



WMO FEATURE

WORLD METEOROLOGICAL ORGANIZATION
A SPECIALIZED AGENCY OF THE UNITED NATIONS

No.11
August 1991

THE WORLD OF WEATHER AND WATER

Point of View

ELEVENTH CONGRESS WORLD METEOROLOGICAL ORGANIZATION

Interviews with Dr. H.M. Fijnaut,
Permanent Representative of the Netherlands with WMO

and

Mr. A.J. Dania,
Permanent Representative of the Netherlands Antilles with WMO

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POINT OF VIEW: Eleventh Congress

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by

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Dr. Moore: Here we are in the studio of the Conference Center in Geneva at the Eleventh Congress of the World Meteorological Organization. The elections have just been completed for Members of the Executive Council. There are 36 Members of that council and I am very happy to say that two of those members are Dr. H.M. Fijnaut, the Director-in-Chief, Royal Netherlands Meteorological Institute, KNMI, and Mr. A.J. Dania, the Director of the Meteorological Service of the Netherlands Antilles. Congratulations on the election. How do you feel now that you are elected Dr. Fijnaut.

Dr. Fijnaut: Well, I feel as a man who has to do a job in the near future. I think that elections are very good for the smaller countries in the world because we are a small country in the world. It is an honour that small countries are elected during such a meeting, but at the same time we realize that we have to do a lot of work in the future.

Dr. Moore: You mentioned that you are a small country, what do you think is the particular contribution that the Netherlands has to make?

Dr. Fijnaut: There are a few things we can do. First of all we contribute in general to the WMO, to the system of maintaining WMO. I think that the northern countries, in Europe especially, have some feeling for efficiency and that type of thing within an organization. So, from our point of view we can try to increase the efficiency of the Organization. This is of course a managerial point. The other thing we can do is to feed the Organization some more information about actual problems in the world, for instance, things that have to do with climate change. Activities may result from sea level rise and The Netherlands, especially, has some knowledge about sea level rise. We think that from our point of view we can contribute to the WMO activities.

Dr. Moore: Let us go back to sea level rise in a moment because it is such an important topic especially for small islands in the Pacific and of course in the Caribbean. I remember at the Second World Climate Conference, the Minister of Trinidad and Tobago was very anxious to get his point across at the Ministerial part of that conference. He said that if he would not be able to discuss his points maybe he would have no home to go back to. What are the key issues Mr. Dania in the Caribbean area, in particular the Netherlands Antilles?

Mr. Dania: Well, to be honest, sea level rise does concern us. As you are aware, our islands have nice beaches and it would be a big problem for us to lose those beaches because of sea level rise. So in that aspect, I think that the Netherlands Antilles are also very much concerned with all the issues of climate change and we are participating actively in the programmes as well.

Dr. Moore: You will have some other special problems in the Caribbean and Central American area, in terms of weather conditions - cyclones, typhoons, tornados. I know that you have been hit a lot by hurricanes especially Hurricanes Allen and David, which devastated small islands such as the Commonwealth of Dominica.

Mr. Dania: As you know, the programmes of WMO cover a very wide range of subjects and one of the important programmes is the Tropical Cyclone Programme. It is one of the more important programmes of WMO for our region. Even though the frequency of occurrence of tropical cyclones in the islands of Bonaire, Curacao and Aruba is relatively low, the problem is not non-existent for these islands.

On the other hand, the other islands of the Netherlands Antilles - St. Maarten, Saba and St. Eustatius - are right in the center of the hurricane belt. So in that sense we are very much aware of the problem of tropical cyclones in our region. In June, the hurricane season starts. This is one of the most interesting and most important periods of the whole year, weather-wise for our Meteorological Service.

Dr. Moore: What are you doing in the Antilles to co-operate with other parts of the community in terms of easing the hurricane problem, for instance diversifying the economy, early warning systems?

Mr. Dania: One of the important components of the National Meteorological Service of the Netherlands Antilles and Aruba, is the tropical cyclone warning system. It is the Meteorological Service, which is part of the local disaster committee, which takes the first initiative to warn the local authorities whenever there is a tropical cyclone threatening one of the islands.

In addition we have a regional body in the Caribbean and Central America called the Regional Hurricane Committee which is one of the working groups of the World Meteorological Organization under the chairmanship of Dr. Bob Sheets who is the Director of the Hurricane Centre in Miami. So in that sense the hurricane warning system in our region is co-ordinated in a very good manner both nationally and regionally.

