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**The Steering Effects of the SDGs
on Environmental and Developmental NGOs
in the Netherlands**

**Sustainable Development Master Thesis (GEO4 -2321)
Earth System Governance Track**

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Abstract

In 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) or global goals emerged as official successors to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) with the vision of development towards a safe, just, and sustainable space for all human beings. In response to this vision governments from all over the world, business, and NGOs committed themselves to a new global partnership based on goal setting as a key strategy. Existing research has examined how and in what ways NGOs can contribute to the attainment or progress of the SDGs. However, this thesis aims to fill a research gap as it focused on examining the ways in which the SDGs have influenced the work of environmental and developmental NGOs in the Netherlands. As a result, it aims to answer the research question, *“what are the steering effects of the SDGs on environmental NGOs based in the Netherlands?”*. To answer this question this thesis depended on the collection and analysis of official NGO information available online as well as interviews with experts and professionals working in the SDG and NGO fields. Collectively this information was discursively and interpretatively analyzed to (1) determine the discursive effects of the SDGs by NGOs and (2) to assess whether the SDGs further lead to normative effects in the work done by NGOs. Lastly, (3) it provided the opportunity to explain the degree of steering effects seen in each NGO sector. Ultimately this study argues that stronger steering effects, both discursive and normative, are experienced in the Netherlands by developmental NGOs. Furthermore, the lack of steering effects because of the SDGs by environmental NGOs are attributed two main categories of conditions or factors, namely due to political circumstances and the inherent characteristics of these organizations.

Key Concepts: Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Environmental NGOs, Developmental NGOs, Steering Effects, Discursive Effects, Normative Changes.

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List of Abbreviations

CSOs	Civil Society Organizations
KVK	Dutch Chamber of Commerce
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
NMO	Natuur en Milieu Overijssel
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SvM	Studenten voor Morgen
ToC	Theory of Change
UN	United Nations
VNR	Voluntary National Review
ZMf	Zeeuwse Milieufederatie

1. Introduction

In 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) also commonly referred to as the global goals, officially came into force and were adopted by all 193 United Nations (UN) Member States as successors to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). In total there are 17 SDGs which embody a “universally shared vision of development towards a safe, just, and sustainable space for all human beings” (Filho et al., 2018). The SDGs range from targets aiming to end poverty, improve health and education, reduce inequality and spur economic growth while simultaneously addressing climate change and working to preserve the oceans and forests of our world (UN SDGs, n.d.). Furthermore, the global goals are based on the principle that everyone and every country in the world should assume responsibility to contribute towards the fulfillment of this vision. As a result, the SDGs, just as MDGs, consist of novel approaches to global governance in which goal setting is the key strategy to be strived towards by all nations of the world (Biermann, Kanie & Kim, 2017a).

The formal adoption of the SDGs has not only promoted a new global partnership between countries but has also been able to inspire increased collaboration between state and non-state actors (Hege & Demailly, 2018). As a result, it is no surprise that alongside the adoption of the SDGs the relevance of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in the same has increased. In the context of the SDGs the role of NGOs has shifted throughout time. In its initial design stages, delegates from over two thousand NGOs from around 157 countries came together to participate in the formulation of the global goals (Hickmann et al., 2022; Ogunyemi & Nwagwu, 2022). The participation of NGOs during this period was particularly valuable as they promoted for increased transparency and accountability, greater provision of basic services, ensured the empowerment of the youth and women and protection of the environment within the SDGs (Ogunyemi & Nwagwu, 2022). Following the adoption of the SDGs the role of NGOs shifted more towards monitoring the goals, implementing development activities, and advocating on behalf of people and the planet (Ogunyemi & Nwagwu, 2022).

Regarding the advancement of the SDGs, the expected and current roles of NGOs can be divided into three non-mutually exclusive as categorized by Arhin (2016), these consist in *advocacy, service provision & facilitation and/or brokering* – these are further explained in section 4. Through the above-mentioned roles, NGOs take roles ranging from being a watchdog or partner of the government, private sector or other CSOs, as well as a project implementer or communicator (Spitz, Kamphof, van Ewijk, 2015; Hassan et al., 2018). Due to these various roles, numerous studies have shown that NGOs have remained vital for driving the progress of the SDGs. Moreover, these further argue in favor of participation of the civil sector or society, which is represented by NGOs, in institutional mechanisms.

1.1. The landscape of NGOs in the Netherlands

The Netherlands boasts, unlike many other nations, with one of the largest non-profit sectors in all Western Europe (Burger et al., 1999). While there is no specific record on the number of NGOs in the country, it is estimated that there are more than 50,000 registered NGOs. The continued and steady increase in the number of organizations in this field is deeply rooted in two Dutch traditions. First, there is the Dutch tradition of subsidiarity to accommodate different religions and ideological groups. Through this tradition the government's role revolved, largely until the 1960s, in providing the financing of services for NGOs affiliated to the above-mentioned groups (Burger et al., 1999). Second, numerous NGOs emerged as private initiatives given the absence of a centralist state. In this environment, private initiatives, which with time have become established NGOs, faced little opposition from the state and instead could rely on its support.

As a result of these two ingrained Dutch traditions, the NGO landscape in the Netherlands has blossomed into a very broad and diverse landscape. Although there is no official overview of the issues of highest priority for the NGOs, it is evident that the mission of these revolve around numerous fields including the development field, human rights, environmental issues, health rights, among many others. Nevertheless, from the side of the Dutch government, they have been most strongly engaged with NGOs in the field of development cooperation (Government of the Netherlands, n.d.). This includes organizations that are focused on working on issues revolving around equal opportunities, human rights, and the work done by trade unions.

Another important component in NGO work relates to funding. In the Netherlands, revenue channels of NGOs consist of donations, subsidies, and contributions (Nieuwenhuizen & Walz, 2017). Additional funds received by many Dutch NGOs includes government funding through provincial and the municipal authorities. The government funding is generally either structural, i.e., it supports the general work of the organization, or it is tied to a specific project with a more delineated and limited scope. Nonetheless, while it is known that many NGOs receive government funding there are no official studies or documents providing the overall amount that is provided to these.

In sum, it can be argued that in comparison to other countries, NGOs in the Netherlands face minimal challenges or barriers and instead can harness numerous opportunities for continued future growth and success. This growth and support have been particularly enabled through the historical Dutch tradition of subsidiarity, absence of a centralist state, as well as government funding.

1.2. Progress on the SDGs in the Netherlands

In 2022, the Netherlands published its second voluntary national review (VNR) on its progress and contribution to the SDGs. The report highlights that *“the Netherlands has made significant progress towards achieving them [the SDGs], both at home and abroad”*

(VNR on the SDGs 2022, p. 22). Further it states that, “public interest in the goals has grown exponentially, too, with companies and other organizations in all sectors increasingly using them as a compass” (VNR on the SDGs 2022, p. 22). In the same way as public interest has risen, the government’s commitment towards the SDGs is in full swing. Based on the latest sustainable development report (2023) the Netherlands ranks as the top 20th performing country on the SDGs. Furthermore, as shown in figure 1, the country is set to meet SDG 1 (No Poverty) by 2030 and further shows high performance for SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), 4 (Quality Education), 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure), 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities).

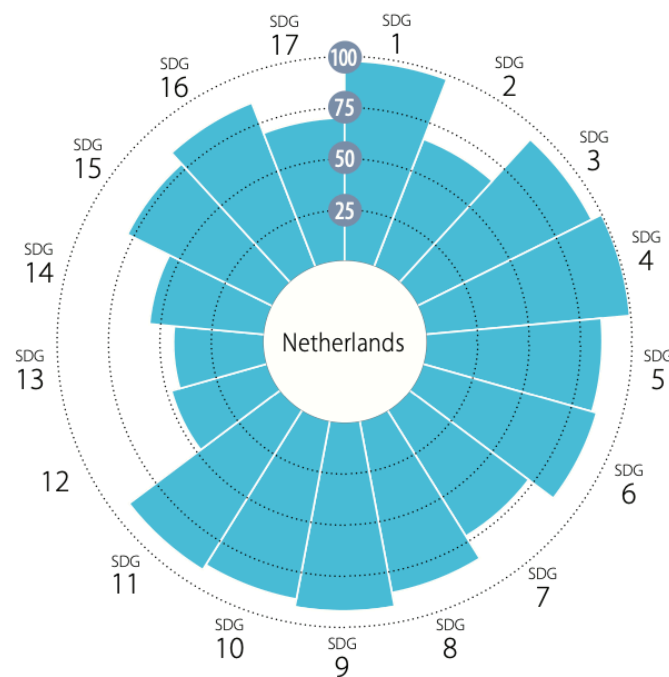


Figure 1. Average performance by SDG in the Netherlands in 2023. Biggest performance challenges evident in the environmental goals, SDGs 12 through 14. (Source: Sachs et al., Sustainable Development Report, 2023).

Despite the high engagement and the overall good performance of the Netherlands on the SDGs, the country continues to face several challenges in making progress towards the environmental goals such as SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 14 (Life Below Water), and SDG 15 (Life on Land). In fact, the current progress of the environmental goals in the Netherlands is quite varied. While SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy), 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) and 13 (Climate Action) are all moderately improving, SDG 14 (Life Below Water) is stagnating and SDG 15 (Life On Land) is trending towards being on track or maintaining SDG achievement (SDG Report, 2022).

As shown in figure 2, major challenges for the fulfillment of these SDGs are shown through the indicators (Sustainable Development Report Dashboard, 2023). Under SDG 7, major challenges regard the share of renewable energy in total primary energy supply. Further, SDG 12 faces barriers in terms of electronic waste, and nitrogen

emissions embodied in imports and exports of plastic waste. For SDG 13, major challenges remain in terms of CO₂ emissions from fossil fuel combustion and cement production, and CO₂ emissions embodied in imports. Under SDG 14, major hindrances remain for the clean waters score, fish caught from overexploited or collapsed stocks, and fish caught that are then discarded. Lastly, SDG 15 is experiencing challenges regarding terrestrial and freshwater biodiversity threats embodied in imports.

SDG 7: Affordable and clean energy

- ↑ Population with access to electricity
- ↑ Population with access to clean fuels and technology for cooking
- ↑ CO₂ emissions from fuel combustion per total electricity output
- ↗ Share of renewable energy in total primary energy supply

SDG 12: Responsible consumption and production

- ** Electronic waste
- ** Production-based SO₂ emissions
- ** SO₂ emissions embodied in imports
- ↑ Production-based nitrogen emissions
- ↓ Nitrogen emissions embodied in imports
- ↑ Non-recycled municipal solid waste
- ** Exports of plastic waste

SDG 13: Climate action

- ↗ CO₂ emissions from fossil fuel combustion and cement production
- ↓ CO₂ emissions embodied in imports
- ** CO₂ emissions embodied in fossil fuel exports
- ↑ Carbon Pricing Score at EUR60/tCO₂

SDG 14: Life below water

- ↑ Mean area that is protected in marine sites important to biodiversity
- ↓ Fish caught from overexploited or collapsed stocks
- ↗ Fish caught by trawling or dredging
- ↓ Fish caught that are then discarded
- ↗ Ocean Health Index: Clean Waters score
- ** Marine biodiversity threats embodied in imports

SDG 15: Life on land

- ↑ Mean area that is protected in terrestrial sites important to biodiversity
- ↑ Mean area that is protected in freshwater sites important to biodiversity
- ↑ Red List Index of species survival
- ↑ Permanent deforestation
- ** Terrestrial and freshwater biodiversity threats embodied in imports

Figure 2. Current trends of indicators for SDG 7, 12, 13, 14 and 15. (Source: Sustainable Development Report Dashboard, 2022).

1.3. Engagement of Civil Society with the SDGs

Since the previous VNR report of the Netherlands in 2017, the latest report found that “support for the SDGs has grown and taken firm root” (VNR on the SDGs 2022, p. 23). This is evident as Dutch companies along with civil society organizations have set up the SDG charter network which has since then become the organization known as SDG Nederland. Further, the report states that the SDGs have been “clearly widely embraced across all section of society” as the movement continues to grow with 1,200 member organizations, including many sector and umbrella organizations (VNR on the SDGs 2022, p. 23).

The high involvement of Dutch businesses, civil society and organizations with the SDGs is further reported in the Dutch National SDG report (2021). This report finds that civil society organizations (CSOs), which includes NGOs, in the Netherlands are highly aware of the need to achieve the global goals and aim to contribute to this in several ways. Dutch civil society organizations strongly believe that they, alongside the government, the private sector, knowledge institutions and members of the public share responsibility for achieving the SDGs. Furthermore, the report found, based on

a questionnaire in which 68% of all organizations¹ in the Netherlands participated, that 44.1% of the participating organizations claim to have “stepped up in their efforts to achieve the SDGs in the past year” (Fifth Dutch National SDG Report, 2021, p. 23). As shown figure 3, on a scale of 1-10, civil society organizations ranked the importance of their own role towards the achievement of the goals to 6.7. As part of their roles, 66.2% of the organizations said they engage with the SDGs by promoting them both domestically and internationally through dialogues, communications, and awareness-raising activities. Another 60.3% reported that activities consist of advocacy and lobbying, while 58.8% take a step further and have involved the SDGs in internal projects (Fifth Dutch National SDG Report, 2021).

Actor	2018	2019	2020	2021
Own organisation	8.5	8.1	8.1	8.2
Civil society	6.0	7.2	6.3	6.7
Government	4.9	5.2	5.6	5.5
Private sector	4.0	4.4	4.9	5.2
Knowledge institutions	5.8	6.3	6.4	6.5

Figure 3. Scores for Dutch action on the SDGs by sector. NGOs make up the civil society group and have ranked the importance of their own role towards the achievement of the goals to 6.7 out 10. (Source: Fifth Dutch National SDG report, 2021).

In addition to finding that civil society organizations continue to significantly note the importance of their role, the study further examined in which SDG cluster there is most activity. As shown in figure 4, the SDGs can be amalgamated in five clusters according to an overarching theme or objective, these clusters are made up by the people, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnerships. The people cluster includes SDGs 1 through 5, the planet cluster, also known as the environmental goals, is made up of SDGs 6, 12 to 15, the prosperity cluster consists of SDGs 7 to 11, the peace cluster includes SDG 16 and finally the partnership cluster is made up by SDG 17. In assessing the percentage of activities of Dutch organizations per cluster, the VNR reports that highest commitment is towards the partnerships cluster (44.1%), made up by SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). This is followed in second place by the peace cluster (42.6%), SDG 16 (Peace and Justice Strong Institutions). Lastly, in third place is the people cluster with 41.48% of activities, this cluster is made up by SDGs 1 through 5.

In terms of specific SDGs, it was reported that 51.5% of the participating NGOs act towards SDG 5 (Gender Equality). In second place, 47.1% of the organizations reported to work towards SDG 1 (Eliminate Poverty). In third place, 42.5% of the NGOs reported that they work on SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions).

¹ Within the 68% of participating organizations roughly 35.5% were in the field of development cooperation, 10.3% are in the environmental field and 5.9% are made up by religious organizations (Fifth Dutch National SDG Report, 2021).

Cluster	SDG's	Percentage of CSOs active in cluster
People	1 to 5	41.48%
Planet	6, 12 to 15	27.64%
Prosperity	7 to 11	27.36%
Peace	16	42.6%
Partnerships	17	44.1%

Figure 4. Percentage of activity by Dutch NGOs per SDG cluster. Highest percentage is the partnerships cluster, second the peace cluster, and third the people cluster. (Source: Fifth Dutch National SDG report, 2021).

1.4. Knowledge Gap & Research Question(s)

Based on the national reports described above, section 1.3 and 1.4, it is evident that in the Netherlands there is a high commitment to achieving the global goals. Furthermore, it is clear that Dutch NGOs have and continue to increase their efforts in making progress towards this goals by assuming numerous roles. The mobilization of NGOs towards the SDGs has been identified through numerous studies since the initial design stages of the goals. As a result, scholars have thus far focused on assessing the ways in which NGOs can (best) contribute to the progress and attainment of the SDGs (Hassan et al. 2018; Hege & Demailly, 2018). As argued by Arhin (2016), NGOs are vital to the progress of the SDGs as these possess unique traits such as being non-partisan, non-profit and close to the grassroots where the impact is expected to happen. Thus, given these unique traits NGOs can cater to different types of roles in SDG implementation.

