

Opening address by His Royal Highness the Prince of Orange at the FAO conference “Water for food and ecosystems. Make it happen!”, The Hague, 9.40, Monday 31 January 2005.

Mr Chairman, your excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to the Netherlands, welcome to The Hague!. As you may know, the Netherlands has a tradition of water management which goes back far into the Middle Ages. And for good reason. Because without counter-measures, most of the country would be permanently under water. And without careful water management, the constant danger of salinisation would have made agriculture and nature conservation impossible in this low-lying, densely populated delta. Only centuries of knowledge and know-how have allowed us to overcome these difficulties. And so, the Netherlands – a land of water – is proud to host this conference on Water for food and ecosystems. Once again, welcome to you all.

The main subject of this conference is how sustainable water management and a healthy environment can globally co-exist with substantial growth in agricultural production. Because if one thing is clear, it is that there is a direct relationship between agriculture and combating poverty. Each one per cent rise in agricultural production translates instantly into an average drop of about one per cent in the number of the very poor. Having access to enough clean water is of course not the only condition for successful agriculture, but it is certainly an important one. So that is the essence of this conference: the positive power of water as a key factor for sustainable development.

Having said this, our thoughts immediately turn to the countries hit by the devastating negative power of water on 26 December. The tsunami which smashed into the coasts of Asia and Africa may have little to do with the theme of this conference. But the results you achieve this week may very well send a message of hope to the people of the affected regions. The message that water not only brings destruction, but also creates opportunities for a better life.

Ladies and gentlemen, what this conference comes down to in the end is combating poverty. Because that is the overarching objective of sustainable development. To achieve this goal, the world community has already made sound international commitments, with the Millennium Development Goals serving as the most important benchmark. As the recent UN report Investing in Development by Jeffrey Sachs shows, we can achieve those goals, and often with very modest resources. I would like that message to ring out loud and clear today. Because it provides fresh inspiration to the international community in its fight against poverty.

The spirit of the Sachs report is both optimistic and ambitious. In short it says that we can achieve a great deal if everyone acts on their promises and behaves rationally. This requires the political will to take action. The results will then follow automatically. Of course, this applies not just to developing countries. Let me illustrate what I mean with an example from close to home on agricultural subsidy reform. Europe is heading towards a new subsidy system which no longer subsidises production. This does not mean that tulips and Friesian cows – typical symbols of my country – will disappear from the Dutch landscapes. But more space will be set aside for recreation and nature. And in the long run, only high value-added, non subsidised agriculture, will be able to survive. Subsidies will be required to maintain the cultural historical values of the countryside, to keep it open, liveable and spacious, mainly for recreational purposes, not as a test bed for scientific recreation of nature.

For us here today, the international repercussions are far more interesting. I should mention here that the new subsidy system will also give farmers in developing countries better access to the European market. Hopefully, that will raise their income and make it easier for them to stand on their own feet. This means that available development funds don't have to be applied to feed those disadvantaged by our subsidy system and can be used more directly and effectively to reach the Millennium Development Goals. I believe that is completely in line with the Sachs report.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have dealt with this point in some detail in order to make it clear that, in the fight against poverty, several developments are closely interconnected. It is important not to lose sight of this. The concrete task for international water experts, however, is very clear. Water consumption must be stabilised at 2000 levels and at the same time food production must be increased significantly. For this to happen, we have to strike a new balance between water for human beings, water for food production and water for a healthy ecosystem. We can only do this if all stakeholders are committed to an integrated approach; internationally and nationally, but also at the local level. In short, every decision at the right level, as close to the users as possible. Too often, policy is still developed on the basis of a single sector – either water, agriculture or the environment.

Fortunately, over the last few years, the concept of integrated water resource management has been gaining ground quickly. Dozens of countries are now working on an integrated water resource management plan. Some have even started implementing them. And several countries have shown great interest in linking this with national strategies for combating poverty.

What we need now is more action. A lot is already under way. But to reach the goals which have been set, the pace of implementation must be accelerated. Which brings me to the purpose of this conference. Together you must make it happen. That is the battle cry this week. You are meeting here to learn from your colleagues and inspire each other with successful cases from all over the world. The scope of the conference has been left deliberately broad, because regions are diverse and there is no single approach which works everywhere.

Let me give you an example. It comes from a recent UN Inter-Academy Council report which maps out the future of agriculture in Africa. The report makes very clear comparisons with other regions. In Asia, where irrigated rice-wheat systems predominate, improved cultivation has led to an enormous rise in production. Such a major step cannot be taken in Africa. If only, as the report points out, because there are at least 17 distinct farming systems there that require tailor-made regional and local plans.

But despite the broad scope of this conference, there are three main themes that apply more generally. This became clear at the regional partner workshops preparing for this conference and the special pre-conference that was held in Addis Ababa in November 2004.

The first recurrent theme this week is 'fostering implementation: know-how for action'. We still need to learn more about the complex relationship between water for food and ecosystems. About how to obtain 'more crop per drop', but also about how to obtain 'more nutrient per drop'. At the same time the results of research on increasing agricultural production are already truly impressive. But their application at local level is lagging behind – especially in developing countries. That is why a stronger commitment by local communities is necessary. Farmers have an obligation to manage the water they need as carefully as possible. They are the ones who know the most about local conditions and, ultimately, they are the ones who actually determine what happens. So they must be in charge, but on the basis of accessible and applicable scientific knowledge. In short, there must be synergy between large-scale research and local knowledge and experience. There are huge gains to be made here, not only for agriculture but also for nature.

The second main theme is 'a new economy for water and food for ecosystems'. Most of you will now agree that we will inevitably need to put a price tag on both the economic effects of policy, and its environmental impact. This allows us to balance interests against one another properly and ensures that decision-making is more transparent. You will be familiar with proposals like payments for environmental services. The important thing now is putting them into practice. This will impose a burden, but let me stress once more that it will also bring new opportunities. A new economy for water and food for ecosystems offers scope for new markets in environmental services. In Costa Rica for example, forest management in an upper watershed is being financed by water users downstream. This means that water and nature now come with a price tag, which is good for the ecosystem and the reliability of water delivery. This approach also makes it easier to interest the private sector in participating financially in projects. And as we all know, the importance of more public-private partnerships in our field of work cannot be overestimated.

The third and final main theme will be familiar to all of you: the enabling environment. Cooperation between countries which share a river basin is particularly promising, as the Nile Basin Initiative clearly shows. Effective arrangements in the Nile basin lead to better water management and higher agricultural yield in all participating countries. I would emphasise that, in all cases, a truly enabling environment means that every partner can make his voice heard. This means not only the different sectors like agriculture, the environment, fishing and industry, but also the local communities. Because – let me repeat – local communities are essential for implementation. And local involvement is also needed to avert another danger. The danger that in countries which are already water-stressed, the global liberalisation of agriculture will lead to cash crops that are profitable, but which use far too much water. If this happens, countries risk not having enough water left to produce food for their own people.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The key word is action – not only at this conference but also in the recent report by Professor Sachs. As I said earlier: the pace must be accelerated and we must take a broader view. If not, it will be impossible to meet the

targets set for 2015. So I challenge you to speak plainly over the next few days and to state your conclusions in terms of concrete action. This will send a clear message from this conference to the 13th session of the Commission on Sustainable Development in April. This conference is neither a beginning nor an end, but an important staging post. Who does what? How and when can you best do so? And who should you work with to reach your goals? I am asking you to come up with concrete answers to these questions. Because we need to make it happen, and we need to make it happen now.

Thank you.