
Speech by H.R.H. the prince of Orange

Speech by H.R.H. the prince of Orange

Speech by H.R.H. the prince of Orange on the occasion of the closure of the project : Strengthening Risk Analysis and Flood zoning in Czech water management at the Charles University, Prague, June 3rd 2004

Excellencies, Rector, Ladies and gentleman

It is a great privilege for me to be here with you at this great historic university and I feel particularly honoured in receiving my University medal.

Today is also the official closure of a Dutch-Czech water project on flood management. I would like use this occasion to say a few words on that subject.

For a long time water and water management was considered a technical problem.

Water serves many purposes:

- drinking-water production,
- shipping,
- industry,
- agriculture,
- tourism,
- etc.

And for these purposes engineers found the “right” methods of supply, control and storage.

Water is simply something one can easily pump to where you need it, water also can be used to flush our pollution problems downstream to our neighbours, making our problem their problem.

Across the ages we all fought against flooding. We did this by regulating our river discharges via locks, floodgates and building high, strong dikes. We thought we had our rivers under our total control and we thought that flooding would never happen again. And so we built up our original flood plains without thinking or considering the risks of flooding.

The Major floods experienced across Europe in recent years have shown that not only the Dutch have to face the challenge presented to them by high water.

It showed that the impact of floods is devastating.

Over the last decades there have been rapid advances in Europe not only in water management but also in policies on the environment and ecology.

Unfortunately, there has not always been sufficient recognition of the logical interrelationships between the various policy fields. Greater integration is needed to tackle a combination of problems occurring because of growing population, economic and social developments and climate change. This needs to be done sooner rather than later.

Water management “the modern way” must be multidisciplinary. Civil engineers must work together with:

- spatial planners,
- agriculturists,
- environmentalists
- and even historians like me.

In Holland we are facing a combination of problems:

- sea level rise,
- soil subsidence,
- high peaks in river volumes.

These developments in terms of risk to our safety, work in the same enforcing direction; becoming a growing probability with even larger consequences than the individual parts.

The safety risk therefore is growing at an accelerated pace. One that must be attended to.

We built our dikes and dams against flooding. We felt safe.

Until, nature gave The Netherlands a wake up call in 1993 and 1995!

High discharges of the river Rhine almost caused a disaster and 250.000 people had to be evacuated. The disruption was immense. It could have been far greater.

The government listened to the call. They decided to change their attitude to flood protection.

Building and reinforcing of our existing dikes and dams was no longer the only solution to protect us against flooding.

Our water systems need room to evolve if they are to cope with uncertain and unforeseen future developments.

One of the results of this is water conservation throughout the entire catchment area and enlarging the flow area of the river rather than embarking on a further round of dike strengthening. In other words, addressing the problem as a whole, managing all the facets of it.

Making room for water also means that we may sometimes need to take a step back and, for instance, stop building in the winter flood plains of the rivers. We reserve land now to maintain flood protection, safeguarding our heritage and our future.

An important principle for future water management is to base measures on natural processes and to restore the resilience of water systems. This can be achieved by encouraging water conservation and buffering to make areas more self-sufficient. This encapsulation will help to ensure that problems are resolved within catchment areas rather than transferred to adjacent areas.

Due to ongoing climate change the sea level continues to rise.

The higher the sea level, the higher the water in the tidal areas and the harder it is for river water to drain off.

Another result of climate change is that the probability of an extreme weather event occurring rises. The more water has to flow through any river channel the higher the water level will become. This leads to a increased chance of flooding.

With sea levels rising and river discharges increasing, the soil (in the Netherlands) is subsiding.

The larger the difference between water levels (either sea level or river level) and lower lying areas then the greater the impact of floods.

Besides these physical problems, we must face the fact that more and more economic activities are taking place in areas which are endangered by high water problems from rivers. This means that when a flood event occurs the social and economic impact will be enormous.

To summarize;

A changing climate means more frequent and higher peaks in river volumes combined with a reduced drainage capacity. In addition the soil is subsiding and population density continues to grow, as does the economy. Consequently the vulnerability of society and its economy to high water disasters increases.

Since the safety risk is growing and waters do not recognise administrative or political borders, thinking and acting in partnership on a catchment scale has to start now.

The E.U. Framework Directive requires member states to cooperate in a catchment area to protect and improve water quality, the high water challenge thus calls for international cooperation on river basin management.

This is even more so since experience has shown that positive local measures in one part of the catchment can have adverse effects on other parts (up- or downstream). Hence an holistic approach is required.

I am glad to know that in some of the major river systems in the European Union planning has been made to address flooding. Making flood plans means not only to prepare our warning systems but must also to consider the way we are going to build in and utilise those areas.

That means reducing the vulnerability of articles which could be flooded and adapting existing uses in flood prone areas.

I conclude that we have to learn to live with flood events, since they are a part of nature they will always occur. We should behave in a manner to mitigate potential risks for people, property and possessions. People must be made aware of the real and actual risks in order to induce precautionary actions.

I thank you for your attention.