Further research in the field has focused on the development of streamlining frameworks of NGO programs. As argued by Hassan et al. (2018), NGOs have the potential to translate the global context of the SDGs to action-oriented programs at local community level as they represent the social interest of a diverse range of interest sectors. Nonetheless, while it is evident that much of the research has examined the ways in which NGOs contribute to the SDGs and how these may be streamlined, research has yet to address whether and in what ways may the global goals steer the values, vision, and mission taken by NGOs. In other words, there is still a knowledge gap and a lack of research on how the global goals may affect the work done by NGOs – this is further described in section 2.

To address the knowledge gap on how NGOs have taken up the SDGs in their work, this thesis aims to examine in three parts the steering effects of the same in the context of environmental and developmental NGOs in the Netherlands – justification and limitations are provided in section 3. The first part of this research will focus on determining the discursive effects of the SDGs by environmental NGOs, i.e. by assessing whether the SDGs are explicitly mentioned in the NGO values, mission, or objectives. The second part aims to determine the normative effects because of the

SDGs by examining whether NGOs plan, evaluate, or monitor their activities or projects, i.e. by showing explicit mention of this alignment in the policy or strategy plan/framework. Lastly, the third and final part will aim to explain, through interview results, the discursive and normative effects identified in the first and second part. As a result, the research question is formulated as follows:

What are the steering effects of the SDGs on Environmental and Developmental NGOs based in the Netherlands, and how can this be explained?

Moreover, to obtain a well-rounded answer to this question the following sub-questions will be answered.

Sub-question 1: *What are the discursive effects of the SDGs on Dutch NGOs?*

Sub-question 2: *What are the normative effects of the SDGs on Dutch NGOs?*

Sub-question 3: *How can the (lack thereof) steering effects of the SDGs on Dutch NGOs be explained?*

The remainder of this thesis is structured as follows: section two, theoretical framework, introduces the theoretical and conceptual framework used in this study as well as the scientific and societal relevance for carrying out this research. The third section, methodology, provides further insights into the selected research methods, research context and cases chosen for this study. Section four, results, presents the quantitative and qualitative findings for sub-questions one and two. Section five, explaining the degree of steering effects, presents factors and/or conditions that may explain the degree of discursive and normative effects identified in section four. Subsequently, section six, discussion, offers further insights into the implications and future directions of the findings from this study. Lastly, section nine, provides concluding remarks on the results, and significance of the same.

2. Theoretical Framework

This section introduces the theory and corresponding concepts most relevant for this thesis.

The Independent Variables: The Three Types of Steering Effects

The adoption of the SDGs in 2015 led to a novel global governance approach characterized by goal setting as its key strategy. As argued by Kanie et al. (2017), under this governance arrangement, governments and other (non)political actors, for instance NGOs, may publicly commit to goals to achieve or pursue. Nonetheless, while goal setting allows for the adoption of goals based on measurable targets and time frames for tracking progress, scholars in the field are highly divided on the utility and effectiveness of the same. This is namely because this governance approach can lead to difficulties in the way each goal is interpreted and applied (Delaney, 2022). On the one hand, international lawyers support the adoption of aspirational norms as they make the actors who adhere to them more accountable. On the other hand, political realists consider that the goals are a result of the failure to develop and implement a more “meaningful binding multilateral agreement”. Consequently, they argue that the SDGs lead to a weak governance arrangement as these fail to provide clear guidance on the prioritization of scarce resources and in ensuring international compliance.

Existing research has found that global norms or treaties may have different types of effects on the work of NGOs. For example, Hickmann et al. (2022) found that in the context of the MDGs, NGOs adopted a crucial role in creating pressure for the implementation of these in some national contexts. This pressure was fostered by some organizations through protests, campaigns, or cooperative strategies with private sector businesses or other international organizations. The creation of this NGO pressure was particularly valuable for the MDGs related to gender equality and advocacy for vulnerable societal groups. Further studies, such as the one by Aigner & Pequeira (2020), more specifically identified through the assessment of environmental and social NGOs in Mexico, that NGO organizational traits such as size and scope, activities and level of professionalization, ability to sustain broader stakeholder relations, and transparency about mission and goals may further influence the degree of NGO engagement with business and further its support for SDG targets.

This thesis aims to further contribute to this literature by examining the “*steering effects*” of the SDGs on the work of NGOs in the Netherlands, a previously unexplored research context. As argued by Pradhan et al. (2022), the notion of “*steering effects*” within the SDGs consists of the influence these can have on the behavioral change of political, economic, and societal actors. There are three types of effects that are likely to emerge, but not always, in a step-by-step fashion – see figure 5. Firstly, the SDGs can lead to *discursive effects*, these effects consider instances in which local citizens, civil society organizations and initiatives in cities, districts or villages are show evidence of being inspired, motivated, or encouraged to contribute to and/or act by

the goals and their mission. Secondly, the SDGs can result in *normative effects*, these occur when political, economic, or societal actors such as NGOs adjust their legislative and regulatory frameworks and policies to become more in line with and because of the goals. It should be noted that although in an ideal or theoretical world it would be desired, the discursive uptake of the SDGs does not immediately lead to normative changes in NGOs. Therefore, normative effects are considered here when the global goals shape how NGOs support and engage in monitoring the goals as well as the ways in which they plan and evaluate their activities and/or projects (Beisheim, Biermann, Bernstein et al. 2022). Lastly, *institutional effects* include the realignment of existing institutional arrangements, or the creation of new departments, committees, offices, or programs linked to the fulfillment of the goals. For the nature of this study, institutional effects are not deemed as applicable to NGOs. These would be more relevant to research, for instance in studies focused on analyzing the effects of the SDGs on a local or national government(s).

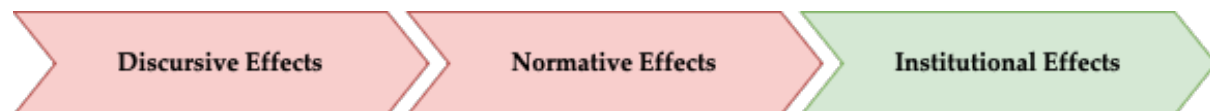


Figure 5. Sequence of steering effects that are likely to emerge because of the SDGs on NGOs. (Source: Pradhan et al., 2022).

The Dependent Variable: Mission & Vision and NGO Role(s)

This study defines NGOs, the dependent variable in this study, as organizations exhibiting the following five characteristics as described by Salamon and Anheier (1992) (Arhin, 2016). First, NGOs are *formal*, they are institutionalized to have meetings, office bearers and some form of organizational permanence. Second, they are *private*, in other words they are institutionally separate from the government even if it receives funding from the same. Third, they are *non-profit*, which means that financial surpluses are not distributed among the owners or directors. Fourth, they should be *self-governing*, they should have the ability to control and manage their own affairs. Lastly, at least to some extent, there is presence of *voluntary* participation in the conduct or management of the organization. In addition to these five characteristics, NGOs can be further distinguished by the types of issues or “activity sectors” around which they organize themselves, these include: the development, environment, social welfare, gender equality and education (Hege & Demailly, 2018).

Since the mid-1980s, NGOs have gained increased access and importance in assisting in the delegation and development of multilateral treaties (Raustiala, 1997). Although the SDGs are not an official treaty, they exemplify the increased access NGOs have gained in the political arena once previously only held by national governments. At the same time, however, it should be emphasized that access to participation is still a privilege granted and mediated by states. Numerous studies have pointed out that the participation of civil society, respectively NGOs, is beneficial for the adoption, implementation and fulfillment of issues falling under sustainability concerns. Streeten (1997) highlights that NGOs are often more innovative, flexible and

experimental than governments. Moreover, he argues that they can carry out projects at lower costs and more efficiently without the assistance of governments. Lastly, he emphasizes that they are more representative and have higher reach to communities that have been previously left behind. This argument is also emphasized by Hassan et al. (2018), as it is highlighted that NGOs represent a diverse range of organizational interests and have the potential to affect the long-term viability to sustain strategic sustainability projects. Similarly, Hege & Demailly (2018), find that NGOs play a crucial role in holding governments accountable to commitments they have made and further encourage the creation of new advocacy coalitions and increase the legitimacy of accountability claims (Hassan et al., 2018). Therefore, studies also highlight the role of NGOs as the principal actors in monitoring the progress made towards the achievement of the goals (Hassan et al., 2018).

In sum, all the roles' NGOs have had since the initial development and adoption of the SDGs can be categorized into three non-mutually exclusive categories consisting of *service provision*, *advocacy* and *facilitation & brokering* (Arhin, 2016). These roles can be also expected to be assumed by NGOs because of the global goals. The role of *service provision* entails activities based on the supply of basic needs or services to specific communities. These services are generally centered around material poverty and the provision of tangible project outputs. Common examples include education and health services for marginalized communities, livelihood interventions, human rights, democracy building, finance, policy analysis and environmental management. *Advocacy* consists of activities centered around increasing awareness through networking, capacity building, lobbying, and campaigning in the form of action-oriented initiatives that aim to promote specific interests or outcomes. Under this role NGOs are the necessary or essential catalysts or actors to initiate, inspire, facilitate, or contribute to improved thinking and action necessary for change. Advocacy of NGOs is generally directed towards individuals, specific groups of local communities, or among actors within the government, businesses, or donors to improve policies and practices aimed at reducing poverty. *Facilitation & brokering* consists in connecting, integrating, and fostering collaboration between different and diverse range of interests through bridging the participation of actors from socioeconomics and politics to achieve goals that NGOs are not able to achieve alone. Thus, the role of NGOs here is to act as intermediaries or partners and play a bridging role to improve policy and practice for individuals or communities.

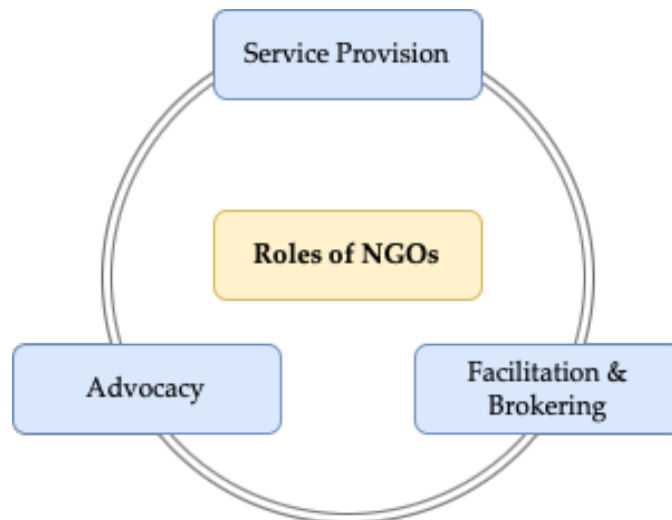


Figure 6. Types of non-mutually exclusive roles that may be taken by NGOs because or for the SDGs. (Source: Arhin, 2016).

2.1. Conceptual Framework

Based on the theories and concepts described above, this thesis will follow the conceptual framework as depicted in figure 2. Following Pradhan et al. (2022), the SDGs can lead to three types of steering effects, nevertheless, this thesis aims to assess the discursive and normative effects. First, the discursive effects will be examined to determine to what degree the SDGs have encouraged or inspired the values, norms, and objectives of environmental NGOs in the Netherlands. This examination will be done by seeing whether and how the SDGs are explicitly referred to by the NGOs. The second part will then aim to examine whether the SDGs lead to normative effects on NGOs. These changes will be determined by assessing whether NGOs explicitly plan, monitor or evaluate an activity or project for the SDGs. Furthermore, depending on the project or activity it will be determined what role is or can be adopted by an NGO for the SDGs. The selection of these two steering effects is based on the fact that they are likely to result in a comprehensive and measurable way of determining the effects of the SDGs on environmental and developmental NGOs.

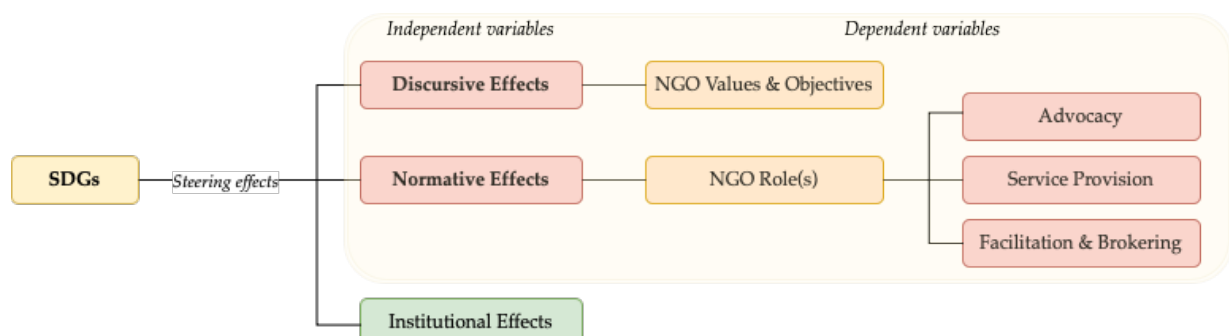


Figure 7. Conceptual framework delineating the relationships between the key concepts subject to examination. (Sources: Arhin, 2016; Pradhan et al., 2022).

2.2. Scientific and Societal Relevance

There are numerous scientific and societal benefits for the examination of the steering effects of the SDGs on NGOs. In terms of scientific relevance, on a broader level it is valuable to carry out this type of research as assessment of the SDGs as a governance mechanism is crucial for the improvement of decisions and actions that are made by politicians, local administration, global corporations, and civil society daily (Biermann et al., 2022b). Thus, if research finds that the current governance structure is lacking or could be improved there is still some time to develop alternative mechanisms or tools for political interventions (Biermann et al., 2022b).

More in depth, it is important to assess the steering effects of the SDGs on NGOs specifically given their large prevalence in Dutch society. While there are currently an estimated more than 50,000 NGOs registered in the Netherlands, research on the effects of the global goals on these organizations is largely unexplored. Nevertheless, it is important to study this as to truly achieve the global goals efficient work and collaboration across all levels of relevant stakeholders is essential. Thus, this research on NGOs, can prove the ways in which the governance mechanism is particularly strong or effective and how these can be further strengthened and perhaps even transferred to future global goals. Moreover, this study would further contribute to one of the most dynamic research areas within the sustainability science field.

Numerous scholars characterize NGOs as the formal representatives of civil society. Therefore, research on the topic is inherently valuable for society as it aims to uncover the ways in which the commitments and actions of NGOs contribute to the sustainable development and well-being of civil society. Existing research has found that there is some evidence that the SDGs are used by NGOs as a reference framework to hold governments to account. As a result, scholars in the field argue that further research is needed to assess the steering effects of the SDGs in domestic institutions as well as the ways in which citizens can use the goals as a tool to enhance the democratic quality of national policymaking. Consequently, given the important role of NGOs for civil society, this thesis can contribute towards better understanding and greater insight into the operations of NGOs and how these are influenced or shaped by bigger global goals. This is particularly important as it can be expected that the world will continue to experience sustainability issues well-beyond 2030 and corresponding future global goals are likely to be developed, adopted, and implemented.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Context

This thesis is focused on examining environmental and developmental NGOs formally registered in the Netherlands; this includes international NGOs with headquarters in the country. Selection of the Netherlands as a research context was based on two crucial factors. First, within Europe the Netherlands is characterized as having one of the most favorable conditions for associations and non-governmental organizations (Gul-Rechlewicz, 2016). As a result, the country not only boasts with a wide range of NGOs, but these have also been found to be committed in many ways to achieving the SDGs (Dutch National SDG Report, 2021). Second, due to practical reasons, in terms of establishing contact and carrying out interviews, it was deemed that studying specific types of NGOs in the Netherlands would be most beneficial and efficient.

3.2. Case-Study Selection

Given the broad range and quantities of NGOs in the Netherlands, it was deemed necessary to select the most relevant NGOs in this research context. In carrying out this selection more focused, and in-depth research for more detailed and narrowed results are more likely to be guaranteed. Correspondingly, to determine the steering effects of the SDGs the research of this study is focused on environmental and developmental NGOs.

