

Speech: opening academic year, UNESCO-IHE, 14-10-2010

Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me begin by thanking Mr. Szöllösi-Nagy for giving me the opportunity to address you today. An interesting new year of water related studies awaits all the new students, in a country that has, as you may know, a long history in water management. Later I will tell and show you a bit more about the Dutch approach to water management and my role in it as Government Commissioner for the Delta Programme.

But first, allow me to evaluate with you some new developments in the Dutch policies for tertiary water education and research in a global environment, and how this fits into a global research and education agenda.

These changes result from a presently ongoing debate about globalization and development, which may directly affect the work of UNESCO-IHE and its opportunities in the market. First there is the widely discussed report by our national advisory council on science and government policies (WRR). This report (" Less Pretence; More Ambition / Minder Pretentie; Meer Ambitie") states that development on the basis of strength and capacity should be the main driver for international development cooperation over poverty alleviation through aid.

A second report "Knowledge without Borders / Kennis zonder Grenzen" by our National Advisory Council for Science and Technology (AWT) draws our attention to the need for the internationalization of our education and research programmes and at the same time base this agenda on global

issues. Moreover the reports notice that the Netherlands should operate from a position of strength in this global knowledge market mentioning water as one of the main windows of opportunity.

I believe that both these reports have a direct link to what UNESCO-IHE is doing and more specifically link to the way in which UNESCO-IHE is doing this. The core mission of UNESCO-IHE is capacity development for the water and environment sector. The development strategy of this Institute is therefore knowledge based and of course linked to the main problems in the target countries and communities.

There are two issues that play a key role. First there is the issue of relevance of the topics dealt with (the global agenda) and secondly there is the quality of what is being done (the academic standards applied). Within

UNESCO-IHE this dual role is fully recognized. Finding the right combination between academic excellence and developmental relevance are the main drivers for the activities of the Institute, all of course in close cooperation with international partners, faithful to the concept to "think globally and act locally".

If we look at the current situation in the (Dutch) world of academia in light of the mentioned relevance of the agenda and the quality level, we notice an increasing emphasis on academic performance over societal relevance. Publishing in peer-reviewed journals with high impact factors has gained preference over applied research. This is currently (in my opinion) leading to an under valuation of engineering disciplines (including water of course). Under unchanged policies this will affect developments in the sector and

(evidently) our position as a supplier of knowledge and development to this sector.

I would like to use this opportunity today to plead for the revaluation of the engineering disciplines in academia to not lose competitive strength in a global (needs) market that comes with its own priorities. Moreover what is academic quality and how should it be evaluated. In my view there is no difference in academic level or quality or complexity between basic river morphology research and nano science. We have to understand that we must continue to value engineering science in one and the same category with all sciences.

If we fail at this, our advanced position in water, as well as in other fields of engineering science, will soon deteriorate, which will not only affect our

position in a global market, but will also go at the cost of the immense global need for development in the world of water technology and delta technology. Needless to say that with this happening also the work of the me, as Government Commissioner for the Delta Programme of this country would be made increasingly difficult.

Please also allow me now to briefly tell you something about the new Dutch Delta Programme. I believe that this will offer you some insights in the Dutch approach to water management and its relation to global issues.

In the Netherlands, almost sixty per cent of the country is prone to flooding. We have a long history of protecting the land against the water. Now we are challenged once again. The main issues are flood risk management and

fresh water supply. Both are essential for the future of our nation and our open economy.

As Government Commissioner for the Delta Programme, I am responsible for the preparation of the national Delta Programme and the implementation of the measures. The objective of this programme is to keep the Netherlands safe for the long term and an attractive place to live and work in. Not as a response to a disaster but to avoid it. This requires political courage.

There is still time to prepare ourselves, realistically and down to earth, as the Dutch are used to. But we have to start right now, since the planning and implementation of measures takes decades. The first Delta programme

was presented last month at the opening of the Dutch parliamentary year. I will update the programme annually.

Measures will not only involve dikes and other barriers. If possible we choose sustainable solutions, working with nature and taking into account the economy and other aspects of integrated spatial planning. A good example is the extra room we give to our main rivers. This will not only improve safety, but also the environmental quality.

One of the biggest challenges is dealing with uncertainties in the future climate, but also in population, economy and society. This requires a new way of planning, which we call adaptive delta planning. It seeks to maximise flexibility; keeping options open and avoiding 'lock-in'. In the meantime, we

prepare the so-called delta decisions about the measures to take if our current water system reaches its limits.

In addition, a solid financial and legal base is required to guarantee implementation in the long term. So in the Netherlands we work with five D's: Delta Programme, Delta Decisions, Delta Fund, Delta Act and Delta Commissioner. This approach is also an interesting export product.

Now, please allow me to show you a short movie on our approach. Dutch TV journalist Charles Groenhuijsen will take you on a short trip through the Dutch delta. I hope it will be an inspirational journey for you all.

<MOVIE (6:10 min) >

I am sure this new academic year will be an exciting one at UNESCO-IHE.
Thank you for your attention.