EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The climate challenge has led to important new policy goals at different levels in recent years: the Paris Climate Agreement, for example, has internationally anchored the goal of limiting climate warming to 1.5 degrees. More recently, the European Green Deal has put the European Union on a path towards carbon neutrality by 2050.

These objectives pose a major challenge to just about every area of society: instead of continuing with business as usual, we are entering a situation of shared uncertainty. This uncertainty relates, among other things, to how the transition to climate neutrality should be fleshed out, which (policy) measures are best pursued in this context, which technologies are most promising, and how far this transition should go in transforming society. These situations of shared uncertainty give rise to different visions on the course of the transition. They can be seen as **sustainability controversies**, and are fundamentally political. Such controversies lead to societal debate, in which actors take up different positions. In such positions, technical-scientific facts (e.g. which figures are referred to, which technologies are considered promising) are interwoven with political-normative views (e.g. what should a carbon-neutral society look like, which values are put forward as important within this vision?).

In this study, we provide insight into three current sustainability controversies in Belgium by means of a **discourse analysis**: the controversy surrounding aviation (is flying still OK?), the controversy surrounding meat consumption and production (meat or no meat?) and the emerging controversy surrounding the question whether hydrogen is the key in the transition to a climate-neutral economy. In concrete terms, we consider a discourse to be a set of narratives (what is the problem? What solutions are considered possible?), world views (through which lens do we look at reality? Which normative assumptions and values recur?), role divisions (who is seen as part of the problem, who as part of the solution?) and metaphors. These discourses create a certain reality with regard to sustainability controversies and can – if successful – be widely shared by different actors in society and even give rise to new policy frameworks, concrete policy measures and form the basis for political institutions. In this research, we therefore consider a discourse to be both a form of text/language and a social practice: it not only describes reality, but also shapes it.

Our research is based on an analysis of a total of 679 Dutch- and French-language text sources and 14 interviews. In terms of text sources, this report draws primarily on articles in newspapers and online media outlets. Using a snowball method, this dataset was further expanded with sources from, amongst others, political parties, governments, private companies and sector federations, NGOs, blogs and books. This analysis led to the following results:

In the **aviation controversy**, we distinguish the 'Balanced Growth'-discourse, the 'Sustainable Tourism'-discourse and the 'Just Mobility'-discourse, respectively. The 'Balanced Growth'-discourse assumes a seemingly inevitable growth scenario for the aviation sector. The central challenge in this discourse is to meet the ever-growing demand of consumers in a sustainable way. To this end, it is mainly focused on socially responsible entrepreneurship and technological innovation. Secondly, the 'Sustainable Tourism'-discourse starts from the many negative aspects resulting from the democratisation of air travel: negative impact on climate and environment, and disruption of local communities. However, through a new kind of consumer travel behaviour – respectful, slow, conscious and sustainable – tourism can become an engine for sustainable development, both in the West and in the Global South. Finally, the 'Just Mobility'-discourse starts from the unsustainability of further growth of the aviation sector. Our hypermobility-lifestyle is not compatible with climate objectives and is fundamentally unjust. Public actors must take the lead in developing a degrowth scenario for the aviation sector, and must upgrade more sustainable forms of transport. Consumers can also discover a new kind of travel and a new kind of freedom through the application of slow travel principles.

In the **controversy surrounding meat production and consumption**, we also identify three discourses: the 'Lekker Van Bij Ons'-discourse, the 'Pragmatic Plant-based'-discourse and the Agro-ecological discourse. Firstly, the 'Lekker Van Bij Ons'-discourse describes Belgian livestock farming as sustainable and circular. This leads to a nuancing of sustainability efforts that still needs to be made by the sector, and to a call for the consumption of local meat, which is sustainable, healthy, pure and of high quality. Criticism of livestock farming is perceived as ideologically biased, harmful for farmers and detrimental for individual freedom. Secondly, the 'Pragmatic Plant-based'-discourse starts from the negative impact of animal production on animal welfare, the

environment, climate and health. It is mainly because of the first reason that an all-vegetable future is envisaged. This should be achieved by stimulating a positive interaction between supply and demand on the market and technological innovation. Finally, the Agro-ecological discourse specifically emphasises the social carnage among farmers as a result of the current growth logic, and the negative impact of intensive agriculture and meat production on climate, people and the environment, both here and in the Global South. Agro-ecology puts forward a holistic vision of the agricultural transition, which, besides advocating organic agriculture in balance with nature, also has socio-political and scientific repercussions.

Finally, in the emerging **controversy around hydrogen**, we find evidence of a 'Hydrogen Economy'-discourse, an Additionality discourse and a 'Hydrogen Hype'-discourse. The 'Hydrogen Economy'-discourse sees hydrogen technology as essential for ensuring a flexible energy system, and for making transport and industry more sustainable. Via a transition phase based on blue hydrogen, we must evolve towards completely green hydrogen production, where the technology – in combination with carbon storage – will form the backbone of our sustainable economy. It is also crucial from an economic point of view for countries to rapidly roll out hydrogen technology. The Additionality discourse largely starts from the same challenges as the 'Hydrogen Economy'-discourse. Nevertheless, the applicability of hydrogen in the transition to carbon neutrality is seen as much more limited and only 'additional' to direct electrification. In addition, the importance of political steering by means of a democratically established transition framework is also explicitly highlighted. Finally, we identify a 'Hydrogen Hype'-discourse that problematizes the current popularity of hydrogen, labelling it as a diversionary tactic by the fossil industry to delay real climate action. Although it sees a (very) small role for hydrogen in a carbon-neutral economy, it sets very strict political conditions for its development. This includes an explicit role for social justice (both nationally and internationally), as well as the creation of a firewall between industrial players and decision-making on this matter.

To summarise, for each controversy we find a status quo discourse, a reformative discourse and a transformative discourse. In addition, we also find a number of overarching dynamics across the discourses and their respective narratives that reproduce and thus perpetuate the business as usual in each of the controversies. Based on the typology of discourses of climate delay by Lamb et al., we distinguish between surrender strategies, strategies that pass on responsibility, strategies that put forward non-transformative solutions and strategies that emphasise the disadvantages of climate action. Based on our analysis, we argue that some of these strategies minimise the 'open' character of the political discussion within each of these controversies, or even try to depoliticise them altogether. It is therefore important not to limit the debate on sustainability issues in advance by formulating narratives that present things as unchangeable or inevitable.

On the other hand, the analysis also clearly shows that discourses that may seem radically opposed at the level of narratives can nevertheless have normative overlap through similar worldviews. In the final section, therefore, we propose a number of experiments to use this discourse analysis as a starting point to avoid deadlocks and to stimulate inclusive communication.