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### **Sustainability and the cultural factor. Results from the Dutch GOES Mass Public Module**

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## Executive summary

The cultural factor is a major determinant in the environmental realm. Exposing the importance of this factor is the main issue at stake in *Chapter One* of this report. Cultural change has markedly influenced people's environmental concern, attitudes, and behaviors. Higher emphases on the basic values personal freedom, personal development, and personal responsibility have transformed the whole range of human activities among which entire lifestyles and consumption patterns. Culture shifts simultaneously gave rise to a growing level of environmental concern and pro-environmental attitudes on the one hand and a series of human behaviors that put higher claims on energy resources on the other. This paradox has inspired the global community of environmental scientists to conduct a truly global survey in which the impact of cultural change, of value shifts, on environmental concern, attitudes, and behaviors can be addressed empirically. This worldwide survey is the GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL SURVEY or GOES. GOES aims to provide policy makers and opinion leaders in the environmental arena with feedback about the fundamental considerations of mass publics that cause orientations and behaviors of these publics to support or contradict the declared strategic shift towards sustainable development. Another major goal is to clarify the linkage between environmental values, attitudes, and behaviors. Special attention is paid to the relative influence of goals people set at the societal level and the personal life goals these people hold. This report, compiled for NOP Global Change, presents the full results of the Dutch GOES MASS PUBLIC MODULE. Late 1999 the detailed results of the Dutch GOES DECISION-MAKERS MODULE, based on interviews with high-level environmental decision-makers and opinion leaders in the Dutch environmental circuit, have been published by the Dutch Ministry of the Environment (Ester *et al.*, 1999). This report builds on a representative dataset of exactly 1,000 Dutch people aged 16 years and older interviewed in late 1997, early 1998. In the course of the year 2000 an international publication will be published by MIT Press (Cambridge, MA) containing cross-cultural comparisons between a wide range of developing and developed countries in which both GOES modules are conducted (Aoyagi *et al.*, 2000).

In *Chapter Two* the level of environmental concern of Dutch people is analyzed. The second most important problem in the Netherlands, according to spontaneous answers of the Dutch, are environmental problems (after crime). Environmental problems are *the* most important problems at world level, be it that this top position is threatened if the votes for all kinds of different global wealth balance problems are summed. Dutch citizens think air pollution is (at world and country level) the most pressing environmental problem. It is also regarded as the most serious and the most dangerous or health threatening problem in the Netherlands. Public concern is about 'classic' environmental issues. The environmental concern of the Dutch is firmly based on the conviction that early ecological themes such as pollution of air, water or soil, are far from solved. However, the sensitivity of the Dutch for 'modern' themes, such as the green house effect or the ozone hole, is certainly not underdeveloped. The main channel of acquiring environmental information is through

television and the daily newspaper. The direct 'market share' of government distributed information is very small. Still, a large majority of Dutch people perceive themselves as well to very well informed about environmental issues. When asked *which* environmental problems one is informed most about it is precisely global warming or the green house effect about which the public claims to have heard or read most (the very problem hardly any citizen is worried about). Air pollution takes the second place.

The media exposure to environmental problems has limited influence. People consider themselves well informed, do consume information about global, abstract, and long-term issues, but seem hardly concerned about these problems. The associations between information level and the assessment of the importance, urgency, and danger of environmental problems are very weak or even non-existent. Having information about specific environmental issues does only in few cases go hand-in-hand with concern about the same issues. Dutch people who read or hear most about global warming and about the ozone hole are more inclined to vote for global warming and the ozone hole as the most serious environment problem in the Netherlands. Vice versa, Dutch citizens who reveal to have read or heard least about land erosion, the loss of biodiversity, and global warming are also more likely to perceive these problems as least serious in the Netherlands. It has to be concluded, however, that in most cases there is no relationship between having information about environmental problems and perceiving environmental problems as important, serious or dangerous.

