

**Address by Siebe Riedstra, Secretary-General of the Ministry of Infrastructure and the Environment, at the Meeting of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention, Maastricht, 30 June 2014**

- Sixteen years ago, on 25 June 1998, European environment ministers met in Aarhus at a conference on the 'Environment for Europe' process. They decided that to protect the environment, we needed a stronger environmental democracy. European citizens should have the right to participate in decision-making about their own environment. At the end of the conference, the ministers approved and signed the Aarhus Convention. Today it has been ratified and is being implemented by 47 countries.
- Delegates and representatives of the Aarhus Convention: welcome to Maastricht, one of the most beautiful and historic cities of the Netherlands. An internationally oriented city too. As one of the architects of the Aarhus Convention, the Netherlands is especially honoured to host this Meeting of the Parties to the Convention.
- Dutch people have a reputation for being frank. So I won't disappoint you and will get directly to the point. Why do I believe this meeting is an important event? Because it is our chance to draft a future-proof Maastricht Declaration.
- The Netherlands and many other countries have long been committed to the pillars of the Aarhus Convention: access to environmental information, public participation in environmental decision-making, and access to justice in environmental cases. They constitute the basis of the Convention, which in turn lays a foundation for environmental democracy.
- The three pillars are more essential than ever. But the world around us is changing fast. I see three trends – or challenges – that will strongly influence what we do next with the Aarhus principles.
  - *first, new information sources generated by information technology;*
  - *second, new forms of communication between citizens and government; and third*
  - *new forms of participation by citizens, businesses and other parties.*
- **The first challenge: new sources of information**

Governments no longer have a monopoly on environmental information. We now live in a network society, where individual members of the public measure, collect, share, assess and review the information they need. And we are entering the age of big data.

- The new age of information technology, big data and social media makes environmental information even more accessible to the public. Since the Convention's entry into force, more data has become available. For example, smartphones can be used to measure air quality, noise levels near airports, or check for the presence of microbeads in cosmetics.
- **The second challenge: new forms of communication**

Thanks to social media, society is increasingly connected at grassroots level. The network society is changing the relationship between governments, people and the environment.
- A demonstration of this will be given at a side event during this conference. In the Netherlands we are working on a digital Atlas of the Environment, which collates the whole range of environmental data at street or neighbourhood level and offers this information in a user-friendly, accessible and integrated way. This brings new opportunities and new challenges.
- The Netherlands is also working to make information more widely accessible.

We have launched an action plan on open government, which addresses topical issues like open data, open-by-design and e-government. The Dutch government's policy is that government information is publicly accessible except in specific, exceptional circumstances. This applies to much more than just environmental information.

It also applies to information about parking facilities, waste disposal and building permit applications currently being processed.

Apps are being designed to enable the public to access and use this information with their smartphones and tablets. Examples include parking

and waste apps.

- **Third: new forms of participation**

Civic participation in government policy is nothing new, of course. We're all familiar with the classic advice and participation models for citizens and businesses. But they no longer suffice in today's society. People want their voices to be heard. When they team up with like-minded individuals on social media, their ideas spread with incredible speed.

- People want to be involved in thinking about and resolving social issues. If you see a traffic hazard in your street, you take a picture and mail it to the local government department responsible.
- In many cases, participation is already happening in the Netherlands. Businesses and citizens get involved at the start when the government launches a new idea or proposal. For instance, they already help shape municipal policy via the municipal website, Facebook and Twitter.
- But people want to do more. They devise their own solutions and apply them in practice, on their own or in partnership with government bodies or businesses. They also want to be involved in government and help develop policy. We call this 'co-creation' or the 'energetic society'.
- This new development of social initiatives, independent of government, is fed by the rise of social media and by the Dutch government's open data policy. As a result, government gives up control in certain areas, or transferring it to civil society.  
In the city of Utrecht, for example, a cooperative energy association – Energy U – has been set up. It entails companies and individuals taking sustainable initiatives to save energy, and produce and use renewable energy sources, without government interference.

- Of course, this new form of participation isn't easy. It's also challenging. Especially for governments. Some people say we are creating our own opposition. But I believe that a healthy democracy is based on open dialogue and transparency. It requires trust, flexibility, smart management and much more. Doing nothing is not an option. Participation 2.0 is here to stay and will only grow.
- These trends have raised some interesting questions for the Aarhus Convention. How can we allocate responsibility for involving the public? When and how should citizens participate in decision-making and implementation?
- Ladies and gentlemen,  
Let me conclude. The pillars of the Aarhus Convention remain rock solid. But new, challenging issues have arisen in the international environmental arena. I just mentioned three of them. I'm sure that when the Minister addresses the High Level Segment on Wednesday, she will explain how she intends to update the Convention while upholding its solid principles.
- But one thing is clear to me today. We will enter this new era together. And we will do so with fresh resolve, starting today in the beautiful city of Maastricht.
- Thank you.