

Speech by Frits Brouwer, Principal of the Dutch Delegation to GEO and Director General of the Royal Netherlands Meteorological Institute, on behalf of the State Secretary for Transport, Public Works and Water Management, Tineke Huizinga-Heringa, at the GEO-IV Ministerial Summit on Earth Observation for Sustainable Growth and Development, Cape Town, Friday 30 November

Your excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour for me to be here today to represent the Dutch State Secretary for Transport, Public Works and Water Management, Ms Tineke Huizinga. Unfortunately, this Ministerial Summit coincides with the European Union Transport Council, which she had to attend. She has therefore asked me to speak on her behalf and to tell you how important GEO is to the Dutch government and to thank the South African government for hosting this Summit in the beautiful Cape Town.

The Netherlands has been a keen supporter of the Group on Earth Observations ever since it was launched at the first Earth Observation Summit in Washington in 2003. GEO allows the international community to reap maximum benefits from investments in earth observation systems. GEO now enjoys widespread international support. And that is needed if global issues, such as the serious consequences of climate change, are to be addressed adequately.

GEO focuses in particular on the situation in developing countries. We believe that it is right to do so. That is where the main gaps in the observation network are to be found. Yet it is in these countries, with their limited resources, that climate change is having the most serious impact on society. GEO's vision, which the Netherlands endorses, is therefore for all humankind to benefit from the Global Earth Observation System of Systems.

For the Netherlands, GEO was a very welcome initiative. It encourages the research community to be more alert to the social benefits of its work. It also puts Dutch efforts in the field of earth observation into a wider context. A number of GEOSS themes are of special importance to us. Weather, water and climate are three very closely linked themes, and of great significance to Dutch society. That was the case in the past, it is the case now, and it will continue to be the case in the future. The Dutch government needs practical information about climate change if the Netherlands is to be climate-proof. The Netherlands is a low-lying country, by the sea. It is densely populated, and is criss-crossed by several major rivers. So you will understand that flood protection is one of the Dutch government's highest priorities.

Water management, and water policy have also Royal attention in the Netherlands. Our Crown Prince, the Prince of Orange, for instance now presides the United Nations Sanitation Committee, which focuses on the importance of water quality in relation to health. Because of the importance of the water societal benefit area, we yesterday offered to second a Dutch water expert to the GEO-secretariat.

For many years, the Netherlands has been making its contribution to the global observation infrastructure. Satellite observation is now indispensable for monitoring and improved understanding the earth system. The Netherlands takes an active part in international partnerships as a member of the European Space Agency and the European Organisation for the Exploitation of Meteorological Satellites. But it is doing more. With the satellite instruments SCIAMACHY and OMI, the Netherlands has been helping for many years to monitor changes in the composition of the atmosphere. The Dutch government is currently considering whether a successor to these instruments is a feasible option, and is focusing on opportunities for an international partnership.

For GEO to succeed, it is essential that GEOSS ensures timely, global and open access to data and products. That is a condition for optimum large-scale use of our investments in observation systems and in developing models.

Mr. Chairman, the Netherlands is proud of the results of GEO so far and endorses the Cape Town Declaration. It brings our aims into focus, identifies GEO's great added value, and points the way to the future. An active stance on the part of the countries and organisations taking part, and political commitment and the spirit of cooperation, remain essential to GEO's success!

Thank you for your attention.