



EUROPEAN SOCIAL POLICY NETWORK (ESPN)

Access to essential services for low-income people

Netherlands

Melissa van de Grift-van Olst



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion

Directorate C — Social Affairs

Unit C.2 — Modernisation of social protection systems

Contact: Giulia Pagliani

E-mail: Giulia.PAGLIANI@ec.europa.eu

European Commission

B-1049 Brussels

European Social Policy Network (ESPN)

**ESPN Thematic Report on
Access to essential services for
low-income people**

The Netherlands

2020

Melissa van de Grift-van Olst

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Quoting this report: Van de Grift, Melissa (2020). ESPN Thematic Report on Access to essential services for low-income people – The Netherlands, European Social Policy Network (ESPN), Brussels: European Commission.

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Summary

In the Netherlands, access to essential services is in practice largely guaranteed for the low-income population. In Dutch policy and practice, however, neither the featured *services* nor the *measures* facilitating access to these services are distinguished in the way the European framework does; in the Netherlands they form part of larger policies and mechanisms. In fact, most measures supporting low-income people are not directed at specific services, while most measures facilitating access to specific services are not specifically directed at low-income people. In this context, there are two dominant policy frameworks for each of the services under scrutiny (water, sanitation, energy, transport, digital communications and financial services): one related to public/basic services and one related to anti-poverty. These policies have a strong subnational component, while their foundations lie at the national level. This means that relevant policy frameworks are layered. The overlap between them is especially crucial. Indeed, the measures facilitating access to services for low-income people form the bridge between the two frameworks.

The first framework – public/basic services – contains multiple definitions related to central services. These usually have broader meanings and scope than the European definition of “essential services”, covering other services as well. Most relevant for the services under scrutiny are the Dutch definitions of public services (and equivalents) and basic services, especially when connected to basic rights or needs. For these publicly funded services, minimum conditions relating to quality, quantity and access (availability of a basic, paid-for supply) are in place.

The second framework – anti-poverty – uses a set income limit to define low-income people, essentially encompassing persons and households (with or without children) with low wages, on benefits and with debts. This population is usually entitled to governmental as well as non-governmental support. By offering (financial) support, anti-poverty policies are designed to prevent and fight poverty, at the same time stimulating social inclusion.

Many of the Dutch support regulations and mechanisms are applicable to all of the services under scrutiny, especially when it comes to affordability and communication. Only measures ensuring the provision of a basic, uninterrupted supply (e.g. disconnection policies and supply obligations) are always strictly service-specific. As for the rest, both financial benefits and price reductions are in place. General variants (e.g. benefits, extra allowances and tax credits) are freely disposable, and not necessarily earmarked to pay for specific services. However, they can be used to this end. Special variants (e.g. extra budgets, in-kind benefits or waivers), on the other hand, are more fitted to individual needs and specific services. The provision of information on eligibility for financial benefits and price reductions is essentially digital, while face-to-face counselling and practical help also play an important role in Dutch practice.

Despite all the measures aimed at supporting low-income people to access essential services, issues remain. Access to (public) transport is especially restricted for low-income people, mainly due to socio-economic and geographic factors. This may have an impact on social participation. Also, access to energy might be increasingly threatened in the future, given climate policies and taxes. As a side note, it is important to mention that subcategories of the low-income population may be excluded from existing benefits and price reductions, due to the strict conditions attached. Lastly, awareness of (financial) rights is not always sufficiently present.

1 Overview of national/subnational measures aimed at supporting low-income people in accessing essential services

According to Principle 20 of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), everyone should have “the right to access essential services of good quality, including water, sanitation, energy, transport, financial services and digital communications”. Moreover, support for accessing such services should be available for those in need.¹ The importance of ensuring access to essential services is also well established globally in the framework of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which was endorsed in 2015 by all UN countries including all EU countries.² This report investigates the extent to which Principle 20 of the EPSR has already been implemented in the six services under scrutiny in the Netherlands. The group of “those in need” is restricted in the report to people on a low income and low-income households.

1.1 Definition of “essential services”

In the Netherlands, there is no *common* definition of essential services in the strict sense of the EU framework. The only (literal) mention of essential services, specifically referring to the six services under scrutiny, can be found in the context of the recently adopted law regarding the security of network and information systems (*Wet beveiliging netwerken informatiesystemen*). This law follows the exact wording and substance of the EU Directive that it implements, namely Directive 2016/1148/EU. Also, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs mentions the term “universal services”, meaning minimum-quality services, for example in the area of telecommunication or mail, with access for all guaranteed for a reasonable price. Both definitions and their distinctive scopes, however, have a clear international origin, and are not commonly utilised throughout the Netherlands.

Historically, the Dutch government, both nationally and locally, uses broader definitions to cover a wide range of services, *including* the services that fall under Principle 20 of the EPSR (see above). Among frequently used terms are “public”, “collective” and “general” services, also referred to as “social services”. These terms all refer to generally accessible services that every Dutch citizen can or should be able to use, as opposed to services whose availability varies between different individuals and situations. In practice, the catch-all terms have diverse and changing scopes. Structural examples include public transport and libraries.

