio-environmental movement'' (Menton et al., 2020, p. 1623) which consequently became known as the environmental justice movement. Hence, globally, the concept of environmental justice refers to the equal ''access to goods, areas and environmental risks among socially different groups (defined by race, class, gender, and other characteristics), beyond their involvement and recognition of environmental issues'' (Leal Filho et al., 2019, p. 180). Scholars are increasingly arguing that the SDGs do not reflect the essence of environmental justice in their language, goals, and targets as discussed earlier (Menton et al., 2020). It is therefore argued that the SDGs should put more emphasis on incorporating the concept of environmental justice in order to be truly transformative and to achieve the goal of leaving no one behind. This section will therefore discuss the more critical intersectional decolonial approach toward environmental justice.

The mainstream approach to environmental justice revolves around the principles of distribution, procedure, recognition, and capabilities (Gellers & Cheatham, 2019; Menton et al., 2020). From this approach, the more critical approach emerged which comes down to an intersectional decolonial approach to environmental justice (Hope, 2020; Menton et al., 2020; Rodríguez-Labajos et al., 2019). This critical approach argues that mainstream environmental justice does not focus on the institutional changes needed to alleviate environmental injustices, but only focuses on the reforms and concessions that maintain the power structures that uphold environmental injustices. Pellow (2016) therefore argues that one must be more critical of the

aforementioned power structures while taking the highly complex nature of environmental justice into account.

It is therefore proposed that four principles must be included to move beyond an anthropocentric and mainstream perspective of environmental justice, these principles are intersectionality, multi-scalar approaches, embeddedness, and indispensability respectively (Menton et al., 2020; Pellow, 2016). The first, *intersectionality* acknowledges that ''social inequality and oppression in all forms intersect'' (Pellow, 2016, p. 21), emphasising the ''common thread of domination and othering practices by other more powerful groups'' (Menton et al., 2020, p. 1624). It thereby recognises that these inequalities not only exist and are exacerbated between human beings, but also between human and non-human beings, with non-human beings including animals, ecosystems, as well as the built environment, and between non-human beings themselves. Second, *multi-scalar approaches* refer to the need for the critical examination of the highly complex spatial as well as temporal causes, consequences, and solutions characterising the struggles of environmental justice (Pellow, 2016). It, therefore, emphasises the need to examine both the influence of time, which includes the past, present, and future, as well as the scale of environmental injustice in order to derive resolutions that can help resolve these injustices. Third, *embeddedness* refers to the fact that social inequalities, between human beings, non-human beings, and nature, are being reproduced and enforced by institutional powers and processes and that they are therefore embedded within society at large (Menton et al., 2020; Pellow, 2016). It is therefore argued that social and environmental injustices cannot be resolved as long as these power structures are maintained. In order to achieve social and environmental justice, social change has to be brought about through practices and institutions that rely less on the state through ''a broad anti-authoritarian perspective'' (Pellow, 2016, p. 20), among others through a focus on direct democracy as also proposed in the upcoming worldviews of Ecological Swaraj and Sarvodaya (Kothari et al., 2014; López-Martínez, 2018). Fourth, *indispensability* entails that ''excluded, marginalised and othered populations, both human and non-human beings and things, are indispensable'' (Menton et al., 2020, p. 1624). This entails that everything is linked to each other and without one being or thing, this linkage can no longer be maintained, this holds for the present but it also means that all are needed in order to create collective ''sustainable, just, and resilient futures'' (Pellow, 2016, p. 20). It, amongst others, goes against the notion of white supremacy which argues that people of colour can be seen as expendable while it simultaneously extends this beyond human beings.

These four principles are thus at the basis of the intersectional decolonial approach toward environmental justice and are also reflected within the forthcoming cosmovisions. These principles complement the pillars of the environmental justice approach discussed earlier by including justice for non-human beings while it simultaneously recognises the consequences of past events, the interconnections between beings and things, as well as the need for fundamental societal change.

3.2.1. Intersectionality

As mentioned in the previous section, intersectionality is one of the pillars of critical environmental justice (Pellow, 2016). However, intersectionality goes beyond the pillar of intersectionality as such. An intersectional approach towards environmental justice should ''(1) emphasize multiple social locations and intragroup differences; (2) explore these issues with a multi-scalar lens; and (3) more directly and critically identify and analyze not only powerful actors but systems and processes of power in these dynamics'' (Malin & Ryder, 2018, p. 3). Hence, intersectionality in itself does not only include the pillar of intersectionality but also the pillar of multi-scalar approaches, while it also refers to embeddedness to a certain extent.

Although intersectionality has been developed and used since the early '90s within ''critical legal scholarship and black feminist thought'' (Malin & Ryder, 2018, p. 3) and after that in a wide array of social studies, intersectionality has been lacking within environmental studies, especially within the field of environmental justice which is inherently multi-scalar and intersectional. In order to overcome the intersecting causes of environmental injustices as well as the complex human-nature interactions leading to them, the root causes of these injustices need to be examined which entails that both the contextual and historical causes, as well as the structures that uphold these injustices, need to be critically examined. In order to achieve this, oppression needs to be examined throughout the ''historical and social context and … multiple levels and/or social locations'' (Malin & Ryder, 2018, p. 4). Thus, in order to transform the SDGs to ensure inclusive, diverse, and just sustainability, the SDGs need to recognise that social, environmental, and ecological injustices intersect, both in time and scale (Menton et al., 2020).

3.2.2. Coloniality

Throughout the world, many former colonised countries still experience the consequences of *coloniality*, such as capitalism, Eurocentric science, and modern institutions (Hope, 2020), with

coloniality being defined as ''long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations'' (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 243). However, the past few years saw the emergence of decolonial praxis in order to counteract the current colonial paradigm which revolves around modernity and coloniality (Menton et al., 2020; Mignolo, 2007), through an emphasis on ''multiple ways of knowing, living, and world-making'' (Hope, 2020, p. 3). This culminated in the IPCC's Sixth Assessment Report, in which colonialism was addressed for the first time, by emphasising that colonialism prohibits the achievement of equity and that it is a historical driver of the climate crisis (Pörtner et al., 2022). Through this decolonial praxis, one is ''working toward a vision of human life that is not dependent upon or structured by the forced imposition of one ideal of society over those that differ'' (Mignolo, 2007, p. 459). Hence, decolonial environmental justice aims to counteract and end the racial and capitalist relationships that currently repress people of colour, indigenous populations, non-human beings, nature, and knowledge systems within past and present colonial systems.

In order to achieve this, environmental justice needs to go beyond the mainstream approach by including an intersectional perspective, but also by focussing on embeddedness and indispensability. It, therefore, needs to go beyond a rights-based approach and a focus on participation and distribution (Pulido & de Lara, 2018; Temper, 2019). Hence, environmental justice should focus on self-governing authorities, the abolishment of the dichotomy between mankind and nature, and go beyond recognition in order to ensure ''epistemic justice and self-affirmation'' (Temper, 2019, p. 104).

3.3. Cosmovisions

This section will examine the worldviews of Buen Vivir, Ubuntu, Ecological Swaraj, Sarvodaya, and Gross National Happiness and will show how these cosmovisions represent the concepts of degrowth and intersectional decolonial environmental justice.

3.3.1. Buen Vivir

Buen Vivir is one of the best-known alternative conceptions to the Western concept of degrowth. Buen Vivir originates from indigenous populations in Peru who called the concept *sumak kawsay* in their native language (van Norren, 2020). The concept has from thereon spread to other native populations in Bolivia and Ecuador with similar traditional knowledge

systems. In Bolivia, the native Aymara people used the term *suma qamaña*, which has been translated to *vivir bien* in Spanish, which roughly translates to 'living well'. In Ecuador, it has been translated to Buen Vivir, which in turn roughly translates to 'good living'. However, a more precise translation would be 'the plentiful life' according to experts in the Quechua language. The concept, albeit under different names, is widely used among native populations in South America, among others by the Mapuche people in Chile, the Kolla people in Argentina, and the Guaraní people in Bolivia and Paraguay (Mamani, 2010).

Although the concept is known by various names within the Andean region, this study will refer to the concept as Buen Vivir as it is simply the most used conception. The concept can be described as ''living in harmony with (and not at the cost of) others or nature and in balance between spiritual and material wealth'' (van Norren, 2020, p. 442). It mainly revolves around a partnership with Earth, which recognises and values the community in partnership with nature, among others through the pillars of interculturality and spirituality. The concept does not revolve around the notion of development, it mainly stresses reciprocity, especially with Mother Earth (Villalba, 2013).

Whereas the current economic model focuses on growth through the accumulation of production and consumption and puts capital and speculation at the centre of the economy, Buen Vivir aims at a ''a self-sustaining and life-nurturing economy without growth … with human beings as central to economy'' (van Norren, 2020, p. 443). Elements of the concept of Buen Vivir have already been incorporated in the 2008 and 2009 constitutions of both Ecuador and Bolivia respectively (Thomson, 2011).

Although both degrowth and Buen Vivir can be described as post-development concepts, questioning ''the foundations of development theory and policy'' (Ziai, 2014, p. 144) and critically examining the current economic system, they differ in the sense that degrowth does not offer a critique on current, Western science, which is still mainly anthropocentric. In contrast, Buen Vivir puts a larger emphasis on spiritual considerations, such as the inherent rights of nature itself. Relating the concept of Buen Vivir to the SDGs, it is argued by proponents that although the SDGs are a step in the right direction, it remains a ''traditional (neo) liberal UN concept supporting economic growth'' (van Norren, 2020, p. 444) whereas the concept of Buen Vivir steps away from this perception.

It can therefore be argued that the SDGs can be completely rethought by incorporating Buen Vivir. The first step would be to leave the structure centred around the goals altogether in order to intrinsically value nature as well as the common biocentric good. In terms of education, Buen Vivir strives toward ''unmasking the coloniality of knowledge'' (Van Norren,

2020, p. 446) which currently undermines other, more traditional and indigenous, forms of knowledge. It, therefore, focuses on creating common ground in which various views can exist together through intercultural dialogue (Walsh, 2011). In terms of gender, it focuses both on the complementarity of 'qhari-warmi', which entails that feminine and masculine both are needed in order to create harmony, as well as the opposing 'chaca-warmi', which entails that the feminine is the life-giving principle and therefore is closer to the Creator and because of that, it takes precedence over the masculine (Van Norren, 2020). With regard to health, Buen Vivir recognises that both the spiritual and emotions are influencing and are of importance for health, which also entails that healing needs to take place at different levels, e.g. physical, mental, and spiritual levels (Villalba, 2013). In terms of the environment, Buen Vivir emphasises the preservation of the cosmic order through a redefinition of the environment towards 'nature' and by putting a larger emphasis on ethics that take nature into account. It, therefore, focuses on ecological citizenship in which people's rights are limited by nature, focusing on ''respecting Mother Earth (who has rights) as chief principle of law; recognising Nature's rights and equal standing'' (Van Norren, 2020, p. 446). Democracy and rule of law are conducted through the feminine principle, which revolves around reciprocity and collectivity. As a result, it steps away from the patriarchal domination defining current, Western society, which exploits ''others, nature, women and ethnicity'' (Van Norren, 2020, p. 446). In doing so, Buen Vivir emphasises autonomy and diversity which fosters self-determination and it acknowledges multiple forms of democracy, such as communitarian, participatory, and representative democracy (Cortez and Wagner, 2010). In terms of peace, Buen Vivir emphasises a community-based approach in which the focus should be placed on restoring harmony by recognising both victims and victimisers and by recognising individual problems as problems of the community. Global partnership can be seen as the overall goal of Buen Vivir, it strives toward recognising our partnership with Earth as the first principle.

All in all, it can be argued that Buen Vivir does not prioritise any of the SDGs as it emphasises dialogue and diversity and therefore believes itself to be above a reductionist scheme like the SDGs (Van Norren, 2020). It does however place a larger emphasis on goals that prioritise the rights of nature and socioeconomic rights. Buen Vivir mainly argues against Goal 8 as it is inherently contradictive towards living in harmony with Nature. As the aforementioned paragraph showed, Buen Vivir strives toward the inclusion of community as a part of nature, plurinationality, interculturality, Earth's identity, and a spiritual sense of nature-culture in the SDGs (Van Norren, 2020).

The link between degrowth and intersectional decolonial environmental justice becomes especially prominent within Buen Vivir as it is a worldview that addresses the values underlying both concepts. Buen Vivir, which has been incorporated into the Bolivian constitution, can be seen as contradictory to the Western notion of development as well as the Western perspective on the modern nation-state while it also goes beyond the anthropocentric view on environmental justice. By including indigenous perspectives in the constitution, the state, land, as well as society as a whole have been restructured in order to recognise the diversity in terms of ''nations, histories, knowledges, and cosmologies'' (Hope, 2020, p. 3) that make up the modern nation-state of Bolivia. This entails that the focus on development is replaced by an emphasis on living well within one's community as well as living in harmony with nature while the nation-state recognises the diversity which creates the nation. It furthermore emphasises the capability of ecosystems to enhance the good life and well-being (Singh, 2019). Hence, indigenous perspectives acknowledge the pillars of embeddedness and indispensability and in the case of Bolivia, ensure that they are included in the constitution. However, this can only be seen as a starting point as much work still needs to be done to step away from the anthropocentric view that currently dominates perspectives on environmental justice.

