

Toespraak van minister Schultz van Haegen bij de opening van het tweede congres Delta's in Climate Change

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Toespraak van minister Schultz van Haegen (IenM) bij de opening van het 2e congres Delta's in Climate Change, op 24 september 2014 in Rotterdam. Alleen in het Engels beschikbaar.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It's great to see so many people from so many disciplines and from so many countries coming together today to reflect on delta protection. After all, climate change needs an international approach. Our deltas are still far too vulnerable. Not only because of rising sea levels, but also because of water shortages in times of drought, health complaints due to heat stroke, and soil subsidence through ground water use.

This is why we need not only flood prevention experts, but also innovative city planners, architects who know about climate-proof construction, and researchers who can calculate how many green roofs and water plazas we need in big cities. What we need is a worldwide coalition of 'delta thinkers'.

I believe that delta protection should feature far more prominently on the international agenda. In the words of President Obama: 'You can ignore the facts but you can't deny them.' He said that before Hurricane Sandy, but after Sandy, people began to listen.

Climate change is happening now. And action is needed. Especially in the world's deltas, where more than half of the global population lives and works and where the most of the global economic value is generated. And since the first 'Deltas in Times of Climate Change' conference four years ago, the urgency has only increased. None of the past four years has been without large-scale flooding. And who would have dared to think, back in 2010, that Manhattan would be under water two years later?

It happened. And I saw the consequences for myself. I was greatly affected by the impact it had, and the resilience shown by ordinary people. Yet it was worrying to see how poorly we are prepared for climate change. Not only in New York, but everywhere. And the worst response to such a disaster is to try and rebuild everything exactly as it was before.

Indeed, the worst response is to invest only in repairs. But all too often this is what happens. It's understandable. There's only ever a year to go until the next storm season hits. But to avoid this short-term reflex, we need to take action before disaster strikes.

New York's Rebuild by Design programme sets a good example for us all. It's not only about keeping the water out, but also about designing areas differently. How can we give the water the room it needs? How can we better protect our vital infrastructure?

And thankfully there are more examples of climate-proof design.

- Take the joint development of a delta plan for the Mekong Delta in Vietnam for instance, which is being done with Dutch help.
- Or a similar delta plan for Bangladesh, which is also being developed as we speak.

And I shouldn't forget my own country, where new measures are always needed.

Sixty years ago, the Netherlands experienced horrendous flooding, and the decision was taken to launch several large-scale delta projects to seal off the land from the sea.

Last week, the Dutch government took another major step to combat flooding: a new Delta Programme which will improve our protection for the next fifty years. Why? Because now, more and more people are living and working in areas prone to flooding. The previous plan was drawn up after a disaster. This one's been drawn up to avoid a similar disaster happening again.

This new plan is not based on concrete or steel structures, but on smart land design. We want to increase our resilience and be better prepared for a rise in sea level, for more rain or for hotter, drier weather. One part of this involves risk evaluation.

Until now, different areas of the Netherlands had differing degrees of protection. That's going to change. Everyone in our country is going to benefit from the same basic level of protection. The risk of death by flooding must not be higher than 1 in 100,000 in any one year.

In places where the risks are especially high – because they are home to more people, businesses or important infrastructure – safety standards will be raised further. By providing more focused protection, we will ensure a twenty-fold reduction in the economic risks related to flooding and a forty-five-fold drop in the chance of a flood disaster that kills 1,000 people.

Why am I telling you this? Well, it's not just because I'm proud of this plan. It's mainly because this plan was only possible thanks to new knowledge and insights, which were often international in nature. Knowledge about:

- how to calculate the risk of death from flooding;
- about the climate: institutions like Knowledge for Climate help us better understand climate change;
- and about innovative land design, heat-resistant construction and how to make room for water in cities.

The lesson is this: this plan was only possible thanks to cooperation between the worlds of research and practice. It came not only from the world of disaster risk reduction, but also from the world of climate adaptation. And I believe in this collaboration between these disciplines. That's why this conference is also a call to action. Don't wait until a disaster strikes and don't simply patch up the holes. Plan and design innovatively. Use each other's knowledge and put it into practice.

Finally, there's a common task to which we must all contribute. Especially now that climate change adaptation is an established policy area in the EU. All EU member states are now in the process of drawing up an adaptation strategy which must be ready by 2017. For this, we need new knowledge and insights.

I warmly welcome the European Commission's invitation for the Netherlands to host the Fourth International Climate Change Adaptation Conference in 2016. This will be a major congress centred on using knowledge concerning every aspect of climate change. I hope to see you all there. With even more insight, ideas and concrete results than now.

I'd like to close with some wise words from the Governor of Washington, Jay Inslee:

'We're the first generation to feel the impact of climate change and the last generation that can do something about it.'

I couldn't agree more. Thank you.