

*Keynote address at ERSCP-EMSU 2010 Conference by prof Jacqueliene Cramer,  
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## **Sustainability from a political perspective**

Ladies and gentlemen

The transition to a sustainable society requires a fundamental, system-level change, in our production and consumption patterns. Technological changes should go hand in hand with changes in our socio-economic and institutional system as a whole. In fact, it is a revolution that can be compared in scale and magnitude with the ICT and internet revolution of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Perhaps we cannot yet fully imagine how our energy technologies and material cycles will look by the end of this century, but we can be certain that they will be different from the current technologies.

Changing course towards sustainability is a collective effort. We need to act together in order to get things done. All actors in society, ranging from government, industry, NGO's and citizens have a role to play. This holds for issues such as climate change, biodiversity and scarcity of resources.

My contribution today reflects upon the role of different actors in the global warming issue at an international level. As the former Dutch Minister of Spatial Planning and the Environment, I was actively involved in the international negotiations on climate change from February 2007 – February 2010. Which experiences did I gain in this process?

Let me state upfront: Yes, The Copenhagen conference in December 2009 was not the success Europe hoped for. But to call it a complete failure, is nonsense. Yes, the organization was a mess. Yes, the Ministers of the Environment could not settle on a deal. But nevertheless the conference was not a complete failure. We, the Ministers of the Environment, especially the European representatives, were far too optimistic about the possible outcome. Why? Because the 27 member states managed to agree upon an ambitious climate package before the Copenhagen Conference and expected other countries to follow the EU example. This strategy had worked two years before at the Bali conference, which was the preparatory conference on the road to Copenhagen. At that Bali conference in December 2007, we had managed to build a bridge between the developing countries and the developed world, especially the United States. This resulted in a Bali

Action Plan, which set the framework for a climate change deal in Copenhagen. The major objectives to agree upon in Copenhagen were:

- Temperature rise should not exceed 2 degrees Celsius;
- Developed countries should reduce their emissions by 2020 with 25-40 %;
- Developing countries should also take actions to reduce CO<sub>2</sub>;
- Finance should be mobilized by the developed countries to support mitigation actions in developing countries and technology transfer and to support actions to adapt to climate change; and
- Special attention should be paid to deforestation (the loss of forests) and degradation of land as a result of human activities.

Prior to the Copenhagen Conference, a large number of preparatory meetings were held both at administrative and ministerial level. The involvement of industry was limited, while NGO's had all kinds of platforms to express their views. As Ministers of the Environment, we dealt with climate change as if it was just an environmental issue, while in fact it was a geopolitical debate. It included issues such as changing power relations between the big blocks in the world economy: China, Brazil, India, South Africa and some other fast growing economies versus the developed World: the US, Europe, Japan, Australia and Canada. The developing countries (united in the G77) did not want to be restricted in their economic growth through climate change measures that could hamper that growth.

Most preparatory work was done by the Ministers of the Environment. To speed up the process on the road to Copenhagen the so-called Greenland Dialogue was held 6 times. About 25-30 Environment Ministers representing all parts of the world (China, US, Brazil, India, Mexico, Africa, EU etc.) were invited by the chairman of the Copenhagen meeting, Connie Hedegaard, the Danish Environment Minister. With my track record within the field of sustainable development as well as my active role in the EU climate change negotiations I was asked to attend the Greenland dialogue. I was therefore an integral part of the climate change debate – as close to the fire as one can be. Every time we met, we made progress. So, we were hopeful that enough preparatory work was done at the political level to seal the deal in Copenhagen. Parallel to this Greenland dialogue process, the G8, G20, the Major Economies Forum and some other political bodies also met in advance. And here too, steps were made. However, the closer we came to Copenhagen, the more it became obvious that it was not just an environmental issue we had to deal with. It was above all a geopolitical issue and a North-South tension that dominated the discussion.

The fast growing developing countries, like China, India, Brazil and South Africa, stated that the developed countries had caused the problem and therefore they should take the lead in solving the problem. Particularly the US was criticized for not having taken strict emission reduction measures. The US was not able to deliver because the draft Climate Bill had not passed the Senate yet. Furthermore, some oil states such as Saudi Arabia and Venezuela demanded financial compensation for their loss of income in case less fossil energy would be sold. Moreover, Venezuela, Bolivia, Cuba and Nicaragua blamed capitalism as being the cause of the problem. These and other geopolitical issues could only be solved by the world leaders. That is why I was pleased that they joined us in Copenhagen.

