

Speech to MVO Nederland (CSR Netherlands) on 30 January 2014, on the occasion of its 10th anniversary

by Meiny Prins

The Netherlands, the greenest city in the world!

Your Majesty,
Willem Lageweg and colleagues from MVO Nederland.
Colleagues from the world of corporate social responsibility!

My name is Meiny Prins. I am CEO of Priva, a high-tech family business. Priva is a producer of process computers. With over 420 employees, we develop and deliver products and services in the areas of climate, water and energy. Priva is the market leader in the horticulture industry and a leading player in the field of building control: it is innovative and active worldwide.

In the autumn of 2013, I went to China. Together with the manager of our Chinese site in Beijing, I visited a number of customers. For this purpose, we travelled by high-speed train from Shanghai to Changzhou. The metropolis of Shanghai is home to around 26 million inhabitants. When you travel to Changzhou by train, within the space of 45 minutes you pass by another three cities with 10, 8 and 6 million inhabitants. These cities are located in the Yangtze River Delta. A kind of 'suburb' of Shanghai City. Approximately 65 million people live and work in a radius of 200 km of Changzhou. A rich area where an enormous amount of construction is in progress. From international airports to high-tech parks and complete medical centres.

People in China, however, are utterly fed up with two things: corruption and pollution. For this reason, the government has decided that by 2017 all legislation and its enforcement must be in order, so that by 2020 these problems will for the most part have been resolved. Even in China, people are realising that economic growth is not the most important value.

In addition, it was agreed that the migration to the cities must be slowed down by significantly developing the countryside, directly in the vicinity of the large cities... And that is precisely what they are going to do.

Speaking about ambition...

Even though this is China, I believe this example shows that, if you have a shared ambition and if together you can create the necessary preconditions, so much more is possible!

But who today in the Netherlands is genuinely working on our future? Who still dares to express a shared ambition!? Who still has a vision?

We do not have much time left, given that we are running seriously short of money. As a country, we cannot continue to spend more than we earn. And we can no longer make money by selling 'hot air'.

And now – even though we are addicted to our gas fields – gas revenues are also disappointing, as was recently reported in the press, as a kind of profit warning. The Netherlands is again missing out on billions of Euros in revenue. That's nothing new, because if you Google 'disappointing gas revenues' you will see that it has been a fact since 2009. Only now it is also a question of compensating for the damage to the environment.

Generating revenues from the extraction of shale gas is not going to be the solution either. This is also 'fossil fuel', and therefore finite and therefore not a sustainable solution. In addition, it counteracts the development of a new, future-proof and sustainable clean-tech economy, an economy that goes beyond filling the state purse or the coffers of a few interested parties.

So there will be more cutbacks. But cutbacks are not an end in themselves; they only make sense if you can use the resulting financial savings to invest in renewal, to invest in the future. But to do that, you need a vision, a vision based on major global trends, on the principal market demands, on the opportunities and on our own core competencies. A vision that will last longer than one government's term of office. A vision that has nothing to do with party politics, but with the economic opportunities for our country in a dynamic international playing field.

Now let's take a look at what's happening in the world...

Every day, almost 180,000 people around the world move from the countryside to the big city. Looking for work, to make ends meet, for a good life. In 15 years, over 60% of the world's population will be living in enormous metropolitan areas. Today there are already more than 30 major world cities. From Tokyo with 35 million inhabitants to Manila with over 20 million. But Seoul, Mumbai, New York and Calcutta are also part of the club. These cities have one thing in common: they are all located in a river delta. From ancient times, the presence of water has provided opportunities for trade, logistics and food production. And that is still the case today.

Where so many people live, more and more food will also be produced. Not just because of the 'mouths' that need to be fed and the available workforce, but also on account of the ability to recycle water and to create new energy flows. Wastewater from the city will be recycled for the production of food. Waste from food production will be composted to create sustainable energy. Efficient energy and water flows, sustainable food production, green and clean neighbourhoods, decentralised, short supply chains, will all transform these cities into Sustainable Urban Deltas.

And then let's take a look at the Netherlands. Another one of these 'world cities' in a river delta. If you look at the Netherlands from a more distant perspective, you can see a contiguous area of urban development. From Alkmaar to beyond Eindhoven. And if we keep that image in mind, then the 'Green Heart' of the Netherlands is like Central Park in New York and the Westland region is just 'Urban Farming'.

Thus, within 15 years, 60% of all the people in the world will be living in a city. The cities will also be the main drivers for sustainability and radical innovations, for technological breakthroughs. Local authorities will use their cities as testing grounds for new technology, as long as these technologies can solve their major problems in terms of air quality, sewerage, water, too little green space, mobility and high-quality, locally grown food.

Because the inhabitants of their city will be placing demands on their quality of life. Look at Beijing. People do not want any more air pollution, stinking sewers and corruption. Quality of life will become more important than economic growth.

In this way, the 19th century was the century of empires. The 20th century was the century of nation states, and the 21st century will be the century of cities.

And this represents an opportunity for the Netherlands. The Netherlands can become the market leader. A supplier to Sustainable Urban Deltas. The Netherlands can make a statement internationally. Together we can create a new future outlook for our country, as the 'greenest city in the world'. In that way we can be an example to all the large metropolises. We can be a showcase for magnificent, efficient and sustainable living and working environments, with smart logistics systems, where all kinds of decentralised energy solutions are used and wastewater from the city is recycled for the production of food, among other things.

Suppose we were to choose to focus on this one theme. A theme that inspires and really unites the leading sectors in the economy! Of course, the various sectors will continue to operate independently and to develop their own niches, but we are going to excel in one particular area.