3.3.2. Ubuntu

The philosophy of *Ubuntu* originates from the southern half of the African continent, being derived from the Zulu' ''umuntu ungumuntu ngabanye abantu'' (Makoba, 2016, p. 46) which roughly translates to ''a person is a person through other people'' (p. 46). Ubuntu can among others be found in South Africa, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola, and Zimbabwe (Idoniboye-Obu & Whetho, 2013). It revolves around the interconnectedness of beings through compassion and relatedness to one another, thus placing the interest of the community above that of individual beings (Ziai, 2016). The concept does not include the notion of development, in contrast, it stresses humaneness in relations between human and non-human beings as well as nature (van Norren, 2020). Ubuntu is a century-old practice but regained prominence in the 1920s when a renewed focus was placed on Zulu values within local communities to preserve indigenous culture, which was further stimulated in post-Colonial Africa (Bennett, 2011; Gade, 2012). Ubuntu became a part of contemporary approaches among ''the South African state, academics, private sector, and non-governmental organisations'' (Makoba, 2016, p. 43) in the post-apartheid era in which southern African

countries transitioned from a minority white rule to a majority black rule (Matolino & Kwindingwi, 2013).

Ubuntu is inherently holistic, ''there is no differentiation between the physical and the spiritual; between humans, animals and objects, the visible and invisible'' (Sartorius, 2021, p. 101). Although there is no common definition of Ubuntu (Bennett, 2011), Idoniboye-Obu and Whetho (2013) defined the philosophy through a set of factors underscoring Ubuntu. It is argued that Ubuntu is a philosophy that ultimately fosters the potential of human beings. It does so through community-oriented thinking which is based on valuing the provision of service, respecting others, being fair and compassionate to all, and having collective respect for the dignity of humanity, while Ubuntu also recognises that humanity is an integral part of ecosystems and that therefore communities have the responsibility to sustain all forms of life and have to share natural resources among and between generations based on the principle of equity.

As discussed earlier, the SDGs rely on the traditional development discourse which focuses on economic growth and technological solutions in order to solve global social, economic, and environmental problems (Sartorius, 2021). In contrast, Ubuntu does not have a straightforward notion of development as it is essentially a criticism of universalising development ideas such as the SDGs. In Ubuntu, the emphasis is placed on human dignity instead of on money, on human relations instead of on the economy, on empowerment and the ability to provide for themselves and others, on the achievement of economic equity, on solidarity, and on redistribution. In doing so, it respects nature as much as people themselves, therefore stressing the intrinsic value of nature (Van Norren, 2020). Because of this, Ubuntu can be seen as a critique of the ''hegemonic notions of (economic) ''development'''' (Sartorius, 2021, p. 109).

Ubuntu can be described as a philosophy that is constantly evolving, it does not see achieving the SDGs as an end goal, the Goals are only a starting point that evolve along the way (Van Norren, 2020). It can therefore be argued that the SDGs are contrary to what Ubuntu tries to achieve as it deduces the philosophy into single targets and indicators. Ubuntu can nonetheless be related to the various clusters of the SDGs. In terms of health, Ubuntu emphasises communal care of the ill, it sees the healer as a mediator between supranatural sources that cause the illness and the ill themselves. Education revolves around morality; it accentuates consensual dialogue and logical and corroborated argumentation. Due to the diverse composition of many African nations, Ubuntu places a large emphasis on different value systems as well as diversity thereby being accepting of a wide array of cultures. Because

of the focus on communality and family, Ubuntu can be seen as progressive in terms of gender equality as well as in its acceptance of the queer community (Bandawe & Meerkotter, 2015). As Ubuntu sees human beings and nature as a whole, environmental protection is essential for both (Van Norren, 2020). In terms of peace and security, it emphasises restorative justice in order to heal from the injustices faced during the colonial era. Institution building and rule of law are mainly developed through nation-building and the empowerment of people which consequently leads to more leadership and citizen participation.

The main connection between Ubuntu, degrowth, and intersectional decolonial environmental justice can thus be found in the values underlying both conceptions (Hoeft, 2018). Both aim to promote a communal way of living that places value on others' well-being instead of the individual's well-being. Both concepts also oppose the anthropocentric orientation of mainstream, Western thinking by opposing individuality and materialism. Ubuntu and the concepts of degrowth and intersectional decolonial environmental justice therefore both are post-developmental conceptualisations that could foster the transition towards a more holistic vision that informs and enriches the dominant development perception (Church, 2012; Hoeft, 2018).

3.3.3. Ecological Swaraj

Ecological Swaraj, also known as radical ecological democracy, is an Indian alternative to sustainable development and economic growth (Kothari et al., 2014). Swaraj can be roughly translated into ''self-rule including self-reliance'' (Kothari et al., 2014, p. 368). It can be described as a grassroots movement that focuses on self-reliance and self-governance, promoting and respecting ecological limits as well as the rights of nature, mankind, and non-human beings (Kothari et al., 2014). Through a holistic perspective on (human) well-being and an emphasis on strong democracy, Ecological Swaraj strives to pursue social justice and equity (Demaria & Kothari, 2017). Due to its grassroots bases, Swaraj is a decentralised and regionally rooted worldview which continuously evolves, putting a large emphasis on local communities.

Ecological Swaraj revolves around ecological sustainability, social well-being and justice, direct political democracy, economic democracy, and cultural and knowledge plurality (Kothari et al., 2014). Ecological sustainability revolves around the intrinsic value of nature. Nature needs to be conserved and its resilience needs to be recognised. Humanity is a part of nature and nature should be granted the right to thrive. Due to the large emphasis on equity, social well-being, and justice it aims for fulfilled and satisfactory lives in terms of physical,

social, cultural, and spiritual dimensions. Peace and harmony need to be ensured, among others by balancing collective and individual interests. Equity also holds in terms of rights, with no differences between socio-economic and political classes. The grassroots nature of Swaraj goes hand in hand with direct political democracy in which the decision-making power is in the hand of each individual, making higher levels of governance downwardly accountable. This direct political democracy takes place within ecological and cultural boundaries. Economic democracy argues in favour of the local regional economy, which ensures self-sufficiency in terms of basic needs within regions while trade and exchange foster this self-reliance. Caring and sharing are the main pillars of the economy, which also emphasises that ''local communities … have control over the means of production, distribution, exchange, and markets'' (Kothari et al., 2014, p. 368). Cultural and knowledge plurality revolves around the acknowledgement of diversity. Learning can be seen as an inherent part of life and living which should foster everyone's ethical and spiritual well-being as well as happiness.

Although Ecological Swaraj has not explicitly been linked to the SDGs, it can be seen as an alternative to the top-down and goal-oriented approach of the SDGs (Kothari et al., 2014). By pursuing some of the elements that are included in the SDGs, albeit in a different way, and by its emphasis on self-reliance and self-governance as well as on ecological integrity, Ecological Swaraj can be connected to the concepts of degrowth and intersectional decolonial environmental justice and can, therefore, foster a more inclusive, diverse, and just conception of sustainable development.

3.3.4. Sarvodaya

Sarvodaya, which can roughly be translated into welfare for all, is a concept coined by Gandhi, promoting equality, justice, and solidarity through institutions that pursue the highest level of well-being for everyone (Wanden-Berghe, 2021). Sarvodaya aims to reduce violence against human and non-human beings in order to obtain ''the rise or emancipation (*udaya*) of all (*sarva*)'' (Nadkarni, 2015, p. 90), i.e. Sarvodaya. Through direct participation in public decision-making and the democratic ownership of resources, all human beings have the power to enhance their and the collectives' well-being (López-Martínez, 2018). Whereas Gandhi's conception of Sarvodaya mainly refers to human beings as they are able to partake in direct participation, other scholars extend the concept to also include non-human beings and future generations of human beings, that are also deserving of a good quality of life (Wanden-Berghe, 2021).

In order to reach Sarvodaya, i.e. welfare for all, four objectives need to be achieved (Wanden-Berghe, 2021). First, mankind needs to acknowledge that it is a part of nature and that they, therefore, belong to the land instead of the land belonging to humanity. Human beings, therefore, need to reinterpret their relationship to nature by stepping away from the dichotomy of humanity versus nature. Second, other cultural paradigms, such as the discussed worldviews of Buen Vivir, Ubuntu, and Ecological Swaraj, need to be included within the spheres of governance, market, and civil society in order to obtain a more diverse and holistic perspective. Third, states need to reorient their investments towards a focus on ''social, health, education and environmental protection expenditure'' (Wanden-Berghe, 2021, p. 65). Fourth, adjacent to point three, consumers need to focus on human needs instead of material desires, which entails that one needs to step away from the planned and perceived obsolescence, i.e. the production of goods with a short lifespan and the continuous drive to purchase new goods to obtain happiness, that currently is the main paradigm of society (Wanden-Berghe, 2021).

Due to the focus on development through ''political, social, economic, technological, and cultural dimensions'' (Nadkarni, 2015, p. 90), Sarvodaya offers an alternative perspective on development that steps away from the need for economic growth which only benefits a small proportion of all beings. Instead, Sarvodaya acknowledges the importance of all beings, therefore offering a more equitable way of development which is strengthened through the interplay of the aforementioned dimensions. The main argument against the focus on economic growth as the instrument of development is that in doing so, a small number of individuals benefit at the detriment of a large number of other human beings as well as at the detriment of nature. Therefore, pursuing the interests of present and future generations, of all beings, should be the main aim of development. Consequently, Gandhi advocates in favour of moral development, in order to prevent injustices and deprivation which ensures economic and social equity in terms of status. This simultaneously ensures that nature remains intact, while it also stimulates technological development which can reduce environmental destruction coming along with humanity's way of living. The former can be argued to be a change in the political, social, economic, and cultural dimensions, by moderating the social and political institutions that currently uphold the injustices faced by many, while the latter offers a more technological solution to society's problems. All in all, society's way of living needs to be altered by adopting a simpler way of life that acknowledges the connection to others and nature.

3.3.5. Gross National Happiness

Gross National Happiness is a Buddhist worldview developed in Bhutan aimed at obtaining harmony between inner skills and outer circumstances through ''respect for nature, compassion, and balance and moderation and interdependence of all things'' (Van Norren, 2020, p. 434). Gross National Happiness differs from mainstream economic thinking in the sense that it places emphasis on a broader notion of well-being which can be measured through the Gross National Happiness index in contrast to the mainstream approach of GDP. Gross National Happiness revolves around four pillars, ''culture as a basis for all development, socio-economic development, care for the environment and good governance'' (Van Norren, 2020, p. 434), which are based on nine dimensions ''psychological well-being, time use, cultural diversity and resilience, community vitality, education, health, good governance, ecological diversity and resilience, and living standards'' (p. 435). By stepping away from GDP as the sole indicator of well-being, Gross National Happiness aims to develop the capabilities of individuals in order to enhance the collective while it simultaneously respects culture as a way of life and puts ecology over the economy (Van Norren, 2020).

Through the implementation of Gross National Happiness, the SDGs can potentially be developed further in order to ensure happiness in the Buddhist sense, through compassion, cooperation, and services. In terms of education, the focus should shift from producing knowledge as a tool to enhance productivity to seeing education as something that is able to provide a deeper understanding of life and reality (Palden, 2011). In terms of health, Gross National Happiness goes beyond the microcosm of the body as it also includes the macrocosm of the universe (Tshenpo, 2006; Van Norren, 2020). By obtaining harmony between both, physical, emotional, as well as spiritual health can be ensured. It promotes gender through the vision of complementary masculine and feminine forces that are present throughout nature and all beings (Crins, 2008). Gross National Happiness acknowledges and respects the intrinsic value of all sentient beings, leading to restorative justice in the pursuit of environmental sustainability (Van Norren, 2020). Hence, peace is generated through achieving inner well-being and striving after restorative justice which fosters global partnerships, supporting and acknowledging the interdependence of all forms of life. By acknowledging autonomy, both on the individual as well as the collective level, and the pursuit of self-sufficiency and decentralisation, good governance can be realised.

Although the SDGs and Gross National Happiness both have a goal-oriented approach and partially embody the same objectives (Van Norren, 2020), Gross National Happiness goes beyond the SDGs. Where the SDGs keep in line with the mainstream development approach,

Gross National Happiness is able to step away from this by focusing on ''spiritual development, cultural promotion, emotional balance and time balance'' (Yangka et al., 2018, p. 10). It furthermore allows approaches that differ from the GDP-oriented approach of the SDGs through the inclusion of other forms of capital such as ecological, social, cultural, and human capital (Penjore, 2017). Thus, although the SDGs and Gross National Happiness share various of their goals to a certain extent, Gross National Happiness provides a broader and more holistic alternative to development by emphasising the intrinsic value of nature and all beings, and foremost by stepping away from development through an economic approach by taking a much broader array of indicators which form the core of well-being and development.

3.4. Inclusive, diverse, and just environmental sustainability

The literature review and the theoretical model provided an in-depth discussion of the concepts and underlying discourses of sustainability, degrowth, environmental justice, and diverse worldviews, which are all essential in order to attain an inclusive, diverse, and just environmental sustainability discourse. The overarching aim of the current sustainability discourse strives to leave no one behind through the 17 SDGs that aim to enhance social, economic, and environmental well-being. However, as shown in the previous sections, this pursuit is ''neither environmentally just nor socially just'' (Scheidel & Schaffartzik, 2019, p. 330). In short, the continued focus on economic growth exacerbates current inequalities and neglects intragenerational considerations while it also hampers the pursuit of the sustainability objectives and does not take the inherent value of nature itself into account.

