

Speech by the Minister for European Affairs and International Cooperation, Ben Knapen, at the IICD symposium 'ICT for food security', 25 October 2011, The Hague

Ladies and gentlemen,

Food security is one of four priorities in Dutch development cooperation. And for good reason. 925 million people still go hungry every day. Two billion people still lack the essential nutrients to live a long and healthy life.

Unfortunately, the problem is growing. In 2050 nine billion people will be living on this planet, for whom a 70 percent increase in food production is needed, whereas the available farmland will increase by only 15 percent. And what's more, natural resources will soon be exhausted. The world is facing climate change. And the demand for biofuels and high-protein nutrition is swelling faster and faster.

That is why my government is working hard for more food security. Recently, I sent a letter to the Dutch parliament saying that we endorse innovation and public-private partnerships in this field. That we support UNICEF food programmes for children and aim to improve food quality inspection in developing countries. And that we advocate wider access to the EU market for agricultural products from developing countries. To achieve these and other goals, the food security budget is being increased from 160 million euros in 2011 to 435 million euros in 2015.

Put simply, my government aims to help people in developing countries help themselves. Economic growth is crucial to this. And in most developing countries economic growth primarily depends on agriculture.

So the key question is: how can farmers in these countries become more competitive? By gaining access to ICT, for example. Nowadays, farming is almost impossible without up-to-date information about farming methods, market prices, weather forecasts or money transfers. What's more, the use of ICT lowers transaction costs and raises productivity, even for farmers in the poorest countries on this planet.

Founded in 1996, the IICD was a pioneer in this field. Your organisation realised early on that in order to be *competitive*, developing countries must be *connected*. I applaud your contribution to the rise of ICT use in ten countries. Millions of people – farmers and doctors, teachers and civil servants – have benefited from your work. Close cooperation with governments, foundations, universities and companies contributed to this success. In short, the IICD has shown us that ICT should always be part of development efforts.

In my view, the private sector has an important role in pushing the use of ICT. There are many good examples of successful ICT projects in developing countries. Take 'e-Choupal' in India, for example. Every day this internet service provides 4 million farmers with up-to-date information about farming methods, market prices and weather forecasts per district. The system is also used for buying and selling. e-Choupal and other services show that developing countries are an attractive growth market for ICT companies.

So, taking the use of ICT to the next level means a more commercial approach. For that reason we support ICT projects in developing countries through our private sector development funds. These range from a telecom project in Africa to the construction of optic cable networks in Vietnam. In the field of food security, for example, we support an International Food Development Centre programme that gives West African farmers better access to market information.

And, of course, we support IICD projects as well. A good example is your programme aimed at women shea butter producers in Mali. With the help of internet and other ICT solutions, these women have improved their working skills and marketing tools. As a result, production has grown and turnover has tripled.

Ladies and gentlemen,

There is another side to this story, however.

Yes, the potential outreach of ICT-based service systems can be massive. But farmers and other workers often lack the literacy needed to use such services. In Bangladesh, for example, a recent study found that lack of sufficient skilled labour and training opportunities has undermined the performance of the garment, textile and leather sectors on international markets.

Things may change when technologies for translation from text to voice improve. However, the use of mobile phones and broadband internet alone is not enough to lift people out of poverty. Education and training are just as important. That is why my government invests in ICT and vocational training.

And, ladies and gentlemen, there is a second catch. The IICD justly draws attention to the effects of increasing ICT use on the 'green economy'. Mounting volumes of hazardous e-waste – like discarded computers and mobile phones – will have a negative impact on public health and the environment. Both in emerging economies and developing countries.

About 2.3 million tons of e-waste is already generated by China, making it second only to the United States. In nine years' time, computer waste is expected to be five times higher in India, and two to four times higher in China and South Africa, compared to 2007. In other words, it is also crucial to take recycling to the next level.

Sadly, we have some hurdles to overcome. Legal and policy-related barriers. The lack of environmental health and safety standards in developing countries. The absence of an e-waste collection infrastructure. And so on and so on. Of course, my government is trying hard to solve these problems. But it cannot do so on its own. Individual countries cannot solve global problems. Global problems need global solutions.

The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development should take the lead in finding those solutions. In a few months – to be more precise, in June next year – the Rio+20 Summit will take place. It is in our interest, it is in the world's interest that this summit brings global sustainability closer.

Our country wants to play a pivotal role in Rio de Janeiro, for example in proposing good ideas for waste and recycling management. Because the Netherlands has the knowledge, the skills and the capacity to make a difference in this field. Just as the Netherlands has the knowledge, the skills and the capacity to use ICT to increase food security in developing countries.

I look forward to making a difference, together with NGOs, companies, knowledge institutions and other partners. I look forward to making a difference together with you.

Thank you.