Dr. Moore: What is your perception from over there in the Caribbean of the World Meteorological Organization Secretariat here at Geneva?

Mr. Dania: We view WMO as being one of, if not the best, specialized agency of the United Nations, especially in the sense that it is a very scientifically oriented agency where very good work is being produced. This is the only field where there are no boundaries at all in international co-operation. We feel that even though we are a very small country we are participating actively in the programmes of WMO, and having been elected to the Executive Council, actually is the proof that small countries are also important in this Organization.

Dr. Moore: The WMO programmes need strengthening in your area. In what way will you project that in the Executive Council?

Mr. Dania: There are two ways - WMO has many important programmes and the Members of EC of course, are not representing their countries in the Executive Council. Actually they are representing all the Members of WMO. I think that now WMO is especially embarking on the environmental and climate issues, probably all Members of EC will support the programmes related to climate change and the World Climate Programme with all efforts that are possible.

On the other hand, we are also involved in the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction, which is within the scope of the tropical cyclone programme, and this is going to be one of the more important issues for me. Furthermore, meteorology is also very important for us because of its application to aviation, since it is the backbone of our Meteorological Service. Historically it has been the backbone of most Meteorological Services. In that sense I think that our largest interest is, in the application of meteorology in the field of aviation, in addition to the tropical cyclone programme and climate change issues.

Dr. Moore: You mentioned aviation. It is really rather difficult to move around the islands quickly without aircraft, and you probably have a good shipping service too. You must be very involved with the oceans and with the air, and that brings me back to the Netherlands because I believe there must be close co-operation between the KNMI, the Royal Dutch Meteorological Service and the national aviation services in the Netherlands which have a long standing reputation for safety.

Dr. Fijnaut: First of all, as always, it is very nice to hear that people are very satisfied with our national air carrier which in my opinion provides very good service. We have of course good relations with KLM but the primary contact in the Netherlands with civil aviation is through the civil aviation authorities and the civil aviation authorities in turn have contacts with the civil aviation carriers. So we have good relations with KLM. At this moment we are negotiating to have a data collection device on the KLM jumbo machines which is called an ASDAR system. It is placed in the aircraft and when the aircraft flies around the world we get a great deal of information on data about air, air pressure air temperature, humidity and so on. Besides, we are one of the few countries in the world that give direct meteorological information to crews from aircraft. We have that at Schiphol and at all other airports in Netherlands.

Dr. Moore: So pilots are very alert to the changes in weather which might affect the safety of air travel and so on?

Dr. Fijnaut: Yes.

Dr. Moore: What about the sea, like the Antilles you are closely connected with the sea through many years of history. They say that God created the world but the Dutch created the Netherlands.

Dr. Fijnaut: I think we should be somewhat modest on that field. Of course The Netherlands has a very long tradition in all ocean related activities and in my country the reason for setting up KNMI was for the economic interest of shipping from the Netherlands to Indonesia and to South America. That was the origin of our service.

Nowadays we face a lot of new problems also related to the sea. For instance our country is very close to the North Sea, and in the North Sea we have the most crowded ship routes in the world. So there are many tankers passing everyday through the channel coming to the North Sea and we are facing problems if we have accidents with these ships. And we are especially very much aware that we have to prepare for these possible accidents so we can act and react as soon as possible if something happens. This is one of our special projects at KNMI, to have a so-called Hydrometeo Centre which has the objective of being prepared for calamities to assist in dangerous transits over the sea.

Dr. Moore: So, in spite of being a small country you have developed a very high and sophisticated technology to deal with the application of meteorology for the service of mankind. At the same time you are unable to operate without data coming in on a world wide basis, The Global Observing System clearly must be improved in terms of the greenhouse gas problem and the climate change issue. Do you feel that the Netherlands has a contribution to make there?

Dr. Fijnaut: Yes I do. Maybe we can come back a little bit to these sea-related activities in the Netherlands. WMO is an organization in which all countries in the world meet each other. It is an ideal body to know one another and to see what possibilities there are so that the knowledge of one country goes to other countries. That is exactly what we do with our knowledge about the sea. We cooperate with different countries in the world in order to have knowledge transferred from our country to other countries.

