Kees van Leeuwen investigates the implementation of the UN SDG 6

THE WHOLE APPROACH IS PROBLEMATIC

The 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) of the United Nations must make the world a better place. Dot on the horizon: 2030. 10 years to go. The question is: is it getting a bit better with implementation? Kees van Leeuwen, together with Bryony Essex and Stef Koop, researched SDG 6 and says: "I kind of sound the alarm bell. I am very concerned about the whole approach."

Kees van Leeuwen is looking for an empty and quiet meeting room in the building of KWR, the water research institute to which he is affiliated as Chief Science Officer. The scientist who is also professor of Water Management and Urban Development at Utrecht University, will talk about his research into the implementation of SDG 6. He did that earlier in Amsterdam, during the Amsterdam International Water Week in November. The organization of the AIWW had asked him to investigate the implementation of SDG 6. In a room of the RAI congress center, the researcher presented his findings for a group of dozens of people. The researcher did not ignore the goodness of the sustainability objectives and what has been achieved, but subsequently concluded that that is not enough. His presentation was a warning: without proper diagnoses and adequate monitoring of progress, the introduction of SDG 6 will be "a disaster". The 6th of the 17 development goals of the UN focuses on clean drinking water and good waste water treatment (sanitation). Goal: everyone must have access to clean drinking water and good sanitation by 2030. The status at present: 2.1 billion people still get their drinking water from polluted sources and 4.5 billion people cannot use good sanitation, as referred to in SDG 6. The research by Van Leeuwen makes it clear that the current indicators to monitor the progress of SDG 6 must be improved. They must be made "SMART," he said in Amsterdam. And extensive, so that there is room to link water to other interventions in the city, such as the circular economy. And, he argued, investments for SDG 6 should only be made after a proper diagnosis and the certainty that progress is being adequately monitored. And that is a mandatory condition, according to his addition: "No data, no financing." The researcher argued for the establishment of an independent implementation fund to achieve the SDG 6 objective. Such a fund, Van Leeuwen argued, is needed to set up a uniform database with SDG 6 data, to exchange experiences, to facilitate training for developing countries, and to monitor progress.

Frans Timmermans has a key role in Europe and therefore also outside Europe. I expect a lot from him in terms of water and climate

Alarm bell

So far in Amsterdam. If a silent meeting room is found in the KWR building in Nieuwegein, he says: "I sound the alarm bell a little bit, yes. We often set political goals and then we think things will work out fine. Developing a framework is a very important step in politics, but implementation, compliance and collaboration are key. The scientist Kees van Leeuwen knows the international process of political decision-making. From 1980 to 2002 he worked in three Dutch ministries, was a member of various advisory and policy groups and worked for the European Commission, the OECD and the United Nations. Insight into political processes and his great involvement (the reason why I still do this is that I am very concerned about how politics currently manages the water challenges), the scientist does not stop with his careful explanation of his research into the implementation of SDG 6. Occasionally he gives room to his care and he warns: "If we don't practically implement SDG 6 in the next 30 years, it will have a huge impact on our quality of life. Full stop!" The researcher does not ignore the good developments. We have enough know-how, he says. The technologies are there and if you link them to other interventions within the urban context, you can limit the costs. Countries, some due to damage and disgrace (drought, floods, fires) have become wise, leading the way. A lot is happening at city level. There is collaboration, essential in a successful approach, the researcher says.

Sad chapter

But he also sketches a future with water problems that can lead to conflicts, hunger and large flows of refugees. With Africa as the most vulnerable continent, due to the fast-growing population and the shortage of water. He
says: “That is the sad chapter in this story. Many countries have major problems and not the organization and knowledge (governance) to come to solutions. “And SDG 6 has not changed that yet. The OECD, says Van Leeuwen, has calculated the cost of implementing SDG 6: up to 2030 6.7 trillion and up to 2050 22.6 trillion dollars. "That’s a huge amount! Then you must also set up a process there to steer in a measurable way."

**That process is not there now?** “That process is not there. Not at all! There is no implementation process of the SDGs, other than that we ask the countries to report more or less without obligation. Completely insufficient! You have to state very specifically what you want and what not. There must be direction in this process."

**That is a remarkable observation** “Yes it is. And also a very disappointing one. Anyone can think of that."

**You said in Amsterdam that the indicators for implementation of SDG 6 need to be improved.**“ A number of indicators are hard and clear. For example: how many people have a good water supply. Also how many people have adequate sanitation. But there are also goals that are vague, not concrete. We soon came to the conclusion that it is wise to name the indicators in a consistent way. And also to make them simple scale from 0 to 10. Where 0 is a maximum distance to the goal. And at 10 you have achieved the goal. So distance to goal. It starts with a good diagnosis, so we must be the first to agree on goals and the appropriate good and measurable indicators."