As presented in section 1.3., the Netherlands continues to face several challenges in making progress towards the environmental goals including SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 14 (Life Below Water), and SDG 15 (Life on Land). In presence of these challenges, it was deemed interesting then to explore what the effects of these are on environmental NGOs – particularly given that their focus of work is on addressing the environmental problems experienced by the country. In addition to environmental NGOs, this study also explores the steering effects of the SDGs on developmental NGOs. Selection for this group of NGOs is because of the high degree of engagement of the Netherlands in development cooperation. Furthermore, the people along with the environment, and economy makes up one of the crucial pillars of sustainable development. Nevertheless, the focus on development NGOs is a slightly less central to the environmental NGOs as the SDGs, in contrast to the MDGs, are not as oriented on development cooperation.

The following sub-sections provide further details into the selection procedure and number of organizations analyzed under each category for research.

3.2.1. Environmental NGOs

In this thesis environmental NGOs are defined as organizations whose scope of work is focused on the protection and well-being of the environment. The list of relevant environmental NGOs used for research was provided by the first national SDG coordinator of the Netherlands - see Appendix A. The full list of organizations used for research consists of 91 officially registered and formally recognized, by the Dutch Chamber of Commerce (KVK), environmental NGOs in the country.

3.2.2. Developmental NGOs

Developmental NGOs are defined in this study as NGOs whose scope of work is linked around the development of communities, institutions, or organizations internationally. This thesis examined the steering effects of the SDGs on 98 developmental NGOs in the Netherlands. The list of NGOs examined was obtained through the trade association for development cooperation, Partos (Members Partos, n.d.) – see Appendix C. This association was chosen as it has the largest partnership of development organizations in the Netherlands. Furthermore, as the environmental NGOs, all developmental NGOs considered in this list are officially registered and formally recognized by the Dutch Chamber of Commerce (KVK).

3.3. Data Collection

In order to answer the main research and sub-question this thesis applied a mixed-methods approach through which relevant primary and secondary information was collected through a literature review, semi-structured interviews, and official NGO website content and documents.

3.3.1. Literature Review

A systematic literature review constituted a major data source for this thesis (1) to assess the current extent of research in the field and (2) to develop the theoretical and conceptual frameworks. The literature used for in this study were obtained through two search engines, namely Google Scholar and Scopus. Furthermore, numerous key search strings were used to obtain relevant articles including but not limited to “NGOs and the SDGs”, “the steering effects of SDGs”, “progress on the SDGs in the Netherlands”, among others. All literature search were restricted to article titles, abstracts, and keywords.

3.3.2. NGO Website Content and Document Analysis

In addition to the literature review a large portion of this thesis relied on the analysis of official NGO website content and documents. All NGOs reviewed came from the two sources as described in section 3.3.1. and 3.3.2. Here website content consisted of NGO pages under titles such as “About [Organization Name]” which then generally further linked to the organizations’ “Mission and Vision”, “Board of Inspiration”, “Policy”, “Annual Reports & Publications”, and/or “Impact and Accountability”.

Additional website content consisted in the review of pages with the title of “This is what we do”, “We are working on” or alternatively “Projects”. Further, project information was then obtained through the links following one of the listed sections. Moreover, in terms of documents that were used for analysis for environmental NGOs these consisted of the latest available “annual report” or alternatively referred to as “impact report”. If available, additional “policy plans” or “strategy reports or frameworks” were reviewed. Due to time constraints, which are further elaborated in section 3.7., limitations, only annual reports were reviewed for the analysis of the steering effects of the SDGs on developmental NGOs. More information on the methods used to analyze the content of these sources and their operationalization is provided in section 3.5.1. and 3.5.2.

3.3.3.Semi-structured Interviews

In order to answer sub-question 3, a total of 9 semi-structured interviews were carried out with university researchers, field experts and professionals – see table 1. These interviews were an essential source of qualitative information necessary for the discursive and interpretative analysis. Selection of the interviewees was based on results obtained through the first and second research stage, availability, as well as network connections. All interviewees were initially contacted via email in which a general introduction and request for an interview was made. Upon written confirmation for an interview, all participants were sent an interview meeting time on teams (if online) and the interview consent form to ensure the fulfillment of all ethical procedures – see Appendix D. At the beginning of each interview all participants were made aware of the research purposes and permission was requested for the recording of the same. On average all interviews lasted between 30 minutes to an hour. Further details on the questions used to guide all interviews are provided in appendix E.

Interviewee	Organization	Job Title
1	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	1 st National SDG Coordinator
2	Studenten voor Morgen	Head Chair
3	SDG Nederland	Project Manager
4	Zeeuwse Milieufederatie (ZMf)	Project Leader – Circular Economy and Energy Transition
5	Utrecht University	PhD Researcher (1)
6	Utrecht University	PhD Researcher (2)
7	iCra Global	Communications Officer
8	Partos	Political Analyst
9	Both ENDS	Director

Table 1. List of interviewees, corresponding job title and organization.

3.4. Data Analysis

3.4.1. Research Methods

Several methods can be used to assess the steering effects of the SDGs. Nevertheless, these differ in two ways, some are better suited to assess the impact of the goals on decision-making and politics, others examine the progress made towards achieving the goals (Pradhan et al., 2022). This study aimed to do the former, consequently the main research method consisted in a discursive and interpretative analysis. The discursive analysis enabled the study of written and spoken material to understand, and examine the ways in which, as well as how, the SDGs have become (or not) embedded in the work of NGOs. Furthermore, they allowed to determine whether they have led to real-life changes.

The first research stage, to answer sub-question 1, consisted in analyzing the discursive effects of the SDGs on environmental and developmental NGOs. This was done by examining explicit SDG reference in formal NGO website content and project documents and/or dossiers. Further, these findings were further verified through interviews when possible. For example, if it was identified that one NGO had discursively taken up the SDGs and these were available for an interview. The second stage, to answer sub-question 2, on assessing the normative effects further depended on analysis of explicit reference of the SDGs in formal NGO website content as well as semi-structured interviews. In both these research stages, the software application N-Vivo was used to carry out a systematic analysis to identify which NGOs show evidence, by explicitly referencing the global goals, of experiencing or undergoing discursive and/or normative effects. For this, a systematic word search query was carried out with the search terms “SDG” and “Sustainable Development Goals”. The third and final research stage, which aimed to answer sub-question 3, further depended on the use of N-Vivo. In this stage the software was useful to organize the results of the semi-structured interviews to identify trends or patterns to explain the extent of discursive and normative effects of the global goals on the NGOs. See appendix F for an overview of the codes used for analysis.

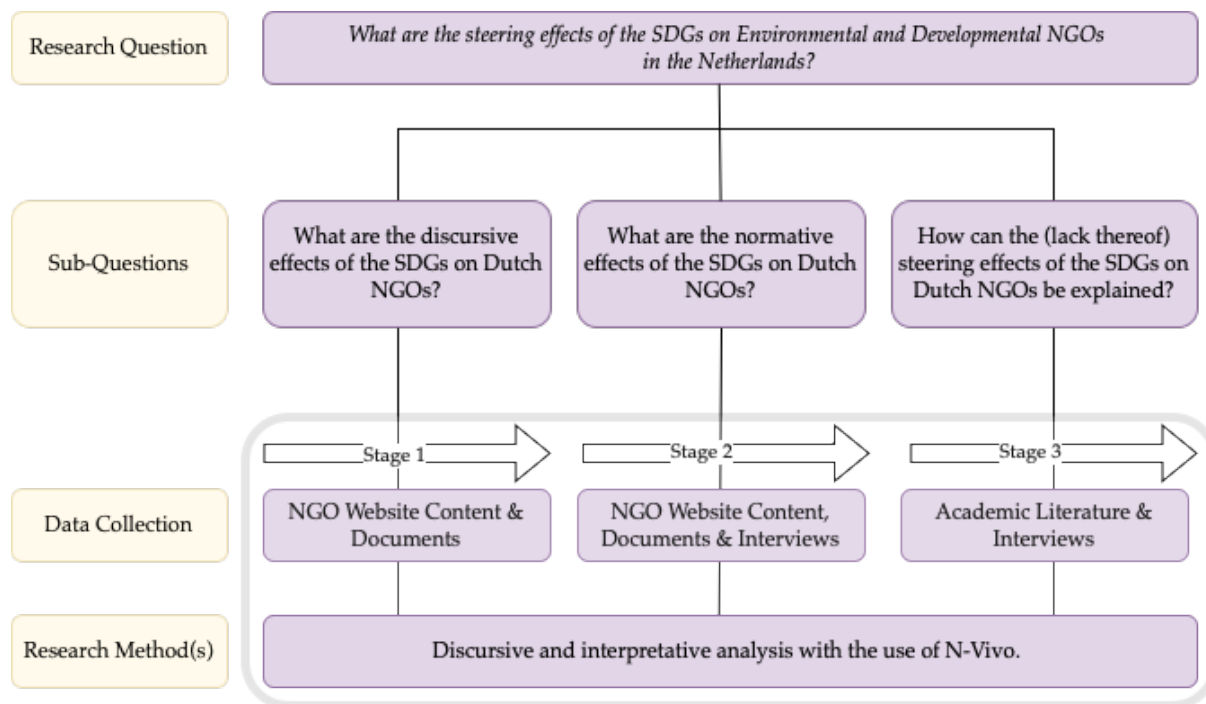


Figure 8. Research framework procedure to answer the main RQ and sub-questions.

3.4.2. Operationalization of Variables

In order to assess the steering effects by the SDGs on NGOs the dependent variables of this research consisted in the NGO values & objectives, to identify the discursive effects, and their roles, to examine the normative effects. These variables are operationalized in table 1.

First, to examine the discursive effects, this study first looked at whether and how environmental NGOs explicitly reference or frame the SDGs in their website content and documents by particularly focusing on the organization values, mission & vision, strategy report/framework, policy plans and/or annual reports. For developmental NGOs, only the latest impact or annual report was considered. To determine whether there is evidence of discursive effect explicit mention of inspiration or encouragement because of the SDGs had to be included in one of the above listed indicators.

Second, to examine whether NGOs have experienced normative effects a review of formal NGO website content consisting of project documents and/or dossiers was done. Based on this review, evidence for normative changes were considered only instances in which there was explicit reference, or it was mentioned that projects or activities have been planned or are monitored and evaluated because of the SDGs. Upon evidence of this each project or activity was categorized under one or more NGO roles - see table 2. This enabled to see what type of role an NGO may assume in contributing or working towards the SDGs. Here again it should be noted that only projects reported in the annual report were considered for developmental NGOs.

RQ	Type of Steering	Variable	Data Source	Indicators
Sub-question 1	Discursive effects	NGO values & objectives	Formal NGO website content, documents, and semi-structured interviews.	References to explicit SDGs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> In organization values, mission & vision, strategy report/framework, policy plans and/or annual reports.
Sub-question 2	Normative effects	NGO role(s)	Semi-structured interviews as well as formal NGO website content consisting of project documents and/or dossiers.	Service Provider: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Activity consisting of the supply of basic needs or services based on an SDG? Facilitator & Broker: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does the NGO carry out an intermediary or bridging role based on the SDGs? Advocator: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does the NGO lobby and campaign for the government regarding the SDGs? Does the NGO engage in an effort to enhance networking and capacity building for the SDGs with the government, businesses or donors?

Table 2. Operationalization of variables to study the discursive effects and normative changes of the SDGs on environmental and developmental NGOs.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

The principles of ethics were considered during the entirety of this thesis. In terms of scholarly literature and NGO online web-site content used, this thesis is committed to deliver results that are well communicated and free of plagiarism. Furthermore, during the process of conducting qualitative research, namely during the semi-structured interviews, numerous steps were taken to account for the ethical considerations. First, all interviewees were sufficiently informed on the research topic. Second, upon agreement for an interview, all interviewees obtained an interview consent form based on the Utrecht University guidelines – see appendix D. Second, at the beginning of all meetings verbal permission was requested for the recording of the meeting, as well as the consent to include NGO or organization names. Lastly, in terms of the use of the data obtained from the interviewees, it was agreed and discussed in each interview whether these preferred data anonymization and whether they agreed or not to the use of direct quotes for the result analysis section of this thesis.

3.6. Limitations

As is common in any kind of research, several limitations were experienced throughout the completion of this thesis. First and foremost, the biggest limitation consisted in establishing connections with NGOs in both the environmental and developmental field. In total over 25 organizations were unsuccessfully contacted via email for interview. Among these organizations, some never provided an email response or reported that they were unavailable to participate in interviews due to time constraints. Consequently, although the initial approach was to only interview NGOs in these two fields, it was at a later stage decided that additional interviews with NGO umbrella organizations, and professional experts or researchers in the field could be equally beneficial. Interviews with people falling in this category was somewhat more successful, however, it should also be noted that over 10 interview requests were sent but a limited amount was readily available for interview.

Second, it should be noted that the analysis on developmental NGOs was subject to time constraints as the decision to include these in the thesis was decided at a later research stage. The decision to include these in the research was based on the interview and general initial results identified during the analysis of environmental NGOs. In other words, the findings of the steering effects of the SDGs on the environmental NGOs suggested that these might be different for NGOs working in other sectors – particularly those working in the development field given the origin of the SDGs as precursors to the MDGs. As a result, the steering effects of the SDGs on these organizations, in comparison to environmental NGOs, were only considered through the analysis of the latest available annual reports.

Third, it should be noted that all information reviewed and analyzed, although operationalized as described in section 5.4.2. are subject to personal interpretation. For example, it is possible that in assessing the discursive effects of the SDGs by an NGO one person might interpret less inspiration or encouragement than reported in this thesis. However, this degree of interpretation was mediated as much as possible with the interviews. Lastly, it should be noted that the overall generalizability of this study is limited as the research is focused on one country only. This, however, allowed for an overall more an in-depth and detailed analysis. Despite the above-listed limitations this thesis still beneficially contributes to a relatively unexplored research path on the steering effects of the SDGs on NGOs. Furthermore, it developed and applied a useful theoretical framework and research strategy that can be replicated on further types of NGOs and even perhaps across different research contexts (countries) around the world.

4. Results

The following section presents the results obtained through discursive and interpretative analysis. First it presents the discursive effects, followed by the normative effects experienced by environmental and developmental NGOs in the Netherlands.

4.1. The Discursive Effects

4.1.1. Environmental NGOs

Based on the assessment of 86 environmental NGOs in the Netherlands, the explicit discursive effects of the SDGs are characterized as low, roughly 7% (6/86). As shown in table 3, only 6 organizations make explicit reference to the SDGs in at least one or more of the discursive indicators used in this study. Most notably it is clear that there is no evidence of discursive effects in the values of any of the identified NGOs. Instead, the discursive effects are primarily evident in one or two of the other studied indicators. Furthermore, the framing of the inspiration or engagement with the global goals by the six identified environmental NGOs is quite varied. On the one hand, there are organizations that broadly explicitly refer to all SDGs. On the other hand, some organizations specifically select a few of the SDGs according to the mission, vision and/or framework of their organization – see table 4.

NGO	Indicators on the Discursive Effects of SDGs		
	Mission & Vision	Values	Policy Plan, Strategy Report/Framework and/or Impact Report
Jonge Klimaatbeweging (JKB)	✓		
Studenten voor Morgen	✓		✓
Natuur en Milieu	✓		✓
Natuur en Milieu Overijssel	✓		✓
Waddenvereniging	✓		✓
Zeeuwse Milieufederatie (ZMf)	✓		✓

Table 3. Environmental NGOs showing evidence of discursive effects because of the SDGs.

Among the organizations framing or engaging with the SDGs in a broad manner there are further differences, particularly in terms of where they choose to mention the global goals in their work. For instance, the Zeeuwse Milieufederatie (ZMf) mentions in its impact report that they want to contribute to the progress of the SDGs with their activities (ZMf Our Impact, 2021) - no reference is made to any specific SDG. Based on an interview with a representative of the organization this is because the organization itself never considered or specifically chose a specific SDG to contribute towards – further explanations for this are explored in section 5.1. In a similar fashion, the Waddenvereniging refers to the SDGs in their multi-year policy plan, with the

statement “the Wadden Association endorses the SDGs 2030 as established by the United Nations” (Waddenvereniging Meerjarenbeleidsplan, 2021, p. 10). Meanwhile, the Jonge Klimaatbeweging (JKB) broadly refers to and uses the framework of the SDGs for their vision, or policy plan, of the future. Based on this framework, the JKB, alongside 70 youth organizations, developed the “the youth climate agenda 3.0” which is a report detailing what young people want the Netherlands to look like in 2040. The agenda is based on 7 themes consisting in the sustainable development of economic, the energy & industry sector, biodiversity & nature, education, and food.

