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A conversation with Henk
Ovink, first Dutch special envoy
for international water affairs

Melanie M. Bakema and Britta Restemeyer

In 2015 Henk Ovink was appointed as the first Special Envoy for International Water Affairs in the Netherlands. It was an entirely new position with global outreach in the Dutch policy landscape. Ovink, who is also called ‘the ambassador for the Dutch water sector’ describes his role as a ‘connector’. He travels to vulnerable places around the globe to connect foreign stakeholders to Dutch governments, businesses and research organizations, helping with Dutch expertise on water management where needed and desired. Among others, the governments of the United States, South Africa, Myanmar, Vietnam, and India have asked for Henk Ovink’s advice in organizing policy processes, usually in relation to a recent water-related crisis. Prior to his position as a Water Envoy, Ovink was part of President Obama’s Rebuilding Task Force in the United States of America after hurricane Sandy had severely damaged the New York region.

Henk Ovink works with governments, knowledge institutions, organizations such as the World Bank and the UN, the global business community as well as the civil society representatives. ‘Building’ resilience in vulnerable places especially in relation to water-related hazards are key aspects of his daily work. As, in addition to the above, his job offers Ovink the chance to see different policy contexts and cultures, the editors of this volume considered it valuable to gain an insight into Ovink’s expertise of ‘building’ resilience on the international level. Melanie Bakema and Britta Restemeyer talked to Henk Ovink about his understanding of resilience, his vision on how to ‘build’ resilience in vulnerable places – something that Ovink terms ‘the transformative approach’ – and the lessons to learn from Ovink’s experiences in the Netherlands as well as his projects around the world.

A special envoy for international water affairs – Why have the Netherlands created such a position?

Since the Netherlands is the only country with a position of ‘a special water envoy’, before enquiring further about resilience, we wanted to know a bit

more about the position and the perception of Henk Ovink on this special role. It may appear logical for the Netherlands to be pioneers in the field of water management, with many parts of the country lying below sea level and Dutch water managers being renowned as ‘conquerors of the sea’. But what specifically is the Netherlands’ ambition with a Special Envoy for International Water Affairs? Is it philanthropy or ideology-driven, bringing Dutch expertise to vulnerable countries, or is it rather economy-driven with the underlying goal of bringing new projects to Dutch companies?

According to Ovink, it is a bit of both. Ovink explains:

“Our Dutch Delta Approach is acknowledged worldwide and is attractive for nations, institutions, cities, NGO’s and others around the globe. Our leadership emerged by distinctively managing our risks and uncertainties. Together with our global partners, we are now striving for comprehensive water security approaches worldwide: better policies, better governance, increased investments and innovations to face future risks and uncertainties, of course in partnership with Dutch governments, businesses and research organizations.”

Henk Ovink’s mission

Ovink’s personal ambition and goals for his position are far from modest: “My water envoy’s ambition? A new narrative, better partnerships and a whole new range of projects to inspire the world.” For Ovink, the new narrative starts with acknowledging the complexity of what he calls the global water crisis and its impacts on society, referring to problems with both water quantity, as in floods and droughts and water quality, referring to hygiene of water to people and ecosystems. Ovink emphasizes that “water is at the heart of our uncertain future; it is through water that we feel the impact of climate change the most.” According to Ovink, water is essential for our economy, our social and cultural well-being, since it is key to our food and energy production. However, Ovink also stresses the downsides of water: “The World Water Development Report of 2012 shows that of all worldwide disasters, 90% are water-related.” Ovink, therefore, emphasizes that water can be an asset if managed right, but a severe risk if not.

By working on a better understanding of the complexity of the water crisis, Ovink hopes to find answers to questions like how to intervene, what actions can work, and where to start? To do this, Ovink is working on building partnerships “with institutional and non-institutional partners across the world, where different governments, businesses and research organizations circulate their knowledge, expertise and experience to help enforce water resilience approaches across the globe.” Furthermore, he is striving for a ‘global water innovation portfolio’ which he is setting up with programmatic funding by the World Bank, other International Financial Institutions (IFI’s), the Green Climate Fund and public and private

investors. According to Henk Ovink, this global innovation portfolio aims at “finding the water-hotspots of the world, where all forces intertwine and subsequently define interventions that are catalytic, transformative and that can become inspirations to be scaled up and replicated for the globe.”

