

Aarhus Convention, MOP-5, 30 June 2014, MECC

Welcome address, Mayor of Maastricht, Mr. Onno Hoes

Good morning ladies and gentlemen.

As Maastricht's mayor, I am deeply honoured to have been invited to open the Aarhus conference. I am always delighted when people from around the world choose Maastricht as the place to share their knowledge, passion and experience. I'm especially impressed by how many of you have travelled here for this event.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The world around us is changing fast and radically. As a local authority, we experience this every day. Information is available everywhere and anyone can post messages. The arrival of social media means that we are not only consumers, but also producers of information. Facebook and twitter have become a permanent part of my daily work. Citizens, entrepreneurs and organisations contact me regularly via these media. But they also use social media in order to place themes and subjects on the political agenda.

The time that public authorities had a monopoly on information about the environment has long since gone. Citizens are using social media to contribute new environmental information obtained from the Internet to the political debate. This allows them to influence political decisions. And just to be clear, I consider this a positive development. The basic idea that more environmental information from public authorities or NGOs results in better environmental protection no longer holds. You have to increasingly assume that more environmental information from several sources plays a role in the decision-making process. Citizens are better informed and have now become a different type of partner. We often see that in practice, the debate is focusing on environmental measures as such – because sustainability and other aspects have long since become important themes in the decision-making process – it is now focusing more sharply on the choices between various environmental aspects. Let me give you an example. We are currently considering a tram connection in the centre of Maastricht. The debate in the planning stage for the construction of the tramway was not so much about sustainable mobility, but rather the wider range of environmental information that resulted in a debate about the merits of sustainable mobility in the city versus no increase in noise levels and vibrations. I believe this to be a positive development because the crucial aspect of the environmental debate is being highlighted.

Furthermore, the term 'environment' is becoming a broader sustainability theme, in which economic, ecological and socio-cultural aspects should balance one another.

Ladies and gentlemen,

During this conference, you will be considering these types of issues. How can we make environmental information more easily available to everyone and how can we use that information more effectively in decision-making processes? You will be dealing with the core of the changing information society. I am very curious about your findings and the results of this conference. And you know that conferences in Maastricht may have considerable repercussions for Europe and the rest of the world. I do not wish to pressurise you, but wouldn't it be wonderful if you were to reach agreements at this conference to which we can link the name of Maastricht. Aarhus is of course a splendid name for your conference. It would be an even better name if we could add Maastricht to it.

I would also like to take this opportunity to tell you a bit more about Maastricht. I hope I can tempt you to leave the exhibition centre in the next few days and take a walk around our city centre while you are here.

Ladies and gentlemen,

You may perhaps have heard of the Maastricht Treaty, signed in 1992, which breathed new life into the European Community and later gave birth to the euro. Maastricht was the cradle of our European currency. Although we all complained when everything became more expensive then, we were happy because it made things easier, and we began to believe in it because it was there and became part of our everyday lives.

Be that as it may, Maastricht is a city in transition. We are transforming ourselves into a service economy and more and more into an international centre of knowledge and culture. And besides that, more than one hundred European and international institutes are now located in Maastricht.

Their activities vary, but there's one thing they have in common: thanks to their networks and relationships they are in contact with the entire world on a daily basis. Maastricht is the vibrant centre of Europe in miniature: the region around Liège, Maastricht and Aachen,

where three countries come together. The combination of three languages and five regions closely reflects Europe's diversity.

It goes with saying that Maastricht too is being affected by demographic transition and the economic crisis, but that does not alter the fact that we can create economic and social dynamics that will make Maastricht strong and guarantee it a robust future. Maastricht is going to organise these dynamics in three areas:

Firstly, Maastricht as a city of culture.

Our city has a very varied arts and culture scene and it will expand its cultural infrastructure in the near future. This will underline our claim to be a city of culture. This image will result in investments and will attract knowledge workers, innovative companies and visitors who stay for several days.

Secondly, Maastricht as an international knowledge centre

Almost a quarter of Maastricht's residents are foreigners, and almost half the inhabitants are under thirty-five. Maastricht houses countless international institutions. Together with these knowledge institutions in the municipality and region, we will create conditions in the coming years to become a more young and open internationally-oriented community at the heart of Europe.

For this reason, Maastricht is seeking to participate in Brainport twenty twenty. This is one of the economic core themes set out for the future by the Dutch Government. Brainport links the existence of knowledge institutions, such as the universities, to the innovative and industrial business community. We call them campuses. The campuses in Eindhoven, Chemelot Sittard-Geleen, Avantis Heerlen, and the Health Campus in Maastricht are the focal points for these developments. The top technology region that will result from this concept will be one of the top three innovation regions in Europe in twenty twenty and one of the top ten in the world. According to forecasts, the Health Campus Maastricht alone will result in two thousand five hundred direct jobs by twenty twenty and several times that number in indirect jobs.

The city's authorities have a strong focus on linking people and organisations. We are working together to build a Maastricht where people are tolerant towards one another and where they can develop to the full. The many economic, social and cultural projects that are planned for our region are a confirmation of a bright future for the city.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Your visit to our city and your conference are a perfect match for Maastricht as I just described it. Over the next few days, you will be bringing knowledge to Maastricht and sharing it amongst yourselves.

Although the Aarhus Convention was ratified by the Netherlands ten years ago, practice has demonstrated that the theme has still to be fully worked out in law. Its practical implementation presents many possibilities. Maastricht is therefore not only your host, but also one of your laboratories for the further implementation.

I wish you all a very successful conference and look forward to welcoming you again to Maastricht!