

Speech for Theo Bovens, Queen's Commissioner for
Limburg
23.10.2012 at 14.00

Honourable guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It's a great pleasure to welcome all of you today to the
Final Conference of the FLOOD-WISE project.

This conference forms the conclusion of three years of
intensive collaboration, involving fifteen partners from
ten countries and six river basins. It's a collaboration that
truly goes beyond borders, even beyond the borders of
the European Union.

I also extend a warm welcome to the representatives of
the various embassies of the countries involved in
FLOOD-WISE.

You are here in the Gouvernement, the home of our
provincial government here on the River Maas in
Maastricht. As the name of our city reveals, the river that
has been part of your study is central to our lives. Only

twenty metres away, here behind us, flows the river that we often call Mother Maas ...

The Maas is of course the Meuse, which has its origins in France, on the Plateau de Langres. There it begins as a modest stream, but as water rushes in from all of its tributaries, it becomes the majestic river that flows through our city: Maastricht, capital of Limburg, the southernmost province of the Netherlands. A province with over one million inhabitants, who are governed from this building.

The name Maastricht derives from the Latin *Mosa Trajectum*, which means ford in the River Maas. It denotes the spot where the Romans settled, two thousand years ago. This makes Maastricht one of the oldest cities in our country, some say the oldest.

Our Province of Limburg is just as European as the Maas. Its borders have been contested by fierce fighting down through the centuries. For hundreds of years, Limburg's strategic location has made it a sought-after spot for European powers. The Romans, the Spaniards, the

Prussians, the Austrians and the French have all been lord and master here.

Limburg is named after the castle Limbourg, which was the seat of a medieval principality. A principality on the River Vesdre in Belgium, one of the tributaries of the Maas.

Limburg can almost be said to be located outside the borders of the Netherlands. As anyone familiar with a map of the Netherlands knows, Limburg is surrounded almost entirely by foreign countries. In terms of our borders, we share many more kilometres with our neighbours Germany and Belgium than with the rest of our own country.

Borders are the scars of history, as is evident around the world. They are often drawn randomly, dividing what was once a single whole. That is what happened to Limburg too. We have close historical ties with our neighbours in Germany and Belgium. Geography and history have made Limburg a province where borders are seen and felt as part of everyday experience. But we have decided

to treat them not as barriers but as opportunities. In doing so, we have discovered that our future lies in seeking cooperation across borders.

Our location means that we are members of no less than four Euroregions. One of these is the Meuse-Rhine Euroregion. Founded in 1976, it is one of the oldest transfrontier partnerships in Europe, with five partners divided across three countries and speaking three different languages: German, French and Dutch. No wonder this Euroregion is sometimes referred to as "Europe in miniature".

I therefore welcome you here today not only as the Queen's Commissioner but also as the representative of the lead partner of FLOOD-WISE, the Meuse-Rhine Euroregion.

Your project has mainly been made possible by the support of Europe. In this part of the world, Europe is palpable in many areas. I am not simply referring to the fact that your work is funded in euros, the European

currency which has its origins in the Maastricht Treaty, signed in this very building in 1992. I have already mentioned that our history is intensely European, but our present-day efforts to ensure the safety of the River Maas also constitute a European endeavour. It flows through France, Belgium and the Netherlands and out into the North Sea through the Low Countries' Maas-Rhine delta.

The Maas travels a distance of one thousand kilometres, 160 kilometres of which lie in Limburg. It enters our province at the southernmost tip and leaves through our northernmost municipality. Between these two points, the Maas is of great importance to Limburg. For us, Mother Maas is much more than an object of research into flooding. It determines our landscape, the flora and fauna in the river basin. It has played a crucial part in the construction of settlements, our later villages, towns and cities. The Maas is the lifeblood of Limburg; it has long been an important trade route. It was and is important for our agriculture and the industrial extraction of gravel and clay. The Maas is a source of energy and provides

essential cooling water for our industries. The Maas is a source of inspiration to writers and artists; it is part of our culture. It is also a place for water sports and recreation. For many miles it also forms the natural border with our Belgian neighbours.

And now and then it floods. In 1993 and 1995 especially, we felt the impact of this. The damage amounted to hundreds of millions, to say nothing of the disruption and inconvenience. A sobering reminder of why flood prevention and limiting the effects of flooding forms the focus of your research and study.

Today's final FLOOD-WISE conference will focus on FLOODS and Cross Border Cooperation. Water is the perfect illustration of the need for such cooperation. Water knows no borders. You are all experts on this precious resource, this force of nature. I do not need to explain to you what it means to have too much or too little water in a river.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The United Nations Economic Commission On Europe will deliver a technical assessment of your findings, and the Association of European Border Regions will deliver an assessment on cross border governance.

Allow me to call particular attention to what I like to call the special forces of water management: the cross-sectional bodies, the representatives of the International River Basin Commissions, who involve the competent authorities in their efforts. I am very proud that the representatives from all sizes of rivers can be with us today, such the larger river Danube and the smaller river the Roer.

I have more or less listed all of the positions of the different persons and personalities here today. I have a good reason for doing so.

Your presence and involvement are a recognition of the fact that water is not solely a local, regional or national issue that can be governed at any one level.

On the contrary, water management is teamwork, it is a multi-level governance activity due to the different competences involved.

It is also a multi sector-activity. The realization that water management – by its very nature – cuts through levels and sectors underlines the importance of flood management.

Combine this with the cross border element and the global threat of climate change, and there is no need to explain or explicitly emphasize the importance of the FLOOD-WISE project.

Water management is not just about building dikes higher and higher to protect people from floods. It consists of a River Basin Wide Approach, to create a resilient river basin from a technical perspective and a sustainable basin from an ecological perspective.

However, the discussion on these topics is best left to you, the specialists.

The final chapter of the FLOOD-WISE project, does not mean an end to flooding, its environmental impact or the

need for solutions. The real action, the prevention and protection measures have yet to be taken. In many ways, the work has only just begun.

Let me conclude with two remarks.

Firstly, I sincerely hope that you will all join the Task Force Water Governance initiative. After all, once this final conference is over, your efforts deserve to be continued in working to create smart solutions in water management.

Lastly, I wish you all very fruitful discussions today and tomorrow and a pleasant stay in our beautiful province.

Let Mother Maas inspire you.
