

Noblesse oblige or self-interest?

Deltas are complex hubs of water and trade, man and the environment, ideals and interests – just try and design an integral delta plan that accommodates all these aspects. What are the underlying ideals and driving forces? A dialogue between Daniëlle Hirsch of Both ENDS and Henk Ovink, the country's first water envoy.

Author: Manon Stravens

If deltas all over the world are the areas where extremes will become increasingly extreme, the Oosterschelde (Eastern Scheldt) in Zeeland shows no signs of this whatsoever. Sail in a small boat along one of the thirteen delta works, on calm water, in the sun and surrounded by brazen seagulls, and the Dutch battle against the water seems to be a thing of the past.

Centuries ago, in our Dutch delta farmers quarrelled about the water level, and nature conservationists, politicians and fishermen became concerned about the effects of the delta works on the ecosystem following the North Sea Flood of 1953. This is the basis of the water boards and the knowledge of water and delta management which the Netherlands is exporting all over the world, in Vietnam and Mozambique, in Argentina and New York.

In doing so, the Netherlands is praised,

but also criticised, as revealed in a discussion with Henk Ovink, who was appointed as the country's first water envoy in 2015, and Daniëlle Hirsch, director of the environmental and human rights organisation Both ENDS.

"You can say what you like about the delta works, but it is a global model of how things can be done", Hirsch says. "And it's not so much about engineering, but rather the entire socio-political process of which the delta works are the result. This is why there were no dams, but ingenious locks that can be opened and closed. Due to the polder model there is now a system that works more or less effectively."

Ovink adds that this model is deeply rooted in the Dutch water history. "The Netherlands was already a water democracy before we became a country or a kingdom.

In medieval times, when we built houses on

mounds. The first water boards, a democratic institute, were founded in the 12th century."

Delta knowledge and technology is something the two of them believe is desperately needed. "This is because all over the world deltas are increasingly becoming areas of tension due to urbanisation, population growth and climate change", Ovink explains, who has a long record in water policy, planning and advice. He does not want to lump the deltas all together, but points out a number of parallels. "As a result of their accessibility, fertile soil, water supply and coastal climate, deltas are extremely appealing places to live and invest in, but we also destroy them with dams, channelling, agriculture and industry."

The average income is increasing, at the same time the gap between the rich



Daniëlle Hirsch, director of Both ENDS

and poor is growing, as is the pressure on natural resources. Ovink: "There are still over two billion people who have no access to clean water. That is appalling."

Hirsch adds that deltas are also playing an increasingly important role in the global economy. "They are hubs where international chains converge, from which domestic production is transported to the global market. Simultaneously forests are cleared and dams are built for the global economy, which results in degradation." As a result deltas are not only hotspots for development and investment, but have also become hotbeds for crises and conflicts of interest.

"Deltas do not respect borders set up by man."

Ovink: "The interests are trans-boundary, because deltas do not respect borders designed by man. Water connects, because it touches everything. A lack of water causes problems related to health, gender and security, and results in social inequality. This offers opportunities for integration, but also increases mutual independence between the different countries. "Major economic interests conflict with society and the environment, according to the water envoy.

What could a small country like the Netherlands, with its peaceful, bird-rich and dammed coastal waters, offer these areas? "Only a fraction of water enters Lobith compared to the flows in the Ganges and the Brahmaputra in Bangladesh", according to Hirsch. "These riverbeds regularly change their course over a distance of two hundred kilometres, entire areas are flooded every year. They can hardly be stopped, they are so strong that they just push concrete blocks away. You cannot make an effective contribution there with infrastructure alone."

Ovink adds that the Netherlands must keep its promise because of the global objectives that have been formulated and the Paris Climate Agreement. "There is a collective responsibility to ensure that adequate knowledge, expertise and money is available to tackle the delta issue on a global scale."

Hirsch states that self-interest goes be-



Henk Ovink, the first Dutch water envoy

yond *noblesse oblige*. "The Netherlands also has serious economic interests in these delta areas. We are leaders in port development, with our construction and dredging companies. Our financial sector is constantly seeking new investment opportunities, in large-scale infrastructure and the fossil economy, because of its return." According to Hirsch, the Netherlands does not just simply want the best for the world. "There is a major public-private push behind it all."

