

Lecture of professor Dirk Frieling, Megacities 28th November 2002

The cultivation of growth or: the predicament of Holland

1. This meeting is organised to compare the experiences of Singapore as an existing megacity and Deltametropolis as a potential one. The choice of this meeting place clarifies the interest in this comparison, that is: where and how to invest our money most profitably. The Netherlands is in search of a more or less coordinated investment strategy of public and private parties. And Singapore, as Mr. Liu has convincingly demonstrated, is a nationcity that is acknowledged all over the world for its capacity of optimising resources.

As Deltametropolis is only a concept, how do we compare and what can we learn?

What we can learn, presumably, is how to choose and decide. This, as we know, is a weakness in our national character.

But what should we compare? The geopolitical and historical differences in context of these two cases are large. To complicate matters, Singapore is a reality, whereas Deltametropolis is just a concept. So, what we might do, is to compare concepts: Urbanising Singapore as a concept and Deltametropolis as a concept, transforming a scattering of cities, towns and villages into an integrated urban network. Mr. Liu has informed us excellently on the concept of Singapore. So let me try to clarify the concept of Deltametropolis. To put theory into practice I will use our time together to learn from Singapore by demonstrating the concept of Deltametropolis as a series of dilemma's to invite you to decide on them.

2. As a start, I have changed the title of my contribution to this meeting. I will talk about the cultivation of growth or: the predicament of Holland. With this title I paraphrase the famous last words of Candide: 'Il faut cultiver son jardin'. And I refer to a report, published thirty years ago, in 1972, called 'the limits to growth' that was part of a project called 'the predicament of mankind'. This was a project of a group of industrialists from all over the world, calling themselves 'the club of Rome'. In the wake of the first oil crisis this report was an instantaneous success. I was told that in this, our moralistic society, more copies of the report were sold than in any other country. Den Uyl, prime minister at that time, stated that the times of limitless economic growth would never come back. Mansholt, *the* architect of European agricultural policy, with its focus on growth of agricultural production, switched sides almost overnight. This report had huge impact and still has, in many ways, to this very day. The reason, I think, is that the predicament of mankind today is the same as it has always been and will always be, that is the dilemma between human ambition and human condition.

3. Fifteen years ago, in 1987, an exhibition was held here in Amsterdam, called New Netherlands 2050. This was part of a project called The Netherlands Now As Design, a project of a group of architects and urban planners who wanted to comment on the concept of 'limits to growth'. In that period huge unemployment gave rise to a no-nonsense, anti-planning political climate, because public money went to social security payments instead of public investments. Under these conditions 'limits to growth' evidently was interpreted politically as the need to limit the growth of unemployment rather than the aim to limit economical growth as such. The Netherlands Now As Design group proposed to change the concept in 'the rules of growth' and it looked to the mainstream political parties for what they had to offer in this respect. What the exhibition did show were four political perspectives on the future, illustrated by designs on a national, regional, and local project level: **Careful** for the Christian Democrats, **Critical** for the Social-democrats, **Dynamic** for the Conservatives and **Relaxed** for the perspective of the initiators themselves, used as a commentary on mainstream politics. The careful and critical perspectives were variations on urban dispersal over the country as a whole, in line with national policy since world war 2. The dynamic perspective chose economical concentration in the west and suburban dispersal all over the country. The relaxed perspective did show overall concentration in the west, as had been the case in periods of rising prosperity earlier, like in the seventeenth century and the fifty years between 1870 and 1920.

4. The fourth report on national land use planning in 1988 followed the dynamic line of thought, concentrating on the intercontinental mainports, hinterland connections and the main cities in the west as business centres. But the christian-conservative coalition fell apart and was replaced by a christian-social democratic one. A revised fourth report was issued, choosing for national urban dispersal again and regional concentration. In line with this policy a bill was passed, to let regional urban constellations evolve into 'city-provinces'. This evolution, however, like all evolutions, evolves very, very slow by ongoing trial and error. In 1994 this coalition was replaced by a coalition of big city conservatives and social democrats. This created a political climate in which the four main cities of the country could initiate a new proposal for urban concentration in the west again. They did so by issuing a 'declaration Deltametropolis' in 1998, a few weeks before municipal elections and national elections some weeks later. As the same coalition was voted in office again, Deltametropolis was adopted as part of national planning policy. In the third part of the fifth report on land use planning Deltametropolis is defined as a 'national urban network of international level, that can compete with metropolitan regions elsewhere in Europe'.

