Side event - Water, Energy and Human Rights

22 September 2014
Room XXII
13:00-15:00

• Thank you for joining us today for this discussion on Water, Energy and Human Rights.

• We have an excellent panel today. The Netherlands have an intimate relation – love and fear - with water and water management, going back to the centuries ago the time of earliest settlements in our wet country. Two third of the Netherlands is under the sea level and we can only live there due to human intervention. The last 50 years our view on how to avoid floods developed. First of all we concentrated on the rising sea level, increasing the height of the dikes but we overlooked that the enemies come also from behind. Living downstream of three major European rivers and a multitude of smaller ones, we suddenly faced that the rivers are an important threat and we had to evacuate 250,000 thousands inhabitants because the rivers reached their maximum. Each country tries to avoid floods; so France and Germany constructed pipes and canals to the Rhine
with the effect that rain waters go fast to the river Rhine. In this way they avoid that villages get their feet wet; yet, the result is that the water level of the Rhine reaches dangerous levels. This is a clear example that the solution of one problem, creates new problems and that you need an international approach, also to ensure access to clean water.

- Other change in mentality is, that instead of increasing all dikes in the Netherlands, we decide to have a flexible system to block the sea in case of extreme high waters of by severe storms by for example two huge doors on the river by Rotterdam that can be closed so that the sea does not push the water level up. When I say huge: each door made from steel has the length of the Eiffel tower. Very expensive but less money than if you have to build higher dikes everywhere.

- In my previous job as Director General I often went on trade missions with the Dutch companies. Water is fascinating because you talk about protection against the sea, clean water, irrigation etc. All areas where there is innovation.

- Our country is densely populated and we have to come up with smart solutions to provide clean water and for everyone on our territory. At the same time we signed up for ambitious goals to
reduce climate change. When we are able to collect energy while treating wastewater, we bring both ambitions together. Some of the breakthrough technologies in this field are being developed in the Netherlands. Waste water produced by households, companies and industry release a good deal of its warmth into the drains and sewers. The recovery and reuse of this valuable energy yields considerable cost savings and prevents the emission of greenhouse gases. This can save households 15% on their energy bill equaling a year of electric light use. Harvesting warmth will help to keep our houses cooler, which will be more important in the future. It is also an important step to achieve energy neutral households in the future, which will produce as much energy as they are using.

• An example of this technology is riothermics, which is a method used to recover heat or cold from the sewers. This energy can be used to heat or cool buildings or installations situated in the vicinity of the sewer system. This provides major cost savings and also means a strong reduction in the use of fossil fuels and consequently the emission of greenhouse gases. Riothermics can be combined quite well with other ‘thermal technology’ such as heat-cold storage in the soil. For some situations the combination
of these technologies can result in an even higher yield and shorter cost recovery times. Riothermics can be applied at locations where there is a sufficient supply of, and demand for, thermal energy. Hotels, apartment buildings, offices and swimming pools would be the likely candidates in cities. Sewage treatment plants also offer good possibilities. The recovered heat can for example be used to dry slurry or to activate the fermentation process. Given the importance of energy saving government subsidies are made available to stimulate innovation and sustainability.

- As chair of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, or UN-ECE, I would like to highlight their useful work to promote access for all to sustainable energy and clean drinking water. UN-ECE is one of the hidden champions of Geneva when it comes to develop standards and recommendations jointly with industry experts and government institutions. Many of these standards are widely used not only within ECE member states, but also in other regions. I have no doubt that also for today’s topic the Commission would be well placed if member states wish to develop standards that further improve access to clean water and sustainable energy. Under its sustainable energy program for
example, an expert group on renewable energy collects best practices to advise member states on their policies. Another example that deserves mentioning is the Water Convention, which now has 40 parties and has been signed by another 26 countries.

- Looking at the work here at the Human Rights Council, we are grateful to the Blue group and the Special rapporteur for pushing the agenda on the right to water and sanitation as a human right. We are grateful for their efforts and fully support them. The latest resolution on the Right to Water that the Blue Group is presenting during this session is an important example of that.

- The Special Rapporteur, in the person of Catarina de Albuquerque, has underlined the importance of the preparations for the new UN Sustainable Development Goals. We think that they are going well; the report of the High level Panel as well as the 'Open Working Group' have included ‘universal access to safe drinking water and sanitation’ as targets to be reached by 2030. The importance of these targets, also from a Human Rights perspective, cannot be underestimated.
• To make the goals truly sustainable, we should not only look at new infrastructure to provide people with access, but also ensure that existing infrastructure works and doesn’t fall apart. It is easy to focus only on opening access for new users. However when we are not looking at maintenance, we’re trying to keep a leaking boat afloat.

• Today our focus will be on the relation between water, energy and human rights. It will provide a practical look at the ways the right to water and sanitation can be realized. This will require robust legislation, but also a willingness and commitment from the private sector. Finally we have to look beyond our first impressions to realize how wastewater does not have to be an eyesore and a pollutant, but can be turned into a source of energy.