

Letter of 7 July 2022 from the Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation and the Minister of Health, Welfare and Sport to the House of Representatives on the government response to the AIV advisory report on a Dutch Global Health Strategy

We have the honour of presenting to the House the government's response to the advisory report 'Foundation for a Dutch Global Health Strategy' of the Advisory Council on International Affairs (AIV). The AIV published its report on 20 April 2022, in response to the motion submitted by MP Anne Kuik requesting the government to draft a study into the scope for and added value of a strategy of this kind.¹ As the AIV states, the COVID-19 pandemic has clearly highlighted more than ever the need to develop a coherent global health strategy, as announced in the government's coalition agreement. The government would like to express its appreciation for the AIV's analysis and clear recommendations. The report provides solid starting points and building blocks for a Dutch Global Health Strategy. The strategy's specific actions and choices will be further elaborated in the strategy itself.

In this letter we discuss the main lines of the AIV's recommendations and concerns, and set out the government's plans to use them as the basis for a Global Health Strategy.

Appraisal of the AIV report

The government endorses the AIV's recommendations, and agrees with its analysis: the Netherlands should invest where it has the most added value and should enhance policy coherence. This will require coordination between different ministries and sectors and with international partners to contribute more effectively to achieving international health objectives and tackle cross-border health threats.

The AIV characterises global health as a multidimensional issue embedded in a broader context. The COVID-19 pandemic has made clear once more that vulnerabilities in the global health system have a major impact not only on health, but also on socioeconomic development, the living environment, wellbeing and safety, with factors such as geopolitics and climate change also playing a role.

The international community needs to meet these challenges jointly and urgently. Moreover, the transnational character of the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated once more how closely linked health in the Netherlands is to the global health situation. The fight against COVID-19, too, has revealed our vulnerability to variants that have emerged elsewhere in the world and have had a direct impact on our response and our resilience. This is not a new insight, but as the AIV states, the extent of the COVID-19 pandemic has made us aware of the importance of investing in global health, resilience and international cooperation.

The government sees an important role for the Netherlands in tackling these tasks and will be glad to take responsibility for them. The Dutch Global Health Strategy will constitute the framework for elaborating the priorities of our approach to global health.

The AIV notes that existing international frameworks to which the Netherlands and other countries have committed themselves, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), should be the basis for strategic, coherent Dutch efforts to promote global health.

Within these international frameworks, the Netherlands' added value needs to be defined and realised. The AIV recommends that the Netherlands align the strategic priorities that it adopts with those of the World Health Organization (WHO). The government agrees that WHO's central and

¹ <https://www.tweedekamer.nl/kamerstukken/detail?id=2020Z23498&did=2020D49542>.

coordinating role must be strengthened in order to structure the international health architecture and achieve the global health objectives. As a committed partner for WHO and an advocate of coherence within the global health system, the Netherlands will consider in developing a Global Health Strategy how it can contribute most effectively to WHO's priorities. As the AIV suggests, the Netherlands will also decide how it can strengthen and make better use of the collaborative relationships within the European Union (EU), the coordination of priorities and the division of labour. The EU has a central part to play in cooperation on health issues in Europe, plays a key role in WHO and in international negotiations, and is a major donor to efforts to build and strengthen basic healthcare systems in developing countries.

The AIV gives four guiding principles for a global health strategy. It emphasises the connection between the health of humans, animals and the natural environment (the One Health approach), as well as the need for including health considerations in policymaking in all sectors that impact on health (health in all policies). In monitoring and reporting on policy and interventions by governments, companies and civil society organisations, the AIV suggests applying the do no harm principle. Finally, the AIV stresses the importance of a context-specific, demand-driven approach. The government recognises the importance of these four principles and will integrate them into the Global Health Strategy.

In addition, the AIV sets out three strategic priorities: (1) strengthening the global health infrastructure (health systems); (2) preparing for future pandemics; and (3) enhancing coherence and coordination at national and international level. These strategic priorities proposed by the AIV offer a sound framework for elaborating a Dutch Global Health Strategy.

An effective global health infrastructure, as well as strong, resilient health systems at country level and global pandemic preparedness, are essential for global health. Dutch foreign trade and development cooperation policy gives priority to a central role for WHO and to strengthening national health systems, including sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis. The policy agenda that the government has drafted for pandemic preparedness also has a major international component, at both EU and global level. In the substantive elaboration of priorities, the government will give great weight to the areas where the Netherlands has the most added value: for example, as the AIV report mentions, deploying and building on existing knowledge and expertise in the areas of SRHR and antimicrobial resistance (AMR). Opportunities are also available for using Dutch knowledge of digitalisation and innovation.

The government endorses the AIV's view that making a substantial contribution to global health demands making progress towards coherent policy based on cooperation between different disciplines and parties. This calls for collaboration at national and international level, the basis for which is the close working relationship between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (BZ) and the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport in the areas of politics, diplomacy and policymaking. As part of a broad approach to health and in line with the principles laid out by the AIV, these two ministries will also work closely with other ministries, with the aim of arriving at an interministerial strategy that enjoys broad support and a sense of shared ownership. To promote international coherence and harmonisation, close cooperation with international partners, both bilateral and multilateral, is necessary. The AIV points out that EU activities in the area of global health must be fully reflected in Dutch policy. The EU is also drawing up a new global health strategy, whose completion is expected by the end of 2022. Extensive consultations are under way with the European Commission and other member states in the interests of synergy.

The AIV refers to the current lack of a platform at national level in which all relevant actors can initiate structured discussions of their ideas. A Dutch Global Health Strategy will provide opportunities to strengthen the partnership between authorities, civil society organisations, knowledge institutions and industry. The AIV refers in this connection to the Dutch Diamond, in which these four actors work together. It is already possible now to structure this working relationship. The four partners will be explicitly enlisted in the development of a Global Health Strategy, for example in the form of roundtable discussions. Use will also be made in these discussions of input from the Dutch Global Health Alliance and the Life Sciences and Health (LSH) top sector. This will lay a solid foundation for effective multisectoral cooperation.

As the AIV emphasises in its advisory report, it is vitally important to take action rather than wait for the next health crisis. At the same time, the steps to be taken to improve global health must do justice to the complexity of global health issues.

Towards a Dutch Global Health Strategy that enjoys broad support

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs will draft a government-wide Dutch Global Health Strategy in close consultation with the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport on the basis of the AIV's recommendations. The drafting process will also involve close collaboration with other ministries: the Interior & Kingdom Relations; Defence; Economic Affairs & Climate Policy; Finance; Infrastructure & Water Management; Agriculture, Nature & Food Quality; and Education, Culture & Science.

Civil society, the Dutch business community, knowledge institutions and international actors – such as WHO and other appropriate UN institutions, multilateral health funds, the EU, like-minded countries and partners in the global South – will also be consulted.

The government aims for the Dutch Global Health Strategy to encompass a strategic, coherent set of efforts, through which the Netherlands can effectively and sustainably contribute to global health on the basis of close cooperation at both national and international level. The building blocks recommended by the AIV form a solid foundation for this project.

As the Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation communicated to the House in her letter on the main lines of her policy, we aim to send the proposed Global Health Strategy to parliament in October 2022, after which the strategy will be further elaborated.