



Ulla Tørnæs' tale ved Dansk Landbrugspresses 100-årsjubilæum

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I wish to thank you for the opportunity to speak at the centenary of The Danish Guild of Agricultural Journalists.

It's not by chance that the Danish Guild of Agricultural Journalists is the World's oldest. 100 years ago Danish agriculture was undergoing a painful transition.

It was then an active and professional Danish agricultural press helped spearhead Denmark's successful transition away from corn exports.

Today Danish agriculture is highly competitive. And I have no doubt that it is the combination of a skilled dynamic agricultural sector and a free and critical press that made this possible.

Today's dominant issue is the effect of globalization: the liberalisation of trade and new competitors in the market place. And this is not only true for Denmark, but for agricultural journalists across the World.

Thus journalism itself is at the frontier of globalisation. Today news runs 24/7 - everywhere. A reminder to all of us that globalisation needs both national answers and international solutions.

This is also true for my topic today: the warnings of future “Water Wars”.

Water and food share the same dismal profile. They are essential for human life. They are adequately available. Yet their unequal distribution costs the lives of millions of people each year. Fortunately the combined forces of human cooperation, ingenuity and globalisation are set to meet the challenge.

Today the World’s population will increase by 250.000 people. By tomorrow 500.000. Next week almost 2 million more people will walk the Earth. The numbers are breathtaking.

More than anything else every newborn will need clean water and food to survive. In adequate amounts. And in a continuous flow.

Sadly, not everyone will get what they need. This year more than 4 million people – mostly children – will die from dirty drinking water. And even more will die from hunger.

Looking closer at the problem it quickly becomes clear that water is crucial also

for our food supply. More than a third of the World's harvest comes from irrigated land.

And more than two thirds of the World's freshwater is used for agriculture.

At the same time fresh water is not so easy to come by as we may imagine. In fact only 1% of the World's water is available for agriculture, industry and human consumption. And that amount is falling.

As the world has struggled – successfully – to produce more and more food we have reached deep into the ground to find the water needed. Electrical pumps and advanced drilling provides huge amounts of water.

However, using more efficient pumps and digging deeper wells is no long-term solution. We are pillaging our ground water resources. Along our coasts salt water flows into the voids where freshwater is spent. We are grimly reminded of Tolkien's warning of the evil that comes from delving "too greedily and too deep."

No wonder, that over the last decade we have been warned repeatedly that "the wars of the next century will be about water". Fortunately, so far water scarcity has lead nations and people towards cooperation far more often than towards conflict.

Taking note of the warnings Danish Government in 2003 commissioned a major study on water and conflict. The study supports the more optimistic view of most leading water experts that a scenario with future “water wars” is unlikely.

Still, there are strong reasons to be aware of the risk of future “water riots.” There is a widespread feeling that the number and intensity of local water-related conflicts is increasing.

And with local water supplies under intense pressure in some parts of the World there is no lack of potential conflict over water in the years to come.

Preventing water-related conflict is first and foremost a political question. Water conflict is not caused by water scarcity in itself, but by the way water is governed.

Here the press can play an important role in making water governance a public issue.

A first step towards a more sustainable water management is therefore governing water as a resource. This includes making short of the myth that fresh water is a free resource and that only governments should be in control of water resources. Making safe water available for everyone is surely a priority because clean drinking water is vital to our survival.

Unfortunately the ideal of universal access obscures the simple truth that water is not – and cannot – be a free resource.

Hiding the true cost of water carries a very high price for the rural and urban

poor of the developing countries. Here one billion people have no access to safe drinking water, because their governments cannot afford or are unwilling to pay the subsidies needed to supply them with clean drinking water. These people often pay much more for the same amount of water than richer people who can rely on the same governments to supply their water.

Meanwhile low prices keep poor governments from having money to invest in new water systems or to maintain and operate them.

One solution is opening water for private investment. Private investors can bring in money needed to extend services, strengthen governance and improve operations.

Some people fear that privatisation will lead to price increases and excessive profits. They claim that water is too vital and valuable a resource to be handled by private investors. But they miss the point.

Price increases on water are desperately needed in many poor countries.

Regardless of public or private ownership money is needed for investment and maintenance. Government subsidies often benefit the relatively better off. And current water subsidies are no exception. Price structures that ensure that i.e. a basic allowance is for free may help alleviate the situation for the poorest. The important thing is that any subsidies are targeted toward those who actually need them.

