



DELTAS IN TIMES OF CLIMATE CHANGE II

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

OPPORTUNITIES FOR PEOPLE, SCIENCE, CITIES AND BUSINESS
ROTTERDAM THE NETHERLANDS, 24–26 SEPTEMBER 2014

Plenary Opening: The ‘soft’ side of adaptation

Adapting to climate change means much more than building dikes and dams and other infrastructure. That was the message on the first day of the second Deltas in Times of Climate Change conference. The conference, which took place at Rotterdam’s World Trade Center, brought together more than 1,250 scientists, policymakers and practitioners. Over the three days of the conference, they shared their knowledge and experience in round table discussions, sessions on understanding climate change, practical workshops, and of course the plenaries.

Speaker after speaker at the first day’s plenary made the case, in various ways, for investment now—and not just in material infrastructure, but also in strengthening communities, in building with nature, in developing new technologies such as carbon storage—and in communication.

Ahmed Aboutaleb, Mayor of Rotterdam, the Netherlands

The need for effective communication featured, indeed, in the welcoming remarks by Rotterdam Mayor Ahmed Aboutaleb. Honesty, he told those gathered, is the *only* communications strategy. “We have to explain to the public that we cannot guarantee their safety. We will always lose out if we try to fight against Mother Nature. All we can do is create the best possible defence system. Members of the public must realise that they are part of that defence system and that they too have a responsibility for their own safety.”

Mayor Aboutaleb also called for cooperation among delta cities. “Rotterdam is a leader in innovation when it comes to adaptation, and indeed it can be a role model for other cities. But there are a lot of areas where other cities are out in front, where *we* can learn from *them*, in developing the most effective evacuation plans, for instance. It’s a two-way street—so we all benefit from cooperation.”

Aboutaleb concluded his welcoming remarks with a reminder of the urgency of the situation, and called for immediate action on a number of fronts.

Minister Schultz van Haegen: The worlds of science and practice have to work together in order to achieve smart deltas

In her remarks on the first day’s plenary, Dutch Minister of Infrastructure and Environment Melanie Schultz van Haegen began by echoing Mayor Aboutaleb’s call to immediate action. She noted that, since the first Deltas in Times of Climate Change, Hurricane Sandy had ravaged New York, Bangkok had been flooded, and the Philippines had suffered a devastating hurricane—not to mention major flooding in climate zones as different in other ways as Sweden’s and Pakistan’s. “The response to such disasters has been to try and rebuild everything exactly as it was before”, she noted.

But we have to think of new solutions, based on smart land design, to increase resilience. The Netherlands are not only investing in steel and concrete, but in smart land planning for all weather extremes. The worlds of science and practice have to come together in order to achieve smart deltas.”





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Working with rather than against nature was the major theme in the speech by World Wildlife Fund International president Yolanda Kakabadse, who argued for a holistic, eco-system-based approach: “Ecosystem-based adaptation and community-based adaptation are important ways of protecting both humans and the habitats of animals in deltas. But in order to make natural structures work, all stakeholders have to be on board—and that means that we need a different way of thinking and working, rather than just building dams and dikes. Dams and dikes prevent deltas to evolve with the sea level rise. To quote Ban Ki Moon: there is no plan B, because there is no planet B.”

BBC correspondent and conference moderator Roger Harrabin took a moment between speeches to remind all those gathered that “politics is creeping along, whereas scientists say, we need to be racing forward in order to adapt to and mitigate climate change.”

Myles Allen, University of Oxford, United Kingdom: Climate change makes a bad day worse

Harrabin’s point was underscored by Myles Allen, Head of the Climate Dynamics Group at the University of Oxford’s Atmospheric, Oceanic and Planetary Physics Department: “We are seeing impacts on all continents in natural and social systems, in ecosystems, and in human health. Coastal systems and low-lying areas will increasingly experience adverse impacts. Bad weather will get worse. Or, as a Californian firefighter once said: Climate change makes a bad day worse.”

Allen made impassioned pleas for investment in carbon storage, and for the inclusion of developing countries. “It is plain and simple: the more carbon you emit into the atmosphere, the warmer it gets. Now we need to get to zero by the end of the century—but we cannot ask people in India or China to simply stop using their coal. So the only option is to offset these effects by investing heavily in carbon storage. The Netherlands could take a major lead on this score, since it is already doing this in the Rotterdam harbour area, for instance.”

Panel:

Bart Parmet, Staff Delta Programme Commissioner, the Netherlands

Tineke Huizinga, Delta Alliance, the Netherlands

Humberto Delgado Rosa, DG Climate Action, European Commission, Belgium

Cynthia Villar, Senator of the Republic of the Philippines

In a panel of four, Humberto Delgado Rosa, Director-General for Climate Action at the European Commission, stressed that adaptation is now fully on the European Union’s policy radar. He noted that all EU member states are in the process of drawing up an adaptation strategy that must be ready by 2017. “Seventeen members now have a National Adaptation Strategy. The EU strategy aims at nature-based adaptation. We want to make sure that, in these strategies, cross-border effects are being taken into account.”

Bart Parmet of the Staff Delta Programme Commissioner mentioned the Dutch approach of anticipating and being prepared for a possible disaster, rather than dealing with the consequences. Building with nature is an important part of that strategy. “This is not bad news for big building companies. In fact, these companies are developing green strategies and structures themselves. There is money to be earned in soft engineering as well.” In the panel with Parmet, Tineke Huizinga of the Delta Alliance said: “Delta’s have to learn from each other





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when it comes to adaptive Delta management. To facilitate this learning the Delta Alliance has created an adaptation toolbox that is now online.”

The importance of exchanging knowledge was made very clear by the fourth participant of the panel Cynthia Villar, Senator of the Republic of the Philippines, where she is Chair of the Senate Committee on Agriculture and Food. Her sense of urgency will come as no surprise to those who know that the Philippines are already being impacted quite heavily by climate change. As Senator Villar put it, “For us there is no choice but to build with nature. We don’t have the money for expensive dikes and dams.” The 7100 islands of the Philippines are threatened by ever more and ever extremer typhoons, hurricanes, floods and storms. “And it’s the poor people that populate the most vulnerable areas. The process of changing their mind set of adapting to climate change is a long and painstaking one. In order to become more resilient to extreme weather events, we need community and stakeholder involvement.”

Chris Rapley, University College London, United Kingdom: We are failing to bring the message across

From this clear and sound plea to invest in technology and knowledge, the focus shifted to communication and awareness to keep climate adaptation and mitigation right up there on the agendas of all those with a stake in climate change—that is, everyone. Chris Rapley of University College of London spoke about bridging the gap between organising on the one hand and, on the other, communicating climate resilience. “We are facing the challenge of explaining as complex a system as climate change in the simplest possible way, but no simpler than is necessary! And we are failing to bring the message across, to the public and politicians alike.” The only way to tell the story of climate change is through dialogue, he insisted: “There has to be a genuine effort to communicate climate science in ways similar to how people communicate in their daily lives, in order to get the story across.”