5. However, the political tide changed again . This year 2002 the planning document has twice been declared politically controversial and mentally we seem to be back in the first half of the nineteen eighties: no money to invest, and a planning policy of slow return on investment in expensive cities replaced by one of quick returns in cheap rural areas.

The big difference between then and now however, is the political reason for this change. Ten years ago, the regions in the south, east and north of the country opposed what they saw as a priority for public investments in the western region. This year, however, the opposition arose in the urban population of the western region itself. Disturbed by large scale urban transformation, disconnected from traditional social networks by ongoing immigration and disoriented by lack of political guidance, they did hope to find security again by thinking local and acting local.

6. So here is the predicament of Holland . By this name I refer to the province of that name, separated in the nineteenth century in two parts to break its political power in favour of state power. The predicament is this: the ongoing economic integration of Europe, speeded up by the implosion of the former Soviet Union, the ongoing integration of the world economy, guide lined by the WTO, both ask for better economic integration of the scattered urban economy of the only part of the Netherlands than can compete on a European and world scale. The other side of this coin is that the urban populations in the west are confronted with rapid transformations of their social as well as their physical urban environment, confronted with a more competitive job market and less social securities, less health care, lower educational standards, less social housing, less public transport, less safety in the streets. In short: a chill wind of internationalisation that hits them, their parents and their children, in the face. No wonder, I think, they protest.

7. If this analysis is correct then Holland cannot trust national government to solve its problems. First of all, because the national government in this democratic society will always favour dispersal rather than concentration. It does so for social reasons: people everywhere in the country are entitled to private prosperity and public facilities. It also does it for political ones: concentration of people in a democracy means concentration of political power. Since the Romans we all know the rule of central power: divide and reign. Secondly, in the European and global marketplace, no longer the nation-states are the competitors, but the city-regions. So, if Holland as a city-region is not able to take the lead itself, initiative of the nation-state would only weaken the competitive mentality of Holland and so make things worse than they are. Thirdly, even more important, any economy is a mix of competition, complementarity and co-operation. As city-regions and companies compete to survive and be profitable, they have to co-operate also. This co-operation is direct and personal. It can not be substituted by indirect contacts with others and especially not with people who have other interests and responsibilities. And the last and, it seems to me, most important reason, is that the present political discussion is not so much the traditional one between central and regional government, but a discussion within the western region itself. Does it really want to enter the global competition of city-regions? I don't know. Is it able to, economically? I

think yes, still. Is it strong enough socially? At the moment, evidently no. Is it able to, governmentally? At present, certainly not. Is it willing, politically? I am not sure. National government has changed its mind four times these last fifteen years. Provincial governments are inclined to follow central government. And municipal governments are busy with local issues.

8. So what can we do to bridge the gap between the human ambition of supporters of Deltametropolis to enter global competition and the human condition of its inhabitants? The most practical and logical way, it seems to me, is just to put this question to the people, in whose interest this policy presumably is pursued.

What I will do now is give you a sample of a series of multiple choice questions about dilemma's one is confronted with as soon as your ambition would be to transform the present urban scatter into a sustainable Deltametropolis. The questionnaire has been produced to serve the design teams, who, commissioned by the minister of land use planning, presently make designs for Deltametropolis. It confronts them with 24 dilemma's they have to decide on within their designs. Choices in these multiple choice dilemma's imply investment priorities. This questionnaire could also serve to help municipal and provincial councillors to make up their mind as a preliminary step in their communication with their constituencies.

9. The dilemma's focus on the international identity of Deltametropolis according to four dimensions:

- A. sustainability of the physical structure
- B. quality of the urban environment
- C. cultural and social identity
- D. economical and political identity

I will present them to you rather quickly, as most of them will be quite familiar to you. These dilemma's have been discussed professionally, publicly and politically for many, many years. What I will do is show them and explain my personal choice. I do so to invite you to do likewise some time and because I think I should not evade clarifying my own position.

10. first sample: connections by air

Will the capacity of Schiphol be enough? I think no. To enlarge it, that could be done locally. But there are limits to growth. Further growth should be accommodated elsewhere, for instance in the North Sea, or in Flevoland, or somewhere else.

My option is to enlarge capacity locally first. It may be that fast trains will substitute European flights. If that would come true, a new intercontinental hub may be better positioned somewhere between Brussels and Düsseldorf, geographically and with regard to population densities situated neatly between London, Amsterdam, Paris and Frankfurt.