Hirsch says that these investments could be interesting for delta residents, "but you have to organise it in such a way that they can benefit from this." The Netherlands does not always succeed in doing so. In Bangladesh the polders and dikes, according to the Dutch model, can no longer cope with the increasingly powerful floods. And in Jakarta fishermen risk losing their socio-economic security due to the construction of a large seawall, to protect the city from the effects of subsidence. "Their voice", Hirsch says, "was insufficiently heard."

According to her, the Netherlands places too much emphasis on technology and infrastructure and too little on the socio-political side of the water issue. In other words: bringing together all the players, joint negotiations and seeking the best solutions. "While this is where the strength of the Dutch model lies." The principles of

participation and the rights of women, crucial pillars for effective water management in Hirsch's view, are embedded in the analysis and mission of the Dutch water ambition, but fade into the background when worked out in practice.

And, in Hirsch's opinion, that is wrong. "After all, it is precisely in the deltas, with their complexity and conflicting interests, where you see social cohesion being eroded." And cohesion is necessary for finding solutions. "In many deltas carrying out more small-scale interventions will achieve more than immediately constructing dams and dikes everywhere."

Hirsch supports a bottom-up approach and decision-making process, which Both ENDS also applies in its land- and water-management programmes. "When you come together, jointly consider the interests, negotiate and combine this with the technical ingenuity and creativity of Dutch knowledge institutions and engineering firms, you will find interesting solutions", according to Hirsch. "Not everyone needs to totally agree with the outcome." That is also how we do it in the Netherlands: "Local residents together reflect on how they want to collect water with the support of urban water services."

Ovink says that it is certainly not only about the engineering approach. "If there's

one country that has learned that a decision taken from the top-down fails, especially in terms of infrastructure, it's the Netherlands." Integration, transparency, inclusiveness and capacity reinforcement, sustainability and collaboration are paramount in the Dutch delta approach, with a long-term vision and short-term results.

"In many deltas carrying out more small-scale interventions will achieve more than immediately constructing dams and dikes everywhere"

The Dutch culture of life in the delta cannot simply be transposed all over the world, but could reinforce the global approach to deltas. "These are tense processes", Ovink knows, having been fully involved in delta planning worldwide. "This is because there are many different interests in a delta area. And people must understand each decision and every spent dollar and be held accountable in this respect."

Hirsch explains that Both ENDS starts from the bottom-up. "We identify the problem and potential solutions with all the actors, including representatives of women's groups, residents of slums, local authorities and the industry." The best solution is determined based on this analysis.

"If you can carry out such a negotiating process at twenty places along a river", Hirsch says, "you build up a basis of knowledge and experience." This was evident in a tributary of the Krishna in India, where old water collection and management systems were repaired thanks to local knowledge. Though she immediately adds: "We are not sure yet if this approach is scalable. That remains to be seen."

Ovink responds by saying that this kind of bottom-up approach risks fragmentation. "Then you have thousands of bottom-up initiatives that may interfere with each other and you still forget certain parties. I always try to place integrality and connectedness on the agenda, not bottom-up or top-down; it is clear that with a horizontal process you create added value."

The key is to find a way to organise trust, space and methods for this collaboration

while considering all interests, which is increasingly difficult, according to Ovink, because he also sees that connectedness and social cohesion are declining in the deltas. "All parties ignore the complexity. The focus on simple solutions is far too great."

A blueprint does not work in delta planning, according to Ovink. "Each delta is unique. You must start with understanding the complexity of the area and then not only examine the rivers, ecosystem and their value, but also the human interventions." Ovink believes that this insight into the complexity of a delta and the willingness to place it on the agenda is very important for a plan to be successful: "You cannot fiddle with a system without understanding it or placing it in a perspective."

When you want to involve all players in the planning process from the very start, Hirsch explains, you must invest time and money in people who are not used to being heard. "You must prepare them to come up with good solutions."

At present she does not see this happen too much. "Local organisations are either involved in the process at a late stage, or not at all. Reality in many countries sometimes makes it complicated; diplomats or (business) partners of the authorities in Indonesia are deemed not to talk to local, social organisations. Or you have to cope with twenty local authorities and at least as many NGOs and other interest groups, such as cooperatives of fishermen and farmers. You have to talk to them and take their knowledge, experience and ideas seriously in order to find better solutions."

Hirsch recommends performing effective risk analyses, in particular about land and human rights, then you will know what to expect. "The elite in many countries do not always act in the best interests of their people."