Henk Ovink’s understanding of resilience and his vision: the ‘transformative approach’

In the light of the global water crisis, Ovink sees many reasons to seek for a new governance approach. According to Ovink, people are actively provoking a manmade ecological disaster without a true understanding of this ecological downfall and its impact on the economy (among other things). As an example, Ovink points out that 50% of the world’s aquifers – our natural groundwater storage capacity – are beyond their tipping point, meaning that a natural recovery has become impossible. He, therefore, calls for a transition in the way risks and vulnerabilities are managed worldwide. According to Ovink, moving from response to preparedness – a shift from a rather reactive to a more proactive approach – should be central in every governance approach which focuses on management of (water) risks and disasters. Ovink disagrees with the so-called ‘bounce-back’ understanding of resilience, where the goal for the system would be to return to the state prior to the disaster as quickly as possible. Instead, Ovink argues that resilience is “about bouncing back differently and smarter, through collaboration, innovation and the best of science.” This sounds beautiful in theory but how can this be achieved in practice?

Over the years, the Dutchman has developed what he terms ‘the transformative approach,’ “an approach with impact and transformative capacity, to help create an enabling environment where better science, research and data will find solid ground.” In this context, Ovink stresses that “innovation and implementation should go hand in hand with inclusive collaborations across all sectors, all layers of government, all stakeholders from activists and vulnerable communities to private and public institutions.” Based on his own visions and beliefs about how to stimulate change as well as experiences from the Netherlands and abroad, Ovink argues that ‘building’ resilience in practice requires five main ingredients:

- 1 *long-term planning coupled with short-term projects* in order to create a comprehensive approach and at the same time stimulate innovation;
- 2 *an inclusive and collaborative process*, in which partners of different backgrounds, experts as well as local inhabitants, would work towards a regional and comprehensive understanding of the problem and ideally create tailor-made responses;
- 3 *institutional capacity*, as the state needs to be capable of enabling an inclusive and collaborative approach coupled with *capacity building* among all stakeholders,

- 4 *funding and public-private partnerships*, which should ideally be built on trust and mutual gains to find new ways of financing;
- 5 and *monitoring and better cost-benefit-analyses* to evaluate the processes.

With respect to the latter point, Ovink addresses scientists, in particular, to develop new approaches since according to him, current cost-benefit-analyses lack the capacity to capture long-term, integrated approaches.

Ovink's 'transformative approach' sounds very promising, but also as a rather utopian policy process rarely encountered in practice. When asked whether his approach is not rather difficult to realize, Ovink enthusiastically declares: "No, it can be done! Currently, the rather slow pace of climate change causes a slow approach and a focus on reactive response, not a pro-active approach to preparedness. But we have a choice to make!" Clearly, Henk Ovink takes an optimistic stance, believing in the capacity of humans to bring about a global change. Nevertheless, Ovink adds: "I am not saying that change is easy, it is extremely hard to escape from existing conditions."

According to Henk Ovink,

"change, unfortunately, often comes from situations that are very disruptive. Or, you need to organize a process that is taking place outside of existing frameworks. In that way, you create enough latitude for the transformative approach without it being fully detached. I like to call this a 'sabbatical detour', a step aside."

A 'sabbatical detour' is, according to Ovink, necessary to make room for change. However, such a detour must go in parallel and in interaction with the existing processes and conditions. The lessons from a detour need to be connected to the existing governance structures and processes.

"It should not be the case that two separate governments are created; you need to bring the lessons back [to existing structures – eds.], you need to dare to test, learn and improve. Transparency, accountability, monitoring and evaluation are therefore highly relevant, otherwise we do not learn anything, or if we do there is no impact."

In addition, Ovink describes a set of principles that such a sabbatical detour within our governance processes needs to meet. First, it is important to not aim for solutions, but to focus on a collaborative process for getting a better understanding of the problem(s), since the complexity of present-day societal conditions is mostly determined by a myriad of issues, interdependent challenges and their impacts, a complex context, multiple partners and a variety of consequences. Second, through this process of enhancing our understanding, we must build capacity among all stakeholders to not only

deal with these issues in one single project but to keep on dealing with them in a continuous and progressive way.