It is argued that in order to arrive at an inclusive, diverse, and environmentally just conception of sustainability, socioeconomic and political systems need to be critically examined and transformed as they currently uphold injustices and foster environmental degradation (Menton et al., 2020; Ramcilovic-Suominen, 2022). The focus on economic growth has to be addressed by a shift towards an economic system based on the underlying values of the concept of degrowth, which are well-being, social equity, and ecological sustainability (Schneider et al., 2010), while the socio-political system needs to address the intersectionality of injustices faced by humans, non-humans, and nature. This inclusive, diverse, and environmentally just sustainability discourse should therefore focus on fundamentally altering the socio-economic power dynamics in order to ensure justice for all, among others through the inclusion of norms and values present in cosmovisions originating in the Global South. Hence, this study argues that the current sustainability discourse which

underlies the SDGs has to incorporate elements from both the critical discourses of degrowth as well as intersectional decolonial environmental justice in order to achieve inclusive, diverse, and just environmental sustainability.
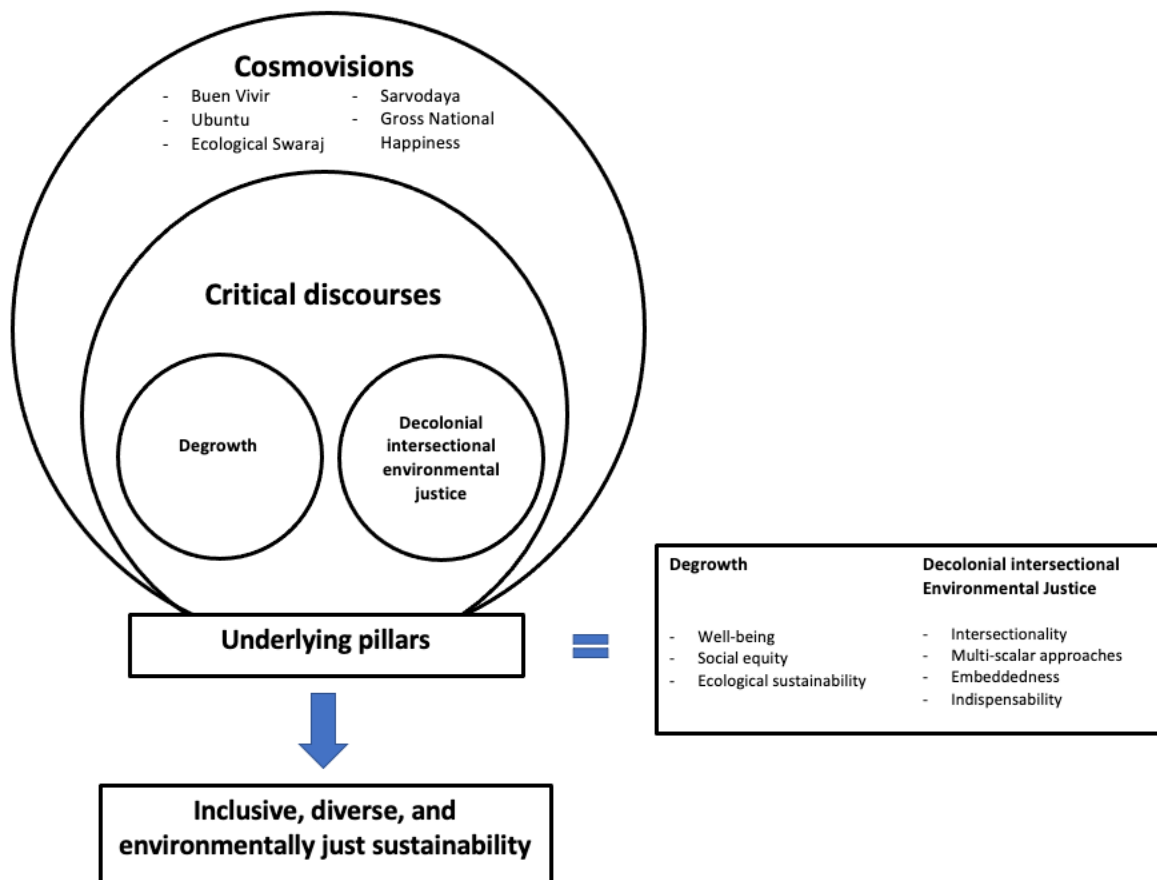
Both the discourses of degrowth and intersectional decolonial environmental justice are fundamentally against the pursuit of unlimited economic growth and aim to attend sustainability and justice by radically changing the dominant system (Akbulut et al., 2019; Dengler & Seebacher, 2019; Martínez-Alier, 2012; Rodríguez-Labajos et al., 2019; Scheidel & Shaffartzik, 2019). Whereas the current anthropocentric sustainability discourse revolves around economic growth, socio-economic development, and saving nature for the sake of humanity, the critical sustainability discourse based on degrowth mainly focuses on socio-ecological transformations by altering our ways of living through an emphasis on social and human-nature relations through the pursuit of well-being, social equity, and ecological sustainability (Cosme et al., 2017; Schneider et al., 2010). The critical intersectional decolonial environmental justice discourse adds to this by extending the scope of justice beyond human beings by focussing on social equity and ecological sustainability through which the multi-scalar implications and intersectional manifestations of injustices among humans, non-humans, and nature can be addressed.

3.4.1. Conceptual model

This inclusive, diverse, and just environmental view of sustainability can be used as a lens through which the Dutch SDG policy context can be analysed. This lens reflects the core of the concepts of degrowth and intersectional decolonial environmental justice and the corresponding cosmovisions. **Figure 2** therefore shows how the critical discourses of degrowth and intersectional decolonial discourses, and the cosmovisions that share the underlying values, can be combined into an inclusive, diverse, and just conceptual model of environmental sustainability.

Figure 2

Conceptual model.

Cosmovisions
- Buen Vivir
- Ubuntu
- Ecological Swaraj
- Sarvodaya
- Gross National Happiness

Critical discourses

Degrowth

Decolonial intersectional environmental justice

Underlying pillars

Inclusive, diverse, and environmentally just sustainability

Degrowth	Decolonial intersectional Environmental Justice
- Well-being	- Intersectionality
- Social equity	- Multi-scalar approaches
- Ecological sustainability	- Embeddedness
	- Indispensability

Note. Figure by the author, based on the literature review and theoretical framework.

3.4.2. Operationalisation

The mainstream and critical discourses can be operationalised within the analytical framework shown in **Table 3**. Whereas the *mainstream sustainability* discourse revolves around economic growth, human development, and environmental sustainability, the critical degrowth discourse, coined *critical sustainability*, revolves around well-being, social equity, and ecological sustainability. Correspondingly, the *mainstream environmental justice* discourse revolves around distribution, procedure, recognition, and capabilities, whereas the critical intersectional decolonial environmental justice discourse, coined *critical environmental justice*, revolves around intersectionality, multi-scalar approaches, embeddedness, and indispensability. These pillars are subsequently used in the analysis to determine to what extent a combination of degrowth and environmental justice discourses are present within the *Fifth Dutch National SDG Report: Sustainable Development in the Netherlands*.

Table 3

Analytical framework on the mainstream and critical discourses on the attainment of sustainability and environmental justice.

Category: Attainment of sustainability	
Mainstream sustainability focuses on:	Critical sustainability [i.e. degrowth] focuses on:
Code a. Economic growth	**Code a.** Well-being
Code b. Human development	**Code b.** Social equity
Code c. Environmental sustainability	**Code c.** Ecological sustainability
Category: Attainment of environmental justice	
Mainstream environmental justice focuses on:	Critical environmental justice [i.e. intersectional decolonial environmental justice] focuses on:
Code a. Distribution	**Code a.** Intersectionality
Code b. Procedure	**Code b.** Multi-scalar approaches
Code c. Recognition	**Code c.** Embeddedness
Code d. Capabilities	**Code d.** Indispensability

Note. Table by the author, based on the literature review, theoretical framework and De Jong and Vijge (2021).

3.4.3. Hypotheses

Since the Rijksoverheid puts extra emphasis on the pursuit of well-being in addition to the SDGs, as discussed in Section 2.2., it is hypothesised that the critical discourses of degrowth and intersectional decolonial environmental justice are to a small extent reflected within the *Fifth Dutch National SDG Report: Sustainable Development in the Netherlands*. However, since the SDGs are premised on the principles of the mainstream sustainability and environmental justice discourses, it is also hypothesised that the majority of the report will reflect the mainstream discourses towards sustainability and environmental justice.

4.   Methodology

4.1.   Research philosophy

Each study is conducted through a research philosophy based on the ''principles and assumptions that are used to design, conduct, analyze, and interpret research and its outcomes'' (Moon & Blackman, 2014, p. 1168), consisting of three elements, ontology, epistemology, and philosophical perspective. This section will propose the positions taken for each of these elements.

The ontological position defines a researcher's perspective on reality as it reflects ''what exists in the human world that researchers can acquire knowledge about'' (Moon & Blackman, 2014, p. 1167). Ontology can be dissected into realism and relativism, with the former arguing that only one reality exists and with the latter arguing that multiple realities exist. This study was conducted from a relativist perspective as this study used multiple understandings to examine the concepts of degrowth and environmental justice. To be more precise, this study used a bounded relativist perspective, defined as ''mental constructions of reality are equal in space & time within boundaries (e.g., cultural, moral, cognitive)'' (Moon & Blackman, 2014, p. 1169), as it is argued that these different understandings are the same within certain regions and therefore can be ascribed as different worldviews.

The epistemological position defines how a researcher creates knowledge, which can be divided into an objectivist, constructionist, and subjectivist perspective (Moon & Blackman, 2014). This study used a constructionist perspective, defined as ''meaning created from interplay between the subject & object: subject constructs reality of object'' (Moon & Blackman, 2014, p. 1167), as the answer to the research question is formulated based on an interplay between the literature review, the case study, and the therefrom derived interpretations from the researcher.

The philosophical perspective describes the philosophical orientation that guides a researcher throughout their study. This study used critical theory throughout the research in order ''to challenge, reveal conflict and oppression, and bring about change'' (Moon & Blackman, 2014, p. 1173) by examining critical perspectives towards the dominant, neo-liberal discourse on sustainability, development, and environmental justice. More specifically, this study used an emancipatory and participatory perspective in order to empower ''the subjects of social inquiry'' (Moon & Blackman, 2014, p. 1169) and change the structures that currently uphold and exacerbate many injustices while simultaneously holding ''politics & political

agenda's'' (p. 1169) accountable through a critical analysis of the *Fifth Dutch National SDG Report: Sustainable Development in the Netherlands*.

4.2. Research strategy

A research strategy reflects the overall design that will be followed throughout the research. Van Thiel (2014) differentiates between four research strategies: experiment, survey, case study, and desk research. In order to answer the research question, a combination between desk research and a case study has been conducted.

The research question revolves around the Dutch SDG policy context. Hence, the *Fifth Dutch National SDG Report: Sustainable Development in the Netherlands* was analysed in this study. As mentioned earlier, the Dutch government annually publishes a report on the Dutch progress in terms of achieving the SDGs and related policies from the perspective of the Rijksoverheid, decentralised governments, knowledge institutions, the youth, and the National Institute for Human Rights. As the 2021 report is the most recent version at the time of writing, it is the one used in this study. Within the report, the Rijksoverheid and the sectors constituting Dutch society review and discuss the progress achieved on the SDGs as well as policy initiatives during the preceding year and policy proposals for the near future, therefore the report offers the possibility to examine it for the presence of mainstream as well as critical discourses on sustainability and environmental justice. This study followed the division as made in the *Fifth Dutch National SDG Report: Sustainable Development in the Netherlands*. Hence, **Appendix I** gives an overview of the actors analysed and depicts by whom the chapters are drafted. Although it can be argued that the knowledge institutions, the youth, and the human rights sector are an indispensable part of civil society, these sectors are analysed and discussed separately as is done within the report itself.

The analysis of the case study was preceded by desk research in order to derive the conceptual and analytical frameworks, while desk research was also applied to contextualise the results and present ways to move beyond the mainstream discourses. During desk research, existing data is used in order to come to an answer to the research question. Desk research can be conducted through primary and secondary materials, with the former consisting of information collected by the researcher themselves while the latter consists of findings of earlier research (van Thiel, 2014). More precisely, primary material refers to ''information that has not been produced for research purposes'' (van Thiel, 2014, p. 102). The *Fifth Dutch National SDG Report: Sustainable Development in the Netherlands* can therefore be classified

as primary material. Hence, secondary materials have been used for the literature review and theoretical framework whereas the case study was conducted through primary material. In turn, both primary and secondary materials were used to contextualise the results and to present ways beyond the dominant discourse.