Just as the NGOs above, organizations engaging with specific SDGs vary in how and where they mention or refer to the SDGs. For example, Studenten voor Morgen (SvM) explicitly mentions the SDGs in their policy plan, which also relates to the organizations mission & vision, as they “*approach today’s challenges via the synergies that SDG 4 (Quality Education), 13 (Climate Action), & 17 (Partnership for the goals) bring us*” (SVM Policy Plan 2022-2023, p. 3). As identified through an interview with the organization’s head chair, selection of these specific SDGs is because these are best aligned with the long-standing mission and vision of the organization. In other words, these are the SDGs that best frame the initial and still existing ambitions and goals of the organization. The Natuur en Milieu or Nature & Environment organization refers to the SDGs in their impact report, this is stated as “*we actively contribute to eight of the seventeen goals in our work*” (Natuur en Milieu Annual Report, 2021, p. 9) – this includes SDG 6 (Clean Water & Sanitation), SDG 7 (Affordable & Clean Energy), SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 14 (Life Below Water), SDG 15 (Life on Land) and SDG 17 (Partnership for the Goals). Finally, the Natuur en Milieu Overijssel, explicitly mentions the SDGs in their annual report (2022) – “*we have formulated our impact in terms of the SDGs... we focus on the substantive SDGs in our work*”, this includes SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 7 (Affordable & Clean Energy), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 15 (Life on Land) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) (Natuur en Milieu Overijssel Annual Report, 2022, p. 6). With these SDGs, the organization aim to achieve what they describe as a nature-inclusive and sustainable society which consists of (1) countering and dealing with climate change, (2) restore biodiversity and (3) stimulate a circular economy (Natuur en Milieu Overijssel Annual Report 2022, p. 9).

NGO's	Referenced SDGs
Jonge Klimaatbeweging (JKB)	General
Studenten voor Morgen	4, 13, 17
Natuur en Milieu	6, 7, 9, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17
Natuur en Milieu Overijssel	4, 7, 11, 12, 13, 15, 17
Waddenvereniging	General
Zeeuwse Milieufederatie (ZMf)	General

Table 4. SDGs explicitly referenced by environmental NGOs in the Netherlands.

The remaining environmental NGOs are made up on the one hand of organizations of which 44.86% (36/86) make general references to “sustainable development”, and “sustainability”. Reference to these terms could suggest that these organizations are aware of the notion of sustainability and its implications. For example, the national Nature and Environmental Federations (Natuur en Milieufederatie) as well as those from different regions of the Netherlands such as Groningen, Limburg, and Drenthe (NMFs) reference to “sustainability” is stated in their mission as they describe that they work with affiliated organization, business, and residents in developing a sustainable and beautiful Groningen, Limburg, or Drenthe (Over Ons NMF Groningen, n.d.). Nevertheless, these NGOs do not show evidence of being explicitly encouraged or inspired by the SDGs under any of the indicators selected for this study.

Further, 51.1% (44/86) of environmental NGOs make no type of acknowledgement or reference to the SDGs and related terms in any way. In general, the organizations in this category can be divided in two categories. The first category includes environmental NGOs that are focused on very specific and / or detailed environmental problems such as the protection, or research for specific animals or insects. Examples under this category include the Association for Moss and Lichen Research (Bryologische en Lichenologische Werkgroep), the Knowledge Center Insects and Other Invertebrates (EIS Kenniscentrum Insecten en andere Ongewervelden), The Fauna Protection Society (De Faunabescherming), the Floristic Research Netherlands (Floron), the Royal Dutch Botanical Association (Koninklijke Nederlandse Botanische Vereniging (KNBV), among others. The second category is made up of environmental NGOs that are particularly encouraged or inspired around the mission & vision for the protection, conservation and development of nature, landscape, and cultural heritage for a specific region of the Netherlands. For example, there is the It Fryske Gea, the provincial association for nature conservation in Fryslân, Brabant Landscape (Brabants Landschap), The Flevoland Landscape (Het Flevolandschap), The Gelderland Landscape (Het Geldersch Landschap), Goois Nature Reserve (Goois Natuurreservaat), The Groninger Landscape (Het Groninger Landschap), The Hague Nature Conservancy (Haagse Natuurbescherming), The Limburg Landscape (Het Limburgs Landschap), and so on.

In sum, these additional findings show two types of trends for factors that inspire or encourage environmental NGOs in the Netherlands. First, a large part (41.7%) of environmental NGOs in the Netherlands are aware of notions closely linked to the SDGs, such as “sustainable development” and “sustainability”. However, these do not

explicitly refer to the SDGs – in other words, there is no evidence of there being discursive effects due to the SDGs. Second, it shows that perhaps NGOs at a “lower” or more regional, and local level tend to generally fall outside of the scope or reach of such broad and international goals or ambitions such as the SDGs. These trends are further explored in the discussion, section 7.1.

4.1.2. Developmental NGOs

Based on the assessment of the annual reports of 98 developmental NGOs in the Netherlands, the explicit discursive uptake of the SDGs by these is 37.7% (37/98). From this 37.7%, just as environmental NGOs, some developmental organizations broadly explicitly refer to all SDGs, roughly 21%, while the remaining 79% makes specific reference to one or more SDGs - see table 5.

NGO's	Referenced SDGs
Both ENDS	5, 13, 14, 15, 17
Aqua for all	6
CNV Internationaal	8
DCDD	2, 10
Edukans	4, 5, 6, 8
Fair Food	1, 2, 3, 8, 10, 12
Hivos People Unlimited	10
iCra Global	2, 4, 8, 17
IRC	6
IUCN	5, 14, 15, 17
KIT Royal Tropical Institute	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 10, 17
Leger des Heils	1, 3, 4, 11
Lepra Stichting	3, 10, 17
Leprazending	1, 3, 4, 10
Liliane Fonds	3, 4, 5, 8, 10, 17
Mondiaal FNV	1, 8
Plan International	3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 16
Prisma	1
PSI Europe	General
RNW	13
Rutgers	General
Save the Children	General
See You – Including Everybody	General
Simavi	General
SNV	1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 12, 13
SOS Kindergarten	1, 3, 4, 5, 8, 10, 16, 17
Terres des Hommes	5, 8, 16, 17
The Hunger Project	General
UNICEF NL	4, 10, 13, 17
Via don Bosco	4, 5, 8
VSO	General
WECF	General
WEMOS	3
Wilde Ganzen	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 17

Women – Dutch Gender Platform	5
Women Win	5, 8
Woord en Daad	2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 12, 15

Table 5. Developmental NGOs showing discursive effects because of the SDGs and referenced goals.

The broad or general inspiration of the SDGs on developmental NGOs is stated in mostly two ways. First, the goals are basis or a source for the mission and vision of the NGO. For example, the See You organization states that it is encouraged by the goals based on the “... common thread [to] “leave no one behind” is exactly what See You stands for” (See You Annual Report 2021, p. 24). Second, other NGOs are encouraged by the SDGs as a framework to work towards to. As noted by Save the Children, “all our activities are designed to contribute to ... and are consistent with global priorities as articulated in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)” (Save the Children Annual Report, 2021, p. 14). Similarly, the Hunger Project states that, “... we work on all SDGs. From the conviction that only by focusing on progress in all necessary areas can hunger and poverty be truly and sustainably ended” (The Hunger Project Annual Report 2021, p. 76).

In a similar fashion, the discursive effects by specific SDGs by the NGOs are varied. Some organizations, show explicit discursive effects as the global goals are part of the mission or goal towards which the NGO works for. For instance, Leprazending, reports that “... in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Leprazending mission committed in 2021 to: fighting poverty (SDG 1), health and welfare (SDG 3), accessible and good education (SDG 4) and reducing inequality (SDG 10)” (Leprazending Annual Report 2021, p. 5). Alike, Plan International, “endorses the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the United Nations in 2015 and we strive to contribute wherever possible to the realization of these goals. We are particularly committed to SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 3 (Good Health and Wellbeing), SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), SDG 8 (Decent Growth and Economic Growth), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequality) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions)” (Plan International Annual Report 2021-2022, p. 8).

Further, some organizations go a step further in the discursive uptake of the global goals, as these have become an alignment guide or become integrated in the organization’s strategy. For example, Simavi states “to measure and showcase how programs contribute to our ultimate goal, we developed indicators that are aligned with each of the outcomes in our ToC [theory of change]. Where possible we align these to the Human Rights framework or the Sustainable Development Goals and targets” (Simavi Impact Report 2022, p. 7). Likewise, Liliane Fonds, highlights that “... in our work we focus on five themes that are consistent with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). All our themes relate to SDG 10: reducing inequality” (Liliane Fonds Annual Report 2021, p. 5).

4.1.3. Comparing the Discursive Effects

In terms of the discursive uptake, the results show that developmental NGOs are roughly up to five times more likely to be inspired or encouraged to act by the global

goals and their mission. This is evident as only 7% of environmental NGOs make explicit reference to the SDGs in comparison to 37.7% of the developmental organizations analyzed. Furthermore, it is noticeable that the SDGs that inspire the NGOs of each group are different. As shown in figure 11, environmental NGOs mainly engage with the environmental SDGs, these include SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy), 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), 13 (Climate Action), 14 (Life Below Water), and 15 (Life on Land). Additionally, they further reference SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). Thus, environmental NGOs also engage, although to a smaller degree, with goals falling in other SDG clusters – the people, prosperity, and partnership clusters.

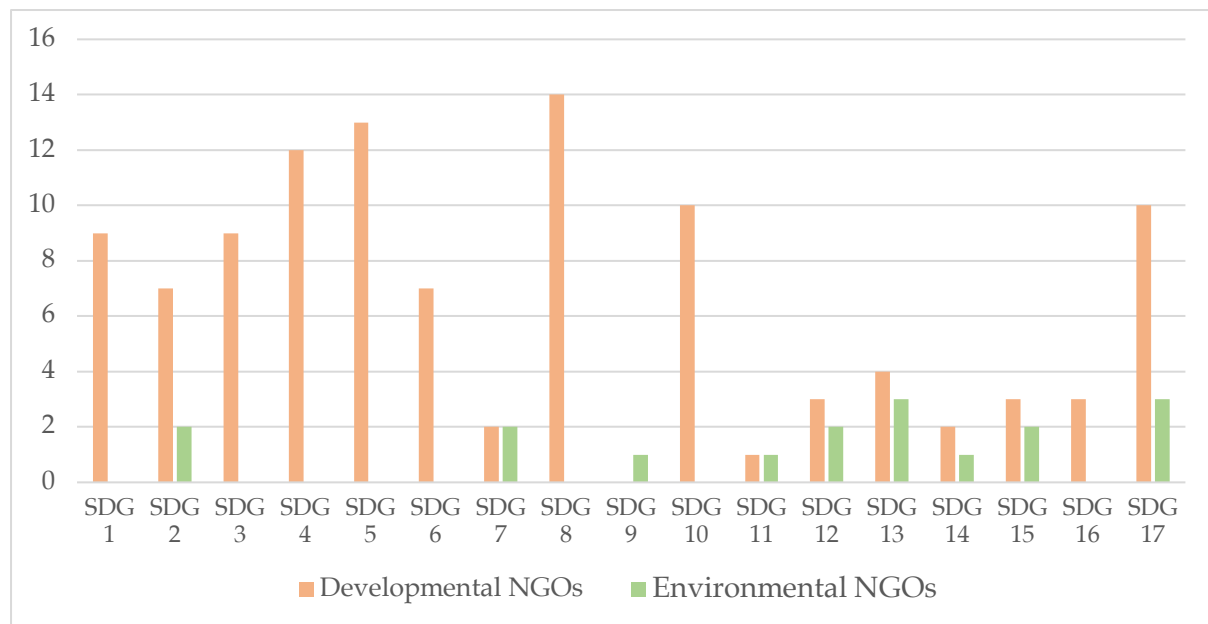


Figure 9. The SDGs and corresponding frequency of explicit reference due to the discursive effects on environmental and developmental NGOs in the Netherlands.

In comparison to environmental NGOs, developmental NGOs engage with all global goals except for SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure). The results show that several developmental NGOs engage with the environmental goals. Nonetheless, the frequency of this engagement is the lowest in comparison to other goals; for instance, SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) which is most referenced as well as SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) both fall under the prosperity cluster. Moreover, high reference frequency is evident in SDGs 1 through 5 which are commonly clustered as the SDGs for the people. Finally, it should also be noted that numerous references are made to SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) which falls in the “partnerships” cluster.

Despite the difference in frequency of discursive effects and the related SDGs between environmental and developmental NGOs, a clear similarity can be drawn in the discursive framing of the SDGs by these. Namely it is evident that in both groups some organizations show “broad” or general inspiration or encouragement by the SDGs while others have specific SDGs which inspire their mission, vision, or strategy.

For example, environmental NGOs show evidence of broad encouragement of the global goals as they state “... *the Wadden Association endorses the SDGs 2030 as established by the UN*” (Waddenvereniging Multi-Year Policy Plan 2021, p. 10). Similarly, a developmental NGO may state “... *all our activities are designed to contribute to ... and are consistent with global priorities as articulated in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*” (Save the Children Annual Report, 2021, p. 14). Similarities can also be drawn in how the NGOs show inspiration of the global goals by mentioning specific SDGs. For example, an environmental NGO may delineate that “[we] *approach today’s challenges via the synergies that SDG 4 (Quality Education), 13 (Climate Action), & 17 (Partnership for the goals) bring us*” (SVM Policy Plan 2022-2023, 2022, p. 3). In a similar fashion developmental NGOs may highlight their inspiration as “... *in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Leprazending mission committed in 2021 to: fighting poverty (SDG 1), health and welfare (SDG 3), accessible and good education (SDG 4) and reducing inequality (SDG 10)*” (Leprazending Annual Report 2021, p. 5). These examples showcase that there are no clear or significant differences in the ways in which environmental or developmental NGOs decide to showcase that their work is or has been inspired or encouraged by the SDGs.

4.2. The Normative Effects Arising from the SDGs

4.2.1. Environmental NGOs

Upon examination of the roles assumed by environmental NGOs in project documents and/or dossiers, NGO website content, as well as semi-structured interviews and whether these are planned or evaluated because of the SDGs, none (0/86) of the environmental NGOs show evidence of subsequent normative effects due to the global goals. As stated by a representative of Natuur en Milieu, the “*uptake of and implementation of the SDGs is not a mission in itself for our organization, but more of a side effect of the work we do... we automatically work on the SDGs mentioned in the annual report*” (Natuur en Milieu, E-mail Correspondence, 2023). Similarly, the representative of Studenten voor Morgen, highlighted that “*the SDGs are labels for what we are standing for already... and this is why we decided to align ourselves with them*” (SvM Interview, 2023). Thus, while in very few cases the SDGs may lead to discursive effects on environmental NGOs, they fail in leading to ensuing normative effects and instead are seen as a complementary or are referenced if an alignment is found with the existing organizations’ work missions.

In addition to being seen as complementary outcomes to existing work, the results show that instead of planning or evaluating activities because of the SDGs environmental NGOs in the Netherlands base their work on more narrowed down missions or themes. For example, the action for sustainability, environment, equality, and diversity (ASEED) organization rallies around building an emancipated sustainable and just food system (Mission ASEED, 2018). In doing so the NGO dedicates its efforts to the ASEED’s campaign rallying for fossil free agriculture (FFA) by educating the people on the consequences of the current agricultural system and targeting big businesses and politicians. Likewise, the Nature & Environment Federation from Friesland (FMF) is committed to the sustainable development of the

region by focusing on three pillars of work (Missie FMF, n.d.). One this pillars consists in counteracting the effects of climate change in the region and to do so the organization has developed its own “Friesian Climate Approach” based on a regional translation of the Paris Climate Agreement (Multi-Year Vision FMF, 2021). These cases exemplify that for most Dutch environmental NGOs the SDGs are too broad or out of the scope of the organizations existing mission. As a result, there are instances in which these may use other international environmental agreements to plan or monitor the organizations projects and/or activities.