A frequently used term that can be interpreted more narrowly is the term “basic services”, defined as services in the social domain that should be available and reasonably accessible to everyone who has the *need* for them. When linked to “basic needs” or “basic (human) rights” such as food and water, this definition best reflects the substance and scope of Principle 20, and is also most closely connected to poverty. However, in practice, the term basic services is often used in a much broader sense, overlapping with the aforementioned general services, or even covering individual services. In fact, critics have long pointed to the erosion of the concept (Werkgroep Informatie, 1983).

¹ The EPSR was jointly proclaimed by the European Parliament, the European Council and the European Commission on 17 November 2017. For more information on the EPSR, see: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/priorities/deeper-and-fairer-economic-and-monetary-union/european-pillar-social-rights/european-pillar-social-rights-20-principles_en.

² The SDGs and their targets seek to realise the human rights of all, by promoting an integrated notion of sustainable development aimed at creating synergies between economic, environmental and social policies and objectives. For more information on the SDGs, see: <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>.

All in all, there are multiple terms and definitions in the Netherlands that apply to, but are usually not restricted to, the six central essential services. The most common definitions are not unambiguous but fluid, encompassing a broad, varying range of services. In practice, broad and narrow definitions are frequently used interchangeably.

1.2 Definition of “low-income people” used in the context of access to services

On the national as well as the subnational governmental level, low-income people are referred to as people, or more specifically individuals or households (with or without children), with a low income or (living) below the low-income threshold. Both definitions apply when the income is lower than the social minimum (*sociaal minimum*), the income amount that is needed to live. This national minimum-income standard usually corresponds to the social assistance benefit (*bijstandsuitkering*). The exact threshold varies, depending on age and household situation. Also, the amounts are periodically revised by the government. As of January 2020, the set limits were €1,653.65 a month for married persons (or equivalent), €1,219.09 a month for single people aged over 21, and €776.04 a month for single people who share a home. Between the ages of 18 and 21 other amounts apply³.

The definition of low-income people, and the corresponding threshold for low income, serve as a starting point for Dutch national and subnational bodies in determining poverty and in providing (financial) assistance. The set norm is also widely accepted by non-governmental bodies and service providers. As a rule, it applies to all assistance measures and to the delivery of all (basic) services.

However, in order to be eligible for support mechanisms that enable access to the featured services, additional or varying conditions may sometimes apply, depending on the measure, service (provider) or municipality. Differing percentages of the social assistance norm (roughly between 90 and 130%) are commonly used, as are extra limits concerning assets (e.g. car, house or savings) and payment capacity. In addition to household composition and age requirements, for certain measures a lawful period of stay in the Netherlands, a period of stay outside prison, a legal address or participation in debt counselling may be required.

The aspects above further modify the definition of low-income people. Indeed, people with low wages, on benefits and with debt problems all fall under the scope of the definition. It should be noted that children are also included in the definition, when belonging to households with low incomes. Notably, people may belong to the low-income group either permanently or temporarily. In total, low-income people are the target group for anti-poverty policies.

1.3 Measures for facilitating access for low-income people to services

Measures facilitating access to services for low-income people, specifically, are usually not distinguished in Dutch policy and practice. This means that many regulations and mechanisms that support low-income people apply to all of the six specific services as well as other basic services. Put differently: in the Netherlands, assistance is not usually bound to, or focused on, *specific basic services*. Also, not all support mechanisms are targeted at *specific groups* (in this case the low-income population). Both observations are especially true for financial measures and for related information and advice mechanisms. Moreover, measures that do facilitate access to *specific basic services* (e.g. for a paid-for, basic or public supply) are in essence open to every Dutch citizen; hence they are not solely focused on low-income citizens. Still, as a rule, the low-income

³ <https://www.uwv.nl/particulieren/bedragen/detail/sociaal-minimum>.

population can resort to all of the existing (broader) regulations and mechanisms in order to access basic services, including the ones under scrutiny.

As a principle, Dutch measures aimed at supporting and informing low-income people in accessing central services have a national legal or financial basis. However, they are mostly organised on a *subnational* level. Dutch municipalities carry much of the responsibility for the categories of measures under scrutiny, although other national, regional and local (non-)governmental organisations also play a role, as do service providers. Measures are usually more personal, practical and tailor-made at a local level.

For Dutch low-income people, *general* social support measures aimed at improving disposable income (e.g. social benefits (*uitkeringen*), extra allowances (*toeslagen*) and tax credits (*belastingvoordelen*)) play an important role in practice, as they enable them to *afford* and thus access the services under scrutiny, even though the measures are not service-specific. In addition, low-income people can apply for *special* or individual benefits, such as budgets and practical means, grounded in special welfare (*bijzondere bijstand*) programmes, which may be more service-specific. In the Dutch system, financial reductions and waivers (*kwijtscheldingen*) are most closely connected to both poverty and specific services, the latter being especially embedded in Dutch practice, as are alternative payment arrangements (*betalingsregelingen*).