In this way, the 'Chemicals' sector will unite with the 'Energy' and 'Water' sectors to develop new forms of recycling and new biofuels; 'Chemicals' and 'Horticulture' will work together on natural raw materials; the 'Energy' sector might join with 'High-tech systems' to implement smart grids, to work on heating networks and to go full out to create smart energy savings in urban environments; the 'Creative Industries' will combine with 'Horticulture' and 'Water' to develop all kinds of new concepts in connection with Urban Farming and come up with new forms of living and working on the water; 'High-tech systems' and 'Logistics' will specialise in intelligent networks; the 'Water' and 'Horticulture' sectors will recycle wastewater from the city for valuable new applications, while 'Water' and 'Energy' will develop clean inland waterway vessels; the 'Logistics' sector will join with 'High-tech systems' to develop unique and sustainable transport systems; 'Life sciences & health' and 'High-tech systems' will come up with solutions to enable the elderly to live independently for longer; 'Life sciences & health' and 'Horticulture' will invest in preventive healthcare through healthy nutrition, while 'Horticulture' and 'Energy' will work on energy sources in the greenhouse; 'Agro' and 'Horticulture' will ensure the increased sustainability, health and taste of food, while developing new, local supply chains.

Do you get it?

The Netherlands is good at this sort of thing. Today, we are still genuinely unique in this area. It is a field in which we have an international position. It is something we can excel at. It is only in this way that we can make an international statement, that we can be

excellent in a single area: the creation of a future-oriented and socially responsible way of life in a Sustainable Urban Delta.

The Netherlands today is very good at adopting an integrated approach, we are very efficient and effective, we are innovative and we are leaders in the field of sustainability. We are a country that derives its main revenues from exporting. It does not matter where you go in the world, you will always meet Dutch people... Mainly because many companies in the Netherlands are market leaders in a particular niche and are therefore internationally very active. And market leadership in the niche markets of today means a key position in the new and sustainable global economy of tomorrow.

Today it is a fact – including in the Netherlands – that large movements in the area of sustainability and corporate social responsibility are not instigated by the government, but mainly by the cities themselves, by members of the public and by companies, through organisations such as MVO Nederland. Today we also know that the only innovation that the Netherlands still needs is administrative innovation.

At present, there is still an enormous amount of knowledge and expertise present in the Netherlands. For example, in Australia it is considered a big deal if you invest a lot of money in a low-energy building with a '5 star label'. But, according to an Australian professor, that is equivalent to our standard building codes in the Netherlands.

We produce, in a sustainable manner, 80 kg of tomatoes per m² per year and use only 4 litres of water per kg, while in many countries barely four kg of tomatoes can be obtained per m², while 80-200 litres of water are required per kg of product.

Today we also know that locally grown food is sold within a radius of 700 to 800 kilometres, and that this also applies to the Netherlands. Our largest market for vegetables is ultimately Germany... And that a kind of 'green belt' develops around the large metropolises, as in Sao Paulo, where around 1.5 hours' drive away there is small-scale food production taking place, which with the rise of the middle classes will rapidly turn into professional agricultural and horticulture.

Today, there is already a project that takes wastewater from the city and transforms it into quality one water, which is recycled for the production of food and which is called Delft Blue Water.

And so I can already name a large number of very practical projects in the Netherlands that are making a direct contribution to living and working in a sustainable city, and I'm sure you know of many more.

And what about the government?

For them, it makes life a lot easier. It removes the need for a lot of discussions and provides focus on what really needs to happen. And if we invest, we will be investing primarily in things that provide a return in the future.

We will not, in any case, be having any more discussions about shale gas, because we will not be using any more fossil fuels, but just our brains.

We will also know where the trade missions should go, and that the mayors of the large metropolises will be our most important clients...

We could make life for our minister Lilianne Ploumen a lot more pleasant if we could give her a clear briefing from the world of industry, and give her a single theme instead of 10 separate sectors. In that case, we will be able to coordinate supply and demand much better. While right now in Belo Horizonte it is a question of building hospitals and urban logistics, and Rio de Janeiro needs Green Buildings, for Beijing air quality and stinking sewers are the main priority. We have the solution in the Netherlands, we only need to take it to them...

We therefore do not have three years to think about export financing or obtaining a guarantee from the government for the financing of international projects. Because we can see their great importance right away. And we can also create additional advantages if we can put together a consortium of Dutch companies and local SMEs and coordinate our activities within the theme of 'Sustainable Urban Deltas'.

We will also not need to worry about maintaining employment in rural areas in the Netherlands, because even the Netherlands cannot escape the global trend, and it will make life a lot easier if we realise that nature and the city cannot always be intermingled and that it is the sparrow hawk's choice to nest on an industrial estate in Vlaardingen and not in the Veluwe region.

And, finally, that it is not just about constantly developing new technology, but about applying it. That the government can help to showcase the Netherlands as one single great reference project by making connections. By making a statement on an international level.

This is precisely where Corporate Social Responsibility comes in. Because today MVO Nederland is giving us an ambition that dovetails perfectly with the opportunities for Netherlands PLC. Not just, as companies, to grow together and to learn from the splendid ambitions outlined by MVO Nederland, but also to be able to generate business from them in a world that demands solutions, where today we already have many of the answers.

The Netherlands can play a major role in the global changes towards a more sustainable world. Today, the Netherlands can already offer a perspective on a sustainable and socially responsible way of life.

Today, MVO Nederland is laying down an ambition. I challenge you to live up to that ambition!

Thank you very much.