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speech

Speech by Dutch Minister for the Environment Wilma Mansveld at the Joint High-level Segment under the Meetings of the Parties to the Aarhus Convention and its Protocol on PRTRs, Maastricht

Minister Mansveld spoke at the Aarhus Convention (High level segment) in Maastricht on 2 July. She also spoke at a press conference later that day about the Maastricht Declaration.

In her speech and press conference Mrs. Mansveld stressed that the principles of Aarhus "are here to stay, but the resources and methods used to pursue its aims must be adapted." Mansveld: "That's the only way to ensure the Convention remains effective in today's world. Against this background we have to have new ambitions. So I support a new approach and a future-proof Convention: an Aarhus 2.0."

The Dutch minister of the Environment also spoke about modern environmental policy and new forms of participation of the crowd. Mansveld: "Besides this new approach I also advocate a modern environmental policy. One in which governments make room for the public, business and civil society organisations to come up with solutions themselves. Where government facilitates and encourages bottom-up initiatives and ideas. I am convinced that participation of the crowd will result in better decision-making and a broader support base for decisions."

Ladies and gentlemen,

Exactly a week ago, Erin Brockovich celebrated her 55th birthday.

You may ask what this has to do with our meeting.

In fact, it has a lot to do with it.

Because Erin's story is all about environmental information, environmental law and civic participation.

She worked for a law firm, where she discovered a big environmental scandal. A utility company was contaminating drinking water, causing damage to people's health. Erin uncovered the facts and filed a lawsuit against the company. Her story was later made into an Oscar-winning film starring Julia Roberts.

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Erin's story is about the perceived conflict between economic and environmental interests. Between activists – the good guys – and the greedy, reckless businessmen who destroy people and the environment in order to make a profit. Between people who want to conceal information and well-informed citizens.

I think that the pressure of new developments will make such excesses rarer. Environmental information is more accessible now. Authorities and businesses are more transparent. Companies see potential profit in sustainable enterprise. Social media play a prominent role. And civic participation is now an irreversible trend.

Of course, a lot still needs to be done. Take environmental whistle-blowers who are put under pressure – or worse. Or citizens who gather information that isn't taken seriously. But I believe things have improved in recent decades. By citing positive examples and continually holding each other to account, we can make progress in this area. And the Aarhus Convention and its Compliance Committee can make a unique and positive contribution here.

Companies, the public and public authorities are more aware than ever of their impact on the environment, thanks to scientific progress, transparency and innovation. More than ever, we are seeking to balance the interests of people, the environment and the market. More than ever, we understand that 'business as usual' is not an option.

What's more, people are realizing that sustainable business practices make companies stronger. Companies that invest in sustainable innovation are more future-oriented, and more popular with consumers, employees and governments alike. They need not fear naming and shaming or substantial awards for damages.

This growing awareness can also be credited to the Aarhus Convention. It is still the world's only legally binding international agreement on access to environmental information, environmental decision-making and environmental law.

But it's great to learn that Chili, Costa Rica and others are building a similar framework for involving the public inspired by the Aarhus Convention in Latin America.

In many countries, environmental law has been adapted and civic participation is now mainstream. Courts are increasingly taking account of the Aarhus principles in their judgments.

In other words, ladies and gentlemen, the three pillars of the Aarhus Convention still stand strong: the right to access to information, the right to participate and the right to access to justice on environmental matters.

But times have changed since the Convention was drafted. Thanks to the internet and social media, the public has more access to knowledge and information than ever before. Empowered citizens don't need a paternalist authority to tell them what's good for them.

People are capable of finding the information they need themselves, and of making their own choices about what's good for them.

Grassroots democracy is on the rise in many countries, fed by the explosive growth of social media.

This is not always convenient for governments.

But it is a good trend.

Because environmental issues affect us all.

So we need to tackle them together.

In that respect, the Netherlands believes the Aarhus Convention is more relevant than ever.

Joining forces and developing solutions together is impossible unless governments, companies, citizens and NGOs think and act in concert. And this is impossible without a broad support base – that is, without environmental democracy. We – government and the private sector – must empower individuals to play an active part in decisions about their future. One of the ways we can do so is by providing better access to environmental information.

But people and companies aren't only on the receiving end of information.

Increasingly, they are also generating environmental data themselves.

It's called citizen science.

Take smartphone apps for measuring air quality.

They help lung patients decide whether it's safe to go outdoors, or whether they need to take extra medication. There's an app to measure noise levels.

And an app that tells you if there are microbeads in your personal care products.

What's our attitude, as governments, towards data generated by the 'crowd'?

I believe we will have to find ways of making room for these developments.

It's what society wants. And it's a trend that we can benefit from, too.

The government no longer holds the monopoly on environmental information.

We live in a network society now.

People communicate about environmental matters with each other and with governments, in their own interests and in the environment's defence.

We need to respond to these developments. We should not be defensive.

These trends present us with opportunities. For stronger public support, good governance and better decision-making.

The Aarhus Convention is here to stay.

But the resources and methods used to pursue its aims must be adapted.

That's the only way to ensure the Convention remains effective in today's world.

Against this background we have to have new ambitions.

So I support a new approach and a future-proof Convention.

An Aarhus 2.0.

Of course, the template of the current Convention should remain intact.

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But we need to better reflect some realities, like:

- the growing role of social media;
- environmental whistleblowers who need better protection;
and
- individuals and companies that want better access to product information;
for instance, about components, sustainability, the presence of
microbeads, recyclable packaging and the production process.

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Besides this new approach I also advocate a modern environmental policy.

One in which governments make room for the public, business and civil society organisations to come up with solutions themselves.

Where government facilitates and encourages bottom-up initiatives and ideas.

I am convinced that participation of the crowd will result in better decision-making and a broader support base for decisions.

It will also improve implementation. Government stands to benefit from well-informed citizens and businesses. This means the provision of environmental information for and by individuals and businesses.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Before I close I would like to remind you of Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's words, that 'this treaty can help us respond to many challenges' and that 'the convention's critical focus on involving the public is helping to keep governments accountable'. I couldn't agree more.

I do agree as well with those who plea for a bigger role of non-state actors in international negotiations, like we do in this Convention. For example: the participation of stakeholders in UNEP's UNEA meetings and active role of Cities, Regions and the private sector in the Lima and Paris Climate negotiations.

Government is dependent on civil society.

Access to environmental information, public participation in decision-making and access to justice in environmental cases are key to good environmental governance. And these principles strengthen public confidence in and support for environmental policy.

The role of government must be to encourage and enable people to take responsibility. This, ladies and gentlemen, is the only way to a just and sustainable future. The Aarhus Convention will doubtless guide us along this long and winding road. I trust that the Maastricht Declaration, which will be presented later today, will offer specific tools we can use to tackle the new developments I've been talking about.

I wish you an inspiring and constructive meeting on the road to Aarhus 2.0.

Thank you.