There are many – generally available – online, telephone and face-to-face information and advice mechanisms addressing (eligibility for) all of the former benefits and price reductions, with increasing attention to financial education for low-income households (e.g. Simonse et al., 2017). For low-income people, special services such as municipal income advice, debt counselling or funds are available, while welfare organisations are also increasingly involved in advice and practical support. Nonetheless, research shows that Dutch households do not always have up-to-date knowledge about their financial rights, which may lead to repayment problems (e.g. Berkhout et al., 2019).

In general, the complexity of the Dutch scheme of support measures and mechanisms (related to the multi-layered and decentralised policy framework discussed in more detail in Section 2), may fuel a lack of awareness of all the options available, which may lead to non-usage of existing measures by those needing them the most, namely low-income groups. All in all, the diversity and diffusion of possible (financial) mechanisms, and of corresponding information services, may hinder the effective application of the anti-poverty policy framework in practice.

1.3.1 Access to water

When it comes to the *affordability* of water, it is important to note that the price of water is relatively low in the Netherlands. Relevant in this respect is the legal duty to provide drinking water for a reasonable price, as laid down in the Drinking Water Act (*Drinkwaterwet*). However, the related costs and taxes seem to rise on a regular basis, and extra allowances and reductions for low-income people are in place to facilitate access. On top of the aforementioned general benefits and exemptions that can be used to pay for varying expenses *including* the water bill, person-, situation-, or water-specific cash benefits may apply. In-kind benefits for water, however, seem to be non-existent. Instead, (partial) waivers of charges are broadly suggested by the government, and can be requested via water authorities (*Waterschappen*) and municipalities. The most important conditions are: an income *near* the social assistance level (*bijstandsniveau*), housing assets not exceeding any mortgage, and the absence of high levels of savings. Lastly, payment arrangements with drinking water companies can offer temporary relief.

Besides information and advice mechanisms regarding general benefits and reductions, municipalities and water authorities are key players in offering information on eligibility for existing benefits and waivers related to the supply of *water*. Drinking water companies mainly inform clients about tariffs and conditions, but may also provide information – if requested – on existing financial assistance mechanisms. Furthermore, the government has launched several websites and awareness campaigns designed to

inform (low-income) people about sensible water usage and saving. Also, a digital drinking water map (*drinkwaterkaart*) details all free public water taps in the Netherlands⁴.

When it comes to the *availability* of water, the provision of an uninterrupted water supply is deemed important in the Netherlands. The legal duty to provide drinking water underlines this, although this is mainly restricted to owners, tenants and legal users. If (legal) private users of drinking water live below the low-income threshold and cannot pay their bill, the recently adapted disconnection policy regulation concerning drinking water for consumers (*Regeling afsluitbeleid voor kleinverbruikers van drinkwater*) is especially relevant, applying after procedures for collecting payment have been exhausted. Most importantly, drinking water companies are obliged to enable users to acquire containers (such as water bags) prior to disconnection, in order for them to maintain a supply of water for a reasonable period before finding alternatives or solutions. Also relevant in this respect are the subsidised free public drinking water points, for example at schools and stations; recent efforts have resulted in 100 points at stations, while the goal is set at 200 stations.

1.3.2 Access to sanitation

Given the broader scope of Dutch water policy, the right to sanitation is not always approached separately in the Netherlands. Consequently, many of the mechanisms and players facilitating access to water are also relevant to sanitation.

As for the *affordability* of sanitation, the relevant costs are highly related to the region and household situation of the consumer, because costs solely consist of municipal fees (*gemeentebelastingen*) and land drainage rates (*waterschapsbelastingen*). Not only may the number and types of taxes vary, but also the payment amounts and target groups. For example, some municipalities only charge homeowners, while other municipalities charge tenants as well. In addition, distinctions are sometimes made between one-person households and larger households, which can lower costs. On top of such set payment exemptions and reduced tariffs, other general and special benefits for low-income people may apply, facilitating access to sanitation. Again, in-kind benefits are less common, while tax waivers via municipalities and water authorities are promoted, under the same conditions as described above.

Again, general information and advice mechanisms are relevant, and municipalities and water authorities are key players in offering information on the eligibility for existing benefits and waivers related to sanitation.

1.3.3 Access to energy

The *affordability* of energy is a general concern, especially when it comes to low-income people. Although the government strives to keep energy affordable for every household, energy costs are high. The energy bill not only contains costs for the energy that is used, but also government taxes and fees, which are rising.

General allowances and tax reductions may apply to low-income people, even if not directly targeted at this group. Especially relevant in this regard is the energy tax credit. This yearly refund of around €300 is deducted from the amount due, which in essence means that 1,000 kWh is free of charge⁵. There are no other noteworthy in-kind benefits. Furthermore, special benefits exist, and are in fact provided in creative ways, not only via municipalities, but also via energy providers, and, possibly, funds. For example, some municipalities provide free “energy bags”, containing energy-saving lamps. These are

⁴ www.drinkwaterkaart.nl; see also www.drinkwaterplatform.nl, www.kraandoorspoelen.nu; www.onswater.nl, www.samenwerkenaanwater.nl, www.staatvanonswater.nl.