4.3.   Research method and data collection and analysis

This study is based on a deductive and qualitative approach, applying critical discourse analysis to the Dutch case study in order to answer the research question. The study started with an extensive literature research in order to critically examine the current sustainability discourse as well as the critical discourses based on degrowth and intersectional decolonial environmental justice. The outcome of the literature review was used to conduct a critical discourse analysis which determined to what extent a combination of degrowth and environmental justice discourses are present within the *Fifth Dutch National SDG Report: Sustainable Development in the Netherlands.*

Discourse analysis is a qualitative method used to analyse written, vocal, or sign language in order to discover linguistic patterns (van Thiel, 2014). Correspondingly, discourses can be defined as ''shared way[s] of thinking and talking about a certain subject'' (Van Thiel, 2014, p. 177). Various discourses coexist together and compete in society to become the dominant discourse. There are various approaches to discourse analysis, among which critical discourse analysis is one. Critical discourse analysis has been developed by Fairclough (1995) as ''a framework and a means of exploring the inbrications between language and social-institutional practices and between these, taken together, with broader social and political structures'' (Fairclough, 1995, p. vii). In critical discourse analysis, language is seen as a form of social practice and it is argued that language and other forms of social practices constitute one another. Therefore critical discourse analysis examines the relationship between discourses and other forms of social practice in order to ''understand, expose, and ultimately resist social inequality'' (van Dijk, 2005, p. 349). Critical discourse analysis is particularly useful for policy analysis as ''it can be employed to identify dominant, marginal, oppositional or alternative discourses within policy texts'' (Cummings et al., 2020). It furthermore is intrinsically activist and critical as it aims to counteract social wrongs present in dominant discourses through the identification of critical sub-discourses. As the aim of this study is to examine to what extent the critical discourses of degrowth and intersectional decolonial environmental justice are present within the *Fifth Dutch National SDG Report: Sustainable Development in the*

Netherlands, which is primarily based on the dominant sustainability discourse, critical discourse analysis can be used to identify the presence of the aforementioned critical discourses.

This study used the methodology of critical discourse analysis developed by Cummings et al. (2020) which is based on Fairclough's (1995) original analysis. Fairclough's (1995) original model and methodology for discourse analysis, as shown in **Figure 3**, consist of three inter-related analyses which are conducted on the micro, meso, and macro-level. These analyses consist of the ''linguistic description of the language text, interpretation of the relationship between the (productive and interpretative) discursive processes and the text, and explanation of the relationship between the discursive processes and the social processes'' (Fairclough, 1995, p. 97). The first analysis, text analysis, examines the object of analysis, in this study the *Fifth Dutch National SDG Report: Sustainable Development in the Netherlands,* in order to provide a description of the discourse. This analysis takes place on the micro-level and the goal is to analyse the language in the text itself. The second analysis, processing analysis, examines the discursive practice. By examining the processes of production and interpretation of the object of analysis, the discourse can be interpreted in relation to the contextual understanding. It thus takes place on a meso-level and it examines the discourse by taking the context into account, among others by examining by whom the object is written and who the target audience is. The third analysis, social analysis, examines the social practice. It takes a macro-level perspective in order to examine larger societal and historical conditions that govern these practices, such as rules, norms, and traditions.

While Fairclough's methodology on critical discourse analysis is a fruitful starting point, Cummings et al. (2020) developed the methodology further ''to make it more appropriate to policy documents where the sub-discourse within the text is the focus, namely a discourse which is not the main theme within the text'' (p. 100). In contrast to the three phases of Fairclough's (1995) approach, the methodology by Cummings et al. (2020) consists of four phases as they clarified the methodology by simplifying the language used, making it more suited for the analysis of policy documents, and tried to make it more accessible for scholars not familiar with discourse analysis. In addition to the three aforementioned phases, Cummings et al. (2020) add a phase in which pre-existing discourses are identified which will subsequently help identify sub-discourses. Since the goal of this study is to examine to what extent the sub-discourses of degrowth and intersectional decolonial environmental justice are present in the Dutch policy report, the methodology of Cummings et al. (2020) is particularly useful.

Figure 3

Diagrammatic representation of Fairclough's critical approach to discourse analysis.

Dimensions of discourse   Dimensions of discourse analysis
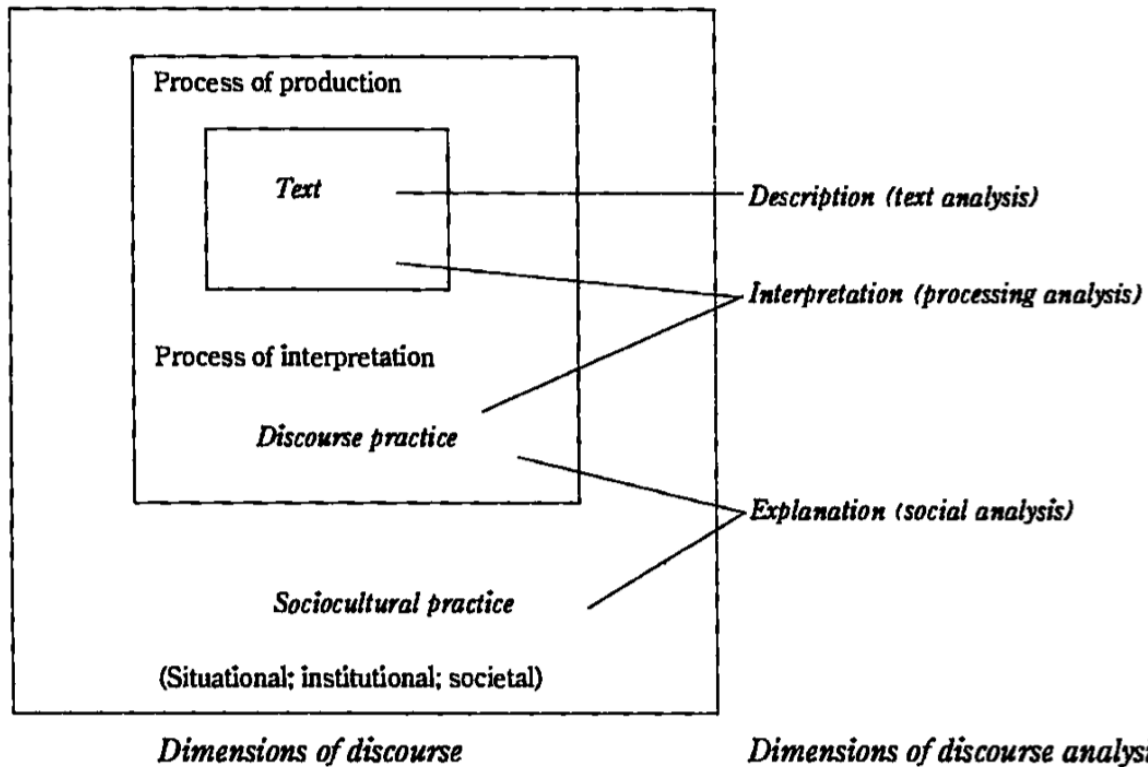
Note. Reprinted from *Critical discourse analysis: the critical study of language* (p. 98), by N. Fairclough, 1995, Longman. Copyright 1995 by Longman Group Limited.

The first phase consists of 1) the selection of a research topic that revolves around a social question which can subsequently be approached through the analysis of a text and 2) the identification of discourses that are already present in the area under examination (Cummings et al., 2020). Hence, this study addressed the critiques that scholars have on the SDGs by analysing to what extent critical discourses are present within the Dutch policy context. In doing so, it identified the dominant sustainability discourse underlying the SDGs and the critical discourses based on degrowth and environmental justice perspectives. The second phase consists of 1) the selection of appropriate texts, in this study the *Fifth Dutch National SDG Report: Sustainable Development in the Netherlands,* 2) the analysis of the respective texts by examining ''individual words and phrases, how the words and phrases relate to each other in the text, the priority given to different themes'' (Cummings et al., 2020, p. 104), and 3) by identifying the discourses present in the text based on the discourses examined in the first phase. This phase thus consisted of the coding of the policy report through the analytical

framework presented in Section 3.3.2. through which the presence of the mainstream and critical discourses could be examined. The third phase revolves around the context behind the text by examining how and by whom the text was created and how this relates to the discourses identified in phase one as well as in the text itself. The fourth phase presents ways past the dominant discourse, for example through critical discourses that provide solutions to the social question examined.

In order to identify the presence of mainstream sustainability and environmental justice discourses within the *Fifth Dutch National SDG Report: Sustainable Development in the Netherlands*, the policy document was analysed through a process of deductive coding. Coding identifies units of analysis within the text, which can be ''clustered together to form themes, categories, and subcategories'' (Mayburg & Poggempoel, 2007, p. 65). As mentioned, Section 3.3. presented how the critical discourses of degrowth and environmental justice contribute to a more inclusive, diverse, and just sustainability discourse. **Table 3** correspondingly presented the analytical framework through which the process of coding takes place. **Appendix II** extends this framework by defining the codes and by including the most frequently mentioned concepts related to the codes.

4.4. Quality of the study

Whereas quantitative studies are often evaluated through the concepts of reliability, validity, and generalisability, this is much harder in qualitative studies as there are no accepted standards by which qualitative studies can be examined. Therefore, in order to assess the rigour of this qualitative analysis, four measures of trustworthiness are discussed: truth value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mayburg & Poggempoel, 2007).

Truth value ''refers to the fact that the data is rich and reflects participants' knowledge'' (Mayburg & Poggempoel, 2007, p. 65). By taking a bounded realist perspective, it is acknowledged that multiple realities exist and that therefore the discourses discussed are a reflection of a multitude of realities. This study simultaneously is conducted through a constructivist epistemology. This entails that the analysis and coding are conducted with a certain degree of subjectivity. Hence, the researcher's assumptions and biases might have interfered with the results to a certain extent. Applicability ''refers to being able to utilize results of the research in similar contexts'' (Mayburg & Poggempoel, 2007, p. 65). While the conceptual and analytical models are applicable in other settings, such as other places or time periods, the results themselves are a representation of the specific case study and are therefore

not applicable in other contexts. Consistency ''refers to being able to follow the research methodology of an original research and come to similar conclusions'' (Mayburg & Poggempoel, 2007, p. 65). Through a clear and transparent research process, consistency can be realised. By outlining the four phases of the methodology in Section 4.3., including the analytical framework, **Table 3**, and by making the codebook available upon request the study can be replicated. Neutrality ''refers to the research being free from researcher bias'' (Mayburg & Poggempoel, 2007, p. 66). Neutrality is achieved when truth value, applicability, and consistency have been addressed as is done in the aforementioned paragraphs.

Thus although the researchers' personal experiences and viewpoints and the limited applicability of the results to another context might limit this study's credibility, this study has incorporated strategies to enhance the credibility by clearly and transparently documenting the process of analysis and by providing a rich and detailed theoretical framework in order to include different perspectives and points of view to ''produce a more comprehensive set of findings'' (Noble & Smith, 2015, p. 35). Jaipal-Jamani (2014) furthermore argues that the validity of discourse analysis can be established through transdisciplinary convergence. It is argued that critical discourse analysis is premised on three disciplines: semiotics, systemic functional linguistics, and critical theory. This presents ''the researcher with semiotic (e.g., knowledge and social codes), linguistic (e.g., typology of language functions) and critical tools of analysis (e.g., constructs from critical theory) to interpret text at multiple levels (e.g., linguistic, situational, and social levels)'' (Jaipal-Jamani, 2014, p. 806). As a result, a claim for the validity of the results originating from the critical discourse analysis, which is based on multiple levels and conducted through differing tools, can be made.

5. Results

This chapter applies the analytical framework as presented in Section 3.3.2. to the *Fifth Dutch National SDG Report: Sustainable Development in the Netherlands* in order to examine to what extent a combination of degrowth and environmental justice discourses have been adopted in this report. As mentioned earlier, within the analysis, the degrowth discourse has been coined critical sustainability whereas the intersectional decolonial justice discourse has been coined critical environmental justice. This chapter will first present the critical discourse analysis through a quantitative approach before exploring this in-depth qualitatively. The discussion in Chapter 6 will dive deeper into the contextualisation behind the results obtained and will

present ways past the dominant discourses through the critical discourses of degrowth and intersectional decolonial environmental justice.