However, it soon began dawn that there was too little time to really seal a deal there. The Copenhagen accord was therefore the best that could come out of this meeting. When you read this brief accord, you can respond in two ways: Is the bottle half empty or half full? I tend to choose for the latter: it is a good start. At least the world leaders agreed upon the need to limit the increase in global temperature below two degrees Celsius. The accord also states the need to commit to CO<sub>2</sub> emission reduction targets and actions. Moreover, finances have been mobilized to address the needs of developing countries. In preparing the financial paragraph of the accord The Netherlands had played an important role. About 18 months before the conference I already started to write a non-paper on this issue and contacted my EU colleagues to respond to this paper. After reaching consensus in EU context, we shared our view with representatives of other parts of the world. This led to various proposals, which were combined to one proposal during the Copenhagen Conference.

It is not to be expected that the follow-up conference in Mexico in December 2010 can reach a full fledged agreement. I expect, however, that on the road to 2012 when a conference of the Parties will be held probably in South Africa, we might be more optimistic. At that time the Kyoto protocol will expire, to which the major developed countries (except the US) are committed. Thus, the pressure to come up with a deal is much higher. The major obstacle in the upcoming negotiations will be the required unanimity of decisions made in the UN context. Each country has a blocking power, or a veto. Thus, if just a few countries reject the conclusions, there is no deal. To overcome this problem, some people suggest to split up decision-making in a number of separate deals instead of waiting for one overall deal.

What can we learn from my story? The climate change issue is for the first time in history on the agenda of all world leaders. It is a highly contested, complex and geopolitical issue. And therefore it is very difficult to solve in unanimity in a UN context. But let us face reality: huge interests and political power relations are involved. So, who thinks that it is easy to fix it, lives on another planet.

It might have helped the international negotiation process if the business community had shown leadership as well on the road to Copenhagen. For instance, she could have acted proactively in preparing business agreements per sector (e.g. for the sector aviation and bunker fuels). In this way a level playing field could have been created for those industries that operate internationally. What I experienced instead was a defensive business world united in branch organizations which refused strict targets for their own sector. The lowest common denominator within the sector was their contribution to the debate without any attempt to build bridges between markets in different parts of the world. The real progressive and constructive forces in industries were hardly heard. Being aware of that, I invited a group of Dutch business leaders half a year before Copenhagen to cooperate on a more proactive and collective approach. All CEO's I invited responded positively. I also tried to motivate my EU colleagues, the Ministers of the Environment, to take a similar initiative and join forces. This proposal was picked up by a few other countries. However, it had not led yet to a counterforce from within business to echo another, more constructive view on solving the climate change problem. But the initiative, taken by industries is growing.

The NGO's on the other hand were very vocal, especially in developed countries. They mobilized a great number of citizens to 'beat the heat'. Before the Copenhagen Conference citizen groups, municipalities, environmental and development cooperation organizations all joined forces to raise awareness among the public for the climate change issue and put pressure on politicians. During the Conference they were very outspoken and present as well. However, their voice in the actual negotiations was limited. Behind closed doors they tried to influence the opinion of the negotiators, but as a group they were too diverse to be a real dealmaker. Thus, what happened was that each actor tended to remain in their own trench. The politicians took notice of the variety of opinions raised by other actors, such as industry and NGO's. But in the end, the dominant factor was the clash of leading powers in the world to master the negotiation process.

### In conclusion

What is my conclusion? Well, in my view the transition to a sustainable

energy system can only be made if enough societal support can be mobilized to make the change. Without this support, politicians cannot act. Moreover, as it requires a system change with winners and losers, conflicts will inevitably arise about the legitimacy of the actions taken. In this turbulent environment, collective efforts have to be made to change course.

At the international level no consensus exists yet on how to divide the burden of global warming. Geopolitical and north-south tensions dominate the dispute. In addition, representatives of the old economy, favoring business as usual, deny strict measures to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Their voice is heard louder in the international arena than those who are willing to make the change and see market opportunities. Initiatives of this latter group to raise their voice and support government actions, can help the negotiation process in which politicians have to reach consensus. The role of NGOs remains important as well. Especially, when they join forces, put pressure on politicians and continue to mobilize broad public support. When the issue of climate change is not just an issue dealt with by professional NGOs, but by every citizen, it becomes a matter of course to deal prudently with the planet. Public campaigns focusing on positive actions and showing how to save energy and money at the same time can increase societal awareness and the willingness to act. Simultaneously, an environmentally conscious attitude in society influences the sense of urgency among politicians.

We live in the 21<sup>th</sup> century: a century in which globalization and regionalization go hand in hand. And a century in which the boundaries between the role of government, industry and civil society in shaping our future, also with respect to sustainability, are becoming ever more blurred. The 21<sup>th</sup> century is also a century in which all kinds of, sometimes unexpected, actors influence policy making. It is in this 21<sup>th</sup> century that we have to make the transition towards a sustainable energy system. The way forward is to strengthen the proactive forces in society and jointly change course towards a sustainable economy.