⁵ <https://www.energievergelijken.nl/nl/energierekening/heffingskorting>.

mainly aimed at, but not restricted to, low-income people. Another remarkable initiative in this respect is the recent crowd-funding campaign launched by prominent providers, calling on users to pay for the energy bills of other (low-income) users who struggle with payment arrears. For the same group, (partial) waivers are accessible via energy providers and municipalities, as are payment arrangements. In this respect, reduced tariffs appear to be absent.

On top of the available information and advice services that cover eligibility for general benefits and tax reductions, municipalities, energy companies and also housing associations carry a responsibility to inform energy users of their rights. In practice, much attention is paid to the transparency of energy bills, possible refunds or extra costs and energy usage. Also, advice on energy use and savings options is highly emphasised and available, as this can save hundreds of euros on energy bills. The ability to compare different energy suppliers, and switch to a new provider, is supported by ACM ConsuWijzer⁶.

The importance of the actual *availability* of energy is emphasised in both policy and political debates. Here too, a general duty of supply is in place, as well as a payment collection procedure and disconnection policy, more closely connected to payment issues. The disconnection policy regulation concerning drinking water for consumers and the Revised Dutch Heat Act (*Warmteregeling*) require that disconnections are prohibited during the winter period (1 October to 1 April), if debt counselling has been requested or is in progress, or if an objection procedure has been started.

1.3.4 Access to public transport

In terms of the *affordability* of (public) transport, costs are relatively high, which can effectively hinder access for low-income people. The latter can, however, apply for general and special benefits and waivers. As for all services, general benefits can be used to pay for various transport expenses, and transport-specific tax exemptions may apply. Also, public transport companies provide general concessionary fares or offers, which can benefit low-income people as well as other citizens. Formal waivers of payment, or payment arrangements, are not common in public transport.

Importantly, special benefits for low-income people are widely available for (public) transport, in various forms. Both national and subnational bodies and funds provide benefits, such as free or concessionary subscriptions or tickets for trains, buses and trams. In addition, alternative forms of mobility are largely encouraged by municipalities, for example by providing bikes or free parking tickets. Strict eligibility criteria, such as no house ownership, may apply. Moreover, there are specific measures that support low-income people who simultaneously have health issues or are (in)active in the labour market. For example, (local) government bodies can organise, reimburse or subsidise (through health insurers) special transport such as medical and socio-medical transport, as well as funding travel allowances for commuting. These work-related allowances can also be provided by employers, even in the course of work (re)integration processes. Notably in this respect, (public) transport has clear in-kind benefits: travel allowances, that are usually deducted from income taxes, are often established in accordance with the number of kilometres.

Information and advice services are available. Besides information and advice mechanisms regarding general financial measures, municipalities and public transport companies are key players in offering information on eligibility for existing benefits and waivers related to (public) transport. Public transport companies mainly inform (future) clients of subscriptions and tariffs, but may also provide information – if requested – on specific benefits or waivers targeted at low-income people. Care providers can also play a role in giving information and advice. In practice, the often complex and diffuse

⁶ www.consuwijzer.nl.

information on public transport options and alternatives, and the accompanying payment structures, are not always available or easy to understand (e.g. Van der Bijl et al., 2019).

1.3.5 Access to digital public services

In Dutch policy, increasing attention is being paid to the importance of digital inclusion. Although internet costs are relatively low, the (purchase) cost of the necessary devices such as computers and smartphones, and the related subscriptions, can be high. Again, general benefits and exemptions can cover or relieve costs. Special reduced tariffs or cash benefits for low-income people can be provided by municipalities, funds and relevant providers such as phone companies. In-kind benefits may apply, in the form of a (free) amount (gigabytes/megabytes) of data. In addition, municipalities and funds may provide low-income people, with concrete support in the form of computers and phones.

Information and advice services are available. Besides that regarding general benefits and waivers, information on how to use digital public services is provided by the relevant authorities that use digital access. In addition, municipalities and funds, as well as providers, can offer information on eligibility for existing benefits and waivers related to digital public services. Ironically, however, this is mostly online. However, local face-to-face advice and paper mail can offer solutions in this respect.

The provision of a basic or uninterrupted digital connection, however, is not necessarily guaranteed, and mainly falls within the scope of individuals' own responsibilities. However, personal internet connections, necessary to use services such as digital mail as well as digital advice, are promoted for all Dutch citizens, including low-income people, and the minimum conditions enabling households to connect need to be ensured. Low-income people can also resort to public internet providers, such as libraries and internet cafes, subscriptions for which may be reimbursed or freely arranged for this population by municipalities or funds. In addition, welfare organisations, in practice, enable low-income clients to use their internet connections and computers.

