

Fifth Verwey-Jonker/SER Lecture, 11 October 2012

Living well in times of crisis.

Supporting lecture by Meiny Prins to Femke Halsema's lecture

It's the spoken word that counts.

The Netherlands, the greenest city in the world

We are living the good life!

Our pensions have proved to be unaffordable, healthcare will definitely become unaffordable and education too is already unaffordable in real terms. In other words: the foundation of our good life is becoming unaffordable.

What a relief! We are really running out of money. As a country, we can't carry on spending more than we earn. And we can no longer earn our money by selling or dealing in castles in the sky, either. Something has to change. And the best motivation for change comes from discovering the money has finally run out.

Time to economize, then. But economizing is not an end in itself. Economizing is only worthwhile if you can use the cash you have freed up for renewal. It is a means for bringing about reform. To create and use new economic opportunities. To be able to invest in the future. But is there anyone in national politics today who is working towards our future?

My name is Meiny Prins. I am CEO of Priva, a family-run business. Priva is a manufacturer of process computers for climate control and process management. With around 420 employees, we develop and supply products and services in the field of climate, water and energy. We have nine branches all over the world and sell our systems to more than 100 countries through our international network of dealers and partners. We are a high-tech business, investing over 25 % of our revenues in product development and innovation. That puts us into the top 30 R&D companies in the Netherlands.

Priva operates in two sectors: global market leader in horticulture, but also leading the way in the field of building automation. Nowhere else in the world are crops grown as efficiently and sustainably as in the Netherlands. Nowhere else in the world is there so much innovation and investment in developing energy-efficient buildings. This means that I come from a world where climate control is linked to saving energy and where food is produced efficiently with a minimum use of energy and a maximum reuse of water. Where we help our customers to achieve better yields by using fewer of our natural resources. That is what I call sustainable. That is our mission.

People have creative powers. We create a crisis, but we can solve it too. We are the cause of hunger, but we are also capable of doing something about it. Together we can create solutions that really matter, that make a difference, based on a vision for the future. We can work on the climate ourselves. We are creating a climate where our health, sense of comfort and safety, nature, our food, energy and water use are all in balance with each other. Where we can grow as people, both in personal and business terms. Where making a profit is not a goal in its own right, but a means to achieve growth. To invest once more in new opportunities, in developing people, in cooperation.

On a global scale, every day almost 180,000 people move from the countryside to major cities, searching for work, for an existence, for a good life.

Today 3 billion people are already living in major cities and by 2030, over 60 % of the world's population will live in gigantic metropolitan areas.

Today 20 major world cities have already been defined, varying from Tokyo with 35 million residents to Manila, with over 10 million residents. But we also count Seoul, Mumbai, New York and Calcutta in their number. These cities all have one thing in

common: they are all situated in a delta. Historically, the presence of water offered opportunities for trading, logistics and food production. That is still the case. In areas where so many people live, an increasing amount of food will also have to be produced. Not only because mouths need to be fed and because labor is available. Wastewater flows and water from the city are being reused for the production of food. Waste from food production is fermented to create new, sustainable energy. Efficient energy and water flows, sustainable food production, green and clean urban districts, decentralized and short chains, make these cities into sustainable deltas, providing the foundation needed for the good life.

Now let's look at the Netherlands. It, too, is a similar 'metropolis' in a delta. But here we think in terms of square kilometers. This is the nation where many mayors travel to China to promote their cities. With all due respect, but if you drive into the outskirts of Shanghai with your car, you still haven't reached the center after three hours. If you drive for three hours in the Netherlands, you've left the country ... Looking at the Netherlands from further away, you see one contiguous region of built-up area. From one side of the country to the other. And if we take that analogy further, then the Green Heart (Groene Hart) region of the Netherlands is the Central Park of New York and the Westland greenhouse region can be seen as Urban Farming.

The Netherlands can make a statement internationally, but to do this, we will have to develop a new vision, creating a new vision for the future of our country as the greenest 'city' in the world. That will make us into an example for all the great metropolitan areas. We can show wonderful, efficient and sustainable residential and working environments where all sorts of decentralized energy solutions are implemented and wastewater from the city is reused for purposes such as producing food.

That will make the Netherlands into a Sustainable Delta. All the ingredients are already in place. All that's needed is to join them together and work on their visibility.

The Netherlands has a vast amount of knowledge and expertise. In Australia, for instance, it's considered quite an achievement if you invest in a building with a '5-star label', but according to an Australian professor, that's the equivalent of our standard building regulations. Our sustainable methods produce 60 kilos of tomatoes per m² per year, using only 4 liters of water per kilo, whereas many countries scarcely manage 5 kilos per m², but to do so, they require a minimum of 100 liters of water.

But all that knowledge and expertise is too fragmented. Our Top Sector policy, however well-intentioned, tends to exacerbate this. Imagine if we picked out this single theme, a theme that inspires and links all the sectors together! Of course the sectors will continue to do business as usual and develop their own niches, but for this one point we are going to excel. And that is not just by developing even more new technology, but particularly by putting it into practice. The Top Sector Chemicals gets to work on natural resources, special forms of recycling and developing new biofuels. The Energy sector will implement smart grids and put all its effort into smart energy saving in the urban environment. Creative Industry develops all sorts of new concepts related to Urban Farming, integrates green spaces and glass and imagines new ways of living on water. High Tech specializes in intelligent networks and the Top Sector Water starts reusing water from the city for new, value-added applications. The Logistics sector develops unique, sustainable transport systems. Life Sciences & Health focuses on preventive healthcare and living independently for longer. Agri-food and Horticulture & Propagation Materials invests mainly in sustainability, health and improved flavor and develops new, local chains.

The Netherlands is good at this. This is something where we are still unique. We have an international position in this field. This is where we excel. Only by doing this can we make a statement to the world, by being excellent in a single theme: the creation of a future-oriented life. One that is a genuinely good life.

The Netherlands can play a major role in the global changes on the way to a more sustainable world. But we will have to make choices and realize that the only innovation that the Netherlands still needs is managerial innovation. Today the Netherlands already offers prospects for a sustainable and good life, even in a time of crisis. I challenge you all to work together to make that possible. Thank you.