

Opening remarks by Dr Cees Veerman, the  
Netherlands' Minister for Agriculture, Nature and  
Food Quality, at the Conference *Water For Food  
And Ecosystems*, The Hague, January 31, 2005

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Your Royal Highness, Your Excellencies, ladies and  
gentlemen!

A very warm welcome to this important  
conference. A conference on water and its role in  
food production and the protection of  
ecosystems. A conference that is, I strongly  
hope, dedicated to action. Time is short, as we're  
all aware; after all, we have committed ourselves  
to make the Millennium Development Goals a  
reality by 2015 – only a decade from now. Water  
management is an essential part of the efforts to  
reach them.

But before we kick off this week-long meeting, let's pause for a moment and consider what I would like to call "the water paradox".

Water is the bearer of life. Without it, our existence on this planet would be impossible.

But as we have seen a month ago in South-East Asia, water also has devastating powers that are well-nigh impossible to harness by mankind. So let us pay respect to those millions who lost life, limb, relatives or property in the Christmas tsunami. And let us be humble in the face of the awesome forces of nature.

Your Royal Highness, Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen!

Why this conference, jointly hosted by the Netherlands' government and the FAO? First, because water is high on the international agenda: for example, it is this year's main theme of the Commission on Sustainable Development. But so far, the focus is mostly on drinking water and sanitation. We would like to complement those important "watsan" activities with an equally intense focus on integrated water management in rural areas.

Secondly, I refer to the motto of this conference: *Make It Happen!* For I strongly believe that now is the time for action. There has been enough talk; we must roll up our sleeves in a concerted effort to establish rural water management around the globe. And we must integrate: agriculture, ecosystem conservation and water management are not separate sectors, as we might have

thought in the past. On the contrary, they are closely interwoven.

Integrated rural water management is, of course, no goal in itself. The ultimate target is the eradication of poverty in large swathes of the world.

I don't have to remind you that the majority of the poor and the hungry live in rural areas. That's why rural development – and one of its major components, integrated water management – is an essential weapon in the struggle against poverty. And it is also a key element in achieving another important goal: sustainable development in the spirit of the three Ps – People, Planet and Profit.

The importance of rural food production was recently confirmed by the UN Millennium Project Report *Investing In Development*, written under the chairmanship of the eminent economist Jeffrey Sachs. According to the report, the agricultural chain – production, processing and marketing – is the main driver of economic growth and social development. Needless to repeat that integrated water management is a crucial factor in this. To paraphrase the motto launched by His Royal Highness during the 2002 WSSD Conference in Johannesburg: no water, no food!

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As I pointed out before, agriculture, ecosystems and water management are, so to speak,

members of the same family. Speaking of ecosystems, let me emphasize the importance of both their conservation and their sustainable use.

Conservation, because we have the responsibility to preserve the still overwhelming, but rapidly diminishing biodiversity of this planet for ourselves and, more importantly, for generations to come. And sustainable use, because nature – and nature alone – provides us with the resources for our continued existence. Let's not squander them.

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To achieve this delicate balance, investments – both material and immaterial – are necessary. In food production, processing and marketing; in

conservation and sustainable use of ecosystems;  
and in integrated water management.

The question is: who should do what? What is the role of governments, of the business sector, of civil society? There are no easy answers to this, but let me give you a few thoughts.

First, actively seek the involvement of the local people. They are the custodians of their rural areas, their natural resources, their ecosystems. Local experience in managing them is built on the lessons going back generations.

Second: get rid of the notion that the government should always take the lead.

Governments, I say it over and over again, cannot and will not go it alone any more. Sure, laws have to be adopted and enforced, visions for the

future agreed upon, enabling environments created. But politicians should not be involved in micromanaging anything, from whole societies to specific water management projects.

This leads me to my third point: the key role of civil society organizations and the business world. NGOs offer a platform for people's concerns and ideas. The business sector throws entrepreneurship and capacity building into the equation. Governments, NGOs and the business sector should form development partnerships; Agnes van Ardenne, the Minister for Development Co-operation, will no doubt highlight the importance of such partnerships during tomorrow's session.

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Agriculture, ecosystems and water management: they've made a comeback on the international agenda. But that is not enough. It is time to make it happen, time for the third of what I call the three Ds: Dialogue, Decision, Delivery. Seemingly endless dialogue has finally resulted in decisions. We must not leave it at that. Now we must deliver. Let's get to work!

So let's turn to the program of the conference. In a moment, we'll hear the keynote speeches by His Royal Highness the Prince of Orange, by FAO Director-General Jacques Diouf, and by Dr Tekalign Mamo, Ethiopia's State Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development.

We all know that the overarching theme of this conference is close to their hearts. I am looking forward to their contributions.

Next, we'll briefly introduce the main themes of the conference: Knowledge For Action, The New Economy, and The Enabling Environment.

After the introductions, we expect your active participation in one of the three working groups. The results of the groups, to be guided by case studies from all over the world, will be reported in plenary sessions. I call on you to report concrete lessons learned from these case studies, and identify concrete conditions and factors contributing to success. And please share your own experiences in dealing with the issues of water management, agriculture and ecosystem conservation in your country.

Once again: *Make It Happen!*

With this, I declare the conference open, and I'm pleased to give the floor to His Royal Highness the Prince of Orange.

Thank you.