1.4 Access to financial services (Directive 2014/92/EU)

In the Netherlands, Directive 2014/92/EU was implemented in November 2016 by amending the pre-existing Act on Financial Supervision (*Wet op het financieel toezicht, Wft*). In the preceding decade, many steps had already been taken at national level to (legally) consolidate the right to a basic bank account. This was deemed necessary after alarming signs and evaluations (Louisse, 2013). The implementation of the European Directive and the accompanying legislation, however, was surrounded by debate for years. Both political parties and professional bodies raised criticisms, which were in essence threefold (Betaalvereniging Nederland, 2015), as follows.

Although the Directive's key objectives were generally supported, one major point of discussion was the desirability and necessity of European interference to realise these objectives. Most importantly, the subsidiarity and proportionality of basic elements of the Directive were questioned in the context of already existing national measures. More specifically, the general view was that the 2004 covenant signed by Dutch banks to provide primary payment services, and the 2012 Wft obligation to provide a payment account to persons in debt counselling, already ensured the right to open and use a payment account. Eventually, the legislature chose in favour of implementation in order to comply with EU law.

A contrasting point of criticism concerned the limited degree to which the Dutch legislation implemented the Directive. As far as relevant, the central right to a basic payment account was deemed to be undermined. In the original bill, the group of consumers eligible for an account was much more restricted than in the EU Directive. This was also true for the scope of the obligations on banks (or rights for consumers), which solely focused on the right to own a bank account and bank card, while neglecting

the rights to make payment transactions and use online banking. The law in its final form dealt with this criticism, and the Wft mirrors the Directive in this respect.

Practical implications formed a third area of concern. Critics emphasised a tension between the newly prescribed duty on banks to accept new account holders, enforced by *strict* grounds for refusal and cancellation, and their existing obligations to guarantee the integrity of business operations and to prevent money laundering and the financing of terrorism, which gave them *broader* grounds for refusing or closing accounts. In this context, the Directive's assumption that banks disposed of sufficient control mechanisms was labelled incorrect, and the legislative changes were expected to lead to additional costs exceeding millions a year. Lastly, both the Directive and the implementation bill failed to consider the role of health and welfare organisations and the "last bank rule" (*laatste bank-regel*)⁷, whereas these aspects were deemed of utmost importance in Dutch policy and practice.

⁷ This required applications for a basic bank account to be filed with the bank where the customer last had a cheque account.

2 National/subnational policy frameworks and reforms

2.1 National/subnational policy frameworks

The measures described above are part of several *broader* policy frameworks. Importantly, the Netherlands has no special framework focusing on access to essential services for low-income people. Instead, for each of the services under scrutiny, two general policy frameworks play a central role; one concerning poverty and one concerning basic services. With regard to the latter, more specific frameworks of (groups of) the featured services are relevant. Given the fact that measures enabling access to the relevant services partly coincide, the frameworks clearly overlap.

As is common in the Netherlands, the relevant policy frameworks are layered, with (inter)national schemes that serve as foundations, combined with corresponding subnational equivalents or elaborations. This stratification is connected to the decentralisation of governmental tasks to the local, municipal level, and the privatisation of service provision. As a principle, implementing bodies have some freedom in carrying out their policies and responsibilities, as long as national guidelines and criteria are followed. Although relevant facilities may in principle differ between each local entity, practice shows great similarities and common choices.

All relevant measures are essentially grounded in the Dutch policy to prevent and fight poverty (and thereby fight social exclusion)⁸. In essence, this policy framework is designed to support low-income people to participate in society. Whereas the central government mainly sets priorities and incentives, as well as taking (and financing) general measures enabling the maintenance of purchasing power, municipalities also try to tackle problems regarding poverty. Currently, there is much attention to child poverty and individual debt problems, both nationally and locally.

A longstanding *financial* approach to poverty and welfare has culminated in the social welfare system, which ensures a social safety net (*sociaal vangnet*) for low-income people. In this national financial support scheme, the highest (tax) burdens are carried by people with the highest incomes. The affordability and sustainability of this system, however, is under pressure.

Today, an increasingly *integrated* approach is pursued by the government, based on the premise that social problems are connected to (the roots of) poverty. Consequently, anti-poverty policies touch on other policy domains and frameworks, for example in the areas of healthcare, housing and employment. There is a broad range of possible anti-poverty measures, varying from measures to cut the cost of living and care costs⁹ to measures strengthening employability¹⁰. This also explains the role that health and welfare organisations, housing corporations and employers play in some of the measures described. At the municipal level, the connections between different policy areas and measures are even clearer, given overlapping responsibilities in all these policy areas. In fighting poverty, many internal municipal players are important, including social neighbourhood teams (*wijkteams*), social services, and debt counsellors, while municipalities also work together with other organisations.

Many of the measures described above are based not only on anti-poverty policies, but also on policy frameworks related to public, or basic, services. This mainly goes for special, service-specific benefits and waivers, and for measures ensuring the provision of a basic or uninterrupted supply. The basic idea of facilitating services for all citizens,

⁸ For more information, see: <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/armoedebestrijding>.

⁹ For examples of extra allowances (*toeslagen*) for rent and care, see: <https://www.belastingdienst.nl/wps/wcm/connect/nl/toeslagen/toeslagen>.

