

Water as a Driver of Change

An Interview with Henk Ovink,
Special Envoy for International Water Affairs for the Kingdom of the Netherlands,
and Sherpa to the United Nations/World Bank High Level Panel on Water

EDITORS' NOTE In 2015, Henk Ovink was appointed by the Dutch Cabinet as the first Special Envoy for International Water Affairs. As the Ambassador for Water, he is responsible for advocating water awareness around the world, building institutional capacity and coalitions among governments, multilateral organizations, private sector and NGO's, and initiating innovative approaches to address the world's pressing needs on water. Ovink is also Sherpa to the UN/World Bank High Level Panel on Water. Ovink served on President Obama's Hurricane Sandy Rebuilding Task Force where he led the long-term innovation, resilience and rebuilding efforts. He developed and led the Rebuild by Design competition and initiated the National Disaster Resilience Competition. Before joining the Task Force, Ovink was both Acting Director General of Spatial Planning and Water Affairs and Director of National Spatial Planning for the Netherlands. He holds a research position at the University of Groningen and teaches at the London School of Economics and Harvard Graduate School of Design. His book, written together with Jelte Boeijenga, titled Too Big: Rebuild by Design: A Transformative Approach to Climate Change, explores his climate and water work for the Obama Administration. In January 2018, Ovink was awarded an honorary membership from the Royal Institute of Engineers of the Netherlands for his "transformative global water work."



Henk Ovink

In 2015, you were appointed as the first Water Ambassador of the Netherlands. Will you discuss this role and your key areas of focus?

As Special Envoy for International Water Affairs for the Kingdom of the Netherlands, I am an ambassador dedicated to a specific topic, and for me that is water. I started five years ago upon request of the Dutch Cabinet, as they wanted a 24/7 representative to work around the world on water awareness, diplomacy and action. As water ambassador, it is my ambition to connect the international water challenges, global development, security and climate needs with our commitments on water policy and expertise. Connecting these global needs with the unique Dutch knowledge, expertise, and experience in water governance, politics, management and action is an opportunity for sustainable impact. The Netherlands is reaching out to the world. We consider it our mission and responsibility to do everything we can towards inclusive and sustainable change in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Today, I act on behalf of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Infrastructure and Water Management, Economic Affairs and Climate Policy, and Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality. This underlines the integrated Dutch approach. I am constantly working on creating a better understanding and awareness through research, capacity building, and education, working with the youth, marginalized communities and in places at high risk. With better

understanding and increased awareness come partnerships, strong coalitions, and collaborations for action because the second need, and my dedication, is about action: helping the world to move beyond response and towards preparedness.

You have said that "Worldwide, water is the connecting issue, the number one global risk and the opportunity for comprehensive cultural change." Will you discuss the critical importance and impact of water in the world?

"Water is life", former Secretary General of the UN Ban Ki-moon used to say. He is right, but it is more. Water is the driver of change. It is critically important and interestingly complex. Water is essential for food, energy, equality, gender rights, health, industrial development, livable cities, nature and biodiversity, and the ecosystems around us. Access to safe water and sanitation is one of the cornerstones of our socioeconomic development. Estimates indicate that if current trends in water security continue, by 2050 forty-five percent of global income, fifty-two percent of the world population, and forty percent of global grain production will be at risk. Water is a matter of life and death.

At the same time, water offers enormous opportunities. Understanding water's complexity, valuing it in its entirety, and managing it in an inclusive way turns water into inspiring leverage for impactful and catalytic change. Water is the enabler – it brings the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) within reach. Smart investments in water lead to incredible benefits. With clean drinking water available, health costs go down, gender opportunities go up, equality goes up and education opportunities go up. With 24/7 guaranteed and safe water, conflict risks go down, and food security goes up. The good news is that investing in water pays off. The World Resources Institute estimates that it would cost just over 1 percent of global GDP to invest in the infrastructure required to provide clean water for all countries by 2030. By contrast, diseases linked to contaminated water cost many countries up to 5 percent of GDP due to poor health and lost productivity.

According to the UN, every \$1 invested in safe drinking water in urban areas yields more than \$3 in saved medical costs and added productivity on average. For every \$1 invested in basic sanitation, society makes \$2.50 back.

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“Together with more than 75 partners, the Global Commission launched a Year of Action to scale up climate adaptation solutions under eight Action Tracks and, no surprise, one of them is water. We are building a climate-proof water agenda and have formulated concrete goals and results to be achieved for the most important components based on a four-step process.”

The return is higher in rural areas, with \$7 gained or saved for every \$1 invested in clean drinking water.

How do you describe your leadership style and what do you feel are the keys to being an effective leader?