*Chapter Three* addresses Dutch environmental attitudes in more detail. The ecology-versus-economy controversy has yielded an intense debate in Dutch society in recent years, e.g. with respect to the expansion of Schiphol airport, gas drilling in the Wadden Sea, and the Betuwe line. Though it is well taken that these policy and societal issues cover more than a simple ecology/economy dichotomy, the nucleus of the debate nevertheless focuses on the prioritization of economic and environmental interests. Our findings indicate that – at least at the level of general attitudes – the Dutch population strongly emphasizes the importance and weight of environmental considerations. This key-feature of the Dutch climate of opinion seems frequently overlooked in the ecology-versus-economy debate. Irrespective of how deeply rooted the prioritization of environmental over economic interests is, it indicates that the ongoing debate is not burdened by a lack of environmental awareness on the side of the public at large. The same conclusion holds for perceived self-efficacy in the environmental domain as expressed by the average Dutch citizen. Our results show that notwithstanding the complex and global nature of contemporary environmental problems, the Dutch still feel that the individual can make a difference and should take personal responsibility in protecting the environment. This self-characterization contradicts many public utterances about a widely shared *après-moi-le-déluge* mentality. This unexpectedly high level of self-efficacy also challenges perspectives that frame environmental degradation as a social dilemma in which self-interests overrule common interests. A more hypothetical and speculative interpretation, though, could be that the mere feeling of being self-efficacious is a generalized feature of modern man. Self-efficacy in this sense reflects the ideal of the modern era to control things and to direct one's own life. Whatever the likely interpretation is, an environmentally self-efficacious citizenry is an asset rather than a disadvantage for an environmental policy that prompts sustainable lifestyles.

The focal concern of *Chapter Four* is the classical issue of values. Since the 1990s environmental studies have more sharply concentrated on incorporating fundamental human values into their analyses of environmental concern and of pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors. There are two paradigms that have hardly ever been combined in

one single environmental study: the paradigm of postmaterialism, indicating what people think is good for society, and the paradigm of value universals, tapping the priorities of what people regard desirable for their own lives. In the GOES MASS PUBLIC MODULE both complementary perspectives are combined. Postmaterialists are people valuing societal emphases on the quality of life, self-expression, and social participation over material wellbeing, and social and physical security. People who value the latter are called materialists. Postmaterialists are enthusiastically underlining the protection of the environment and eagerly engaging in political action for the sake of the environment. In the late 1990s there are about 34% postmaterialist people in the Netherlands over against 15% materialists. The majority of the Dutch make a balanced choice between postmaterialist and materialist goals. In search for a stable structure of basic human values or value universals scientists social psychologists have delineated a two dimensional space underlying people's orientation on what they want out of life: on the first dimension 'conservation' (e.g. tradition) counterbalances 'openness to change' (self-direction) and on the second dimension 'self-transcendence' (benevolence) opposes 'self-enhancement' (achievement). The latter dimension is a powerful predictor of pro-environmental attitudes. In the Dutch GOES MASS PUBLIC MODULE we were able to replicate this twofold dimension by discerning biospheric values (directed at the protection of and unity with nature) and egoistic values (being in control). Almost three-quarters of the Dutch strongly supports biospheric values and six out of ten endorse egoistic values. There is hardly to no relationship between postmaterialism (societal goals) and these two value universals (personal life goals).

In *Chapter Five* environmental policy preferences of the Dutch population are pictured. At the level of the individual consumer sustainable development has to do with advocating lifestyles that prioritize ecological concerns. Government can promote such lifestyles by implementing soft or hard environmental policy measures. Soft measures refer to policies that aim at raising general environmental awareness among citizens, such as information campaigns that prompt energy conservation, recycling, or selective private car use. Hard measures, though, intervene more directly by changing the parameters of citizens' behavioral context through choice limitation such as energy rationing and restricting car use or through pricing and taxation. Soft measures appeal to responsibility motives and voluntary pro-environmental behavior change, whereas hard instruments restructure consumer choice processes by punishing environmentally damaging behavior or by rewarding and reinforcing environmentally friendly behavior. The Dutch GOES data indicate that at the turn of the millennium Dutch citizens prefer soft environmental measures over hard environmental measures, i.e. they support persuasive campaigns prompting pro-environmental behavior but disagree with higher taxation and rationing. However, disagreement is not unanimous as a small but relevant minority – between 15-30% - supports more harsh policy options. Further inspection of the data reveals that environmental policy preferences are related to political orientations in a specific way. Dutch people likely to favor harder environmental measures tend to vote for the green leftist and liberal democratic party, place themselves at the left side of the political spectrum, are willing to participate in political action for the environment, emphasize the importance of pro-environmental stands of a political party in order to vote for that party, and feel that government should invest more in environmental protection (relative to other policy areas). Though not reported in this chapter, they also tend to adhere to postmaterialist values. It seems therefore, that people favoring more harsh measures make up a specific political segment that resembles the ideological profile of the New Left. Adherents of New Left political convictions adhere to a blend of basic values such as