¹⁰ See, for example, the Participation Law (*Participatiewet*) which provides municipalities with a framework for the provision of support in the field of employment: <https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0015703/2020-01-01>.

(partly) financed by public money, is historically part of welfare policy. Some of the currently highlighted public services relevant to the topic include youth care, housing and public transport; extra investments are announced by the central government.

The overall framework contains sub-frameworks for each specific service, and for clusters of services as well. Clusters of the featured services can be found in water policies (drinking water and sanitation) housing policies (energy, water and internet), and policies concerning logistic, network and information systems (different clusters of the six featured policies). With regard to services related to housing, social housing arrangements are in place for low-income people, which enable low-income people to find and rent affordable homes. Importantly, the Housing Act (*Woningwet*) and Building Decree (*Bouwbesluit*) contain minimum (quality) conditions for old and newly built buildings and installations, in particular for power, energy, water and ICT infrastructure. For example, new houses have to be increasingly energy-neutral (or gas-free).

In specific policies for water, sanitation, energy, public transport, digital public services and financial services, sufficient *quality* and *quantity* is essential. Usually, the applicable laws ensure a duty to supply services at a reasonable price, which underpins the basic right to effectively access these services. Increasingly attention is being paid to the transparency of services and costs, and sustainable (e.g. eco-friendly) arrangements.

2.2 Ongoing or announced reforms

A scan of the relevant measures and frameworks does not reveal significant policy reforms in progress, at least not when it comes to specific services or service-specific mechanisms. Nevertheless, there are some notable reforms in broader policy frameworks that may have an impact on access to essential services for low-income people.

In 2020, the national government will invest more in improving people's purchasing power and reducing financial burdens on them (*lastenverlichting*), especially working people. The accompanying policy changes regarding general benefits and price reductions appear to be advantageous for low-income people. For example, more households will become eligible for the child-related budget (*kindgebonden budget*), the maximum labour credit is to be raised, the healthcare allowance will rise, and the *strict* income limit for rent allowance/housing benefit is to be relaxed. The actual effects of these reforms, however, need to be awaited.

In addition, there are ongoing debates and reforms within the national and subnational anti-poverty domain concerning debt counselling. In essence, changes are proposed to debt counselling schemes, with a view to improving the conditions for access, the level of assistance provided and the chances of successful outcomes. In several municipalities, pilots are being implemented to these ends; for example, with a view to increasing customer responsibility and insight. Also, the prevention of (accumulated) debts is a hot topic, which may lead to policy proposals. All in all, these ongoing reforms may facilitate access to services for people in debt situations. More importantly, they may break poverty cycles, opening opportunities for independent social participation and structural access to services.

In contrast, policy reforms relating to climate goals may have a disproportionate impact on low-income people, impeding their access to some essential services, especially energy (and also private transport). More specifically, the ongoing energy transition is hardest on low-income people: they cannot keep up with stricter standards on domestic energy efficiency and the related costs; and cannot pay raised tax amounts, while they are probably the most affected by them, for instance, because they have higher chances of living in outdated houses. Debate is ongoing on measures special benefiting low-income people.

3 A focus on access to (public) transport

In the Netherlands, access to (public) transport seems to raise particular difficulties for low-income people. In recent years, increased attention has been paid to “transport poverty”, in policy as well as research. Although the extent of the problem in the Netherlands is not yet clear, research suggests that there are certain population categories that have limited transport means, which can lead to (a risk of) social exclusion. Relevant barriers, population categories and characteristics, and mechanisms for social exclusion appear to be closely connected (Bakker et al., 2009; Van der Bijl et al., 2019; Jorritsma et al., 2018; Kampert et al., 2019).

The most important barriers that low-income people face in accessing (public) transport can be placed in two categories, namely person-specific (or socio-economic), and service-specific barriers. Geographic factors and financial factors play an especially significant role. Combinations of factors often occur.

First of all, weak personal capacities may hinder access. More specifically, low levels of education, low literacy and inadequate knowledge of the Dutch language can contribute to immobility. In such cases, a limited knowledge of accessible forms of mobility hinders effective use. This may be the case for travelling options such as trains, buses, taxis, and public bikes, but also for the different forms of tickets, subscriptions, and payment methods. In addition, poor health can play a role, as can household composition, including age or a combination of these factors (e.g. elderly disabled people).

The highest socio-economic barrier, however, is created by the increasing pressure on the affordability of mobility. According to relevant data from the National Institute for Family Finance Information (Nibud), many (low-income) households can barely afford mobility. First of all, public transport prices are high. Secondly, low-income people have limited scope to spend money on mobility. In practice, possession of a driver’s licence and car ownership are relatively rare among the low-income population. Cars owned by low-income people are usually older, and less energy and fuel efficient, meaning that they are subject to higher taxes. This might become even more detrimental under the current climate policy.