Some of those opposing privatisation of the water sector also seem to believe that state owned and government managed water resources are superior. In

reality historical evidence – if anything – points towards the opposite. Governments such as the former Soviet Union thrust their countries into catastrophic water disasters.

So is the solution wholesale privatisation of the World's water resources? No. A case-by-case approach is needed. In reality mixed schemes dominate even in countries where private investors have been allowed into the water sector.

On the other hand clinging to a poorly managed, under-financed public water service for vague ideological reasons is a monumental mistake. It betrays the very people whose interests they profess to protect. Or as has been said: Food is also a vital resource, but what would happen if we stopped paying farmers and let Governments take over production and supply?

Private ownership and management of water resources can potentially bring clean and safe water to millions of poor people who are left without any access. Carrying on as now will not.

Refusing to treat water as a valuable resource has led to a number of predictable problems: excessive use and waste, heavy subsidies and market distortions, poor governance and corruption.

Farmers have little or no incentive to use efficient drip irrigation. Industry has little or no reason to invest in recycling of their water. And water managers are

not accountable for how water is spent.

Even so-called “modern” water systems waste water at an alarming rate.

There are many cities where more than half of all water consumption is wasted! Leaking into the ground from broken pipes and running off broken faucets and taps. Losing anything from a third to half of the water extracted is not uncommon even in many of the World’s modern cities.

Clearly more investments and better management is needed if we want to stem the tidal wave of waste. Unfortunately, far too often water waste and depletion of water resources go unnoticed passed the public eye. Once again the press could help raise awareness and knowledge of the high cost of negligence.

But even if we begin to manage our water resources better there are some countries that do not have enough renewable water resources to meet their needs in a sustainable way. However, even these countries have no reason to despair.

In stead water and food – so intrinsically link to each other – hold the very keys needed to solve the challenge.

On a global scale, we face the problem of unequal global distribution of water and food. There is an abundance of water – but its distribution is far too unequal to meet the needs of some people and countries. At the same time the world’s food production – absolute and measured per capita – has never been higher than today. There is enough grain, fruit, vegetable and meat to supply

every one of us with a full and healthy diet.

The benefit of globalisation is that through international trade we can effectively ship food from where rain and water makes it grow in abundance to dryer places where costly and scarce water resources should be reserved for human consumption only – and not spent on agricultural production.

Because one ton of food takes around 1,000 tons of water to produce, we in fact have a virtual global water bank embodied in agricultural trade.

By importing some of their food instead of producing it themselves, arid and dry countries can save vast amounts of water. Thus, trade can help iron out both seasonal highs and lows in different countries as well as help alleviate much of the unequal global distribution of water.

Clearly not all is well. People are starving. People are dying from dirty water. Precious water reserves are being striped and even wasted. However, the current crisis is not an inescapable evil. We have all the talent and technology needed to change the situation.

Some of what needs to be done will come through development assistance from the rich to the poor countries.

Last month the European Union decided to increase its development assistance to 0,56 percent of national income in 2010 and to 0,7 percent in 2015.

Still the most important contributions must come from the people directly affected:

- by moving towards better water governance and management.

- by introducing market mechanisms and bringing in private sector actors into the water sector, and

- by conserving and reusing scarce water resources

Returning to the wider issue of globalisation we also need to work to harvest the full benefits of globalisation by optimizing the global agricultural market

The Danish Government's answer is to press for a faster and deeper reform of the European Union's agricultural policy. And to actively work towards successfully ending the WTO-negotiations. There are no easy answers to how this can best be done. But there are no excuses not to take the steps needed.

In a fast paced world we face a clear choice: to plough new ground or let the

weeds grow. Past achievements will not help us meet today's challenges. And so Denmark will continue to press on.

Meanwhile, biotechnology, structural reform and global trade is rapidly changing the face of modern agriculture. Here we rely on an active, highly professional and free press to report on the stories of change.

We trust you to tell us the stories about the winners and the losers. About the gains and the pains. About the rights and the wrongs. About Agriculture as you see it.

I have no doubt that the free press and - I hope - Danish agriculture will prove to be key allies as we navigate the stormy but promising sea of change.

Thank you for your attention.

Tags

Festtale, Venstre

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