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## Executive summary

Health Council of the Netherlands. Considering health in environmental policy: balanced and equitable management of risks and opportunities. The Hague: Health Council of the Netherlands, 2016; publication no. 2016/12

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Environmental factors have a substantial impact on health. In recent decades, thanks to a wide range of measures, there has been a significant decline in the burden of disease from environmental stressors. Even though there is almost universal compliance with the statutory standards in the Netherlands, air pollution and noise exposure are still significant contributors to the burden of disease. There is also concern about the health risks posed by relatively new technologies and developments, such as the growth in mobile communications, wind turbines and intensive livestock farming. The extent to which current environmental policy takes health into consideration is not always clear. To achieve greater health benefits, the Minister for the Environment has asked the Health Council of the Netherlands to advise her on a risk governance framework that could be used to take health into consideration. This is particularly relevant in the light of the upcoming Environment and Planning Act, the goal of which is to achieve a safe and healthy physical living environment with scope for local deliberations.

### Existing risk governance frameworks suffice

The Committee that prepared this advisory report notes that there is no need for an entirely new risk governance framework. This is because useful tools for supporting such deliberations are already available. The Dutch Risk Assessment Framework for Health and the Environment has proven to be a practical and

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appropriate tool for evaluating the health risks associated with environmental factors, and for discussing the pros and cons of possible risk control options with stakeholders. However, it does not have a particularly strong focus on the actual processes of deliberation and decision making. The International Risk Governance Council's (IRGC) tool, on the other hand, gives considerable emphasis to the process involved in complex deliberations. It is rather generic and abstract, however, which makes it less suitable for use in everyday practice. Nevertheless, it could be a useful addition to the Dutch Risk Assessment Framework.

### Guide needed for participation and deliberation processes

The Environment and Planning Act gives local authorities greater responsibility for taking health into consideration when drawing up their environmental policy. The Committee wonders whether, based on the existing frameworks, they will be able to conduct such deliberations effectively. Accordingly, it is advising the Minister for the Environment to develop a guide. This is entirely in line with the government's directing and supporting role in this context. A guide like this could take advantage of the strength of the Dutch Risk Assessment Framework and the IRGC's framework. On the one hand, this would provide for an adequate assessment and discussion of potential health effects, while on the other hand ensuring that the process of deliberation is well balanced. In addition, the Committee asks for a stronger focus on the societal values involved in the final deliberation and decision-making process, such as the level of public concern or an inequitable distribution of health in society.

With regard to local implementation, participation and communication are essential if the process of deliberation is to be truly transparent and effective. Accordingly, a guiding principle for the design of participation would have to be a major element of the guide in question. In this context, the Committee has identified two points of special interest. First, those groups that are less inclined to participate (e.g. groups of low socioeconomic status) will have to be encouraged to do so. Furthermore, when communicating about often uncertain environmental risks, it is important to make it clear what actions members of the public themselves can take. That helps to ameliorate the health risks involved, while giving the stakeholders in question more control over the situation.

## Health benefits require well-founded standards

The Minister for the Environment wants to make health a more pivotal aspect of environmental policy. The Committee points out that the use of a risk governance framework does not, in itself, guarantee health benefits. The goal of current policy is to avoid exceeding the statutory environmental quality standards. However, these standards are not based purely on data relating to health effects but also on economic considerations, such as feasibility. As a result, air pollution, for example, still causes a substantial burden of disease, despite almost universal compliance with the standards in the Netherlands. To further reduce the burden of disease resulting from exposure to environmental stressors, the Committee urges that health-based recommended exposure limits and target values in the regulations be used as an incentive for achieving health benefits, starting with air pollution and noise exposure. At local level, it is possible to deviate from these limits and values, provided that reasoned arguments are put forward for doing so. In this way, local government authorities retain their administrative scope for deliberation while, at the same time, having an incentive to take better account of health considerations.

## Health protection plus health promotion

The main purpose of health-based recommended exposure limits is to protect health, and to reduce both the burden of disease and nuisance. Health can also be interpreted in a broader sense, as ‘positive health’, in which people’s performance, resilience and self-management are pivotal considerations. According to the Committee, the new environmental policy offers excellent opportunities for health promotion, such as designing the living environment to encourage healthy behaviour. The Committee recommends that national and local ‘Environment Visions’ should be based on a broad definition of health. When drawing up area development plans, this provides an opportunity to try to ensure that everyone, including vulnerable groups in society, is able to retain as much control over their own living environment as possible.