

Speech prof. dr. Rutger Engels, rector magnificus Erasmus University Rotterdam,
Dies Natalis, 8 November 2019

Welcome Your Excellencies, distinguished guests, trustees, dear colleagues, dear students. Ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the 106th Dies Natalis of the Erasmus University Rotterdam, on behalf of the Board and our Deans. And a special warm welcome to our distinguished guests today. To our honorary doctors and their promoters:

Honorary doctor professor Esther Duflo;

Honorary promotor professor Olivier Marie from Erasmus School of Economics;

Honorary doctor professor Dani Rodrik;

Honorary promotor professor Mansoob Murshed from the International Institute of Social Studies.

And welcome to our guest speakers: Dutch Minister of Finance Wopke Hoekstra and Professor Anne Gielen of the Erasmus School of Economics.

It is an honour to have you all here to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Nobel Prize in Economics to Professor Jan Tinbergen.

And is it not a beautiful coincidence that, fifty years after Jan Tinbergen, our honorary doctor professor Esther Duflo was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences this year?

Ladies and Gentlemen, I quote

“Man has exploited his natural environment destructively long enough. The time has come to rationalize his relationship with the resources offered by his habitat, and to plan a far more intelligent use of them in the future, especially of energy and mineral reserves.”¹

This is not a recent Tweet by Greta Thunberg. These are the first few lines in an article by Jan Tinbergen, published almost fifty years ago, in 1972, in the journal *Impact of Science on Society*, which I read a few weeks ago as preparation for

today. It is almost unbelievable how valid this quote – and much of the article for that matter – still is today.

Tinbergen argues that scientific insights in general do contribute to the welfare of humanity. But at the same time, we should not close our eyes to the adverse effect of science and technology either, for instance in pollution or the exhaustion of vital natural resources. In his view, this should have implications for the role of scholars, for our social and even political responsibilities. Scientists should be aware of how their work can be used and ask themselves whether they agree.

I find it fascinating, and at the same time worrisome, how right Tinbergen was with his predictions.

Nevertheless, would Tinbergen say we made any progress? As mankind, and as academics? I think he would. We have made huge progress in the last decades. World poverty has decreased², infant mortality has decreased³, and more children than ever have access to education⁴.

But not every child. So we have to step up, like we do concretely in the southern part of Rotterdam to try to give children the education that matches their talents. On the other hand, it is very clear that there is an urgency to combine efforts to deal with major challenges like climate change. Work that has to be done globally, but also locally, here in Rotterdam.

And what about us, as the academic community, here at our university?

I think Tinbergen would approve. Our new strategy focuses more than before on the role of academia in society. An important step. And I am hopeful when I look at some of the ongoing activities. We stimulate interdisciplinary approaches to societal challenges in our Erasmus research Initiatives, we try to integrate sustainability in our educational programmes, and we bring students from all faculties together in our honours programme on how to tackle inequality. To mention just a few.

But we are not there yet. Our world is not the world Tinbergen lived in. Many of the rapid changes in our modern society – positive and negative – are driven by technological developments, disruptions and corporates.

Societal challenges deriving from those developments can only be tackled if we work together. We need to cross the disciplinary boundaries. This is not something an technological-focused ecosystem can do on its own, or social sciences can do on its own.

If we as a university, as scholars, want to contribute to our society, we have to work together. We have to get rid of the simplified dichotomy between tech and social. It's what society needs. It's what our students and our graduates ask from us. And it's also something our policymakers should understand.

So, yes, we are on the right track. But, we should not lean back. The hard part, to transform our university to a truly impactful university in the spirit of prof. Jan Tinbergen, is still to come. I trust we are getting there. Together.

Thank you

Notes

1. Tinbergen, Jan. 1972. "Society needs to organize the structures and uses of science". *Impact of Science on Society*, XXII, 4, p. 289.
2. <https://data.worldbank.org/topic/poverty>
3. https://www.who.int/gho/child_health/mortality/neonatal_infant_text/en/
4. <https://data.worldbank.org/topic/education>