It should be noted that despite not undergoing normative changes because of the SDGs, examination of the projects and/or activities of the environmental NGOs showing discursive uptake of the SDGs show that these very broadly or loosely aim to contribute to the general attainment or fulfillment of all or a few selected goals. All six environmental organizations showing discursive uptake of the SDGs highly engage in projects or activities that aim to enhance the networking and capacity building for issues under the SDGs with the government, businesses, or donors – see Appendix B. In fact, this is the role under which most activities or projects are carried out by these NGOs in relation to the global goals. This shows that although these NGOs have not changed the ways in which they plan and evaluate their activities because of the SDGs, they still commit or spend lots of their efforts as an advocate for these. For example, Studenten voor Morgen, states [we] “*approach today’s challenges via the synergies that SDG 4 (Quality Education), 13 (Climate Action), & 17 (Partnership for the goals) bring us*” (SVM Policy Plan 2022-2023, 2022, p. 3). As a result, this may show that this organization engages in activities or projects in which it advocates for these SDGs. For instance, it has developed the “*DuurzameStudent.nl*”, or Sustainable Student platform, in which students can write and inform each other on a number of sustainability topics. Moreover, they have developed the “*Duurzame Studies*” or sustainable studies, and “*SDGs on Stage*” platforms which further aim to engage students on studies or internships that contribute to the SDGs.

The Waddenvereniging, or the Association of the Wadden region, has lobbied against human threats human shared use of the Wadden Sea, filed lawsuits against gas extraction, participates in legal proceedings for sustainable fishing, and actively promotes the importance of the region as a world heritage site. These activities, individually as well as collectively, may likely in some way or another contribute to SDG 7 (Affordable & Clean Energy), SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 14 (Life Below Water), SDG 15 (Life on Land), and possibly others. This assumption is based on the multi-year policy plan of the organization in which it is mentioned that “the association endorses the SDGs as established by the United Nations (Waddenvereniging Multi-Year Policy Plan 2021, p. 10). In a similar fashion, the Zeeuwse Milieufederatie (ZMf), is a sustainability advocate in its projects as it advocates for ensuring that a sustainable energy system is implemented in the region through the Regional Energy Strategy, monitoring and controlling landscape developments in areas such as the Veerse Meer and participating in the Coastal Vision plan, advocating against organofluoride chemical compounds (PFAS) through the International Scheldt Commission (ISC), as well as working in the Water Landscape Consortium. These projects yet again, can contribute to several SDGs such as SDG 7

(Affordable and Clean Energy), SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 14 (Life Below Water), SDG 15 (Life on Land).

4.2.2. Developmental NGOs

In the context of developmental NGOs, the results show that there is more engagement of these and the SDGs, in comparison to environmental NGOs, per definition of what is entailed in the normative effects. As listed in table 6, roughly 7% (7/98) of developmental NGOs show explicit evidence of planning, evaluating, monitoring, or contributing through projects and/or activities in relation to one or more SDGs. In doing so, these NGOs assume one or more of the roles as categorized by Arhin (2016), namely as advocates, service providers and/or facilitator & brokers.

NGO's	How? Projects or Methods	SDG(s)	NGO Role
Fair Food	RECLAIM Sustainability!; Verstegen Spices & Sauces; Trabboca & Simon Lévelt; Traceable Menu with Dole Europe B.V.; Dreamfund; Pure Africa	1, 2, 3, 8, 10, 12	Advocacy, Facilitator & Broker
Liliane Fonds	Family-based rehabilitation	3, 10	Advocacy, Facilitator & Broker
	Inclusive Education	4, 10	
	Sexual Health and Rights	5, 10	
	Employment and Income	8, 10	
	Transport and Communication	17, 10	
Simavi	WASH SDG Program	6	Advocacy, Facilitator & Broker
SNV	Climate Resilient Agribusinesses for Tomorrow (CRAFT)	1	Advocacy, Facilitator & Broker, Service Provider
	Agriculture Portfolio	2	
	Livelihoods Improvement for Women & Youth (LIWAY) Program; Security, Protection and Economic Empowerment (SUPREME)	5	
	WASH SDG Program	6	
	Energy Portfolio – BRILHO Program	7	
	Livelihoods Improvement for Women & Youth (LIWAY) Program; Realizing Aspiration of Youth in Ethiopia through Employment (RAYEE) project; Value Chain Development and Youth Employment (EJOM); The Youth Employment for Food Security Improvement in	8	

	North Benin (EJASA) project; Security, Protection and Economic Empowerment (SUPREME) project, among others.		
	GrEEen Project	12	
	Climate Resilient Agribusinesses for Tomorrow (CRAFT)	13	
SOS Kindergarten	Help vulnerable families and communities break the cycle of poverty	1	Advocacy, Facilitator & Broker
	Increase access to and resources for education	4	
	Helps and support young people to acquire vocational skills and training	8	
	Advocates for laws and policies that ensure equal opportunity and social inclusion	10	
	Advocate for awareness on children's rights and dangers of insecurity	16	
VSO	Framed NGO work to align with the SDGs based on three underpinning principles; (1) leave no-one behind; (2) universality, meaning the Goals apply everywhere; (3) integration, the goals are interlinked and need to be people-centered if they are to be met	General	Advocacy
Wilde Ganzen	Provide the financing for projects by private development initiatives and local partner organizations to achieve these goals	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7	Service Provision, Facilitator & Broker
	Strengthening partnerships between private development initiatives and local partner organizations	17	

Table 6. Dutch developmental NGOs identified as undergoing normative changes because of the SDGs. (Sources: Annual Report Fair Food, Liliane Fonds, Simavi, SNV, SOS Kinderdergarten, VSO, Wilde Ganzen).

For example, VSO highlights that “a key part of our VSO strategy is to make a bigger contribution to delivering the Sustainable Development Goals by scaling up the impact and influence of our work [...] We have framed our work to align with the SDGs. Within this, our focus has increasingly been on those who have been marginalized or made vulnerable to ensuring that primary actors voice is heard, and their choices are supported to drive an

inclusive development process” (VSO Annual Report 2021, p. 11, 49). This example shows VSOs engagement with the SDGs not only in framing its work but also how it assumes the role as an advocate. In other words, because of VSOs alignment of work with the SDGs the organization assumes the role as an advocate for socially disadvantaged communities.

Similarly, SOS Children’s Villages, states that it *“cooperates with partners and states to achieve the SDG targets that have the greatest impact on disadvantaged children and young people...”* (SOS Children Villages Annual Report, 2021, p. 10). The organization at a later point in the report explicitly details projects, and therefore roles it assumes to contribute to several specific SDGs. The NGO states that it contributes to SDG 1 (End Poverty) by helping vulnerable families and communities break away from poverty as they (1) provide education, healthcare, professional training, and acquisition skills; (2) improve the resilience and self-resilience of vulnerable families and communities; (3) offer children a supportive environment in which they can grow into independent individuals (SOS Children Villages Annual Report, 2021, p. 10). Thus, for this SDG it is evident that the NGO assumes the role of a service provider. This role is also assumed for SDG 4 (Quality Education), through which the organization aims to increase access to all levels of education for children. Further, the NGO assumes the role of a facilitator & broker as it collaborates with partners to increase access for the youth to higher education, training, mentorships, and internships, as well as helping parents gain access to decent jobs (for SDG 8 – Decent Jobs and Economic Growth). Lastly, the organization is also an advocate under SDG 10 (Reduce Inequalities) and 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) as it advocates for laws and policies that ensure equal opportunities, social inclusion, prevent discrimination, and awareness of the rights of the child.

Another organization showing evidence of possibly experiencing normative effects is Wilde Ganzen, as the NGO indicates that *“everything we do aligns with Sustainable Development Goals, or SDGs. These are 17 goals for a sustainable and fair world, adopted by all UN member states. Because we fund development projects rather than implement the project themselves, Wilde Ganzen contributes specifically to SDG 17: Strengthening implementation resources and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development. We do this by strengthening partnerships between private development initiatives and local partner organizations. In addition, the projects we support contribute directly to achieving SDG 1 through SDG 7”* (Wilde Ganzen Annual Report 2021, p. 12). For instance, Wilde Ganzen has provided half the funds for a water pump for a local community in Kenya (SDG 6), they support local schools in Peru for prepare young entrepreneurs to start their own business (SDG 4), provide support for tree plantations in India to fight climate change (SDG 13), support the Kadolha social organization in Uganda who advocates for the rights of the Batwa indigenous community (SDG 17), among over 270+ projects the organization is engaged in worldwide.

In sum, as shown in figure 12, in this context the results find that the role that is most likely assumed by developmental NGOs possibly experiencing normative changes because of the SDGs is equally divided between being an advocate (43%), or facilitator

and broker (43%). Significantly less NGOs assume the role of a service provider (14%) because of the SDGs.

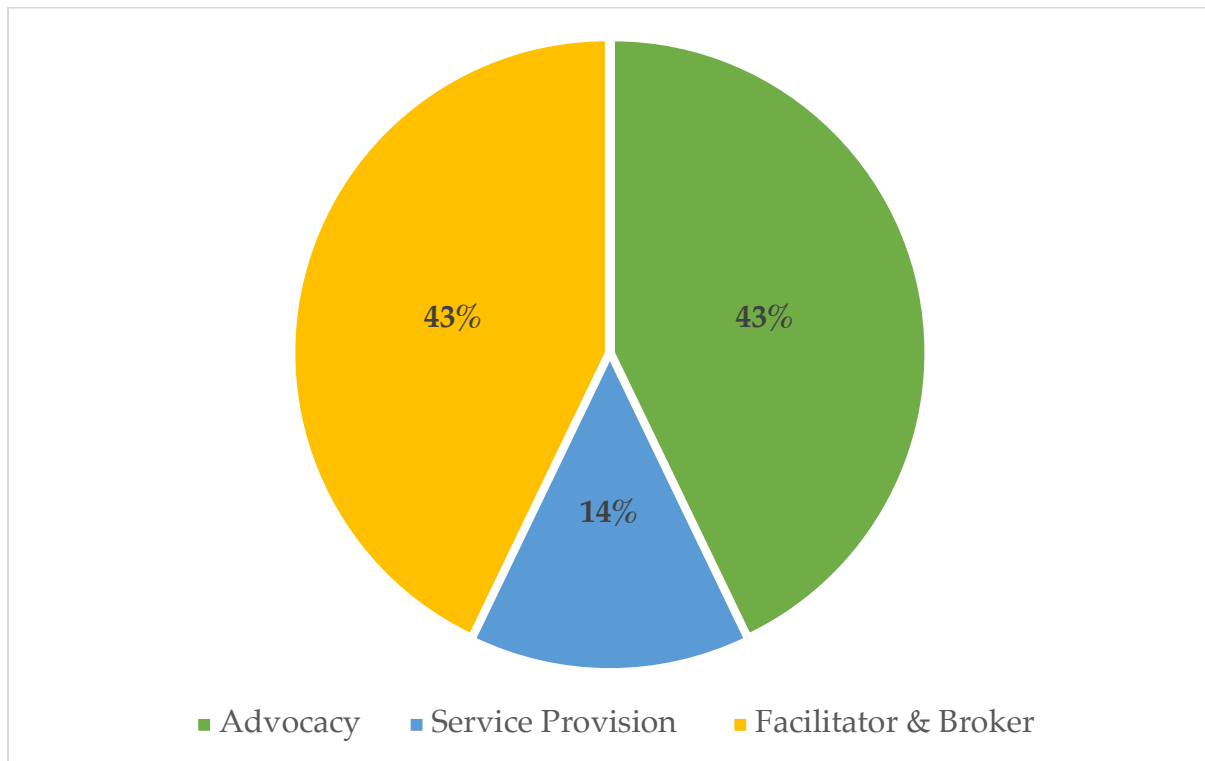


Figure 10. The roles, and according percentages, most likely to be assumed by developmental NGOs in the Netherlands experiencing normative effects because of the SDGs.

4.2.3. Comparing the Normative Effects

As identified in the section above, the results show that there is some engagement between the SDGs and developmental NGOs, compared to environmental NGOs, in terms of the normative effects these may lead to. Roughly 7% (7/98) of developmental NGOs show explicit evidence of planning, evaluating, monitoring, or contributing through projects and/or activities in relation to one or more SDGs. In comparison, there is no evidence of the same for environmental NGOs. Several of the developmental NGOs explicitly show that they plan, evaluate, or monitor projects and/or activities because or in accordance with the SDGs. Furthermore, in doing so these NGOs are three times more likely to assume the role as an advocator or facilitator and broker because of the SDGs. Consequently, only in more rare instances are developmental NGOs likely to assume the role of a service provider because of the SDGs. Nonetheless, although none of the environmental NGOs examined in this study show explicit evidence of experiencing normative effects because of the SDGs, there are still a few NGOs (of those that showed evidence of discursive effects) that may implicitly contribute in one way or another in general or to one or more of the SDGs. In those cases, the results show that these NGOs are most likely to assume the role of an advocate because the SDGs.

As shown in figure 10, among the developmental NGOs that have undergone normative changes, the highest frequency of SDGs for these organizations plans or evaluate for are SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). These goals correspond respectively to the people and prosperity clusters. Subsequently, in second place SDGs 2 (Zero Hunger), 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), 4 (Quality Education), 5 (Gender Equality), 6 (Clean Water & Sanitation) and 10 (Reduced Inequalities) are all referenced equally. SDGs 2 through 5, correspond to the people cluster, SDG 6 to the planet cluster, and SDG 10 to the prosperity cluster. Therefore, it can be said that most normative effects experienced by developmental NGOs fall in the category of SDGs primarily in the people cluster, followed by those in the prosperity cluster, and to a lesser degree the partnership and planet cluster. Moreover, it should be noted that no effects are experienced at all by SDGs 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure), 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), 14 (Life Below Water), and 15 (Life on Land). The lack of normative effects because of SDG 14 and SDG 15 is particularly noteworthy given that these are generally categorized as part of the environmental SDGs. This suggests that the steering effects of these are particularly low, not only for NGOs in the environmental field but also those outside of it. Moreover, the effects of these environmental SDGs is different to SDG 6 (Clean Water & Sanitation) which does seem to have some normative effects on developmental NGOs despite also being an environmental goal.

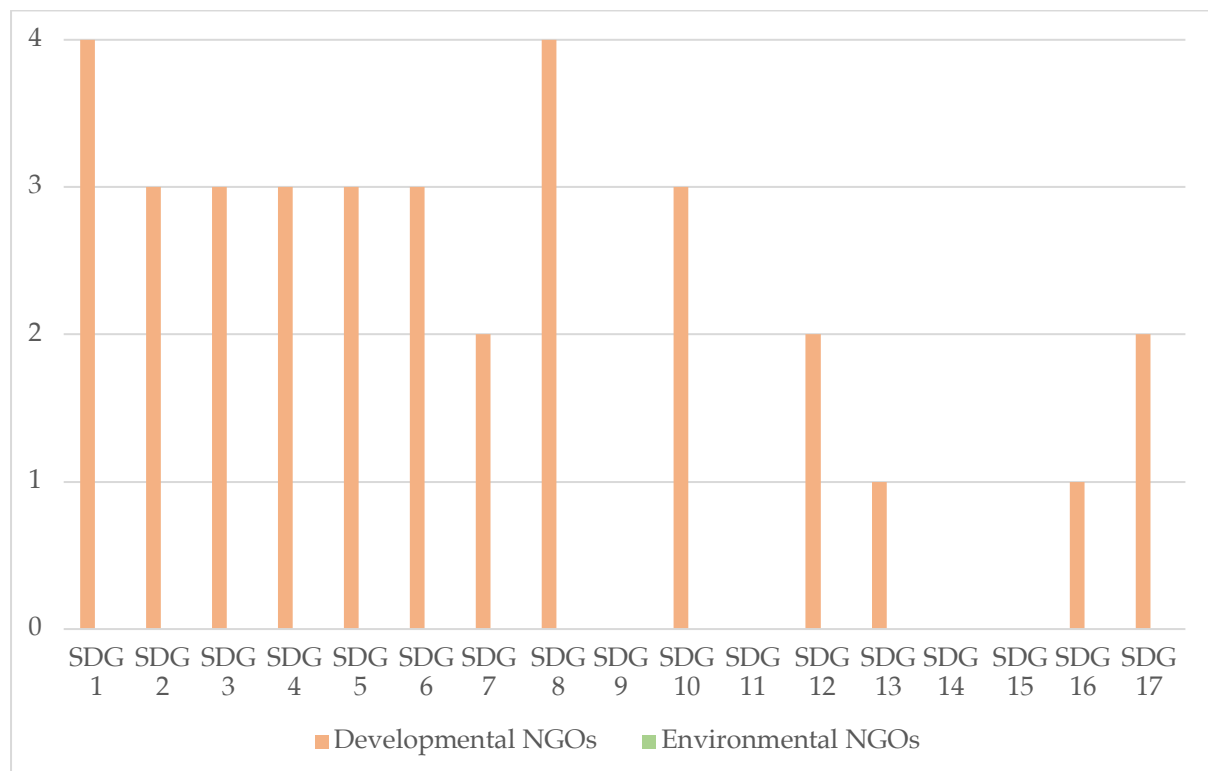


Figure 11. The SDGs and corresponding frequency of explicit reference due to normative effects on environmental and developmental NGOs in the Netherlands.