Ovink agrees with Hirsch that the Dutch strength lies in the inclusive and integral process, and that this process is weakened across the border. Sometimes Ovink is "flabbergasted" about how "interests are fragmented", something which he believes every party is guilty of. "Countries that fight each other over water rights, risk-avoiding companies that miss sustainable opportunities and exclude parties, NGOs with blinkered views, which prioritise their own interest group, investors that cannot innovate, etc."

Then try to seek a common denominator,

which will benefit everyone. In short: delta planners take the 'slow but sure' approach and regularly hold 'serious discussions' when parties want to go their own way. "We reinvent diplomacy every day."

Ovink says that you should not expect the plans to be set in stone from day one. "Developing the Dutch delta plans, including specific details for their implementation, also took years. At times we do not allow others to take their time, and that is stupid. At the same time you want everyone to be safe right now and invest in a sustainable way. You must therefore view the Bengali or Mozambique plans as the basis for a common language and an assessment framework for developing projects and investments, which will only follow at a later stage."

Ovink adds that once a plan is ready and has been approved, things will continue to be tense. "Parties must demonstrate ownership, otherwise the process grinds to a halt and everyone just ends up looking at each other. This requires a continuous commitment and sometimes you have to shake up things a bit. You have to explain and to organise matters in such a way that it is workable, for everyone and with everyone. Because I want everyone to be fully committed to such a plan." ●

Daniëlle Hirsch is an environmental economist, board member of the Netherlands Water Partnership and since 2008 she has been director of Both ENDS, which strives for sustainable development worldwide. Both ENDS reinforces and collaborates with a global network of interest organisations, activists and researchers, to defend the right of using nature and the environment. Before joining Both ENDS she lived and worked for three years in South America. When she returned to the Netherlands she worked as an international consultant for a Delft engineering firm, specialised in water and coastal management.

Henk Ovink, a water envoy, is the figurehead of the Dutch water sector. His task is economic diplomacy, to achieve good relationships between foreign governments, companies, interest organisations and donors. Ovink was previously an adviser to President Obama's Hurricane Sandy Rebuilding Task Force and acting Director-General of Space and Water and Director of National Spatial Planning at the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management. Ovink is also involved in various research programmes and academic institutes.

It all starts with a sluice

The densely populated Ayeyarwady delta is the economic centre of Myanmar, but it is under serious threat from issues such as salinisation, flooding and pollution. The Netherlands is supporting the young, inexperienced government in formulating efficient solutions in which all parties are involved. However, is Myanmar ready for an integrated strategy?

Author: Bente Meindersma

A heavy monsoon rain shower causes the streets of Yangon to flood. The busy Friday afternoon traffic slowly navigates its way through the deep puddles. Men and women wearing flip-flops wade through the brown water; plastic waste has accumulated in the drainage channels along the road. The rapid growth of Myanmar's economic centre places such a heavy strain on the water supply, drainage and sewer system, that during the monsoon season flooding is the order of the day.

The city is located on the edge of the Ayeyarwady delta, the most densely populated area in Myanmar. The Ayeyarwady river springs from the foothills of the Himalayas and traverses the country from north to south. The flow widens in the delta, to a water surface over a kilometre wide in some parts, and branches into many tributaries.

Ten years ago, in early May 2008, the devastating cyclone Nargis ravaged the area. Many villages and towns were swept away, official figures estimate the number of people that lost their lives in the disaster to be 138,000, although most sources believe the actual figure was much higher.

The delta is still vulnerable. Population growth and economic activities place the area under pressure, the consequences of climate change, such as the rise in the sea level and extreme rainfall, pose a threat. According to the *Global Climate Risk Index 2016* Myanmar

is the second most vulnerable country with regard to the effects of climate change, such as storms and floods.

Three different ministries are tackling the problems with their own measures, but all these individual interventions do not provide an effective response to the problem. An integrated approach is required. This requires some effort from the departments, because they are used to strictly focus on their own part of the delta. The Ministry of Transport focuses on the navigability of the river, Agriculture is mainly interested in irrigation and Forestry is concerned with the mangrove forests.

"With our centuries of experience in managing an economically important delta, we are the ideal party to help Myanmar develop a strategy for the Ayeyarwady", according to Huub Buise, Deputy Ambassador in Yangon. "I see many similarities, but while the Netherlands had the luxury of gaining experience in a relatively sparsely populated area, the population pressure is far greater here and Myanmar suffers much more from the effects of climate change."

In 2013 the Netherlands and Myanmar signed a memorandum to formalise the collaboration related to integral water management. Support for the problem in the delta is an important factor. Zaw

Ayeyarwady-delta

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