5.1. Quantitative discourse analysis

The analysis started with the first round of coding examining the policy report for the presence of both economic as well as environmental justice discourse in general. In subsequent rounds of coding, the text was examined for the presence of the codes mentioned in **Table 3**. As some quotations referred to both the sustainability and the environmental justice discourses as well as to multiple pillars within them, the number of quotations grew over subsequent rounds of coding. This led to 370 references related to the sustainability discourses, with 225 referring to the mainstream sustainability discourse and 145 referring to the critical sustainability discourse, i.e. the degrowth discourse. The analysis furthermore led to 359 references related to the environmental justice discourses, with 271 referring to the mainstream environmental justice discourse and 88 referring to the critical environmental justice discourse, i.e. the intersectional decolonial environmental justice discourse. As **Figure 4** shows, 39.19 per cent of the references related to sustainability refer to the critical sustainability discourse while this is 24.51 per cent for the critical environmental justice discourse. This thus entails that 60.81 per cent of the sustainability references refer to the mainstream discourse while this is 75.49 per cent for the mainstream environmental justice discourse. Hence, the majority of the references to sustainability and environmental justice within the *Fifth Dutch National SDG Report: Sustainable Development in the Netherlands* are based on mainstream discourses.
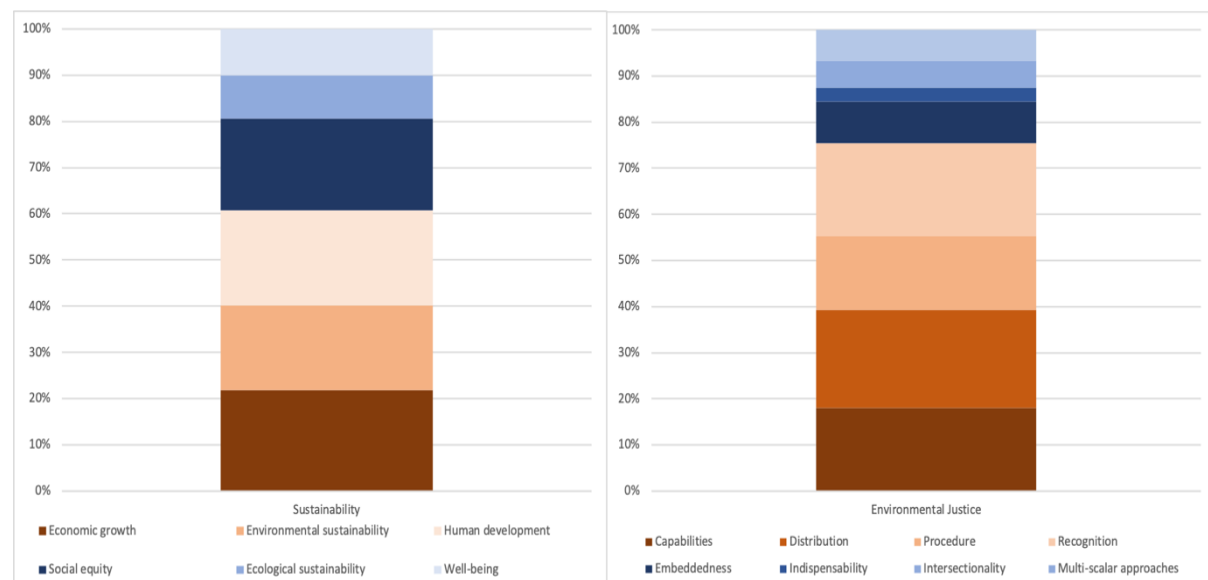
Figure 4

The presence of critical and mainstream sustainability and environmental justice discourses in the Fifth Dutch National SDG Report: Sustainable Development in the Netherlands.
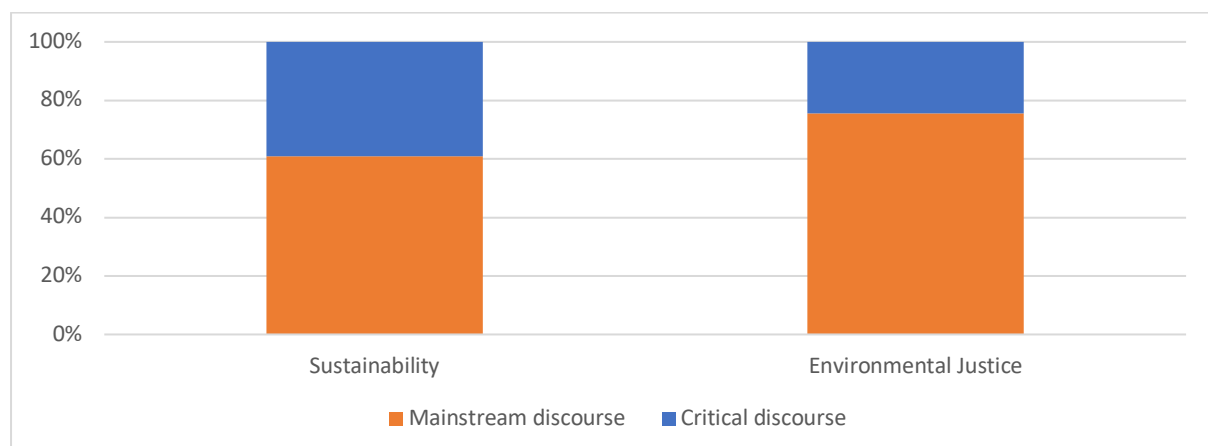
While **Figure 4** shows the distribution between the critical and mainstream discourses of sustainability and environmental justice, this can be unpacked further by examining the respective pillars of both the mainstream and critical discourses by examining the codes for each category. For the mainstream sustainability discourse, 81 quotations related to economic growth (21.89%), 68 related to environmental sustainability (18.38%), and 76 related to human development (20.54%) were found. For the critical sustainability discourse, these respective numbers were 73 related to social equity (19.73%), 35 related to ecological sustainability (9.46%), and 37 related to well-being (10.00%). In terms of the mainstream environmental justice discourse, this led to 65 related to capabilities (18.11%), 76 quotations related to distribution (21.17%), 58 related to procedure (16.16%), and 72 related to recognition (20.06%). For the critical environmental justice discourse, this led to 32 quotations related to embeddedness (8.91%), 11 related to indispensability (3.06%), 21 related to intersectionality (5.85%), and 24 related to multi-scalar approaches (6.69%). Hence, **Figure 5** shows to what extent each pillar appeared in either the references to sustainability or environmental justice.

Figure 5

The presence of individual pillars of the critical and mainstream sustainability and environmental justice discourses in the Fifth Dutch National SDG Report: Sustainable Development in the Netherlands.

Besides a division in the general presence of critical and mainstream sustainability and environmental justice discourses and the presence of each pillar within these discourses, a further division can be made by examining each sector within Dutch society as presented in the *Fifth Dutch National SDG Report: Sustainable Development in the Netherlands*. As the report discusses the central government, local and regional government, the private sector and financial institutions, civil society, knowledge institutions, the youth, and the human rights sector separately, **Figure 6** depicts the presence of the critical and mainstream discourses within each of these sectors. What stands out is that civil society refers relatively the most to the critical discourses, closely followed by the human rights sector, the private sector and financial institutions, and the youth. It furthermore shows that the knowledge institutions are the least critical as most references are made to the mainstream discourses, followed by the central government and the local and regional government. This division can further be dissected by examining the presence of the individual pillars of the critical and mainstream sustainability and environmental justice discourses within these sectors, as shown in **Figure 7**.

Figure 6

The presence of the critical and mainstream discourses among the varying sectors in the Fifth Dutch National SDG Report: Sustainable Development in the Netherlands.

Figure 7

The presence of individual pillars of the critical and mainstream sustainability and environmental justice discourses among the varying sectors in the Fifth Dutch National SDG Report: Sustainable Development in the Netherlands.
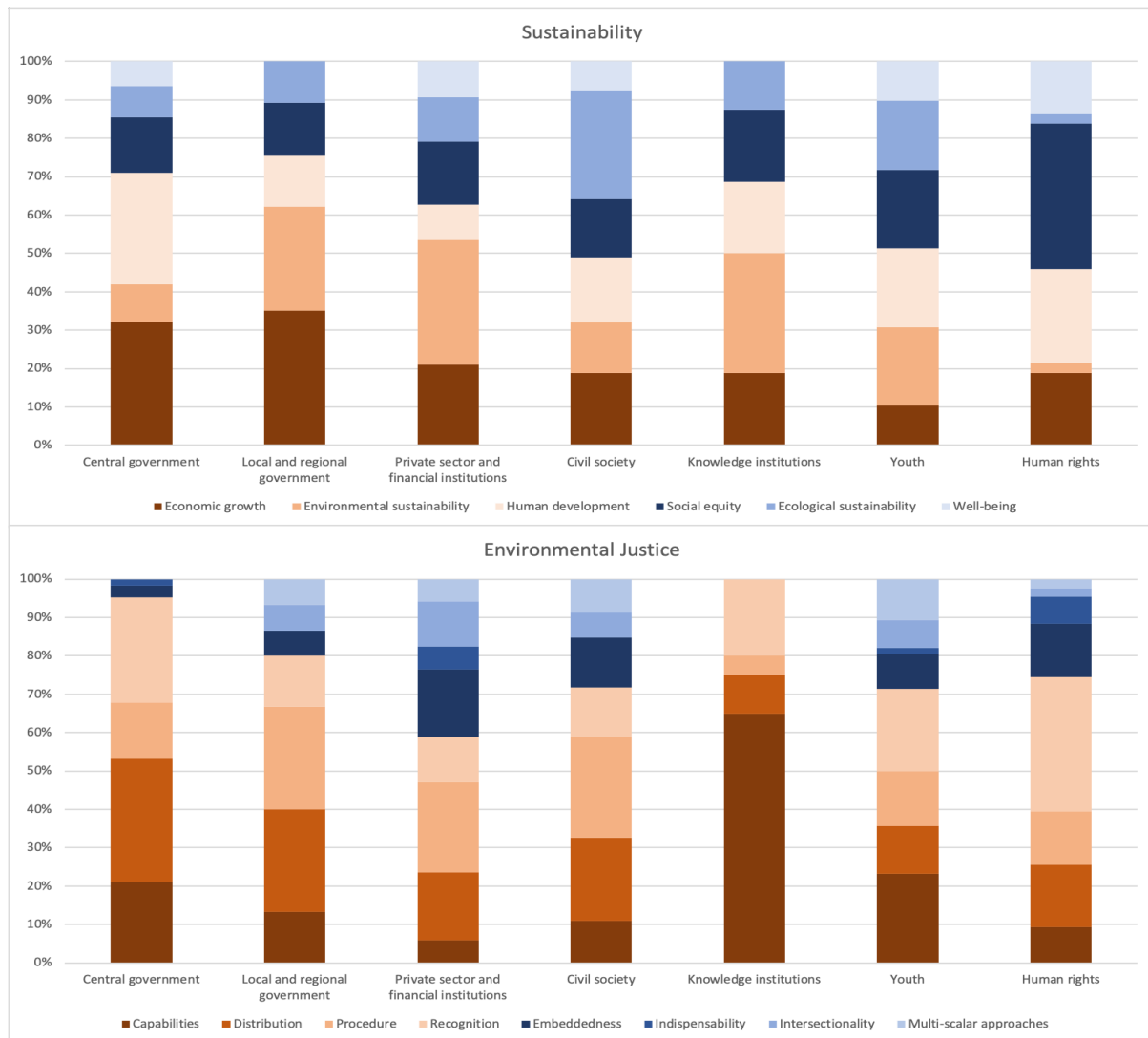
5.2. Qualitative discourse analysis

This section will analyse the *Fifth Dutch National SDG Report: Sustainable Development in the Netherlands* in-depth. The analysis will first discuss the general presence of mainstream and critical sustainability and environmental justice discourses before exploring each sector individually. As mentioned earlier, the *Fifth Dutch National SDG Report: Sustainable Development in the Netherlands* discusses the major developments and initiatives undertaken during 2020 in order to achieve the SDGs while it simultaneously discusses the opportunities

and challenges the Netherlands is facing in the upcoming years by analysing these facets from the perspectives of the central government, local and regional governments, the private sector and financial institutions, civil society, knowledge institutions, the youth, and the human rights sector (Rijksoverheid, 2021). Overall, the analysis showed that the majority of the report is presented through the mainstream sustainability and environmental justice discourses. However, when examining the sustainability and environmental justice discourses separately, the results indicated that the critical sustainability discourse makes up a larger extent of the overall sustainability references (39.19%) compared to the critical environmental justice discourse in terms of the overall environmental justice references (24.51%).

In terms of the sustainability discourse, the division among the mainstream pillars of economic growth, environmental sustainability, and human development is relatively equal whereas social equity makes up a substantially larger proportion of the critical sustainability discourse compared to ecological sustainability and well-being. In terms of the environmental justice discourse, distribution and recognition make up a larger extent of the mainstream discourse compared to capabilities and procedure. When examining the critical discourse, it stands out that only a small fraction refers to indispensability while embeddedness, intersectionality, and multi-scalar approaches roughly make up the same percentage of references.
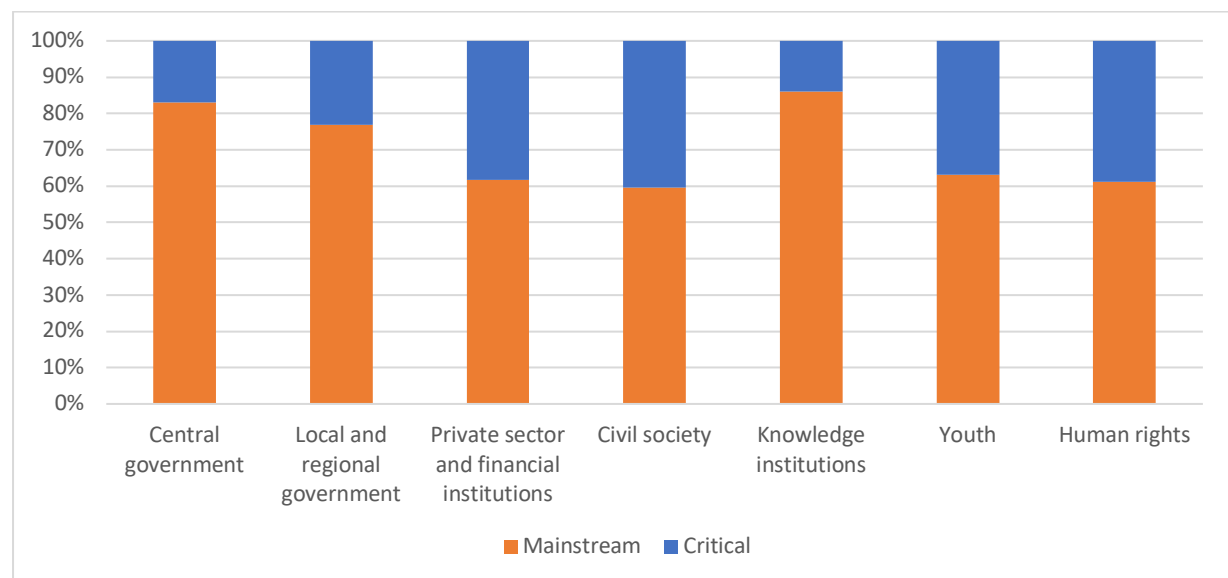
When looking at the presence of the critical and mainstream sustainability and environmental justice discourses among the varying sectors, it stands out that relatively more references are made to the critical sustainability discourse, i.e. degrowth, in contrast to the critical environmental justice discourse, i.e. intersectional decolonial environmental justice. The following sections will explore the presence of the critical and mainstream pillars among both discourses in-depth through an analysis of each sector.