A final noteworthy trend identified in both types of NGO is that only the NGOs that refer to the SDGs as a source of encouragement or inspiration discursively in the

organization mission or mission are likely to experience or show evidence of ensuing normative effects. However, in this research context only a handful of developmental NGOs have experienced these. In comparison, environmental NGOs state that they contribute or want to contribute to the SDGs through their existing or previously established endeavors. In other words, they are likely to contribute to the SDGs if they find an alignment to these but do not use these as a starting point for their work. Further insights and explanations explaining the lack of change because of the SDGs are assessed in the following section 5.1. Nevertheless, it should still be noted that the alignment of the environmental NGOs shows that these still assume the role as an advocate for the SDGs. The main difference is that developmental NGOs go a step further as they assume this role but also engage as facilitator & brokers, and in few instances even as service providers.

5. Explaining the Degree of Steering Effects

This section aims to explain the degree of discursive effects and subsequent normative effects experienced by environmental NGOs because of the SDGs as shown in the results, section 4. Additionally, it intends to explain the differences in the steering effects between environmental and developmental NGOs.

5.1. Explaining the Steering Effects on Environmental NGOs

As identified in section 6.1.1, the discursive uptake of SDGs by environmental NGOs in the Netherlands is very low, roughly 7%. At the same time, however, the few cases showing discursive effects because of the SDGs does suggest that there is a bit of steering by the same. Furthermore, there is no evidence of normative changes because of the global goals. According to interviews with 5 NGOs and 4 (research) experts/professionals in the field there are numerous factors contributing to this.

For the roughly 7% of environmental organizations that show evidence of good discursive uptake of the SDGs there are a few valuable or beneficial reasons to do so. First, some NGOs are very likely to be encouraged or inspired to act by the goals and their mission given that the SDGs are broad holistic agenda that is *“easy to integrate”* (Interview 2, 3, 2023). As described by interviewee 2, the global goals make up a very comprehensive set under which organizations should be able to or can integrate their own mission and vision. Similarly, interviewee 3, pointed out that it is beneficial that the agenda is holistic as it makes organizations *“look [beyond] their own field and ... forces them [organizations] to think of synergies and trade-offs with other goals... [and it also provides a list of goals] that we need to work towards and on a global scale”*.

Second, not only do the global goals provide a broad holistic agenda that is easy to integrate but they are perceived as a source providing a *“common language”* and agenda between numerous actors. As described by interviewee 3, *“the SDGs were mostly useful for people who did not know what to do, and what I think makes them so important is that all countries agree on what we need to work toward... we agree on what we need to strive towards”*. Further, the SDGs were described as a tool to work more efficiently, *“to an extent we do try to convince them [organizations] to mention the SDGs when they are communicating about it, just because the shared language does help [...] Obviously, the more people know about the SDGs, the more the framework is used, the more we can talk to each other in an efficient manner... ”* (Interview 3, 2023). As a result, it was mentioned that *“probably then [organizations] can work a lot faster then, [and] work together instead of against each other to achieve certain things”* (Interview 3, 2023). Third, it was also noted that the global goals are also highly considered or regarded by NGOs given their origins. In the words of interviewee 2, there is a lot of credibility to the goals and their corresponding targets given that these were drafted and developed by the United Nations.

Although the factors above may explain some of the steering effects, specifically the discursive effects, experienced by some environmental NGOs in the Netherlands, this

study finds that there are more factors that contribute to the hindrance or low degree of steering. As shown in figure 11, these factors can be used to explain why the SDGs fail in being an even greater source of inspiration and encouragement for environmental NGOs. Moreover, these factors also explain why there is no evidence of ensuing normative effects.

First and foremost, several interviewees pointed out that there is still significant lack of awareness of and knowledge on the value of the SDGs by environmental organizations in the Netherlands (Interview 1, 2). As noted by interviewee 1, *“the first ten years [of the SDGs] goes very slow. You have to convince people”*. Similarly, interviewee 2 pointed out that *“... they are not very well known, and I am pretty surprised about it every time, ... but perhaps it is because we are in a sustainability bubble”*. Contributing to this lack of knowledge and general awareness, interviewee 1, emphasized the lack of PR around the time the SDGs were rolled out, *“there had not been a PR campaign in the Netherlands... I have had to explain everyone what the SDGs are, no one knew”* (Interview 1, 2023). The lack of PR for the SDGs is particularly unique to the Netherlands as interviewee 1 mentioned that this was unlike other European and South American countries *“there was, in a lot of countries, a national campaign, not in the Netherlands because there was an attitude... the SDGs are not for us, it is for developing countries because the MDGs were to help developing countries...”* (Interview 1, 2023).

In addition to a lack of PR, a lack of steering from the government has been highlighted by the first spotlight report of the SDGs in the Netherlands as well as several interviewees (Interview 1, 3, 4). As noted in the spotlight report, interviewee 1 and 3, the Netherlands has failed in giving the SDGs a convincing place in the national government policy as a national implementation or strategy plan with measurable goals was never developed (Spotlight Report, 2020). In the words of interviewee 1, *“I tried to explain to all the ministries of the national government that they have to translate the SDGs in national... acts and laws... some did... we have a climate act, for the reduction of CO₂ emissions... and there are more examples of food waste and social goals... I would say 10-15% is covered by law and the rest is not”*. Similarly, interviewee 3 emphasized that *“we do not have a national implementation plan which is... really one of the faults that we have, it makes it very hard to work”*. From the perspective of NGOs, this is problematic as these often *“think that it is the government who should do everything”* (Interview 1, 2023). This viewpoint is further supported by interviewee 4 (working at an NGO), who stated *“[the SDGs] are not obligatory... and you know, the Dutch probably if it is not obligatory, we do not it...”*. It should be further noted that NGOs, also often have the view that companies are more to blame for environmental problems (Interview 1, 2023). Thus, this could also contribute to the argument why they see their responsibility in addressing (environmental) problems to be much lower than others.

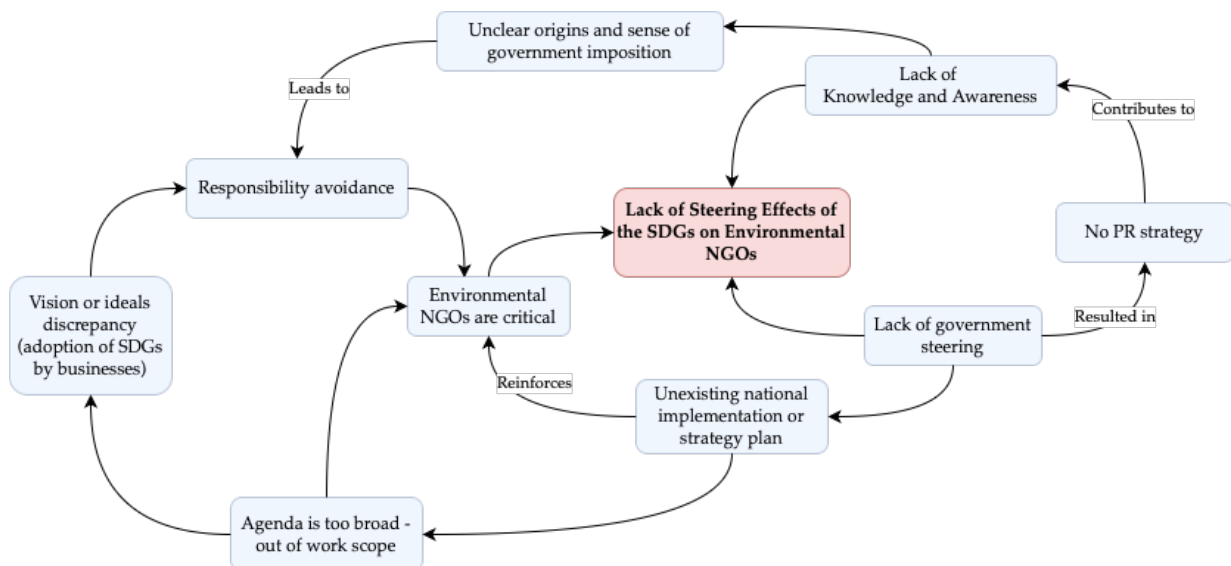


Figure 12. Overview of the factors or conditions that explain the lack of steering effects of the SDGs on environmental NGOs.

Another common argument for the lack of discursive uptake and subsequent normative changes noted amongst interviewees is because, in comparison to other types of organizations or NGOs, environmental NGOs are characterized as being particularly critical of the SDGs. First, environmental NGOs are critical of the SDGs because of their origins, as mentioned by interviewee 1, “they did not really know if they were successful and did not really know what this [the SDGs] was based on basically”. This argument has also been noted by Kurz (2021), who notes that NGOs often criticize the SDGs as they consider that these are a rather naïve list of wishes that have emerged from a complex global participation process. In consequence, the NGOs have been stubborn to adopt the goals as they are coming from the government given that they were the ones to that signed the SDG declaration and usually “NGOs are working to change the government’s perspective on things... so I do not think they are very eager to immediately adopt that framework” (Interview 3, 2023). Therefore, NGOs have a feeling that the global goals agenda is being imposed on them by the government. Nevertheless, this is even though “in invention, the SDGs ... are coming from the NGOs [but] they did not know because NGOs refresh themselves continuously... and suddenly only the older people in the NGOs remembered that they had asked for quantified goals... but it took of course 10 to 15 years to negotiate them” (Interview 1, 2023).

Second, environmental NGOs are critical of the SDGs because they are too broad and resonate with other actors that characterize a mindset or vision different than that of NGOs. As noted by interviewee 3, “companies also ran with it [the SDGs] as a green washing tool or... to jump on the sustainability wagon... or a promotion thing... I mean, if you see shell using it, then you are not going to be much in favor of using it yourself, I think”. This argument can explain why NGOs would not want to associate with the SDGs and continue to use their own frameworks. As summarized by interviewee 3, “I think they [NGOs] are all in favor of us working with the SDGs and they see us as a potential partner... it is not as if they are anti-SDG work, but they are just critical of whether they should use the framework”. As a result of being too broad and adopted by too many actors,

environmental NGOs often think that the SDGs are not for them because they are already sustainable, and already working on the issues mentioned in the global goals (Interview 1, 2023). Thereupon, they do not see or feel the necessity in adopting or reporting on the SDGs (Interview 1, 2023). In other words, environmental NGOs seem to be responsibility avoidant as they feel that they have been doing their part in addressing environmental problems. As ZMf representative explained the organization emerged *“in the 70s... during a lot of protests against nuclear energy... and the SDGs are new concepts for us”*. Similarly, the representative for Students for Tomorrow, explained that the organizations inspiration and mission to increase awareness of sustainability in higher education has existed since the beginning. However, the organization noticed that *“the SDGs are labels for what we are standing for already... and this is why we decided to align ourselves with them”* (Interview 2, 2023).

In addition to being broad, environmental NGOs are further critical of the SDGs because they propose a conflicting paradigm between economic growth and sustainable development in line with post-growth ideas. As emphasized by interviewee 3, *“SDG 8 stands for economic growth... and that is because the agenda is also for the global south where economic growth is necessary... but a lot of NGOs in the Netherlands... are part of the post-growth movement... this might explain why some NGOs do not really mention working on the SDGs. They are working on it, but it is just not the framework they choose to use because it is also very broad...”*. This argument is also evident in existing academic literature where scholars such as Gupta & Vegelin (2016) have noted that while the SDGs comprise the three pillars of sustainable development - namely the ecological, social, and economic aspects - there have been difficulties in optimizing all three aspects simultaneously without the emergence of concepts that embody dualities within the three, i.e., green economy, inclusive growth, etc. In other words, they point out that there are several ways in which the SDGs may favor economic growth over social and ecological well-being. Similarly, Hickel (2019) has found that there is not internal coherence between the SDGs. This is particularly evident in terms of addressing environmental problems and achieving more harmony in nature as laid out by the environmental goals and in achieving global economic growth as detailed in SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth).

Lastly, it is also important to acknowledge the circumstances and/or contexts in which environmental NGOs (and in general) work, particularly in terms of their scope of work and resource availability. As emphasized by interview 4, while it is the organizations wish to include or incorporate the SDGs more into their mission, the organization currently believes that there would not be much more added value especially because *“it would be something extra and for us. And we do not have the time or the finances to do so...”*. Furthermore, it was noted that *“we are also regional... the only one in the region. What we do with partners, the government, and other organizations, they know what we do. They do not need the SDGs to understand our work”* (interview 4, 2023). Simultaneously, the organization does not believe that much more value is obtained of working with the SDGs as *“we just want to make impacts here, in the region... and maybe this is why are not important enough to consider as well”*. As a result, it can be argued that the global goals are perhaps better suited to developmental NGOs working on the

larger national and international level. The following section, 7.2., goes more in depth in explaining differences that may explain this notion.

5.2. The Differences in Steering Effects between Environmental and Developmental NGOs

As analyzed and described in section 4, the results of this thesis find that the SDGs have stronger steering effects on developmental than environmental NGOs. However, there are numerous developmental NGOs that experience less strong steering effects in many of the same ways as environmental NGOs do.

First, just as environmental NGOs, developmental NGOs are critical of the SDGs. For example, one interviewee noted that the SDGs are often used as a cherry-picking agenda by the government and/or multinational entities to showcase the good they are doing or intend to do. This in turn can be problematic given that to truly address sustainability problems a more holistic approach should be taken. Additionally, it was mentioned that despite being such a broad agenda there are still several issue dimensions that are not covered by the SDGs. For instance, the global goals do not consider the effects of power relations or dynamics. Consequently, in the view of developmental NGOs they fail to bring about the expected or desired change in addressing numerous sustainability problems. This is evident for example in the sense that the SDGs do not promote or encourage in any way the strengthening of civil society in the global south – this being an issue that strongly shapes the mission and/or vision of developmental NGOs. As a result of these limitations, there are instances then in which developmental NGOs more strongly engage with other international agreements which in their view has stronger political power. For example, one interviewee noted that the NGO had ratified the Paris Agreement as it has a more concrete mission that is of high interest to the NGO, namely, to ban fossil fuel financing.

Second, as was also mentioned by environmental NGOs, it was explained that the mission and vision of their organizations have existed for decades before the creation of the SDGs. As described by interviewee 7, *“we are celebrating 40 years this year... [and since then] we have been focused on doing research and having impactful results on society... we see challenges in the food system such as food insecurity, poor livelihoods, environmental impacts and we want to contribute to that or solving that... but the SDGs are complementary”*. In essence then, the SDGs are seen as redundant to the work that has been done for decades and is continued to be done (Interview 7). Given that the organization mission(s) has long existed, one interviewee further highlighted that the SDGs are an interesting conversation tool, however that in terms of monitoring they may be more beneficial instrument at the government level. Consequently, while they want to contribute to achieve the SDGs there is no additional value in incorporating these more concretely or explicitly in the mission, vision, or strategy of the NGO. Similarly, this has been argued by Kurz (2021), in which it is noted that while NGOs accept the responsibility and support the implementation of the SDGs this only the case if there is an already existing overlap with their own previously delineated mission(s).

Evidence for the complementarity rather than full incorporation of the SDGs was further described by interviewee 8 who noted that, *“I do not see the SDGs playing a big role here [the Netherlands], at least in our lobbying towards parliament... NGOs much rather lobby using specific thematic ... topics, so they lobby for food security, or they lobbied for humanitarian aids, ... climate justice ... but I don’t often see them referring to the SDGs”*.