emancipation, equality, minority rights, cultural progressiveness, quality of life, postmaterialism, sustainability, and environmentalism. As the agenda of the New Left, though not always under this umbrella, is increasingly successful in challenging existing political agenda's and drawing citizen support, it might embody a societal trend towards greater consensus about the necessity of more strict environmental policies. Not in the form of rationing and taxation, but tougher regulation and control are likely candidates. But irrespective of changing political and ideological configurations, the conclusion holds that social acceptance of environmental policy measures depends on the degree in which the public at large perceives these measures as being legitimate, just, efficient, and feasible.

*Chapter Six* goes beyond the verbal behavioral intentions displayed by the Dutch citizen and depicts factual (self-reported) behavior of the Dutch that specifically relates to energy consumption. In the Netherlands the use of electricity and the consumption of fossile fuels have risen sharply in the last decade, despite deeply felt concern for the environment and despite numerous environmental policy regulations aimed at meeting the Kyoto greenhouse gas emmision reduction criteria. The involvement of Dutch people in green consumption, energy saving behavior, and means of transportation is ambivalent. Green consumption (e.g. buying products for its environmentally-friendly packaging) applies to a large minority of 43% of the Dutch people. Green consumption has become more popular during the 1990s (especially buying organically grown food products). Energy efficient consumption (e.g. buying appliances for their low energy-use) has more adherents: 66%. About one-quarter of the Dutch aims at buying computers, automobiles, and high-energy consuming domestic appliances such as dish washers and cloths dryers within the next three years. Saving behavior for the Dutch refers to water and heating. Small majorities of the Dutch have done this in the last year and half to a third of them save for the sake of the environment. Seven out of then Dutch citizens have not used public transporation in the last year, although two-thirds agree that it would help to protect the environment. Private car use is most common. People using a car for shopping or visiting friends drive as many kilometers as the people using public or non-motorized transportation do. We found only little consistency between the different energy relevant behaviors. Desiring products that do or do not use direct energy has no bearing on saving more, saving for the sake of the environment or travelling less far for any reason. Aiming at energy efficient consumer strategies goes hand in hand with saving more water and energy for heating. This also holds for those acting within green consumer strategies, albeit that they in contrast to those directed at energy efficiency in their consumption do also save more often for the sake of the environment. None of the consumption styles have any relationship with car possession or car use. It is again shown that pro-environmental consumption styles and driving are two separate worlds.

The previous chapters each sketch different important dimensions of environmentalism in the Netherlands. *Chapter Seven* integrates all these separate findings into an integrative perspective, finally assessing the social and cultural foundations of the whole set of environmentalist behaviors in one encompassing space. In the end influential factors are postmaterialism, educational level, income size, left-right political orientations, the willingness to bear lifestyle costs for energy and car use, concern for economy over ecology, and self-efficacy. These factors explain Dutch people's involvement in pro-environmental political action, green consumption, saving for the sake of the environment and the number of motor vehicles people possess. We found two dimensions. The first one indicates anti- to sympathy for political action and green consumption. The sympathy pole of this dimension coincides with low levels of concern for economic consequences of