5.2.1. Central government

When taking a look at the discourses present within the central government, it stands out that almost all references to environmental justice can be ascribed to the mainstream discourse, with only a small number ascribing to critical pillars of embeddedness and indispensability. The majority of the mainstream references refer to distribution and recognition with the central government emphasising that ''some sectors and groups proved to be vulnerable'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 10) which manifests itself by the emergence of a division, amplified by the COVID-19 crisis, ''between people who have retained their jobs and groups who are

vulnerable in terms of work, income and opportunities to participate'' (p. 11) such as the young, flexible workers, self-employed people, and older people. In order to ensure that the vulnerable are protected from both financial, social, and health-related vulnerabilities, the government radically intervened in order to ''mitigate the […] consequences of the pandemic'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 10), ''to create stability'' (p. 10) in order to ''leave no one behind, in accordance with the principle underlying the SDGs'' (p. 10) through support and recovery packages and increased spending on poverty reduction and debt restructuring. The central government furthermore focuses on citizens' capabilities through ''active labour market policies with a strong focus on retraining, further training, and development'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 11) to ensure that everyone is able to improve their prospects and skills. To a lesser extent, the central government focuses on procedure to address social and political processes that uphold systems of injustice, which is mainly reflected through an emphasis on ''dialogues with society'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 10) and reforming institutional processes by ''strengthening the legal status of workers'' (p. 11). Only three references are made to the critical environmental justice discourse, specifically to the pillars of embeddedness and indispensability. The central government acknowledges that there are ''underlying structural problems'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 11) that uphold inequalities felt by self-employed and flexible workers while it also emphasises the implementation of ''Woman, Peace, and Security: The Fourth National Action Plan on Resolution 1325'' (p. 16), which recognises that social inequalities against women need to be addressed as they themselves are indispensable and the inequalities are being reproduced and enforced by institutional powers and are therefore embedded within society at large.

When examining the references to sustainability, the division becomes less clear cut although the mainstream pillars still make up the majority of the references. Within the mainstream sustainability discourse, most references are made to economic growth and human development. Due to the COVID-19 crisis and the corresponding economic and social consequences felt throughout society, the Dutch government implemented multiple support and recovery packages, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, to ''[keep] the economy up and running'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 10) and in order to mitigate the ''social and economic consequences of the pandemic'' (p. 10), thus focusing on maintaining economic growth and the levels of human development achieved. Most references in terms of environmental sustainability can be related to the Caribbean Netherlands, for example through the obligation to ''conserve, protect, and sustainably use the islands' considerable natural wealth […] for the development of the local economy and to create the conditions necessary to enable nature

conservation policy to achieve sustainable results'' (p. 13). The focus on conserving and protecting the islands' natural wealth can simultaneously be related to the critical discourse of ecological sustainability, among others through the specific focus on ''healthy, resilient coral reefs [and the] restoration and conservation of unique habitats and species'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 13). The central government furthermore refers to the critical pillar of social equity, emphasising the importance of the stimulus packages in order to ''leave no one behind'' (Rijksoverheid, p. 2021, p. 13) and ensuring that ''everyone […] should have the opportunity to develop skills and improve their prospects'' (p. 11). Well-being is among others addressed by the ''commitment to improving the livelihoods'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 12) of Dutch inhabitants and by examining their ''satisfaction with life in general'' (p. 10).

5.2.2. Local and regional governments

In contrast to the central government, the local and regional governments refer relatively more to the critical environmental justice discourses, with a more or less even distribution between the pillars of embeddedness, intersectionality, and multi-scalar approaches. In terms of embeddedness, the local and regional governments ''are required to release additional information, leading to more openness and transparency'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 17) which ensures that embedded inequalities as a result of institutional powers can be addressed. Simultaneously it is acknowledged that current, past, and present decisions influence society at large and that therefore, for example, ''regions must step up their collaboration in area-based approaches to ensure sound, long-term decisions about water, land and soil use'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 19) as these have complex spatial and temporal effects as well as different effects on different groups in society, influencing justice, thus referring to intersectionality and multi-scalar approaches. In terms of the mainstream discourse, a larger emphasis is placed on procedure and recognition at the detriment of the pillars of distribution and capabilities. Local and regional governments advocate in favour of participatory decision-making by ''engaging with local residents in implementing legislation and by-laws'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 17) and they emphasise that vulnerable groups within society should get ''the best possible support to become independent'' (p. 18). This support is both given through a focus on developing their capabilities, as well as through a focus on redistribution through ''benefits under the Work and Social Assistance Act'' (p. 17).

In terms of the sustainability discourses, the regional and local governments make relatively the same number of references to the critical discourse as the central government,

although the references now only consist of the social equity and ecological sustainability pillars. It is argued that the COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated social inequity through ''the emergence of new social and regional divisions and growing inequalities in areas like the labour market, income, and healthcare'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 17) which also relates to the mainstream sustainability discourse through a loss in economic growth and a cutback in human development. Local and regional governments furthermore emphasise the importance of ecological sustainability through biodiversity conservation, among others by ''investing nearly €3 billion in making lasting improvements to nature areas up to 2030 [and enhancing] the quality of natural ecosystems outside protected areas'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 18). Another important point of focus is the circular economy in order to maintain and boost economic growth and to pursue environmental as well as ecological sustainability, for example by ''aiming at [a] 50% reduction in use of primary resources with a negative environmental impact by 2030'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 19).

5.2.3. The private sector and financial institutions

In terms of sustainability, the private sector and financial institutions put most emphasis on the pursuit of environmental sustainability, followed by economic growth as ''major transitions in the field of climate and the circular economy is crucial to their [i.e. the sector's] future resilience'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 21). However, they simultaneously adopt critical perspectives by acknowledging that there should be ''a greater focus on long-term value creation rather than short-term profits'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 21), making ''organisations more purpose-driven'' (p. 21) thus putting more emphasis on creating stakeholder value by embedding sustainability and social goals within their business strategies, which reflects that there is a shift towards the pillars of ecological sustainability, social equity, and well-being. However, much can be done as ''biodiversity is still not high on the private sector agenda'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 21) which not only has consequences for the environment, but also for society and the economy at large. As ''an increasing number of companies want[s] to play a leading role on sustainability and inclusion, and are joining networks that can help them achieve this aim'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 22), the private and financial sectors aim at attaining all pillars of the critical and mainstream sustainability discourses.

In contrast to the central, local, and regional government, the private sector and financial institutions take on a more critical perspective in terms of environmental justice primarily through their focus on embeddedness and intersectionality. It can furthermore be

argued that the sector's environmental justice perspective is relatively the most critical of all sectors examined in the policy report. By emphasising the need for major transformations, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, the sector acknowledges that only transformative changes are able to address the problems embedded within society that are simultaneously highly intersectional. In terms of the mainstream environmental justice discourse, most emphasis is placed on procedure and recognition as the sector acknowledges the need to take on an active role in order to become more inclusive as also mentioned in the previous paragraph. A concrete example of recognition, as well as the critical pillar of indispensability, is the implementation of the ''cultural diversity barometer for employers'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 20) which specifically aims to improve the inclusion of marginalised groups.

5.2.4. Civil society

In terms of environmental justice, civil society mostly refers to the pillars of procedure and distribution. Civil society actors for example state that the institutional processes of the state need to be addressed in order to ensure a genuine impact by arguing that ''government and political parties need to take the lead'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 23) in the transition towards a sustainable, just, and inclusive society. Civil society actors in the field of development aid mainly refer to the pillar of distribution as they ''mainly [focus] on helping people survive'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 23), simultaneously organisations argue in favour of ''a more equitable tax climate […] in which businesses and the wealthy contribute their fair share to the public purse'' (p. 25) which could help set up ''a robust social safety net for people still living in poverty'' (p. 25), therefore not only addressing the pillar of distribution, but also the pillars of procedure, embeddedness, social equity, and well-being. Civil society organisations furthermore aim to ''promote sustainable development both in the Netherlands and elsewhere through communications, campaigns, dialogue and awareness-raising'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 23), thereby trying to inform society as a whole, which fosters the recognition of difference as well as the capabilities of actors to act more sustainable. This aim also relates to intersectionality and multi-scalar approaches as not only sustainable development in the Netherlands is addressed but also abroad. Intersectionality is also addressed, for example through trade policies which need ''to be coherent and fair'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 25), especially between rich and poor countries as they currently foster social inequalities and oppressions.

Civil society organisations simultaneously call for systemic change by moving ''towards a more circular, inclusive and sharing economy, which no longer focuses on maximising profits, but on promoting people's wellbeing and improving the quality of our living environment'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 25), thereby taking a critical sustainability perspective, emphasising the importance of the pillars underlying degrowth, ecological sustainability, social equity, and well-being respectively. In addition, they advocate in favour of ''poverty reduction through a comprehensive approach to economic, social and sustainable development'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 25) which premises on the mainstream pillars of economic growth, environmental sustainability, and human development which also manifest themselves through a focus on ''sustainable, inclusive [economic and social] recovery'' (p. 23) after the COVID-19 crisis.

5.2.5. Knowledge institutions

What stands out is that the knowledge institutions make no reference to the critical environmental justice discourse. Most references are made to capabilities, which reflects one of the main goals of knowledge institutions as they aim to enhance the capability of individuals to flourish through their practices. The MBO schools, for example, ''prepare students for the world of work, further training and good citizenship'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 26), and the HBO institutions include ''SDG competence in teaching and research'' (p. 27) to ''integrate the SDGs in students' careers'' (p. 27), while universities focus on contributing ''to a sustainable world through their teaching, research and management'' (p. 27). After capabilities, most references are made to recognition, distribution, and procedure, among others by ''participating in human rights week'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 26) and discussing concepts like ''universal basic income'' (p. 28), which also touches upon the sustainability pillars of social equity and well-being.

In terms of the sustainability discourses, most references are made to the mainstream discourse, specifically to environmental sustainability. By emphasising the importance of the ''circular economy, the energy transition and climate adaptation'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 26) within the curriculum of MBO schools, the pillars of economic growth and environmental sustainability are reflected. The overall aim of schools of course reflects the pillar of human development, which for example is shown through the aim of MBO schools as mentioned in the previous paragraph. Due to the corona crisis, many activities moved online, making them ''more accessible'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 26) which fostered social equity. Through an

emphasis on the importance of biodiversity, for example, by ''designing the school grounds to promote biodiversity'' (Rijksoverheid, 2012, p. 26) and reducing their CO2 emissions, schools also focus on ecological sustainability.

5.2.6. Youth

The youth sector makes a relatively equal number of references to the mainstream and critical sustainability discourses, while the majority of the environmental justice references refer to the mainstream discourse. In terms of sustainability, most emphasis is placed on the critical pillars of social equity and ecological sustainability, as well as the mainstream pillars of environmental sustainability and human development. To a lesser extent, the focus is placed on the pillars of economic growth and well-being. The National Youth Council emphasises that ''though the [corona] virus itself poses relatively little risk to young people's health, the measures taken to contain it have serious consequences for their lives, opportunities and wellbeing'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 29) reflecting that the capabilities of the young are hampered, which also affects their position in terms of social equity, human development, and well-being.

The youth have made up various recommendations to the government which reflect a multitude of pillars from both categories. For example, they urge the government to ''use capacity available among young people and create more paid work placements, jobs and traineeships focusing on green and inclusive post-pandemic recovery and reconstruction'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 30), which focuses among others on fostering the capabilities of the youth, as well as on promoting economic growth, social equity, human development, and environmental sustainability. It furthermore shows that all these problems are highly related and are therefore intersectional. They also emphasise the importance of ''international negotiations on climate and biodiversity'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 31), which contribute to the achievement of environmental and ecological sustainability. In terms of income, they recommend to ''build a fair, simple and balanced pension system, which gives weight to the interests of young and future generations'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 30) which addresses multi-scalar approaches by including present and future generations, social equity, as well as distribution. They also want the government to address the labour market by reducing ''the gap between permanent and flexible contracts'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 30) which asks for institutional changes and thus refers to the pillars of procedure and embeddedness, while it also recognises the vulnerability of flex workers. In the end, the young are an indispensable part of

society and therefore the government is urged to ''listen to young people's voices'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 31).