11. second sample: international business centres

Is Amsterdam as the only serious international centre of Deltametropolis sufficient? If not, what can one do? Exploit the local position of Amsterdam and concentrate on the north wing? Exploit the distance between Amsterdam and Rotterdam to develop two competing centres, using competition as a method to promote the strength of both competitors? Or should we exploit the combined powers of the cities on the western wing by integrating their economies?

My choice is the western option. The urban network here is already quite developed. Additional urbanisation here would be the most efficient policy with regard to interconnectedness and mutual accessibility in the metropolitan urban system. Hence additional investments in infrastructure will be most profitable here.

12. third sample: social identity: public domain

In Holland, liberty is interpreted as freedom of speech and safety in the streets. Ongoing immigration and internationalisation may ask for extra effort to maintain these civic liberties. But other policies can be considered too. For instance promoting an archipelago of social islands, providing social cohesion within these islands and social interaction between them. Sustaining liberty and safety under conditions of ongoing internationalisation, growing differences in income levels and rising social contrasts may make gated communities for private homes and camera's, identity cards and admission control in the public domain a necessity.

All these things already are happening, Nevertheless, I think we should put much effort in sustaining civic liberties for everybody and everywhere in the metropolitan environment. A future consisting of gated and guarded private and public domains is contrary to civic liberties that in Europe are associated with city life,

13. fourth sample: political identity: public authority

At present, metropolitan government consists of three provinces and some hundred municipalities as well as several types of functional government - like waterboards - and private institutions with public functions - like chambers of commerce -. It works. But slow and not very sure.

To improve metropolitan government one might empower provincial government enlarging its authority by giving it more legal responsibility and more budget.

To further improve provincial authority, one may undo the separation of North and South Holland and combine them again and reduce three provinces to two. One step further and Holland and Utrecht are combined to one province. My suggestion would be that undoing the separation of North and South Holland would be the best bet. Even without any additional legal or budgetary powers the authority of Holland would rise enormously because of its enlarged constituency, enlarged budget and enlarged professional staff. As nothing would have to change in formal powers, a bill might contain just four short articles: the fact of their fusion, the name of the province, the number of councillors and the date the new province will formally take over. Utrecht has a different and more independent role to play in the Deltametropolis and it has a different history and identity .

14. last sample: ranking of identities

Ranking identities my highest mark would go to sustainability of physical structure as this is of existential importance to Deltametropolis. After that I would rank cultural and social identity as these seem to me to be most influential on human ambitions. In the third place comes economical and political identity as these determine human conditions. In the last place then comes the identity of the urban environment. I see that as the outcome of the interaction of the physical structure of the land and the mental structure of society.

15. Let me sum up the line of thought in this lecture in five concluding remarks.

1. internationalisation, that is participation in the global network of competitive and co-operative megacities triggers rapid transformation of urban environment as well as urban society. This disturbs,

disconnects and disorients the urban population. This is the chill wind of internationalisation. The predicament of Holland is that it has to bridge the gap between its ambitions to participate in this global network and the condition of its inhabitants.

2. Holland cannot leave the responsibility to overcome this predicament to central government. First of all because central government cannot decide. Like the donkey between the two stacks of hay, it cannot choose between concentration and dispersal. Secondly, this is a game of city-regions, not of nation-states. Thirdly, competition implies co-operation between participants, that is city regions, not nationstates. Most important though is that the political conflict to be solved is not between central government and region, but between the governors of Holland and their constituency. Central government is no party to this conflict. So Holland has to take the lead itself.

3. The concept of limits to growth cannot bridge the gap. It should be discarded and replaced by the concept of cultivation of growth. Like Candide, who after a long and worldwide search for the best of all possible worlds came to the conclusion that one should cultivate one's garden, the governors of Holland have to accept that the gap is regional and likewise has to be the material of the bridge. Holland is their garden. Here they should cultivate growth.

4. A practical and logical way to bridge a gap is that parties on both sides of it communicate about construction and building of the bridge. Whoever starts this communication should offer several solutions, thereby conditioning an open discussion. I think this is what has to be done right now. Not another policy document, but public debate based on a well-prepared opinion poll.

5. Deltametropolis as a strategic concept is, like that of Singapore, focused on optimising resources. In this beloved piece of mudcake we call Holland, the most precious and valuable resources are the people who happen to live here, to whom we belong. So the thing to do in the present conflict of interests is to identify the sort of Deltametropolis we want by putting these questions to the people, to sort out their opinions, and to bargain with each other to strike a deal. Just like we are used to on other social-economic questions of strategic importance.

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