**That is the crux in your story?** “The diagnosis, yes. Compare it to a visit to the doctor. After a good diagnosis the treatment follows, not the other way around!"

**The SDGs date from 2015. Surely these diagnoses should have been made long ago?** “Yes. But I also understand it a bit. We are already happy that the SDG framework is there. But it must be implemented. It must go to the countries, to the cities, to the river authorities, it must go to the citizens, and industry. And you cannot achieve that by sitting on your hands. It is basic management: if you do not have indicators to properly measure progress, you cannot make adjustments. It is time for implementation, that means rolling up your sleeves, concrete projects, pilot projects, exchanging techniques, celebrating that goals have been achieved, praising companies if they have developed and applied good and cheap technology. It should also be fun.”

**You argue for an implementation fund for which, you said, $ 220 million must be made available.**"More than $ 200 million for the implementation of SDG 6. That is of course a no brainer! Such an amount is peanuts compared to the 22.6 trillion dollars that the OECD believes are needed to realize the water infrastructure for SDG 6."

**That fund is intended to help developing countries make good diagnoses?** “Yes, again, it starts with a good diagnosis. Make sure that the indicators that are mentioned are discussed. Help the countries that are struggling to set up a data infrastructure. Make sure there is money available to make training programs. Ensure that there is also a financial process. The OECD has produced fantastic reports on how we are going to finance this expensive water infrastructure. And my plea is: couple it with other tasks in the city, where most people are going to live anyway, because linking is cashier. ""The challenge lies in planning and getting the population along. What we noticed in the urban research we did: if you go to tropical countries, first start with an approach to the solid waste that is on the street. There are mountains of trash on the street and at the first rain shower that disappears into canals and sewers and everything is hidden. You may want to make a good water policy in a city, but first make sure that the solid waste is disposed of. And reused. It is easier said than done, I know that. But you have to start like this. "If you manage that well, think about the development of sewers. See if you can separate rainwater and sewage collection in areas with a large water shortage. Rainwater and purified waste water can be used to recharge groundwater or to fill reservoirs and basins. In short, think about the links. That is very necessary."

**This requires clear goals, coordination and implementation.** "Yes. Absolutely. In the Netherlands we are well organized. Peter Glas is our Delta Commissioner. Globally the work should be coordinated by the United Nations. And you will have to work it out regionally. You can do that in Europe with the European Commission, you can think of the OECD in industrialized countries. Water is also related to agriculture, then you are at the FAO. Those organizations must collaborate. That is at the level of countries. A network of cities has since emerged. They think: we are not going to wait and we are going to collaborate on water and climate. We must
become resilient and water wise. There are a number of cities that have had wake-up calls. Think of New York, Melbourne, Cape Town. Imagine annual conferences, introduction of new techniques. “It has to be buzzing. The spotlight must be on in the media. And you have to involve your citizens. What we will now get in Europe is that Frans Timmermans will play a major role. He will certainly also talk to Dutch partners and partners in other countries in Europe. And then I think he will soon get the idea that the green deal is a wrong term, because that should be a blue green deal. It’s not just about energy, it’s about water, food and energy. ”

You would like to talk to Timmermans?

“Yes. And we also have something to offer as KWR, I think he has a key role in Europe and therefore also outside Europe. I expect a lot from him in terms of water and climate. ”

This year the Netherlands is holding an International Global Summit on Climate Change. What is the agenda you propose? “I would say: hold a second round about the water objective, about the SDGs, about bringing together money for an implementation fund for SDG 6. About who will write the curricula and where the training courses will come. Where an expertise center goes, that’s possible in Rotterdam. It should also be about involving Frans Timmermans and the OECD Secretary General. Those figureheads are needed, and then it will work. ”

Kees van Leeuwen (64) is Chief Science Officer at the KWR Water Research Institute and professor of Water Management and Urban Development at Utrecht University. His focus is on water management and governance in cities. From 1980 to 2002 he worked at three ministries on water, substances, health and the environment. From 1992-2007 he was a part-time professor of Biological Toxicology at Utrecht University. He has been a member of various advisory and policy groups in the International Rhine Commission, European Commission, OECD, United Nations and the chemical industry. He worked at the European Commission as Director of the Joint Research Center (JRC) in Italy. Van Leeuwen has published more than 200 reports and publications and 2 editions of a book on risk assessment of chemical substances. He also edited the European Water Atlas and a special issue of Water magazine on water management and governance.