As for service-specific factors, insecurity appears to be of some significance: mobility is both hindered by (perceptions of) safety issues – road safety, and also issues of personal safety in other settings. There are also important geographic barriers in the Netherlands: in some rural areas, there are long distances between public transport stops, while the total supply of public transport (in terms of both frequency of service and physical access) may also be limited. Moreover, the consumer base for public transport in these areas is being eroded by population decline and increasing car usage. (Population decline also triggers a decline in the general level of facilities in rural areas, such as shops and schools.)

In cities, transport poverty can also be a problem. For example, public transport in cities does not always serve certain work locations. Indeed, much low-skilled work takes place relatively far away from points of access to public transport.

Certain groups appear particularly disadvantaged in terms of their access to transport. According to the Knowledge Institute for Mobility Policy (*Kennisinstituut voor Mobiliteitsbeleid*) and Statistics Netherlands (*Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek*), there are specific groups in the Netherlands that are less able to use the (public) transport system. These are low-income people, unemployed people or job-seekers, residents of rural areas, elderly people (especially women), people without a driver’s licence and people with migration backgrounds. These groups, which can also be viewed as subgroups within the population of low-income people, are concentrated in the large cities and the regions with shrinking populations (*krimpgebieden*). For (low-income) people with physical or mental disabilities, the problem of restricted access to mobility plays a smaller role, because they can use transport provision targeted at them.

Disadvantaged groups often face a combination of inadequate access to transport options (at both the start and end points of a journey) and limited personal capacities. This ultimately increases their risk of social exclusion, by limiting their ability to reach locations and participate in activities. For example, finding employment in remote places can be difficult without a driver's licence. In addition, access to school locations can be hindered, preventing low-income households from climbing the socio-economic ladder. In this respect, income poverty is deemed to be a root cause of transport poverty, while transport poverty can in turn also reinforce income poverty. Currently, research is mainly exploratory, and solid quantitative evidence is not yet available.

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Annex

Table A1: Essential service – Water

1) Definition of “low income” used in the context of the delivery of the service in the country:¹¹

Income lower than the social minimum (*sociaal minimum*): the income amount that is needed to live.

2) Measures aimed at facilitating access for low-income people to water (for hygiene purposes, to cook...) in the country:

	National (*)	Subnational	
		Regional (only if <i>no</i> for national) (**)	Local (only if <i>no</i> for national) (**)
Reduced tariffs	No (***)	No	No
Cash benefits	Yes		
In-kind benefits	No	No	No
Advice/training or information services	Yes		
Provision of a basic/uninterrupted supply	Yes		

(*) For each measure: Does the measure exist in the country at national level (“Yes”/“No”)?

(**) **Only** if the measure does not exist at national level **and** if the service is organised at subnational level: Does the measure exist at regional level (Yes in all regions; Yes in most regions; Yes but only in a few regions; No)? And at local level (Yes in all local entities; Yes in most local entities; Yes but only in a few local entities; No)? Important: if a measure exists as a **general social support measure**, not specifically aimed at facilitating access for low-income people, the answer is “No”.

(***) No, but there are waivers.

¹¹ **National definition** used in this context (most frequently used definition if there is more than one definition). **Only if** there is no national definition **and if** the service is organised at subnational level, most common definition used in this context at regional (if any) or local (if any) level.

Table A2: Essential service – Sanitation

1) Definition of “low income” used in the context of the delivery of the service in the country:¹²

Income lower than the social minimum (*sociaal minimum*): the income amount that is needed to live.

2) Measures aimed at facilitating access for low-income people to sanitation (i.e. systems for taking dirty water and other waste products away from dwellings in order to protect people's health) in the country:

	National (*)	Subnational	
		Regional (only if <i>no</i> for national) (**)	Local (only if <i>no</i> for national) (**)
Reduced tariffs	Yes		
Cash benefits	Yes		
In-kind benefits	No	No	No
Advice/training or information services	Yes		

(*) For each measure: Does the measure exist in the country at national level (“Yes”/“No”)?

(**) **Only** if the measure does not exist at national level **and** if the service is organised at subnational level: Does the measure exist at regional level (Yes in all regions; Yes in most regions; Yes but only in a few regions; No)? And at local level (Yes in all local entities; Yes in most local entities; Yes but only in a few local entities; No)? Important: if a measure exists as a **general social support measure**, not specifically aimed at facilitating access for low-income people, the answer is “No”.

¹² **National definition** used in this context (most frequently used definition if there is more than one definition). **Only if** there is no national definition **and if** the service is organised at subnational level, most common definition used in this context at regional (if any) or local (if any) level.

Table A3: Essential service – Energy

1) Definition of “low income” used in the context of the delivery of the service in the country:¹³

Income lower than the social minimum (*sociaal minimum*): the income amount that is needed to live.

2) Measures aimed at facilitating access for low-income people to energy (to light dwellings, heat or cool dwellings, use home appliances) in the country:

	National (*)	Subnational	
		Regional (only if <i>no</i> for national) (**)	Local (only if <i>no</i> for national) (**)
Reduced tariffs	No (***)	No	No
Cash benefits	Yes		
In-kind benefits	No	No	No
Advice/training or information services	Yes		
Provision of a basic/uninterrupted supply	Yes		

(*) For each measure: Does the measure exist in the country at national level (“Yes”/“No”)?

