

The future in policy

Looking for certainties

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WRR



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The Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) is an independent advisory body. The WRR informs and advises the Dutch government and parliament on cross-sectoral issues that have a major impact on our society. Its advice is based on scientific research and focuses on the long-term perspective.

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All WRR publications are available at wrr.nl.

Edited by: Acolad, Maastricht
Published by: WRR

Design: VormVijf, The Hague
Cover image: Steffie Padmos, Eindhoven
Figures and tables: VormVijf, The Hague

ISBN 978-90-837679-1-8
NUR 740

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Preface

This investigation was prompted by a number of conversations held between the Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) and the joint secretaries-general of the various ministries of the Dutch government in early 2025. The secretaries-general wished to know if there were any future certainties that could serve as the basis for decisions to be made in the present. Given that future studies usually deal with uncertainties, this question captured the WRR's imagination to the point that it decided to conduct a study as part of its work programme. This document presents a summary of our approach and findings. By looking at certainties from three different angles, the WRR offers broader perspectives on the future in policy.

The work was carried out by a project group consisting of Prof. Corien Prins (Council chair), Dr Ramy El-Dardiry (project coordinator), Dr Roel Jennissen (research fellow), Prof. Ab Klink (Council member) and Prof. Frans Brom (Council secretary). Mia Salminen and Sander Blaauw served as interns on the project. Alissa Stuut and Chrisje van Rijsbergen provided secretarial support to the project group and also helped to conduct the study. Mitra Javanmardi and Maurits van IJsendoorn prepared the study for publication.

This publication is part of the WRR's 'Investigations' series. Investigations do not have the status of a formal advice to the government. They are studies that the WRR considers important for publication. The content of this investigation is the responsibility of its authors and does not necessarily represent the position of the WRR. In the course of the study, the project group spoke with more than 50 scientists and academics, policymakers, administrators and other experts. In addition, the project group looked to a number of Dutch-language novels for inspiration and to broaden its horizons. A number of interim findings were shared with the secretaries-general in November 2025 and April 2026.

In the concluding phase of the project, a draft of this investigation was submitted for review to Prof. Maarten Hajer (Utrecht University), Prof. Eefje Cuppen (Rathenau Institute, Leiden University) and Dr Annemiek Nelis (Ministry of Justice and Security). We are grateful to them for their input.

Summary

Whoever wants to develop a vision for the future of the Netherlands will need to consider not only the type of country it *wants* to be, but also the type it *can* be.

In its investigation *The future in policy*, the Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR) looks at a number of certainties for 2050 that could serve as the basis for decisions to be made in the present from three different angles. Based on its belief that policy for the long term should be informed by uncertainties as well as certainties, the WRR has developed a frame of reference that allows policymakers to consider the future and discuss their considerations with other policymakers in a structured manner. Although this investigation considers the Dutch context specifically, the frame of reference may be applicable to other regional, national and supranational entities as well.

The WRR approach

This investigation looks at certainties for 2050 from three different angles:

1. *Big shifts* – we know for certain that a number of changes, such as developments in terms of knowledge and technology, climate, demographics and geopolitics, will dramatically transform our living environment and everyday life. Even though we do not know the exact nature of these big shifts and their consequences for 2050, it is a certainty that they will happen. Moreover, we know that these types of change do not take place at random, but have occurred throughout history and will continue to do so in the future.
2. *Anchor points* – we know for certain that a range of factors, such as the existence of planetary boundaries, the geographic position of the Netherlands and people's need for a purpose in life, are and will be present. These anchor points are almost certain to remain constant until 2050. As such, they define the boundaries within which policy can be made.
3. *Tensions* – we know for certain that big shifts and anchor points will collide, leading to tensions and societal challenges. These tensions may involve vulnerabilities, conflicts of values and necessary choices.

The instrument

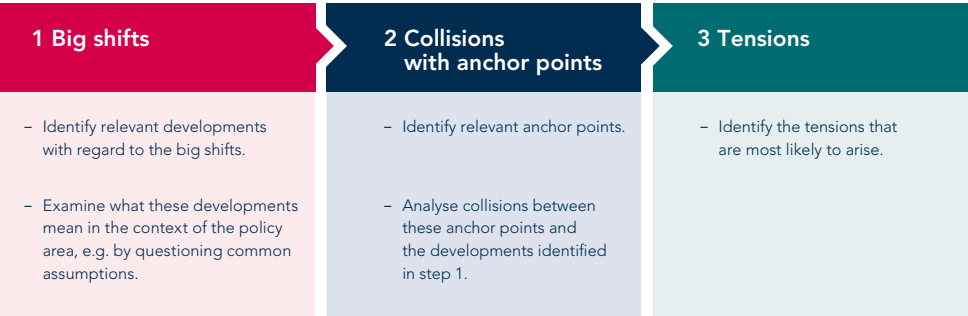
Based on the three types of certainties outlined above, the WRR developed a flow chart (see below) to help take the future into account in policy. The flow chart makes it possible to identify the tensions in certain policy areas at an early stage. In addition, it may help policymakers broaden their perspective in order to recognise tensions that may not be immediately obvious.

In what way does this frame of reference add value?

Policymakers tend to direct most of their energy and focus towards the issues of the day, so making policy for the long term is not the easiest or most obvious route to take. Studies on the future may help shift their attention to the issues of tomorrow. There are already regular forecasts, scenario studies and visions for the future that fulfil that role. The instrument that takes centre stage in this investigation is intended as a supplement to these. A systematic evaluation of certainties helps to make clear what kind of country the Netherlands of the future can be, as it offers insights into the essential conditions and trade-off required.

The identification and use of the insights in this investigation does not necessarily make policymaking for the future easier, but it may help clarify areas in which friction can be expected, thereby making policy discussions more productive. The way policymakers talk about the future will play a large part in shaping that future. This opens up various perspectives. While there are many developments that the Netherlands may not be able to steer on its own over the next 25 years, it may help determine the topics for debate. The challenges facing the Netherlands are immense: issues such as climate change, the emergence of artificial intelligence and geopolitical turmoil all necessitate policies for the long term. All the more reason to address the future in policy.

Figure 1 Future-in-policy flow chart to help set policy area agendas



It may be helpful to use the flow chart multiple times, as tensions may lead to new insights into relevant developments and anchor points.

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