Ultimately this thesis finds that more discursive uptake and ensuing normative changes because of the SDGs by developmental NGOs is likely due to the way the goals have been approached at the government level. It was mentioned in several interviews that in the Netherlands the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) is the one responsible for organizing the government’s approach towards the SDGs (Interview 5, 6, 8). As highlighted by interviewee 8, the responsibility of the goals on this ministry is likely due to the historical *“legacy of the SDGs as an instrument for socioeconomic development in the South”*. Thus, there seems to be a notion around the SDGs as a tool to revitalize global partnerships for sustainable development (Interview 6, 2023). As explained by interviewee 6, the global goals may be seen or used by developmental NGOs as a toolkit to make the work between different countries and people possible. As a result, in contrast to other types of organizations, given the focus of developmental NGOs in working in other parts of the world these are more likely to be exposed to the SDGs as they are in more regular contact with the MFA. In essence then the SDGs are useful to these organizations as they ignite or showcase the relational connections between what can happen in the Netherlands and the effects it may have elsewhere. This argument has been highlighted by numerous scholars which emphasize that many still view the global goals as an extension of a universalist development agenda built on a globally instituted neoliberalism that is promoted by those in the global north and supported by elites in the South (Arora-Jonsson, 2023; McMichael, 2017).

6. Discussion

This thesis contributes to a largely unexplored research context by answering the research question: *“What are the steering effects of the SDGs on environmental and developmental NGOs based in the Netherlands, and how can this be explained?”* It finds that in the Netherlands developmental NGOs undergo more steering effects because of the SDGs compared to environmental NGOs.

First, in answering sub-question 1, *“what are the discursive effects of the SDGs on Dutch NGOs?”*, the results find that roughly 38% developmental NGOs show evidence of being encouraged or inspired because of the SDGs. The most frequent SDGs leading to discursive effects include SDGs 1 through 5, which are the people goals, as well as SDGs 8 and 10 which are goals for prosperity. This finding is further supported with what has been reported in the latest Dutch VNR, namely that 41.48% Dutch NGO commitment is for the SDGs in the people cluster (VNR on the SDGs 2022). In comparison, only 7% of environmental NGOs showed evidence of experiencing normative effects – these are mainly due to the environmental goals, SDGs 7, and SDGs 12 to 15. Based on the remaining 93% of environmental NGOs three trends were identified. First, several NGOs referred to sustainability, or sustainable development but did not make explicit reference to the global goals. The second group consists of organizations that aim for the protection and research for an animal or insect. The final groups are made up by NGOs that are encouraged or inspired for the protection, conservation, and cultural development of a specific region of the Netherlands.

Second, regarding sub-question 2, *“what are the normative effects of the SDGs on Dutch NGOs?”*, this study found that roughly 7% of developmental NGOs may experience normative effects because of the SDGs. Within this group, the goals instigating normative effects are again most frequently SDGs 1 through 5, SDG 8, and SDG 10. Therefore, it is evident in the analysis of developmental NGOs that the SDGs which are most likely to lead to discursive effects may also then further contribute to normative effects on these NGOs. Moreover, it should be noted that the environmental goals SDG 14 (Life Below Water) and SDG 15 (Life on Land) were among the SDGs that do not lead to normative effects for developmental NGOs. This is in comparison to SDG 6 (Clean Water & Sanitation), also an environmental goal, which does seem to contribute to normative effects for a few of the analyzed NGOs. There are two conditions that may explain why SDG 6 has more steering effects than SDGs 14 and 15. First, this result may be due to the governance approach of goal setting by the SDGs given that, as argued by Delaney (2022), the way in which each goal is interpreted and applied may be different depending on the type of actor, i.e., NGO. Consequently, this may suggest that some of the goals and their targets may have more steering effects depending on the way (and ease) in which they are interpreted and applied. Second, in addition to being influenced by the governance approach, the steering effects of each SDG on an NGO may be further subject to the interaction of these amongst each other. Given the wide range of goals and targets there are numerous ways in which the SDGs may interact, this can result in synergies, cancellations, indivisibility or even trade-offs (Sherer et al., 2018). In terms of SDG 6,

one study found that this goal strongly engages synergistically with other SDGs (Pradhan et al., 2017). In comparison, less synergies are shown for SDG 15 and no finding, due to limited data, is shown for SDG 14. Therefore, one could argue that the steering effects of any individual SDG may be influenced by the interactions it is able to have with other goals. In other words, it could be that by having more synergistic interactions with other SDGs one goal may be more easily adopted or implemented in the work of an NGO.

In comparison to developmental NGOs, this report identified that none of the environmental NGOs may experience normative effects because of the SDGs. Instead, it was found that for environmental NGOs, contribution to the global goals is generally made if there is an existing alignment with the current planning, evaluation, and monitoring of projects and /or activities by these organizations. However, for the few NGOs experiencing discursive effects, it could be understood that these implicitly assume the role of an advocate and facilitator & broker for the goals. Similarly, developmental NGOs were identified as being equally likely to become an advocate or a facilitator & broker for the advancement of the SDGs. As a result, it can be said that generally NGOs most often assume these roles for the SDGs. The adoption of these roles by NGOs for the SDGs have also been identified in other studies in Germany, France, and South-East Asia (Hege & Demailly, 2018; Florini & Pauli, 2018).

Third, in terms of sub-question 3, *“How can the (lack thereof) steering effects of the SDGs on Dutch NGOs be explained?”*, this thesis finds that there are numerous factors or conditions that have contributed to the lack of steering effects of the SDGs on environmental NGOs. These factors or conditions can be categorized in two groups, namely political and inherent characteristics of environmental NGOs. First, there are the inherent characteristics of environmental NGOs which have made them particularly critical of the global goals namely in terms of their origin, purpose (given its wide scope), as well as the general perception that they have been working on these environmental issues decades before the emergence of the SDGs. Second, political conditions which have undermined the steering of the SDGs consist in the lack of government guidance. As explained through the interviews, there was no PR strategy during the initial rollout of the goals, and this had led to an overall lack of knowledge and awareness. Moreover, the government never developed a national implementation or strategy plan.

While the initial and current approach of the government of the SDGs has led to low steering effects on environmental NGOs, the situation differs for developmental organizations. In the Netherlands, the MFA is the one responsible for the organizing the government’s approach to the global goals. This is largely because, as successors of the MDGs, the SDGs still seem to carry the historical legacy as a development agenda. In consequence in the Netherlands, as well as Germany and France, studies have found that development NGOs are often most engaged with the SDGs (Hege & Demailly, 2018). This may also explain why these experience more steering effects as identified in this study. In addition to this exposure, it may be further valuable to consider the differences within the analyzed NGOs for each type of NGO group. As

argued by Aigner & Pequeira (2020), NGO organizational traits may be used to explain the ability of these to engage with the global goals and the corresponding targets. There are two traits that are particularly worth noting in this research. First, it should be recognized that the size and scope of work of all environmental NGOs assessed in general are smaller than those in the category of developmental NGOs. For instance, while many of the environmental NGOs analyzed have a local or regional scope of work, most of the developmental NGOs carry out projects and/or activities in one or more countries abroad. Additionally, given the difference in scope of work, developmental NGOs are for the most part larger than the environmental NGOs reviewed. Second, the differences in activities and level of professionalization should be acknowledged. During the analysis of both groups, it was evident that there is a higher degree of voluntarism in the environmental organizations examined than in the developmental ones. Consequently, it could perhaps be the case that the overall increased level of professionalization allows for the better ability of developmental NGOs to engage and implement a long-term global agenda such as the global goals in their work.

6.1. Increasing the Steering Effects of the SDGs on Environmental NGOs

As previously discussed, environmental NGOs in the Netherlands do not experience many steering effects because of the SDGs. Nonetheless, this study suggests two strategies that could help increase or change this. First, this is recommended because of the existing challenges faced by the Netherlands in making progress on the environmental SDGs. Second, as reported in the latest VNR, it is a crucial time to harbor the strong engagement by the civil society sector in making progress towards the goals. Lastly, although the SDG agenda has been set to be fully implemented by 2030, the extension of these goals or emergence of an agenda as this one is highly likely well beyond this deadline. As a result, it can be argued that it would be valuable to strengthen the steering effects of the global goals in a way in which the existing efforts by environmental NGOs are better harnessed to make progress on these goals as well as for the future.

As an initial strategy the government could launch a new awareness and knowledge campaign on the value of the SDGs. In fact, efforts to increase the exposure beyond the development circle has been an issue already taken up by the umbrella organization Partos through the “Adopt an SDG Campaign” (Adopt an SDG Partos, n.d.). This campaign aims to encourage Dutch parliamentarians to adopt an SDG to use as a guideline in their work and to increase awareness of the goals for organizations beyond the development field. Nevertheless, results up to this point have been rather superficial as only a handful of parliamentarians have taken this opportunity to truly advocate in a stronger fashion for the SDGs (Interview 8, 2023). Thus, as an additional step, it would be vital if the government engaged more actively and consistently in this mission by clarifying discrepancies between the assumed role of NGOs, businesses, and other actors in their contribution to the goals. In other words, more work should be carried out around the notion of “collaborative governance” for the SDGs. In the best-case scenario this would then diminish the

critical view of environmental NGOs on the goals and perhaps encourage these to engage more with the same. Furthermore, the government should consider shifting the responsibility of the SDGs on to another ministry. As addressed in section 5.3., the SDGs in the Netherlands are delegated by the MFA. However, this has negatively led to a disproportionate amount of exposure between different types of organizations, where developmental NGOs may have more possibilities of engagement than for example environmental NGOs. Consequently, it would prove beneficial if the government considered shifting this responsibility to the Prime Minister's Office or another department to which NGOs all have relatively equal exposure to.

Beyond increasing knowledge and awareness, a few environmental NGO representatives noted that more engagement with the SDGs is not possible due to limited resources (Interview 2, 4, 2023). Consequently, more steering effects by the global goals would be expected if more resources were made available for NGOs to monitor and plan their activities for the same. Taking these steps would be beneficial as it was evident during this research that the current work of environmental NGOs is already making great progress in addressing numerous environmental problems. Nonetheless, by providing an extra push the NGOs could go the extra step in linking their work to the larger environmental and sustainability problems faced in the country. In other words, a more explicit link could be made between what the NGOs are working on and how this (positively) contributes to the global goals.

6.2. Future Research Directions

The results of this thesis contribute to a largely unexplored field of research, particularly given its focus on NGOs in the Netherlands. However, there are still numerous venues for future research that can further contribute to a clearer picture on the steering effects of the SDGs and its impact on society. First and foremost, future studies could aim to further explore the steering effects of the SDGs on more NGOs that were not considered here, such as NGOs who revolve around social welfare, gender equality and education issues. This research would positively complement the partial picture that has been drawn through this thesis on what the steering effects of the global goals are on the entire non-profit sector in the Netherlands. Future studies could also apply the theoretical and analytical framework used in this thesis in an entirely new research context, i.e., in another European country with a more detailed SDG national implementation plan, or in a country in the global south experiencing different environmental and developmental circumstances. Research in any another country could serve as a useful comparative case study to this study and show whether the SDGs are able to exert stronger steering effects in countries with varying circumstances – differences in terms of economic or social development, government structure, etc.

Additionally, future studies could delve deeper specifically on the work framework of NGOs by carrying out more interviews. It is possible that for some of the environmental NGOs reviewed these are unconsciously steered by the SDGs and thus do not explicitly mention the goals. Consequently, given that in this study only explicit

reference of the goals was considered it is possible that the results show an underrepresentation of the steering effects of the SDGs. Furthermore, while carrying out analysis for this study it was identified that NGOs in the Netherlands often base their strategic frameworks on the “theory of change”. Thus, carrying out more interviews and more analysis on the different work frameworks would be particularly useful as it would result in an even more detailed analysis of the conditions or factors that have stronger influence on the work of NGOs. Therefore, it is expected that this would yield in a better overview of the factors or conditions that make or shape the mission, vision, and strategy of NGOs.

Another noteworthy venue for research could consist in taking a more detailed look at the differences between the SDGs in each cluster, i.e., what they entail, structure, their targets, etc. As shown in section 5.3.3., comparing the normative effects, the environmental SDGs were amongst the group of goals that led to no normative effects on environmental NGOs and the least amount of steering for developmental NGOs; This is despite the fact that these NGOs generally engage with a broad range of SDGs. Consequently, it would be further interesting to explore more in detail the specific characteristics or traits that make the (environmental) SDGs different from one another in their ability of having stronger steering effects.

Finally, alternative research beneficial for comparison, could explore the steering effects of other international environmental or developmental agreements. As identified in this study, NGOs generally engage or are aware of several other international agreements. Consequently, future research could explore whether these agreements have stronger steering effects on the work of NGOs and how they differ from the SDGs. In a similar fashion, future studies could explore the steering effects of the SDGs on other societal actors such as businesses and the government. This research would be especially interesting as it would show whether the goals can harbor stronger effects when used in other work sectors. In sum, research in these two last directions would be useful as they could perhaps be utilized to better explain how the SDGs can be amended or improved as a governance tool for the future.

7. Conclusion

In the end, this thesis finds that the steering effects of the SDGs are stronger on developmental than environmental NGOs. The steering effects for developmental NGOs primarily consist of the goals in the people and prosperity clusters. In comparison, the (minimal) steering effects experienced by environmental NGOs most frequently are because of the environmental SDGs. Moreover, despite differences in the degree of steering effects experienced, the results show that the roles most likely to be assumed by NGOs for the global goals are generally as an advocate or facilitator & provider. In other words, for projects and activities planned, evaluated, or monitored for the SDGs, NGOs are most likely to assume these roles. Furthermore, this study finds that the difference in steering effects between the two types of NGOs may boil down to the assignment of SDG responsibility by the Dutch government to the MFA. Furthermore, the lower degree of steering effects of the SDGs on environmental NGOs is further exacerbated by two main categories of conditions or factors, namely due to political circumstances and the inherent characteristics of these organizations.

Based on the results, as argued by political realists, this thesis concludes that in the context of the ways in which the global goals are taken up by environmental and developmental NGOs in the Netherlands, the SDGs are generally a weak governance arrangement, given that they are non-binding, as they have not been effectively translated in the national context of the Netherlands and do not provide a clear guidance on the prioritization of resources. As a result, two strategies may be used to increase the steering effects of the SDGs on environmental NGOs in the Netherlands. First, it is suggested that the government increase the knowledge and awareness on these. Moreover, the provision of additional resources would further strengthen the steering effects on environmental NGOs. Ultimately these strategies are proposed to address the challenges the Netherlands currently faces in making progress on the environmental SDGs. Moreover, it is further based on the believe and awareness that global treaties such as the SDGs are likely to emerge and persist well-beyond 2030. Consequently, it is strongly recommended that the valuable work already being done by NGOs should be used as most efficiently as possible for the sustainable development of the Netherlands as a whole.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Environmental NGOs analyzed

The table below provides a list of all environmental NGOs in the Netherlands used for analysis. This list was provided by the first SDG Coordinator of the Netherlands. The original list includes a total of 92 organizations, from which 6 were discarded due to no longer existing or to avoid repetition with NGOs which are recognized as developmental NGOs by Partos. Color codes: green are all organizations explicitly mentioning “SDG” or “Sustainable Development Goals”; orange are organizations discarded in this report.