My mother and father both passed away after long and rewarding lives and they continue to inspire me to this day. My father was an architectural engineer. No problem was ever too big or too crazy to take on, but his solutions were always people-oriented. He believed that only through collaboration the best solutions could come to life and only by collaboration values can be shared.

My mother was the activist, lead community organizer and first female school director in the east of the Netherlands post-World War II. She was an amazing educator, always bringing groups of people together. She was the personification of the UN's motto “leaving no one behind.”

I try to combine the best of both of them and live up to their standards. I think their upbringing determined who I am today and how I work. To me, successful leadership is all about collaboration, and not about self-interest, bringing people together and getting things done. It is as simple as that because success can only be measured by results. At the end of the day, we need to accomplish change on the ground in the lives of people that need it most.

How do you define resilience and how critical is it to being successful in your role?

Resilience is in the heart of what I am trying to do every single day. Resilience is about being robust and adaptive at the same time. It is about nature-based solutions and about respect for the cultural and historical context. It is about including everyone and leaving no one behind. We have to move the world from a response mode to a preparedness mode and we must build back better, learn faster and progress building back better for a total shift and reset of our outdated standards. We need scale and replication, and at a different speed and extent than we see now. When done right, climate resilience can yield economic, social, and environmental benefits.

This is exactly what we do with the Water as Leverage Program in three cities in India, Bangladesh and Indonesia. The project “City

of 1,000 tanks” in Chennai, India, for instance, offers a holistic solution to the problems of floods, water scarcity, and pollution and identifies the interrelationships between the underlying causes. The project relies on nature-based solutions solving holistically the problems of water supply, sewage, and flooding, while building capacity and creating opportunities for the communities at risk.

What do you see as the contribution that the Netherlands can make to build a more resilient world?

The Netherlands and water are inseparable. Water determines how we plan and protect our cities and our landscapes. It is about how we work together through our “polder model” to keep dry feet and secure safe drinking water for all in the Netherlands, in Europe and through our river basins and across the world. From strategy to planning practice to implementation, we manage to bring all stakeholders, partners and interests together in an innovative and catalytic way. Water is as much about adaptation as it is about mitigation. We have a lengthy and rich tradition of tackling this through innovative water-technology, inclusive collaboration within a robust and transparent governance system, and public/private finance mechanisms. Water cuts across all our challenges, needs, disciplines and opportunities.

We offer the range of this knowledge, experience and dedication to the world based on our responsibility because we are convinced that we can make a difference and we must make that difference. That is also why the Netherlands initiated the Global Commission on Adaptation to share its knowledge on how it has managed to adopt innovative water management solutions.

How will the Global Commission on Adaptation's work help protect people and economies in the future?

The Global Commission on Adaptation was launched in The Hague on October 16, 2018 by 8th UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon. He leads the group with co-chair Bill Gates (of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation), and Kristalina Georgieva, Chair and Managing Director of the IMF and former CEO of the World Bank. The Global Commission on Adaptation seeks to accelerate adaptation action and increase political support for building climate resilience. Together with more than 75 partners, the Global Commission launched

a Year of Action to scale up climate adaptation solutions under eight Action Tracks and, no surprise, one of them is water.

We are building a climate-proof water agenda and have formulated concrete goals and results to be achieved for the most important components based on a four-step process integrating the international climate and water dialogues by: 1) making sure that water and climate adaptation action are part of the COVID-19 relief and recovery; 2) galvanizing pledges from global leaders and their institutions on water and climate adaptation action for the Climate Action Summit in January 2021; 3) including the water agenda in the NDCs, the Nationally Determined Contributions that countries must provide to achieve the goals in the Paris Climate Agreement; and 4) building a decade of water and climate adaptation practice for reform in this critical Decade of Action.

There has been, internationally, a trend away from cross-border collaboration, a rise in nationalism, and a tendency for nations to increasingly do it alone. What do you think this means for the future, particularly in the face of far-reaching crises like the pandemic and climate change?

That is of course a very worrying development. Water does not stop at borders, so real and effective solutions require an international perspective and international transboundary cooperation. We need to go all the way with an inclusive and sustainable approach, leaving no one behind. It is a dangerous illusion that we can face major global challenges from our own island, thinking we are safe there. Just think of the catchment area of rivers which often flow through several countries. Another reality is that everything is interconnected: drought in a country can cause political instability, migration flows, and regional conflicts, always across man-made borders or barriers.

Today, in the COVID-19 pandemic, this is more urgent than ever. Governments worldwide are investing more than \$10 trillion this year alone in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, but most recovery packages are hardly integral, sustainable and inclusive. Regardless of all this, when others are much worse off than us and we have the capabilities and the resources, then we simply must help. We have no time to waste. We can do it if we work together across all our diverse interests, ideas and borders. Imaginary or physical, we must break down these walls. ●