ecological orientations, postmaterialism, higher education, and to a lesser extent the priority for environmental protection than for economic growth and high self-efficacy. The counterparts of people having these characteristics are found on the antipathy pole. All in all, this dimension seems to require an ecological form of 'cultural capital': familiarity with and skills for environmental activism. The second dimension is particularly determined by the number of cars people possess aligning with foremostly income level, followed by left-right orientations, and the support for lifestyle costs related to energy and car use. More cars, higher incomes, right-wing thinking, rejecting lifestyle costs cluster together on one pole of this dimension. As possession, income and costs coincide, this dimension seems to tap some sort of environmental budgeting capacity. One can discern four groups that, looking closer, are either socially or attitudinally well demarcated. High income, high educational level, and a slightly left-wing orientation relate to moderate environmental activism. High activism is found among strong left-wingers lacking marked social boundaries. The same goes for the group of right-wingers who have highly developed skills in terms of environmental budgeting. They are contrasted by socially well-defined (lower strata) but non-political individuals who strongly reject environmental activism and have low environmental budgeting capacities. There is no such thing as a uniform set of proenvironmental behaviors that are equally explained by the same body of social and cultural factors. This underlines the importance to stress environmental policies that take account of the basic correlates of environmentalist behavior in which both skills and ideology prevail, each in their own particular way.

*Chapter Eight* summarizes the main conclusions from the Dutch GOES study and puts these in perspective. The DUTCH GOES MASS PUBLIC MODULE observed an environmentally concerned and according to its own self-perception generally well informed Dutch citizenry that favors soft over hard environmental policies, but that struggles with the elasticity of a personal sustainable lifestyle. Dutch citizens are aware of the seriousness and urgency of environmental problems both in their own society and in the world as such. They 'fail', though, to translate their environmental concern in systematic and consistent environmentally conscious behavior. Now many studies have pointed at the discrepancy between environmental attitudes and behavior among consumers and have shown that environmental behavior is an ambiguous and heterogeneous categorizing concept, so that is hardly a novel point of view. Moreover, it is not so much a question of perceived low environmental self-efficacy as we found that the majority of the Dutch population states that it can make a difference in environmental matters. But *what* difference? Increasingly, environmental problems have become global, abstract, long-term, complex, and multi-layered issues that transcend the here and now. The average Dutch citizen is confronted with the dilemma how to frame such problems in a way that they become meaningful and prescriptive in their everyday life. There is quite a mental and psychological distance between the grand environmental narratives of policy makers and the more trivial and petty narrative of the average citizen in its role of a responsible consumer. What is the relationship between global warming and the behavior of the individual consumer? How do international agreements on emission reductions affect one's personal lifestyle? These are fundamental questions that are central to the observed incongruities between environmental attitudes and behaviors. But there is more. Environmental policy through media intervention has been quite successful in nestling the environmental issue on the public's agenda. It has been less successful in providing citizens and consumers with concrete and applicable skills how to practice a transparent sustainable lifestyle. Consistent environmentally conscious behavior, as we saw in the previous chapter, presupposes the wide dissemination of cultural capital to judge the

environmental ins-and-outs of sustainable consumer behavior. Environmental policy should not only prompt behavior change among its citizens' target groups but also supply them with skills and opportunities to do so. Next to doing this, environmental policy should abstain from sending ambiguous and ambivalent messages to its target groups. For instance: are pay-as-you-drive policy measures aimed at reducing environmental degradation or directed at diminishing traffic congestion? There seems to be a level discrepancy between the environmental policy agenda and the public agenda. Environmental policy makers increasingly frame environmental problems as global and complex issues, whereas the individual consumer is struggling with assessing the relevance of such framing for their everyday life considerations. At the start of this new millennium environmental policy should wisely reinvest in re-opening the dialogue with the ordinary citizen by explaining policy goals and particularly by relating these policy goals to the private concerns and lifestyles of citizens, to facilitate sustainable lifestyles, by providing role models and skills, and by giving feedback to citizens and consumers about results realized. Dialogue, explanation, facilitation, and feedback are the crucial factors for environmental policy to be successful and acceptable.