Environmental NGOs	Discursive Uptake?	Normative Changes?
ASEED	NO	NO
Stichting ANEMOON	NO	NO
Ark	NO	NO
Both ENDS	--	--
Brabants Landschap	NO	NO
Bryologische en Lichenologische Werkgroep (BLWG)	NO	NO
Centrum voor Landbouw en Milieu (CLM)	NO	NO
Das & Boom	NO	NO
De Kleine Aarde (DKA)	NO	NO
Het Drentse Landschap	NO	NO
EIS Kenniscentrum Insecten en andere ongewervelden	NO	NO
Ecologische Beweging	--	--
Extinction Rebellion	NO	NO
De Faunabescherming	NO	NO
Fietsersbond	NO	NO
Het Flevolandschap	NO	NO
Floron	NO	NO
Friese Milieufederatie	NO	NO
It Fryske Gea	NO	NO
Het Geldersch Landschap	NO	NO
Global Action Plan NL	NO	NO
Goede Waar & Co.	--	--
Goois Natuurreservaat	NO	NO
Greenpeace	NO	NO
Het Groninger Landschap	NO	NO
Haagse Natuurbescherming	NO	NO
Hoekschewaards Landschap	NO	NO

Stichting Ijssellandschap	NO	NO
Ijsselmeervereniging	NO	NO
IVN	NO	NO
Jeugdbond voor Natuur- en Mileiustudie	NO	NO
Jonge Klimaatbeweging (JKB)	YES	NO
Jongeren Milieu Actief (JMA)	NO	NO
Koninklijke Nederlandse Botanische Vereniging (KNBV)	NO	NO
Koninklijke Nederlandse Bosbouw Vereniging (KNBV)	NO	NO
Koninklijke Nederlandse Natuurhistorische Vereniging (KNNV)	NO	NO
Kustvereniging	NO	NO
Laka	NO	NO
Land von Ons	NO	NO
Studenten voor Morgen	YES	NO
De 12 Landschappen	NO	NO
Landschap Noord-Holland	NO	NO
Landschap Overijssel	NO	NO
Landschappen NL	NO	NO
Landschapsbeheer Friesland	NO	NO
Landschapsbeheer Nederland	NO	NO
Het Limburgs Landschap	NO	NO
Milieu Centraal	NO	NO
Milieudefensie	--	--
Milieufederatie Limburg	NO	NO
Morgen	--	--
Nationaal Park de Hoge Veluwe	NO	NO
Natuur- en Milieufederatie Limburg	NO	NO
Natuur & Milieu	YES	--
Natuur en Milieufederatie Drenthe	NO	NO
Natuur en Milieufederatie Groningen	NO	NO
Natuur en Milieu Orijsel	YES	--
Natuurmonumenten	NO	NO
Vereniging Nederlands Cultuurlandschap (VNC)	NO	NO

Nederlandse Jeugbond voor Natuur (NJN)	NO	NO
Nederlandse Mycologische Vereniging (NMV)	NO	NO
Nivon	NO	NO
Stichting De Noordzee	NO	NO
Reptielen Amfibieën Vissen Onderzoek Nederland (RAVON)	NO	NO
Saba Conservation Foundation (SCF)	NO	NO
Sea Sheperd Conservation Society	NO	NO
Soorten NL	NO	NO
Sovon Vogelonderzoek Nederland	NO	NO
St. Eustatius National Parks Foundation (STENAPA)	NO	NO
Stichting Aarde	NO	NO
Stichting Milieuwerkgroepen Ede	NO	NO
Stichting Nationale Parken (STINAPA) Bonaire	NO	NO
STRO	NO	NO
Stichting TINEA	NO	NO
Transition Towns	NO	NO
De Twaalf Ambachten	NO	NO
Universitair Milieu Platform Nijmegen	NO	NO
Het Utrechts Landschap	NO	NO
Vereniging Nederlands Cultuurlandschap	NO	NO
Vereniging Tropische Bossen (VTB)	NO	NO
Vereniging van Bos- en Natuurterreineigenaren (VBNE)	NO	NO
De Vlinderstichting	NO	NO
Vogelbescherming Nederland	NO	NO
Waddenvereniging	YES	NO
Wereld Natuur Fonds (WWF)	--	--
Werkgroep Behoud de Peel	NO	NO
Werkgroep Wolf Nederland	NO	NO
World Information Service on Energy	NO	NO
Het Zeeuwse Landschap	NO	NO

Zeeuwse Mileiufederatie	YES	NO
Zoogdiervereniging VZZ	NO	NO
Zuid-Hollands Landschap	NO	NO

Appendix B: Roles assumed by environmental NGOs for the SDGs

Overview of the number of activities, projects or engagements carried out by environmental organizations possibly the Netherlands that may contribute to the fulfilment or the attainment of one or more of the SDGs. It should be noted that in none of these examples made explicit reference to any of the SDGs. Nevertheless, these organizations showed evidence of discursive effects because of the SDGs. Consequently, their activities and projects were deduced to contribute to the goals in some ways. Timeframe of projects considered here are from 2019 to present. Results of NGOs marked with a (*) are supported with information obtained through semi-structured interviews.

Roles	Indicators			
	Service Provider	Facilitator & Broker	Advocator	
NGO	# of activities consisting of the supply of basic needs or services based on an SDG?	# of intermediary or bridging roles carried out for the SDGs?	# of lobbying and campaigning efforts carried out for the government?	# of engagements to enhance networking and capacity building for the SDGs with government, businesses, or donors?
JKB	0	13	5	4
Natuur & Milieu	2	7	18	12
Natuur en Milieu Overijssel (NMO)	2	20	1	19
Studenten voor Morgen (SvM)*	0	0	0	9
Waddenvereniging	0	7	9	8
Zeeuwse Milieufederatie (ZMf)*	3	10	8	20
Total	7	57	41	72

Appendix C: Developmental NGOs analyzed

The following table contains the list of all developmental NGOs in the Netherlands from the NGO umbrella organization in the Netherlands, Partos. There are 105 organizations, from which 7 were discarded, either due to repetition with another organization or because of missing annual reports needed for the analysis carried out in this thesis. Color codes: green are all organizations explicitly mentioning “SDG” or “Sustainable Development Goals”; orange are organizations discarded in this report.

Developmental NGOs	Discursive Uptake?	Normative Changes?
100 Weeks	NO	NO
Action Aid	NO	NO
Aflatoun International	NO	NO
Aidfonds	YES	NO
Akvo	NO	NO
Amred flying doctors	YES	NO
Aqua for all	YES	NO
Both ENDS	NO	NO
Care	NO	NO
CSD	--	--
Choice – for Youth & Sexuality	NO	NO
CINOP	--	--
CNV Internationaal	YES	NO
Cordaid	NO	NO
DCDD	YES	NO
Defence for Children	NO	NO
Stichting DOEN	NO	NO
Dokters van de Wereld	NO	NO
Dorcas	NO	NO
Edukans	YES	NO
Fair Wear	NO	NO
Fair Food	YES	YES
FICDD	NO	NO
Free Press Unlimited	NO	NO
Friends of the Earth (Milieudefensie in NL)	--	--
GPPAC	NO	NO
Habitat for Humanity	NO	NO
HealthNet TPO	NO	NO
Heifer Nederland	NO	NO
Hivos People Unlimited	YES	NO
Home Plan	NO	NO

iCra Global	YES	NO
IJM	NO	NO
IRC	YES	NO
IUCN	YES	NO
Karuna Foundation	NO	NO
Kerk in Actie	NO	NO
Kinderpostzegels	NO	NO
Kit Royal Tropical Institute	YES	NO
World Coaches – Football & Life Skills	NO	NO
Leger des Heils	YES	NO
Lepra Stichting	YES	NO
Leprazending	YES	NO
Liliane Fonds	YES	YES
Macheo	NO	NO
Ma ma cash	NO	NO
Max Foundation	NO	NO
FMS	--	--
MCNV	NO	NO
Mensen met een Missie	NO	NO
Mercy Corps	NO	NO
Milieudefensie	NO	NO
Mondiaal FNV	YES	NO
Vereeniging NEDWORC Association	NO	NO
NFP – Netherlands food Partnership	NO	NO
Netherlands Helsinki Committee	NO	NO
Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy	NO	NO
One	NO	NO
OXFAM Novib	NO	NO
PAX	NO	NO
Plan International	YES	NO
Prisma	YES	NO
PSI Europe	YES	NO
La Benevolencia	--	--
Red een Kind	NO	NO
Right to Play	NO	NO
RNW	YES	NO
Rode Kruis	NO	NO
Rutgers	YES	NO

Save the Children	YES	NO
SKC – Schone Kleren Campagne	NO	NO
See You – Including Everybody	YES	NO
Simavi	YES	YES
SNV	YES	YES
Solidaridad	NO	NO
SOMO	NO	NO
SOS Kindergarten	YES	YES
Sympany	NO	NO
Tearfund	NO	NO
Terre des Hommes	YES	NO
The Hague Academy	NO	NO
The Hunger Project	YES	NO
Transnational Institute (TNI)	NO	NO
Tropenbos International	NO	NO
Unicef	YES	NO
UNOY	NO	NO
Vastenactie	NO	NO
Via don Bosco	YES	NO
Volunteer Activists	--	--
VSO	YES	YES
Wage Indicator	--	--
War Child	NO	NO
WECF	YES	NO
WEMOS	YES	NO
WWF	NO	NO
Wereld Kinderen	NO	NO
Wetlands	NO	NO
Wilde Ganzen	YES	YES
Women – Dutch Gender Platform	YES	NO
Women Win	YES	NO
Woord en Daad	YES	NO
World Vision	NO	NO
YA	NO	NO
Young in Prison	NO	NO
Zoa	NO	NO

Appendix D: Interview Consent Form and Information Sheet

D1. Interview Consent Form

In this study we want to learn about the steering effects of the SDGs on environmental NGOs. Participation in this interview is voluntary and you can quit the interview at any time without giving a reason and without penalty. Your answers to the questions will be shared with the research team. We will process your personal data confidentially and in accordance with data protection legislation (the General Data Protection Regulation and Personal Data Act). Please respond to the questions honestly and feel free to say or write anything you like.

I confirm that:

- I am satisfied with the received information about the research;
- I have no further questions about the research at this moment;
- I had the opportunity to think carefully about participating in the study;
- I will give an honest answer to the questions asked.

I agree that:

- the data to be collected will be obtained and stored for scientific purposes;
- the collected, completely anonymous, research data can be shared and re-used by scientists to answer other research questions;

I understand that:

- I have the right to see the research report afterwards.

Do you agree to participate? Yes No

Signature

Date

D2. Information Sheet

Introduction

You are invited to take part in this study on the steering effects of the SDGs on environmental NGOs. The purpose of the study is to learn about the discursive uptake and normative changes as a result of the SDGs by environmental NGOs. The study is conducted by Laura Rodriguez Zehnder who is a student in the MSc programme in Sustainable Development (track: Earth System Governance) at the Department of Sustainable Development, Utrecht University. The study is supervised by Dr. Marjanneke Vijge.

Participation

Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary. You can quit at any time without providing any reason and without any penalty. Your contribution to the study is very valuable to us and we greatly appreciate your time taken to complete this interview. We estimate that it will take approximately 40 to 60 minutes to complete the interview. The questions will be read out to you by the interviewer. Some of the questions require little time to complete, while other questions might need more careful consideration. Please feel free to skip questions you do not feel comfortable answering. You can also ask the interviewer to clarify or explain questions you find unclear before providing an answer. Your answers will be noted by the interviewer in an answer template. The data you provide will be used for writing a Master thesis report and may be used for other scientific purposes such as a publication in a scientific journal or presentation at academic conferences. Only patterns in the data will be reported through these outlets. Your individual responses will not be presented or published.

Data protection

The interview is also audio taped for transcription purposes. The audio recordings will be available to the Master student and academic supervisors. We will process your data confidentially and in accordance with data protection legislation (the General Data Protection Regulation and Personal Data Act). Audio recordings will be deleted when data collection is finalized, and all interviews have been transcribed.

Appendix E: Semi-structured Interview Questions

Below is the general template of interview questions asked during the interviews of professionals and experts in the NGO and/or global goals field. These interview questions were often adapted to each individual interview. For example, the type of questions asked depended on whether it was an interview with an environmental or developmental NGO, a field or research expert, or an umbrella organization standing for the SDGs or NGOs.

Introduction

At the beginning of each interview a brief overview of my research topic was given to all interviewees. Furthermore, the ethical guidelines were established or clarified, introductions were made, and participating interviewees could have the opportunity to ask or clarify any initial questions.

Interview Start

1. Could you introduce yourself and your function [organization name]?

To start I would like to get your impression or general thoughts on the SDGs.

2. What is your view and/or the view of [organization name] on the SDGs, how important do you think they are in the Netherlands?
3. In your experience, what do you think is the general perception or view of the SDGs by NGOs?

As I mentioned before [in introduction], I decided to focus my thesis on the normative and discursive effects of the SDGs on environmental and developmental NGOs. In the first part, by discursive effects – I considered the instances in which local NGO make explicit reference, namely in their mission, vision, core values or strategies to being encouraged or inspired to act by the goals and their mission.

4. What is your general impression of NGOs in the Netherlands, would you say that these are generally inspired and encouraged by the SDGs? Or what is the current reality? (Not aware, or other factors inspire them more...?)

In my own research what I found is that developmental NGOs engage significantly more with the SDGs in comparison to environmental organizations...

5. Do my findings surprise you or is this something that [organization name] is aware or conscious of?
6. What do you believe, based on your experience, hinders environmental NGOs from engaging more with the SDGs?
7. How then do you think developmental NGOs differ from environmental NGOs?

In the second part of my research, I have analyzed whether the NGOs in the Netherlands further undergo normative effects because of the SDGs. This means whether the SDGs have had an influence on how NGOs plan and evaluate their

activities. For example, if they have a project and they monitor the progress in terms of achieving any given SDG or SDG indicator...

Based on information I reviewed online, I found that no environmental NGO plans or evaluates their activities for the SDGs. Instead, these generally engage with the goals if they see an alignment based on the work they have already been doing – so they often state that they want or contribute to a few SDGs but that is it. On the other hand, I did identify a few developmental NGOs that explicitly state that they have “framed their work to align with the SDGs” or more specifically lists how the projects or activities it carries out contributes to a specific SDG.

8. What are your thoughts on this? (Again), based on your own research what do you think are some factors that can be used to explain this trend?

9. Do you know how or in what ways NGOs would like to change the SDGs? Particularly in terms of steering... do you think that the way in which they work now are favored or should they be changed?

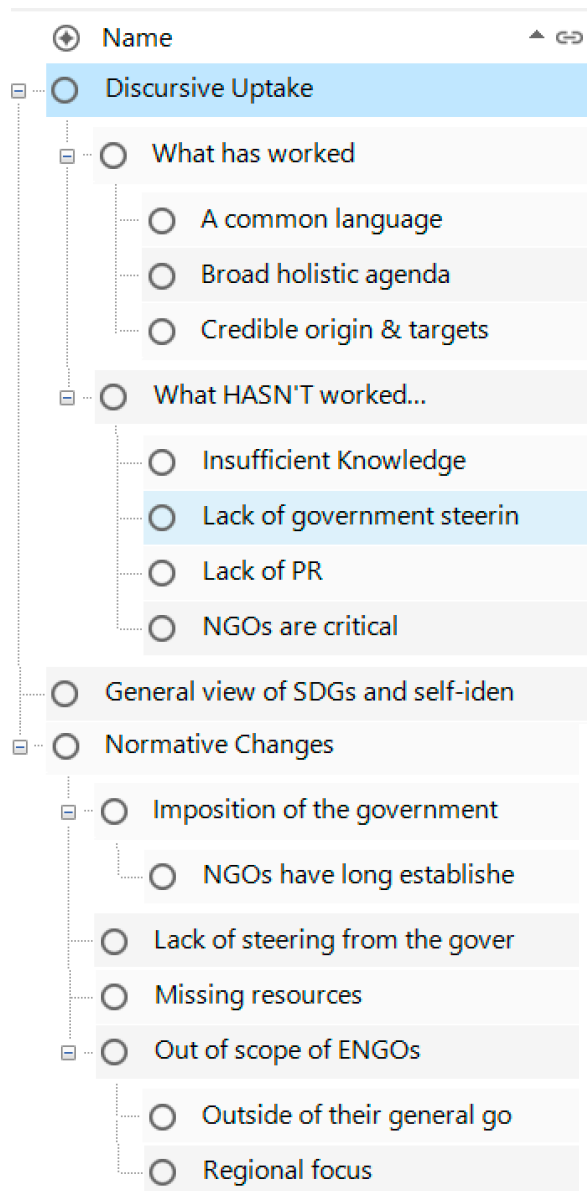
Closing

10. Do you have any additional comments or something you would still like to address?

Appendix F: N-Vivo Coding

The following images show the codes deduced for the analysis of the interview material. The first image consists of the analysis derived with experts in the environmental field. The second image is made up of the analysis with experts in the developmental field.

1. To explain the (lack of) steering effects of the SDGs on environmental NGOs.



2. To explain the differences in steering effects between environmental and developmental NGOs.

Name	^
------	---

- Alternative to SDGs
- Complementary work fra...
- Dev. NGOs are critical
- Env. are critical
- Exposure through the MFA
- Future direction
- Previously Existing Missio...
- View or use of SDGs