5.2.7. Human rights

What stands out is that the human rights sector is the most critical of all sectors discussed in terms of the sustainability discourse, with the majority of the references referring to social equity. It is for example argued that ''like the SDGs, achieving human rights often calls for major government investment in order to provide people with a decent standard of living'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 32) thereby emphasising the importance of human rights for the sustainability pillars of social equity, human development, and well-being as well as the environmental justice pillar of distribution. They furthermore are ''impressed by the [governments'] efforts and financial resources deployed to mitigate the impact of the economic crisis'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 34) which stimulated economic growth. As human rights mainly revolve around mankind itself, the only references made towards environmental and ecological sustainability are through the emphasis on ''sustainable recovery'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 32).

In terms of environmental justice, the majority of the references relate to the mainstream pillar of recognition, as ''the pandemic has also impinged on economic and social rights, like the right to education, health and work'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 34) thereby increasing inequalities, among others between younger and older generations, and people with flexible and permanent contracts. It is therefore emphasised that despite the pandemic, governments are not relieved ''of the obligation to achieve these rights'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 34) and that they, therefore, have to address the institutional processes that uphold the injustices embedded within society as these foster the ''emergence of a society of insiders and outsiders: of people with secure jobs and a secure income, a good education and good health, as opposed to the outsiders with flexible jobs who have none of these things'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 33), which only worsens as forms of inequality and oppression intersect. Hence, ''the coronavirus pandemic has revealed existing patterns of vulnerability, inequality and discrimination on a major scale'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 34), showing that injustice is a highly complex spatial as well as temporal problem which can only be addressed by fundamentally altering institutional processes.

6. Discussion

The subsequent sections will analyse and explain the results by providing an in-depth contextualisation of the results. It will furthermore discuss ways in which the sectors, and therefore society as a whole, can move beyond the mainstream discourses identified within the Dutch policy context. This section will conclude by addressing the limitations of this study and by recommending pathways for future studies.

As this study is the first to examine to what extent a combination of degrowth and intersectional decolonial environmental justice discourses has been adopted in relation to the implementation of the SDGs by nation-states, the results cannot directly be compared to earlier studies. However, as set out in Section 2.1.2., Gellers and Cheatham (2018) examined to what extent the pillars of the mainstream environmental discourse were present within both the SDGs themselves and 49 voluntary national reports submitted in 2016 and 2017. In this they found that most references were made to capabilities, followed by distribution, procedure, and recognition. As this study examined to what extent both the mainstream and critical discourses were present within the text, the percentages cannot directly be compared. Nonetheless, this study found that, within the mainstream environmental justice discourse, most references were made to distribution, followed by recognition, capabilities, and procedure. A potential explanation for this is that this study only reflects the Dutch situation, whereas Gellers and Cheatham (2018) examined a multitude of countries, ranging from Belgium to Egypt, which all have different priorities and therefore their results reflect ''how states have translated, integrated, and implemented the SDGs in light of national circumstances'' (p. 292). This might thus explain the different order of the mainstream pillars of environmental justice.

Overall, the findings of this study clearly showed that the mainstream discourses make up the majority of the references to both the sustainability and environmental justice discourses, although this extent differs per sector. The following sections will review these findings and discuss the outcomes in light of the sector-specific context, while it will also address how the critical discourses can be better reflected within the Dutch context.

6.1. Contextualisation

The *Fifth Dutch National SDG Report: Sustainable Development in the Netherlands* thus presented the status of the Netherlands in terms of achieving the SDGs, as well as the successes and challenges faced during 2020 and in the years to come. As mentioned by Cummings et al. (2020), it is important to examine the context behind a text by examining how and by whom

the text was created and how this relates to the discourses identified in the analysis, which also adds to the validity of the research (Jaipal-Jamani, 2014). The report itself was presented to the Dutch House of Representatives by the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Development Cooperation on Accountability Day on behalf of the Government and all other sectors involved, the local and regional governments, the private sector and financial institutions, civil society, knowledge institutions, the youth, and the National Institute for Human Rights respectively. The report has been drafted in eight chapters, starting with a general introduction before diving into each sector in-depth. While the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Development Cooperation is ultimately responsible for the attainment of the SDGs, the Dutch government takes a decentralised approach, as explained in Section 2.2., and therefore each sector presents its own reflections on the status of the SDGs in the Netherlands. This section will therefore describe by whom the chapters have been written, as is also depicted in **Appendix I**, and how this might relate to the discourses identified.

As **Figure 6** showed, the knowledge institutions were the least critical of the sectors examined, closely followed by the central government and the local and regional governments. The reflection on the status of knowledge institutions in terms of achieving the SDGs was drafted by NWO-WOTRO Science for Global Development which represents secondary vocational education (MBO), the universities of applied sciences (HBO) and practice-oriented research, and the universities and academic research (Rijksoverheid, 2021). Overall, the chapter on the knowledge institutions made relatively few references to either the sustainability and environmental justice discourse, which might have influenced the results to some extent. The sector mainly emphasised human development and capabilities, which is in line with the main activities of knowledge institutions, i.e. teaching and research. In 2019, Arjen Wals, Professor of Transformative Learning for Socio-economic Sustainability at Wageningen University, already questioned the presence of mainstream thinking in Western knowledge institutions (Aarnoudse, 2019). He for example argued that solidarity, compassion, and empathy are naturally present in human beings, which are prominent values in the discussed cosmovisions. However, the Western way of education, which focuses on measuring and ranking and reducing the world to boxes, prohibits students from asking critical questions and questioning the status-quo which hampers the pursuit of these values.

The central government, as well as the local and regional governments, also fell among the less critical sectors. The reflection on the local and regional governments' status in terms of achieving the SDGs is drafted by ''the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG), the Association of Provincial Authorities (IPO) and the Dutch Water Authorities (UVW)''

(Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 17) representing the view of the 344 municipalities, 12 provinces, and the 21 regional water authorities. **Figure 6** shows that the view of the local and regional governments mainly consists of the mainstream discourses which is in line with the perspective of the central government. Although the SDGs have been drafted through widespread societal consultation, ultimately the UN institutions and processes ''are in the hands of officials of nation-states and formal sector 'experts' with private corporate power pushing from behind'' (Kothari et al., 2014, p. 372) and therefore the underlying flaws of the dominant economic and political systems have not been addressed within the 2030 Agenda. It is therefore not surprising that the central government mainly refers to the mainstream sustainability and environmental discourses, as these are most in line with the current socioeconomic system. It should furthermore be noted that the *Fifth Dutch National SDG Report: Sustainable Development in the Netherlands* was drafted while the Netherlands had a demissionary cabinet and that as a result, the government was not able to initiate new controversial legislation on most topics which might be more closely related to the critical discourses (Ministry of General Affairs, 2022a).

The reflections on civil society, the human rights sector, the private sector and financial institutions, and the youth were the most critical. The reflection of the private sector and financial institutions was drafted by the ''Global Compact Network Netherlands, MVO Nederland, the Dutch Sustainable Growth Coalition (DSGC), Social Enterprise NL, the Dutch Banking Association (NVB), the Confederation of Netherlands Industry and Employers (VNO-NCW) (including the Groene Groeiers network), and the Royal Association MKB-Nederland'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 20) which together represent the Dutch private sector. The reflection on civil society's status in terms of achieving the SDGs was drafted by Partos, which is the civil society's organisation for development cooperation. They collected the views of 68 civil society organisations through a questionnaire distributed among members and non-members active in fields such as development cooperation, religion, climate, capital funding, networking, and women's rights (Rijksoverheid, 2021). The reflection on the role of human rights related to achieving the SDGs was drafted by the National Institute for Human Rights, while the reflection on the youth was drafted by the National Youth Council, which represents the four million Dutch citizens aged between 12 and 30 through 39 member organisations and over 20 projects. When examining the trends of recent years, it is not surprising that these sectors are the most critical (van der Molen, 2021). Although citizens recognise that they have a shared responsibility in order to arrive at a more sustainable and just world, they emphasise that the main responsibility lies with businesses and government. Since 2011, the percentage

of consumers paying attention to the social and environmental impact of products and services has grown from 32 per cent to 56 per cent in 2021, with a 3 per cent growth since 2020. The *Monitor Merk & Maatschappij*, conducted by b-open and MarketResponse, emphasises that more and more media coverage relates to climate change and biodiversity loss (van der Molen, 2021), which further stimulates society's stance toward the need for corporate social responsibility. Additionally, as mentioned in Chapter 1, society becomes increasingly more aware of the crises that humanity is facing which can only be addressed by critically examining the socioeconomic processes that uphold the systems of injustice. This is also emphasised by Statistics Netherlands, which concluded that although the Netherlands, together with the Scandinavian countries, scores the best on citizen participation, institutional trust, and other indicators for social cohesion, it also shows signs of growing social uneasiness and pessimism towards the future (Schmeets & Exel, 2020). This is amplified by a growing negative sentiment throughout society, fostered by the concern that the state of society is deteriorating and that there is little hope for a better future.

6.2.   Ways beyond the mainstream discourses

As the results indicated, the majority of the references made to sustainability and environmental justice within the *Fifth Dutch National SDG Report: Sustainable Development in the Netherlands* can be ascribed to the mainstream pillars underlying each category. This chapter will therefore present ways beyond these mainstream discourses in order to arrive at a more inclusive, diverse, and just society by examining recent developments linked to the critical perspectives of degrowth and environmental justice and by linking the results back to the theoretical framework.

What stands out in the results is the relative lack of references to the critical discourses within the Dutch central government. As of early 2022, the Dutch government is constituted through a renewed coalition of the Dutch political parties VVD, D66, CDA, and ChristenUnie (Ministry of General Affairs, 2022b). Since then, the government has proposed various legislations and has made various statements that relate to the critical discourses. For example, the Dutch Minister for Climate and Energy Policy announced that the interests of nature should be weighed more heavily during the tender of new offshore windmill farms (NOS, 2022a) which can be related to the critical discourses of ecological sustainability as well as indispensability as it focuses on the preservation of ecosystems which also recognises their inherent value which is needed in order to create a sustainable, just, and resilient world. The

government furthermore announced plans to increase the minimum wage by 7.5 per cent (NOS, 2021) while the Minister for Housing and Spatial Planning announced plans to intervene and regulate the housing market in order to curb excessive rents by implementing rental price protection for houses up to 1250 euros (NOS, 2022c). Through these measures, not only mainstream pillars such as distribution and procedure are addressed, but also the critical pillars of social equity, well-being, intersectionality, and embeddedness as these measures address the social and political processes that uphold injustices which are intersectional and embedded within society. For example, someone living on the minimum wage might not have enough waiting time to be eligible for social housing and therefore has to pay an excessive amount of the rental market, which further affects their abilities to participate in society, etc. Hence, ensuring a fairer rental market and increasing the minimum wage leads to a more equitable society and higher well-being for citizens currently facing injustices.

Besides the central government, the local and regional governments also made relatively few references to the critical discourses. Based on the cosmovisions discussed in Section 3.1., steps towards a more just, diverse, and inclusive society can be made by addressing the current systems underlying society's democracy and rule of law. The cosmovisions stress the importance of autonomy, self-determination, shared responsibilities, and citizen participation, and one way to foster these features is through the implementation of citizen assemblies. The province of Gelderland is already experimenting with this, through the implementation of a citizen assembly on the province's climate-related policies (Provincie Gelderland, 2022). 3,000 inhabitants of the province will be randomly selected and will be given a questionnaire on how the climate crisis can best be tackled. Of these 3,000 participants, 150 will be selected to participate in a citizens' forum to advise the executive committee of the province which will be used to update the province's climate plan. Besides the province of Gelderland, the municipalities of Amsterdam, Rijswijk, Den Haag, and Alphen aan den Rijn as well as the housing corporations within the Zaanstreek-Waterland region have started with citizen assemblies to address problems related to climate policies, the energy transition, and social housing (Jansen, 2022).

However, in order to arrive at a truly inclusive, diverse, and just society for all beings, a much more transformative approach needs to be taken. The overarching similarity of the cosmovisions discussed in Section 3.1. is that they move beyond an anthropocentric view of life. Although Buen Vivir, Ubuntu, Ecological Swaraj, Sarvodaya, and Gross National Happiness all differ to a certain extent, they share an ''inherent biocentric value orientation'' (van Norren, 2020, p. 431), that simultaneously is inherently non-dualistic, relational, and less

hierarchical. In contrast, as discussed in Chapter 2, the SDGs are inherently anthropocentric, focusing on attaining economic, environmental, and social sustainability for the sake of humanity. Hence, the 2030 Agenda needs to be reshaped by emphasising the ''human-nature-well-being interrelationships'' (van Norren, 2020, p. 431). This would thus entail that mankind would live in harmony with nature, stepping away from the hierarchical relationship which puts humanity above nature, no longer differentiating between human beings, non-human beings, and nature.

This can among others be done by giving nature the same juridical position as humanity, for example by extending rights to nature. This is for example done in Article 71 of the Ecuadorian constitution, which states ''Nature, or Pacha Mama, where life is reproduced and occurs, has the right to integral respect for its existence and for the maintenance and regeneration of its life cycles, structure, functions and evolutionary processes'' (Constitute, 2021, Article 71 section). Simultaneously, rivers in the state of Victoria in Australia, the Whanganui River in New Zealand, and the Ganges and Yamuna Rivers in Uttarakhand, India have been declared legal persons (O'Donnell & Talbot-James, 2018). Also in the Netherlands, there has been a growing call for the extension of rights to nature (van de Venis et al., 2021). In 2021, a group of experts united in Rights of Nature and UN Harmony with Nature called on the province of Utrecht to extend legal entity to Ameliswaard, which is a relatively small nature reserve consisting of hundreds of unique trees threatened by the broadening of the A27 highway running through the area. The experts do not only recognise the value of Ameliswaard for humanity but emphasise the intrinsic value of Ameliswaard itself. Because of the small scale of Ameliswaard, as well as its clear boundaries and high intrinsic value, it is the ideal testing ground to explore what extending rights to nature might look like, which might provide the basis for extending legal entities to larger areas of nature, such as the Wadden Sea, the North Sea, the Maas River, and to the Biesbosch (van de Venis et al., 2021; Lambooy, 2021).

