

Address of Mayor Jozias Van Aartsen of the City of The Hague to the Global Hearing on Refugees and Migration 4-5 June 2012

It is an honour and a pleasure to welcome you to The Hague, the international city of justice and peace, which has also given its name to The Hague Process on Refugees and Migration and the Declaration of The Hague. I do not believe you could have chosen a better location for this Global Hearing. There are many of you who already know The Hague well, and to you I would like to say, it's nice to see you again. I also see many new faces. Welcome to the city. I hope that you will find time during the discussions in the coming days to get out and savour the atmosphere of the city.

It is ten years since the Declaration of The Hague was adopted. It is in many respects an extraordinary document, not least for its content.

The distinctive feature of the Declaration of The Hague compared with many other vision documents on the subject of refugees, migration and integration is the positive approach it takes to the subject, with its focus on the potential contribution of migrants to revitalising and reforming societies.

That perspective is particularly welcome at a time when migration, aliens, refugees and migrants are increasingly seen as a problem, as a threat to the standards and values, the rights, the social services and the prosperity of the receiving societies.

The response given in the Declaration of The Hague is not one of naive optimism, but a carefully considered vision based on principles of social, cultural and economic innovation.

In this vision, migrants and refugees are not victims, but bring with them skills and experience that the host countries need to make the changes necessary to keep pace with the rapid changes occurring in the world. Migrants keep our communities sharp and alert and open our eyes to new opportunities.

To make the most of those opportunities, host societies must abandon their traditional attitudes, in which their way of life and their view of the world is the ideal.

That is easier said than done. Change takes time. And in a rapidly changing world, time is a very scarce commodity. The caravan has to move on. It is incumbent on the government, including local authorities, but also on businesses, the creators of our prosperity, to consider those who are unable to keep up with the pace of change. They include members of the host society who no longer feel comfortable with the changes occurring all around them. They also include migrants and refugees who are unable to achieve their dream of climbing the social ladder.

Our aim must be to give them a sense of belonging, the feeling that society is not divided into first- and second-class citizens.

The changes can be seen most clearly in the world's large cities. Great successes are being made in those cities, but they are also where the problems can be seen in the sharpest relief.

Cities are social ladders. Throughout the world people migrate to cities in search of a better future, for themselves and for their children. And many succeed. Only for their places to be taken immediately by newcomers. It is always crowded on the lowest rungs of the social ladder. We can see that clearly in the districts of cities with the cheapest housing. You could regard those districts as a hotbed of problems, but you can also see them as a springboard for social advancement.

Cities need these types of district. There is only a problem if people get stuck at the bottom of the social ladder and have nowhere to turn. It requires the efforts of many actors to prevent that, not just the national government and local authorities, but also the business community and, not least, individuals themselves. Certainly in the West, there is an urgent need for workers in the cities. The current situation is that a great many of the people who live in them are not, or rather are not yet, equipped for the jobs that exist. A major offensive is needed to match supply and demand in the labour market, and that will require substantial investment by the authorities and the business sector in education and training. Any action plan must target everyone, regardless of their nationality.

In this city, where half of the young people have an ethnic background, that means raising the level of education, but also providing opportunities for young migrants with qualifications. The government is doing that, and we expect the business community to do the same. It will not happen by itself. When I look around, I still see too few refugees and migrants in prominent positions in government and the private sector. That has to change. I am not talking about affirmative action, but about identifying and recognising qualities that companies and national and local government need to adapt to the changing society.

At the same time, we expect migrants, like other citizens, to take advantage of the chances they are offered. That means doing their best to climb the social ladder, however steep it might seem at times.

Ten years on, the challenge facing you now is to devise a strategy for the future. The task you have set yourselves is to explore ways of translating an inspiring vision into practical measures and solutions. The members of this company highlight a second aspect that makes this event special.

There are participants here from many countries and many disciplines. People who have established a reputation in their own field. Experts from academia, from government bodies, from companies and from NGOs. People who wrestle with these issues every day of their working lives.

It is the diversity of the participants that makes The Hague Process unique. They provide a guarantee that the discussions in the coming days will not become stalled in abstractions, but that hopefully you will find practical solutions. There are many people waiting anxiously for those solutions.

I wish you every success and look forward to reading your conclusions and recommendations.