His emphasis on the necessity of inclusive and context-sensitive governance processes indicates that Ovink does not believe the transformative approach to be a blueprint for the world; instead, a regional (or eventually even local) interpretation is essential for success. In addition to the idea of sabbatical detour, during our conversation, Ovink drew out three main lessons based on his experiences with water governance processes in New York, Bangladesh, India, South Africa and the Netherlands. The three lessons, which are discussed below, are according to Henk Ovink essential for stimulating change and thereby making vulnerable places more resilient.

Lesson one: resilience – the importance of context and culture

Being sensitive to contextual and cultural factors is, according to Henk Ovink, a first very important lesson to take into consideration in the implementation of resilience strategies. Ovink passionately introduces the Dutch tradition of consensus building and working collaboratively in planning processes. Ovink points out the relevance of the so-called Dutch ‘polder model’ – a tradition of collaboratively searching for the best solutions to gain new land from water, which is strongly interwoven in the Dutch (planning) culture. Often, the Dutch experts tend to think that such model can be simply copied to other contexts. But a successful approach in one context is not a guarantee for success in another – the context and culture should not be overlooked to determine likeliness for success.

Ovink exemplifies this statement with the case of Bangladesh. The Dutch team of experts that was asked to give advice to Bangladesh initiated a coalition of different (local) stakeholders and various Dutch organizations which developed a ‘Delta Plan for Bangladesh’. The plan is developed and enacted in 2016 and is aimed at making Bangladesh a more ‘socially and technically’ resilient delta. The delta of Bangladesh is the largest delta in the world and very complex, because of the large system of connected rivers and river basins. “One could say that this delta plan assures Bangladesh of a long-term approach for increasing its resilience. However, without institutional and human capacity, in the long run, this comprehensive strategy does not have ownership, meaning or added value.” Henk Ovink is afraid that in the case of Bangladesh too much focus is on technological innovations, without paying any attention to the cultural innovation that is needed for a Delta Plan to succeed. In the Dutch context, the ‘polder model’ has been developed over centuries, which makes a Delta Plan in the Netherlands an appropriate and indeed successful instrument. Without such long-term experiences and decision-making culture, there is a risk that in Bangladesh projects aiming to copy the Dutch approach become standalone short-term interventions, without the necessary regional linkage and long-term perspective, Ovink argues. In his opinion, the plan with an integral resilience

vision should go beyond technical innovations in order to trigger cultural innovation. Ovink explains:

“I am not saying that the whole world needs to become like the Netherlands, not at all! I am saying the contrary; we do not have to think that what we do in the Netherlands is automatically appropriate for Bangladesh.”

An important lesson that we can draw from this case is, therefore, to indeed obtain inspiration from the best practices of the Dutch case and spread it in a case-specific way to Bangladesh, taking into close account the cultural and contextual characteristics of Bangladesh.

However, Ovink also points out that it is too simplistic to see culture only as barrier for resilience strategies. He illustrates his argument with an example from Chennai in India where he was working after the floods of December 2015. Ovink was invited to Chennai directly after the floods to discuss and explore potential courses of action with international and local stakeholders. During the visit, Ovink noticed a big ‘drive’ and willingness among people to work collaboratively and learn together for the rebuilding challenge. Ovink was particularly impressed by the process; everyone was invited to meet with the international experts, including the most vocal community leader and the former alderman of the city who had to step down right after the disaster had occurred. “Where do you experience this? The former alderman sitting there, without a sense of personal revenge, trying to work on the problems and solutions as much as everyone else,” Ovink exclaims. When he asked the local people and authorities in India where such willingness to collaborate comes from, he was told that part of the reason lies in the Tamil culture. It appeared to be a relevant part of the religion and culture of the local people to collaborate, to have all people together in one room regardless of their ‘status’ – the high officials together with the ‘lay’ people –, to discuss the shared issues, be transparent and by doing that, develop trust in each other. Ovink was positively surprised that during such meetings, there was no finger-pointing and that the people appeared to be completely honest about the vulnerabilities of their area towards the international visitors. As Ovink explains: “people were still proud [despite the disaster – eds.] and wanted to show their city, but they also did not hide anything.” Although the recovery process is still ongoing, the culture in Chennai makes Henk Ovink optimistic about the future of this extremely vulnerable area.

