

We keep absurd systems alive

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In early April I was in Boston at the invitation of AACSB, an organisation that accredits business schools throughout the world, including the Rotterdam School of Management. In this respect, RSM is in good company, alongside schools such as MIT in Boston and Harvard University.

In September 2015, AACSB compiled a list of 100 'influential leaders' based on nominations from more than 1,000 universities worldwide – and I was very honoured to be one of them. And now here I was on stage at their annual conference.

In front of a packed audience, I was asked what are the greatest barriers to applying sustainable solutions and thus to conserving our world for future generations. And I had to explain that in 5 minutes. It is certainly the case that as a society we are keeping systems in place that work against major breakthroughs in the areas of energy, water, food supply and even healthcare. For instance, there are still absurd subsidies for agriculture and fossil fuels, there are laws that hold back sustainable solutions, healthcare is ruled by the pharmaceutical industry and there are still companies that are focussed solely on optimising profits. Companies, in other words, that have every interest in maintaining the status quo. Even if in so doing we seriously pollute our world and put humanity itself at risk.

The good news is that over the next 10 years we shall witness major technological breakthroughs, while our ever growing cities are becoming test beds for all sorts of sustainable and integrated solutions. Precisely because this is what urban consumers are demanding. They no longer want to live in an atmosphere of smog and stinking sewers, while at the same time having to pay large amounts of money for their tiny apartments. The cities of today are already the hotbeds of the 'shared economy'. Well-being is becoming more important than economic growth. Anything that does not add value will cease to exist. Whether the old economy wants it or not. We are standing on the threshold of a new era. And hopefully we're just in time to prevent any further irreparable damage to our planet.

After that, I gave a speech at Indoor Ag-Con in Las Vegas on the relationship between large metropolises and the countryside. On the new interconnectedness between urban and rural areas and the importance of local food production. And on sustainable integrated solutions and new business models.

In between, I visited a number of customers in California. Growers with outdoor crops who have huge concerns about the availability and quality of water, while even today California is still the 'salad bowl' of America. They have to get used to the idea that automation enables you within a single year to save 40% water while increasing production by 30%, and that a large amount of food production will move to the city.

And then back to the Netherlands. On 14 April Prime Minister Mark Rutte introduced the Netherlands as a Sustainable Urban Delta at the Innovation Expo. On account of the Netherlands' EU Presidency, there were a large number of representatives from the European member states. In addition, there were hundreds of entrepreneurs demonstrating smart integrated solutions in the areas of energy, water, food and mobility, thus providing answers to the questions that all these rapidly growing metropolises are wrestling with. And if, with all these answers, we can give a helping hand to the metropolises, we will at the same time be creating a new business model for the Netherlands. At the end of the day, that is something we urgently need, now that our gas is running out. A good idea!

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