



Water Delight: Colourful debate across themes



Henk Ovink
Photo: Guy Ackermans

Do we need more women in water management, or simply more diversity in social and other competencies? And how can we implement great Dutch plans elsewhere? Engineering, environment, gender issues, and economic sustainability: all aspects of international water management were touched upon during the first large interdisciplinary debate of KLV on 20 October 2015

Five KLV study circles were involved - Network Land & Water, Network Environmental Sciences, Study Circle Agricultural Economics, Women's Network Wageningen Alumni and Wageningen Debating. KLV played a facilitating role.

The debate was organised as part of KLV's policy pillar public debate and dialogue. However, it was also a pilot full of opportunities for the study circles, says Eddy Moors, chair Network Land & Water: 'If you organise something as a network, the group that attends is often small compared to the energy it costs to put the event on. When KLV proposed the idea of this debate, we thought: "fine, but we also want to see 100 to 200 people attending".'

Moors knows that you need a popular subject or an animated speaker to achieve this. A crowd puller was found in Henk Ovink, who as the first Dutch Special Envoy for International Water Affairs conveys our approach at an international level. He attracted a diverse group of about 130 people to Wageningen.

The debate

In 20 minutes, Ovink gave an overview of the worldwide water problems. The conflict in Syria that started due to drought, the heavy floods in Germany two years ago, and hurricane Sandy. And in all honesty, our earth is not particularly blue: all of the fresh water together forms a drop just 170 miles in diameter. Water is the biggest risk in the future, when there will be more emergencies with a larger impact than now. The problem is complex. Climate change is a slow process. For example, 26 cm of sea level rise in one hundred years is a lot for an island, but little for politicians. (Or, as the Americans would say: 'Climate change is slower than congress'.) We lack a long-term vision, but according to Ovink, a long-term approach with short-term interventions is needed. With funding that is transparent and accountable, and with local collaborations in which everyone is always welcome to join.

Three PhD students posed a proposition. The public responded using a green card to say they agreed and a red card to say they disagreed. After that, Ovink and the audience engaged in a lively discussion.

Regional above local?

The first PhD student, Debora de Block, stated: 'a regional, ecosystem-based approach gives a more sustainable solution than a local approach. At one location people take protective measures, while a factory slightly further on discharges its waste. That is why you should consider the Delta in its entirety.'

Most of the audience agreed with the proposition, as did Ovink. ‘However’, he said, ‘you also need local interventions, as not everything is possible at the regional level.’ A few people in the audience also dared to place question marks. There are often many stakeholders involved within and outside of the area, and it is difficult to manage that complexity said one participant. Furthermore, the proposition oversimplifies the problem, because in practice there is rarely a clearly defined area.

Too much concept and design?

‘In the Netherlands, we are stuck in the concept and design phase,’ stated PhD student Karianne de Bruin. ‘This is insufficiently linked to the construction and maintenance phases. We need to know our clients and better express the costs and benefits in monetary terms.’

Ovink also sees opportunities, but is less pessimistic. For example, the new Suez Canal is a superb piece of engineering. Attributing value is still a problem though. How do we export knowledge to places where the capacity and finances are lacking? The key: local partners. Ovink: ‘Without that connection with the community, everything will fail. Construction will be initiated but not completed, and no maintenance will be performed. And no, such collaboration is hardly ever spontaneous. You really need to roll your sleeves up and work through the difficulties without giving up.’

More female competencies?

Last proposition. ‘The water sector is male dominated, especially abroad, and we need more feminine competencies’, argues PhD student Janwillem Liebrand.

This proposition elicited a lot of discussion. Ovink states the nuance: feminine does not necessarily mean ‘from or by women’. This is about social competencies that the water sector can make good use of. Nevertheless, it is important to involve

women. Especially in developing countries: it is often the women who are responsible for water, who start small companies and who ensure that children go to school.

One participant said we need to look more from the perspective of minorities in general and not just women. In fact, the conclusion appears to be that it is diversity in general what is needed.

Follow-up

Eddy Moors invited everybody to contribute to a paper about the subject. After that, it was time for a drink. The participants could look back at an interesting debate with strong speakers. The discussion might have lacked a clear focus but as somebody also said: ‘We might not have reached a clear conclusion due to the range of views expressed, but in the space of two hours we have gained a really good idea of the factors involved.’

Moors was also satisfied with the good turnout and fine balance between speakers and discussion. ‘The next meeting could definitely be a bit livelier, though. The younger participants did not get involved until later in the discussion. Perhaps we can loosen up the debate with a general strong proposition. We will now do an evaluation. KLV has the ambition to organise a conference once every two years in collaboration with the study circles and I think there is enough momentum for such a follow-up.’



Photo: Guy Ackermans

INVITATION

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ACTIVITIES

Info: klv.nl/en (unless indicated otherwise)

19 December
VWI - Walk along

13 January
World Lecture - Energy landscapes: public interest versus NIMBY

14 January
Young KLV - Workshop - Scientific English

2 February
Career Day 2016 Wageningen UR

9 March
Dies Natalis - the 98e birthday of Wageningen University
Granting of the Teacher of the year award and the WUF-KLV thesis awards.

24 March
Young KLV - Training - LinkedIn for students

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