The other point of course is climate change. I think in Europe and especially the Netherlands, and certainly in the world, we are very concerned about environment. We are a very heavily populated country so we feel that if the traffic produces too much exhaust, and if there are accidents in factories which are poisoning our surroundings, we in the Netherlands are directly exposed to it.. We are very much in favour of increasing the world-wide collection of data concerning climate issues. That means that we are very much in favour of the creation of the Global Atmospheric Watch, which is one of the items at this Congress which not only looks to the physical parameters such as temperature, surface pressure, but also to the chemical composition of the atmosphere. We think that it is a very important item for the world and we are very much in favour of it.

Dr. Moore: Would you say that this is a new development in the World Meteorological Organization to look at factors like this?

Dr. Fijnaut: That is very much a new thing. I think that at this moment WMO should take the lead and indeed has taken the lead in the world in the field of climate change. This is a new challenge for meteorology. We have done a lot of work. We can now forecast rather well. Now we are at the moment where we have to take the lead in the observation of climate changes. We have to take the lead in the coordination of these activities in the world because the atmosphere all over the world connects everything that is placed in the atmosphere transporting it across the world. I think that from the point of view of the scientific knowledge of meteorology, we have a very important role to play.

Dr. Moore: You have made a very important point Dr. Fijnaut. The atmosphere connects all of us. How does it connect us in the Caribbean, Mr. Dania?

Mr. Dania: As Dr. Fijnaut said, actually we cannot have meteorology if we do not have data from other countries. And similarly in the Caribbean, all the countries contribute to the Global Observing System. In the near future, there will be two similarly important programmes, the Global Atmospheric Watch and the Global Climate Observing System. All the countries of the world and this includes the countries in the Caribbean which of course includes the countries of the Netherlands Antilles, will participate in these programmes.

We also have meteorological stations on our islands where we do the necessary observations. This information is distributed to all countries of the world. As you know, the atmosphere is one big volume of air and what happens in the Caribbean when you stir the air over the Caribbean will eventually have repercussions in the Pacific. So in that sense we think that we are an integral part of the global meteorological science.

We are aware that there is a very large gap in the development of meteorology between the developed countries and the developing countries. But one of the most important aims of WMO is, to try to bridge this gap in order to raise the level of development of the National Meteorological Services. And that is one of the aims in our country, the Netherlands Antilles. Actually, it is the same type of development that we see in all the other countries in our Region.

Dr. Moore: As a newly elected member of the WMO's Executive Council, what do you feel are the key steps that you will promote in that Council?

Mr. Dania: Most definitely; it is the bridging of this gap, which is indeed a very large gap in the level of development between the developed countries and the developing countries. This is both in the sense of human resources and in the sense of available technology. In most of the developing countries, the meteorological services will not be able to survive if there is no technical and financial assistance from the developed countries. I think it is a world-wide problem that in most developing countries the National Meteorological Services are not very high on the list of priorities in their countries. In our case I should say that we do have the necessary support from our government. Nevertheless, to survive, it is necessary for National Meteorological Services to receive assistance from other countries.

Dr. Moore: As far as development cooperation is concerned, the Netherlands has a fine reputation as being one of the leading countries of the world especially with regards to providing 1% of the gross national product for development cooperation. What does the Netherlands do regarding development cooperation in meteorology and the application of meteorology?

Dr. Fijnaut: I am not aware of all details in this field at the moment. In general we do support very much the activities that have to do with information and the participation of developed countries in the climate issues. As you know we have the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change which was created by WMO and UNEP. The Netherlands sponsors more than 50% of the money needed to make the IPCC work and more than 50% of the money needed to have the developing countries participate in this process.

Yes, we have contributed more than 50% in that direction. Besides, we do a lot in the field of agrometeorology in the Sahel Zone in Africa. We have at this moment six priority projects that are conducted by WMO in the Sahelian area where in we try to bring information directly to the farmers so that they can use weather information for organizing their daily activities. One other thing that we are considering now is to contribute to a large extent to the observational system of Uganda.

Dr. Moore: Dr. Fijnaut, what will you be emphasizing in the Executive Council?

Dr. Fijnaut: There are many important things such as cooperation in different fields. My primary goals in the EC will be to promote the position of WMO in the fields of climate and climate observation and to continue the lead role of WMO in this field, especially from the scientific and technical point of view, and not from a political point of view. I think WMO is an Organization that produces real information for the world that you can trust, that you can rely on and is not mixed-up with political issues. That is my most important issue for activities in the EC. I do want to put this as the point I would like to discuss the most.

Dr. Moore: Much has been done and there is a long way to go. I would like to wish you both every success in the task before you. Thank you for taking part in this interview.