Lesson two: the importance of political leadership in promoting ‘movements for resilience’

The second lesson Henk Ovink draws out based on his experiences is the importance of leadership, which Ovink illustrates with examples from the US and South Africa.

When Barack Obama had just been inaugurated as the president of the United States in 2009, he spoke the famous words: “No Katrina on my watch”. Soon after he was installed, Obama implemented a strategy to be prepared for a hazard such as a hurricane and by doing this, he distanced himself from his predecessor George W. Bush who did not take immediate action after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans. To develop a disaster preparedness strategy, Obama asked the ministers of Housing and Homeland Security at the beginning of his presidency to develop a new framework for disaster management, which would be operationalized in the case another disaster like Katrina would take place. And a disaster did indeed happen.

In 2012 hurricane Sandy hit the North East coast of the US, including the city of New York. This disaster revealed the vulnerability, tensions and disconnection between politics and people in the region. However, according to Ovink, New York and the federal government were ready to respond. In the turbulent period after the storm, Barack Obama installed the Hurricane Sandy Rebuilding Task Force, consisting of the heads of more than twenty federal departments, agencies or offices and headed by the (at the time) Secretary of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Shaun Donovan.

During our conversation, Ovink explained that “as a signal and gesture [of solidarity – eds.], Obama went immediately to the region to show his commitment and dedication to provide first-aid quickly and start the rebuilding as soon as possible”. Obama had declared: “Cut bureaucracy! We need help on the ground, now! Rebuilding and relief efforts that are struck because of default processes are not allowed.” With his dedication, Barack Obama had, according to Ovink, implicitly made room for innovation and rethinking existing policies.

Building on the immediate action after Sandy, successes and preparedness that were possible because of already existing disaster management strategies, Obama also aimed to ensure a good recovery after Sandy, to “re-build better”. This ultimately resulted in the ‘Rebuild by Design’ program developed and led by Henk Ovink. Rebuild by Design brought together stakeholders from regional and local governments, private businesses and people from the communities and connected them to international experts in architecture, engineering, planning, ecology and design. Together these teams researched the interdependencies, vulnerabilities and opportunities of the region. Figure 14.1 represents one of the meetings in this collaborative designing process. The teams identified 42-proposals, each one of them aimed at increasing the resilience of the region. Ten project-plans across the region were developed with local coalitions of which six – the “winners” – are currently being realized in practice. Among these six are plans for Manhattan (the ‘Big U’, a comprehensive system in which the land is divided into compartments using landscaping and engineering measures to improve flood protection as well as social, economic and ecological services of the area) and Staten Island (‘Living Breakwaters’, using artificial oyster reefs as a protection shield).



Figure 14.1 Collaborative design process in Rebuild by Design.

Source: Rebuild by Design/The BIG Team.

Recently, the OECD embraced Rebuild by Design as an inspiration for public-private partnerships and the UN presented it as an example for ‘Institutional arrangements for national adaptation planning and implementation in the context of climate change’.

“With Rebuild by Design a large and inspired coalition of stakeholders joined forces with the ambition to set a new standard for resilient development. Teams of engineers, scientists, architects and activists from all over the world came together with different levels of government, federal, state and local.”

Henk Ovink proudly states. Supported by funding agencies such as the Rockefeller Foundation, Rebuild by Design evolved into a “movement for resilience” as Henk Ovink puts it.

According to Ovink, “Rebuild by Design would not have been possible without the political support of President Obama and the leadership of Secretary Shaun Donovan.” The special Task Force that was set to work as a result enabled an inclusive process and facilitated the collaboration between people and policy-makers, which was highly important in getting political support for the eventual rebuilding efforts. Ovink praises the politicians who in the case of Hurricane Sandy did not get stuck at the borders defined by jurisdiction but followed what they believed to be the right response. “The issues at stake and the ecological and economic interdependencies cut across nations, states and cities. Understanding this complexity,

perceiving the issues on this larger scale is where good politics started in the case of Hurricane Sandy,” Ovink concludes.