A more concrete example, oriented at extending rights to non-human beings, is Visseren-Hamakers' (2020) call for the implementation of an 18th SDG on animal concerns. It is argued that the current animal and sustainability governance systems are disconnected even though the integration of both systems could foster synergies and prohibit trade-offs. Integrating individual animal considerations into the SDGs acknowledges the inherent value of non-human beings and sets them on equal feet with humanity. This in turn would reflect a broadened perspective on sustainable development and a more ecocentric approach toward the SDGs.

Although the results indicated that the Dutch SDG policy context reflects the values underlying the critical discourses of degrowth and intersectional decolonial environmental justice to some extent, much more needs to be done to arrive at a truly inclusive, diverse, and just society for all. Overall, the critical sustainability and environmental justice discourses showed that the interests of humans, non-humans, and nature need to be taken into account, not only in the present, but also by examining the consequences, causes, and solutions related to (in)justices of past and future events. This can however only be done by addressing the institutional powers that are embedded within society at large. Hence, transformative changes are needed to ensure social equity, ecological sustainability, and well-being for all. This discussion tried to set out of few examples of what this could look like in practice, based on the aforementioned indigenous cosmovisions. Applying these examples to the Dutch SDG policy context provides ways in which the Netherlands can go beyond the goals of the SDGs by including the pillars underlying the degrowth and intersectional decolonial environmental justice discourses which ensures an inclusive, diverse, and just society for all. This can subsequently provide fruitful starting points for extending this to other nations.

6.3. Limitations

The reader should bear in mind that there are some limitations related to this research. The first relates to the wide scope of the topics discussed in this study. Both the literature on degrowth and environmental justice is extensive, especially as cosmovisions beyond the Western scope were also part of this study. Although both topics are very much related and it was interesting to see to what extent they both were reflected in Dutch SDG policy and society, in hindsight it would have been the preference to focus on one of the topics in order to examine it in more depth.

A second and third limitation concerns the limited generalisability and validity of the results, although this has also been discussed in Section 4.4. As the report examined in this study gave an overview of Dutch society in times of the COVID-19 crisis, the results might be influenced by this event. The results specifically reflect the status of the Netherlands in 2020 and therefore they cannot be generalised to other countries or time periods. Due to limitations in research time and capacity, among others due to personal circumstances, this study has been conducted through desk research. The conduct of interviews might have heightened the validity of the results, but by using the methodology as discussed in Section 4.3. and substantiating the results through secondary materials, it is believed that the results still give an accurate depiction

of the extent to which critical degrowth and intersectional decolonial environmental justice perspectives are reflected within the *Fifth Dutch National SDG Report: Sustainable Development in the Netherlands.*

6.4. Recommendations for further research

Despite the aforementioned limitations, this study provided an interesting first insight into the presence of a more inclusive, diverse, and environmentally just sustainability discourse within the context of the SDGs in the Netherlands. As the results indicated that the critical discourses on degrowth and environmental justice were to some extent reflected within Dutch society it would be interesting to examine whether this extent has changed over the past few years and whether this extent changes in the years to come. Especially now that there is a renewed coalition leading the Dutch government that is making steps towards the implementation of a national action plan on the SDGs and broader well-being, it would be interesting to see whether this changes the extent to which the central government refers to the inclusive, diverse, and environmentally just sustainability framework, based on degrowth and environmental justice perspectives.

Additionally, it could be interesting to explore the sectors discussed in this study in-depth. As mentioned, a lot of changes are happening throughout society related to both the mainstream as well as critical discourses. A more detailed study of each sector, and the differences within these sectors, could provide compelling insights that could further spur the uptake of the inclusive, diverse, and just sustainability framework.

It could furthermore be interesting to compare the extent to which these discourses were present within Dutch society to different nation-states. For example, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Bhutan have already implemented some of the values underlying degrowth and critical environmental justice within their constitutions and policies. Therefore it could be interesting to examine to what extent this leads to a difference in terms of the presence of critical perceptions within society. Additional research within this field could provide fruitful insights that could benefit the implementation of a more inclusive, diverse, and just conception of sustainability.

7. Conclusion

In 2015, the SDGs were established ''to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that by 2030 all people enjoy peace and prosperity'' (UN Development Programme, n.d.-a) through

the attainment of 17 Goals revolving around social, economic, and environmental sustainability. Although the SDGs have claimed to be universal through the extensive multilateral negotiations among the members of the UN as well as many representatives from society, business, and NGOs, scholars and society have increasingly opposed these claims primarily because the SDGs have a strong bias towards economic growth, which hampers the achievement of the social and environmental goals. To combat these shortcomings, scholars have advocated in favour of an inclusive, diverse, and environmentally just sustainability discourse among others through the inclusion of critical environmental justice and degrowth perspectives. Hence, this study aimed to provide a critical assessment of the SDGs through a combination of environmental justice and degrowth perspectives while applying this to the Dutch SDG policy context. This has been done by examining to what extent a combination of critical degrowth and environmental justice discourses have been adopted in the *Fifth Dutch National SDG Report: Sustainable Development in the Netherlands*.

In order to assess to what extent these discourses have been adopted, a more holistic-encompassing sustainability framework has been established consisting of both elements from the critical intersectional decolonial environmental justice and degrowth discourses, as also have been included in more indigenous cosmovisions such as Buen Vivir, Ubuntu, Ecological Swaraj, Sarvodaya, and Gross National Happiness. Whereas the mainstream sustainability discourse revolves around the attainment of economic growth, environmental sustainability, and human development, the critical degrowth discourse, coined critical sustainability, more specifically focuses on social equity, ecological sustainability, and well-being. Correspondingly, the mainstream environmental justice discourse revolves around the pillars of distribution, procedure, recognition, and capabilities, whereas the critical intersectional decolonial environmental justice perspective, coined critical environmental justice, extends this by emphasising the pillars of intersectionality, multi-scalar approaches, embeddedness, and indispensability.

Based on both the quantitative and qualitative critical discourse analysis, the conclusion can be drawn that various elements of the critical sustainability and environmental justice discourses have been adopted within the Dutch SDG policy context. Overall, it can be stated that the sustainability discourse adopts a more critical perspective in comparison to the environmental justice discourse. Hence, the percentage of references to the critical sustainability discourse, which is premised on the pillars of degrowth, is higher than the percentage of references to the critical environmental justice discourse, which is premised on the pillars of intersectional decolonial environmental justice.

However, as the Dutch SDG policy is characterised by a decentralised approach, in which each sector determines for itself what has to be done in order to achieve the SDGs by 2030, the extent to which these critical discourses have been adopted varies significantly among the sectors within Dutch society. It can therefore be argued that civil society, the human rights sector, the private sector and financial institutions, and the youth relate the most to the degrowth and intersectional decolonial environmental justice pillars, whereas the central government, the local and regional governments, and the knowledge institutions mostly refer to the mainstream discourses. Within the sustainability category, it can be concluded that most references are made to economic growth, followed by human development, social equity, environmental sustainability, well-being, and finally ecological sustainability. Within the environmental justice category, most references are made to distribution, followed by recognition, procedure, capabilities, embeddedness, multi-scalar approaches, intersectionality, and indispensability.

It can thus be concluded that although the *Fifth Dutch National SDG Report: Sustainable Development in the Netherlands*, representing the Dutch SDG policy context, refers to some extent to the critical discourses, the majority of the references are made to the mainstream sustainability and environmental justice pillars. Hence, in order to become truly inclusive, diverse, and just, all sectors within Dutch society will have to extend their vision beyond the scope of the SDGs by adopting the critical pillars underlying degrowth and intersectional decolonial environmental justice as is done in other cosmovisions discussed in this study. Only through these transformative changes, the injustices of the SDGs can be brought to an end and well-being for all can be ensured.

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Appendices

Appendix I

Table 4

Overview of sectors discussed in the study.

Sector	Drafted by
Central government	Central government, i.e. cabinet (Rijksoverheid, 2021).
Local and regional government	''The Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG), the Association of Provincial Authorities (IPO) and the Dutch Water Authorities (UVW)'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 17).
The private sector and financial institutions	''Global Compact Network Netherlands, MVO Nederland, the Dutch Sustainable Growth Coalition (DSGC), Social Enterprise NL, the Dutch Banking Association (NVB), the Confederation of Netherlands Industry and Employers (VNO-NCW) (including the Groene Groeiers network) and the Royal Association MKB-Nederland'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 20).
Civil society	Partos, which is the sector organisation for development cooperation. It represents 68 ''members and non-members that are active in civil society. 35.5% of the organisations […] are active in the field of development cooperation, 10.3% are environmental organisations, while 5.9% are religious organisations. [It also represents] women's organisations, climate organisations, capital funds and network organisations.'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 23).

Knowledge institutions	NWO-WOTRO Science for Global Development, representing secondary vocational education (MBO), universities of applied science (HBO) and practice-oriented research, and universities and academic research (Rijksoverheid, 2021).
The youth	National Youth Council, representing the four million Dutch citizens aged between 12 and 30 ''through its 39 member organisations and more than 20 projects'' (Rijksoverheid, 2021, p. 29).
Human rights	National Institute for Human Rights (Rijksoverheid, 2021).

Appendix II

Table 5

Definition and related concepts to the codes.

	Related concepts	**Definition**
Category: Attainment of sustainability		
Mainstream discourse focuses on:		
Code a. Economic growth	GDP, economy, recovery, investment, development.	''The increase in the production of goods and services per head of population over a stated period of time; the rate of expansion of the national income'' (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.-a).
Code b. Human development	Development, education, poverty, skill,	''Human development – or the human development approach - is about expanding the richness of human life, rather than simply the richness of the

		economy in which human beings live'' (UN Development Programme, n.d.-b)
Code c. Environmental sustainability	Climate, recovery, water, energy, adaptation, circularity.	''A dynamic process that guarantees the persistence of natural and human systems in an equitable manner'' (IPCC, 2015).
Critical discourse focuses on:		
Code a. Well-being	Prosperity, wellbeing, people.	''With reference to a person or community: the state of being healthy, happy, or prosperous; physical, psychological, or moral welfare.'' (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.-b).
Code b. Social equity	Rights, inequality, poverty, opportunity, discrimination.	''Social equality is a state of affairs in which all people within a specific society or isolated group have the same status in respect to civil rights, freedom of speech, property rights and equal access to social goods and services. It includes concepts of health equity, economic equality and other social securities. It also entails equal opportunities and obligations, and so involves the whole society.'' (Unesco, 2018)
Code c. Ecological sustainability	Biodiversity, nature, ecosystem, restoration.	''The maintenance or restoration of the composition, structure, and processes of ecosystems over time and space.'' (Potter & Ford, 2004, p. 130).
Category: Attainment of environmental justice		

Mainstream discourse focuses on:		
Code a. Distribution	Poverty, income, inequality, benefit, support.	''The fair distribution of environmental costs and benefits, the allocation of material goods, such as resources, income, and wealth, or on the distribution of social standing.'' (Menton et al., 2020, p. 1624).
Code b. Procedure	Transition, government, participation, policy.	''Procedural justice (PJ) addresses the fair and equitable institutional processes of a State.'' (Menton et al., 2020, p. 1624).
Code c. Recognition	Group, position, difference, inequality.	''The recognition of, and respect for, difference.'' (Menton et al., 2020, p. 1624).
Code d. Capabilities	Teaching, opportunity, education, knowledge, competence.	''The capabilities approach views justice not simply based on the distribution of various goods (e.g., natural resources or environmental services), but on how they link to an individual's capacity to flourish.'' (Menton et al., 2020, p. 1624).
Critical discourse focuses on:		
Code a. Intersectionality	Generation, country, cohesion.	''The recognition that social inequality and oppression in all forms intersect, and that actors in the more-than-human world are subjects of oppression and frequently agents of social change.'' (Pellow, 2018, p. 21).

Code b. Multi-scalar approaches	Generation, future, country, justice.	''CEJ [i.e. Critical Environmental Justice] aims to take a multi-scalar approach understanding the complex spatial and temporal causes, consequences, and possible resolutions of EJ struggles.'' (Menton et al., 2020, p. 1624).
Code c. Embeddedness	Rights, policy, society, exploitation.	''Social inequalities – from racism to speciesism – are deeply embedded in society (rather than aberrations) and reinforced by state power, and that therefore the current social order stands as a fundamental obstacle to social and environmental justice.'' (Pellow, 2018, p. 23).
Code d. Indispensability	Outsider, woman, position.	''The perspective that excluded, marginalized, and othered populations, beings, and things – both human and more-than-human – must be viewed not as expendable but rather as indispensable to our collective futures.'' (Pellow, 2018, p. 26).

Note. Table by the author, based on the literature review, theoretical framework, and analysis.