(**) **Only** if the measure does not exist at national level **and** if the service is organised at subnational level: Does the measure exist at regional level (Yes in all regions; Yes in most regions; Yes but only in a few regions; No)? And at local level (Yes in all local entities; Yes in most local entities; Yes but only in a few local entities; No)? Important: if a measure exists as a **general social support measure**, not specifically aimed at facilitating access for low-income people, the answer is “No”.

(***) No, but there are waivers.

¹³ **National definition** used in this context (most frequently used definition if there is more than one definition). **Only if** there is no national definition **and if** the service is organised at subnational level, most common definition used in this context at regional (if any) or local (if any) level.

Table A4: Essential service – Public transport

1) Definition of “low income” used in the context of the delivery of the service in the country:¹⁴

Income lower than the social minimum (*sociaal minimum*): the income amount that is needed to live.

2) Measures aimed at facilitating access for low-income people to public transport in the country:

	National (*)	Subnational	
		Regional (only if <i>no</i> for national) (**)	Local (only if <i>no</i> for national) (**)
Reduced tariffs	Yes		
Cash benefits	Yes		
In-kind benefits	Yes		
Advice/training or information services	Yes		

(*) For each measure: Does the measure exist in the country at national level (“Yes”/“No”)?

(**) **Only** if the measure does not exist at national level **and** if the service is organised at subnational level: Does the measure exist at regional level (Yes in all regions; Yes in most regions; Yes but only in a few regions; No)? And at local level (Yes in all local entities; Yes in most local entities; Yes but only in a few local entities; No)? Important: if a measure exists as a **general social support measure**, not specifically aimed at facilitating access for low-income people, the answer is “No”.

¹⁴ **National definition** used in this context (most frequently used definition if there is more than one definition). **Only if** there is no national definition **and if** the service is organised at subnational level, most common definition used in this context at regional (if any) or local (if any) level.

Table A5: Essential service – Digital public services

1) Definition of “low income” used in the context of the delivery of the service in the country:¹⁵

Income lower than the social minimum (*sociaal minimum*): the income amount that is needed to live.

2) Measures aimed at facilitating access for low-income people to digital public services (e.g. digital post, digital fiscal services, digital social security services, digital healthcare appointments) in the country:

	National (*)	Subnational	
		Regional (only if <i>no</i> for national) (**)	Local (only if <i>no</i> for national) (**)
Reduced tariffs	Yes		
Cash benefits	Yes		
In-kind benefits	Yes		
Advice/training or information services	Yes		
Provision of a basic/uninterrupted supply	No	No	No

(*) For each measure: Does the measure exist in the country at national level (“Yes”/“No”)?

(**) **Only** if the measure does not exist at national level **and** if the service is organised at subnational level: Does the measure exist at regional level (Yes in all regions; Yes in most regions; Yes but only in a few regions; No)? And at local level (Yes in all local entities; Yes in most local entities; Yes but only in a few local entities; No)? Important: if a measure exists as a **general social support measure**, not specifically aimed at facilitating access for low-income people, the answer is “No”.

¹⁵ **National definition** used in this context (most frequently used definition if there is more than one definition). **Only if** there is no national definition **and if** the service is organised at subnational level, most common definition used in this context at regional (if any) or local (if any) level.

Table B1: Essential services – Summary table

- 1) Measures aimed at facilitating access for low-income people to the different services that exist at national, regional and/or local level in the country
- 2) Broader policy framework under which all or some of these measures are organised in the country
- 3) Ongoing or announced reforms of the measures and/or related frameworks aimed at (further) enhancing effective access to the service for low-income people in the country

	1. Measures (NAT, SUBNAT, BOTH, NONE) (*)	2. Policy framework (**)		3. Ongoing or planned reforms (Yes/No)
		National (Yes/No)	Subnational (Yes/No)	
Access to water	BOTH	Yes	Yes	No
Access to sanitation	BOTH	Yes	Yes	No
Access to energy	BOTH	Yes	Yes	Yes
Access to public transport	BOTH	Yes	Yes	No
Access to digital public services	BOTH	Yes	Yes	No
Access to basic financial services (***)	Not applicable	Yes	Yes	No

(*) This column summarises the response provided in Tables A1-A5 above. "NAT" means that all the measures that exist in favour of low-income people are national measures; "SUBNAT" means that there are no national measures but some of/all the measures that exist are subnational measures; BOTH means a mix of NAT and SUBNAT; "NONE" means that there are no measures, be it at national or subnational level.

(**) Is there a broader national policy framework under which all or some of these measures are organised in the country for some of/all the services under scrutiny ("Yes"/"No")? **Only if** there is no such national framework for one service **and if** the service is organised at subnational level: Is there a broader subnational policy framework under which all or some of these measures are organised for this service ("Yes"/"No")?

(***) Open and use payment accounts with basic features (Directive 2014/92/EU).

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