In the case of South Africa, the political context was very different, but political leadership again played a crucial role in promoting a resilience strategy. Henk Ovink elaborates on his experiences there: “In South Africa, the problem is that there is at the same time too much, too little and too dirty water, and all three problems will even be exacerbated by climate change and economic, demographic and political challenges.” Ovink explains that the problems are especially acute in the context of a lack of institutional capacity to deal with the above water issues on a regional level. Therefore, a water program called ‘King Fisher’, promoting an integral and long-term governance approach to deal with the problems at hand was established. Whereas in the case of Rebuild by Design the institutional context was largely shaped by the Task Force, and the leadership of President Obama and Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, in the case of King Fisher and South-Africa this political leadership was exercised by one woman, the Minister of Water Affairs and Sanitation, Nomvula Mokonyane. Mokonyane implemented a very strict strategy to get the water problems on the political agenda. “Since Mokonyane was convinced that implementing a strict water policy strategy was the only way to move things forward, she decided to be not three, but ten steps ahead of her political organization,” Ovink explains. The strategy that Minister Mokonyane was pursuing was to set up a national water governance framework, including thirteen water catchment management agencies, through collaborations with Dutch organizations, regional partners and local initiatives. The Minister managed to get funding for her ambitious plan from international donor organizations such as the World Bank and the World Economic Forum.

“This coalition has been able to implement innovative pilots and although it might be too early to judge whether all these initiatives add up to robust approach and long term success in water management, we can say that due to the political ambition of one minister and her taking the lead, we can see things moving on all levels, and moreover, in cooperation.”

The experiences of Henk Ovink in both, US and South Africa, thus highlight the relevance of political leadership for stimulating change: strong leadership helps to set the problem on the political agenda, to form coalitions and to acquire adequate funding. Political leadership alone, however, does not provide guidelines about *how* to set up a collaborative process and *how* to create linkages between policy-makers and the (local) community. Confronted with the question of ‘how’ to set up a successful collaborative process and stimulate interaction, based on his experiences, Henk Ovink stresses the potential role of design. Ovink considers design to be both, a process and an instrument for collaborative policy making which is also the last important lesson he draws from his experiences.

Lesson three: the potential of design as an instrument to stimulate change towards greater resilience

Ovink's affection towards design comes from a long personal and professional history. In 2007, he initiated the Design and Politics research program in the Netherlands and to date operates as the chief editor of the 'Design and Politics' book series with NAI010 Publishers (2007 – ongoing, The Netherlands). As a curator of the International Architecture Biennale in 2012 in Rotterdam, The Netherlands, and in his role as Director of National Spatial Planning in The Netherlands, he explored the importance of design in policy-making and the connection of design and the 'sabbatical detour' discussed above. For Ovink, the Rebuild by Design program was the ultimate opportunity to test, explore and exploit the value of design in resilience building processes. As explained above, Rebuild by Design focused on 'rebuilding better' after Hurricane Sandy. As principal of the Rebuild by Design program, Henk Ovink set up a design competition and invited teams from all over the world to participate. However, it was not a 'regular' design competition.

“Usually you launch a request for *proposals*, which means that teams suggest ideas to solve the identified problems. In Rebuild by Design, however, we launched a request for *qualifications*. We did not want to have experts with fixed ideas [as would be the case when asking for proposals – eds.], but we wanted them to ask questions first, explore the region together and then develop ideas in collaboration with regional and local stakeholders from government, businesses and civil society. We needed the best teams with different qualifications [characteristics, expertise and backgrounds – eds.] to join us in the US, so that we would have interdisciplinary teams working on proposals together with local stakeholders,” Ovink explains.

According to Ovink, using design in plan-making processes has several strengths: it helps to unravel the past, analyse the present and envision the future. But above all, “design is essential for the collaborative and inclusive process, for building the alliances that are needed for realizing change.” And collaboration was necessary for solving the complex problems which had been brought to light by hurricane Sandy.

“We [the Rebuild by Design leading team – eds.] needed the talent from the region and from the world together. You cannot do it with your neighbour only, and neither only with a professor from Japan. If you do not try to involve everybody and everything, there is no point to start.”

However, despite the good intentions, practice shows that participation processes often tend to be dominated by specific groups, and it is nearly

impossible to include everybody equally. The groups with the dominant presence, in general, refer to ‘the white, male, elderly and highly educated’, whereas the groups with the least presence include the migrants, female, young and less well-educated people. When asked about the issues of inclusion and exclusion, Henk Ovink says:

“I know about this problem [of exclusion – eds.], but in Rebuild by Design we really involved everyone. We contacted schools and we went to community centres. We had to invest a lot of time in people, in building trust and partnerships, but it was so rewarding to see the results and impacts on the community. We built partnerships that will last a lifetime. Capacity was built up along the way, thereby creating a real environment of opportunities.”

Specifically, Ovink points out the value of the *competitive element* of design.

“I believe the competitive nature of Rebuild by Design strengthened all aspects of the plan-making process. Joining forces to win, to overcome the disaster and to lift oneself up is a cultural thing. Pride, ambition and ownership are essential and were embedded in this design approach.”

According to Ovink, the research phase of the Rebuild by Design program, which was organized by New York University’s Institute for Public Knowledge and its Research Advisory Group, eventually turned into a comprehensive scientific and practical exploration of the region. Through design, people got acquainted with data and research. Visualization helped to make the research and the potential strategies more tangible, where texts would have left every person with their own interpretation of the words. However, Ovink also makes clear that just like the Dutch Delta Plan, Rebuild by Design cannot be simply approached as a blueprint and simply copied to a different context. Again, a regional, tailor-made approach and the support of strong leaders would have the potential for the best resilience outcomes.

Henk Ovink’s recommendation for scientists in triggering resilience

At the end of our conversation, we asked Henk Ovink whether he had some specific recommendations to scientists regarding stimulating resilience. In response, Ovink refers to his experiences with Rebuild by Design pointing out that this project was not only successful in convincing the residents and designers to start a collaborative process; it also inspired and involved scientists. “When do things go wrong in the world? When everyone sticks to their own ivory tower. When do good things start to evolve? In the moment, you bring different parties together,” Ovink explains. With this book, the

editors aimed to come closer to an understanding of resilience in both scientific terms, but also in developing strategies and collective actions to implement resilience in practice. The different chapters contribute to, either one or both, of these aims, and a common element in studying resilience in all cases throughout this book is the emphasis on collaborative processes to understand and create more resilient places. When viewed from the perspective of practice, that especially Henk Ovink is devoted to, openness and willingness to collaboration are not only helpful in clarifying and working with a specific concept as resilience, it is also extremely relevant in ‘building’ a more resilient world together.

Ovink’s main recommendation to scientists is: “Dare to share, dare to collaborate. You are often afraid that you put your own credibility at risk when you do so, but in fact, you will only strengthen it.” Ovink encourages scientists to be more vocal and express their opinions more strongly, especially in relation to politics and policy-making processes. In the first chapter of this edited collection prof. Simin Davoudi emphasized the need for scientists and decision-makers to be critical about using resilience in practice and the potential influence of neoliberal agendas when ‘operationalizing’ resilience. From a practitioner’s perspective, Henk Ovink encourages scientists to take a more active role in facilitating practitioners’ work with resilience. Ovink argues that scientists should position themselves in relation to politics, policy and society instead of being afraid of them: “Organize yourself within instead of outside of it [politics, policy and society – eds.]” According to Henk Ovink, academics have an important societal role and an obligation to share not only their research findings but also opinions and reflections on what’s happening in the world. Ovink illustrates his point with an example:

“In the climate change debate, we all pinpoint to politicians and policy-makers [for either starting or ignoring the need for a debate – eds.], which is legitimate and logical, but what efforts have the scientists made? They have been very careful and silent for a long time. Luckily that is changing, and that is needed.”

Ovink’s final advice therefore is:

“I know that if the problems and the complexity are so extensive, scientists do not have an unambiguous answer. It is challenging and exciting, but have the courage to speak up and dare to form a coalition outside of your own world, and it will help and inspire us all!”