



Prof. dr. Annemieke Roobeek, entrepreneur, professor Nyenrode, various committees and chairman of the Committee of Experts

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'The Netherlands is unique. But for how long?'

'We are sliding down the innovation ladder. We are simply not doing well enough.' These strong statements were made by Professor Annemieke Roobeek in an interview for accountancy firm KPMG in 2015. Two years later, the new chair of the Committee of Experts still sees little real progress. 'New players are greedily working to capitalise on our vegetable cultivation and floriculture knowledge, which took us centuries to accumulate. The Dutch horticulture cluster is too fragmented in its operation, and innovation is suboptimal.'

Annemieke Roobeek has built up an impressive CV in the field of strategy and innovation. Formerly a Professor of Metropolitan Issues, Annemieke has now been Professor of Strategy and Transformation Management at the Nyenrode Business University for many years. She is also a supervisory director at ABN AMRO and KLM.

She made the statement at the beginning of this article in her position as supervisory director at ABN AMRO regarding the competitive strength of the Netherlands. The complete quote is specifically applicable to the horticulture industry. 'In my view the top sector policy is not the right approach. It is the wrong way to deal with this issue, as I demonstrated years ago in my thesis. What is the right way? As is the case elsewhere, establishing good connections is a determining factor in the horticulture industry, such as between innovative, established businesses, fast growers and start-ups, supplemented with enterprising scientists and progressive consultants.

Together they form the innovative ecosystem.' Recently, Annemieke Roobeek has focused increasingly on the Dutch horticulture industry. Together with her strong statement, this provided the incentive to ask her to succeed Willem Vermeend and lead the Committee of Experts. Her current professorship is her reason for meticulously analysing and filtering the Dutch horticulture cluster. 'I discussed the subject of clusters, ecosystems and networks with a group of international MBA students. We originally planned to use a Harvard case from 2011 called "The Dutch Flower Cluster" as a case study. Even though it was a fairly new case study, I thought it was dated, as developments move so quickly. I have therefore spent the past years conducting an in-depth investigation into what is really going on in the Dutch horticulture cluster, focusing specifically on where the risks and opportunities lie.'

Suboptimal innovation

'The horticulture cluster is so interesting because it is the Netherlands' most complex cluster. It is a rich collection of businesses, sectors and subsectors. Propagation material, cultivation, sales, auctioning, logistics, technology, ICT - the industry has

everything. These pillars can also be found in the Committee of Experts. However, there is a flaw within that great diversity and vastness. If you look closely, there is no fundamental driving force behind everything. I believe that the opportunities lie in a new collective vision of production and sales, with data driven, sustainable and remotely controllable processes.

We can see that a number of businesses are taking individual steps in this direction. Among the Hillenraad100 businesses, we are seeing the first cases of remote growing, sensor deployment, data analysis for cultivation and data research into consumer behaviour. However, the horticulture cluster as a whole is not operating as a single entity with a shared vision. In my opinion the Dutch horticulture industry functions as a collection of businesses in adjacent sectors. Although there is some crossover, and some contact between like-minded organisations, as a whole it is suboptimal. One way or another the sector should work towards a strong IT-driven foundation under this cluster of clusters. That is the first thing. In addition we should aim for greater synergy in the supply. With niche players acting in conjunction with the major players, and with the digital support structure, we can come up with collective answers to the global issues. We can be the frontrunner who controls the market on the basis of data and variety.'

'Establishing good connections is a determining factor.'

Genuinely new concepts

Annemieke Roobeek has not really seen any genuinely new concepts come from the Dutch horticulture industry for many years. 'All things considered it is really just more of the same. It may be larger, more international, with a greater use of technology, but just consider that in 2030 or thereabouts over two thirds of the global population will live in cities or megacities. That puts new cultivation

techniques such as vertical and urban farming in a different light. Individual businesses in the Hillenraad100 are working on this, but I believe that it could be tackled far more intelligently. Where are the consortiums that act together? Where are the links with the urban planners, policy makers, and mayors of these megacities? Where are the connections with the emergence of smart cities? As an entrepreneur, I would be scratching my head in bewilderment if I heard that the brother of Elon Musk plans to get involved in the world of urban farming, or if I heard that countries such as Korea were gearing up in the field of vertical farming, or if I noticed that the Amazons of this world have discovered the food trade.'

Different speeds

'I of course realise that major enterprises in particular will not suddenly change course overnight. And of course, I realise that the predictions of people like me sound like fantasies in the here and now. I know that we can praise everything that start-ups do through the roof, even while they sometimes fail to generate returns as existing large enterprises continue to rake in profits. But we need both. The senior who says "Let's wait and see," is just as valuable as the kid who says "I'm going to give it a shot." We cannot allow ourselves to be lulled to sleep by the great results many businesses are generating at this high point in time, or by the seeming stability of the composition of the Hillenraad100.

So much is going on, and outsiders at home and abroad are getting ready, which is why this year, the Hillenraad100 is so focused on so-called Challenging Concepts - ideas that could fundamentally change the horticulture industry. These appeal to me because in them, I see businesses increasingly reasoning from the perspective of demand. I also see new blood, fresh faces and new insights on the Committee of Experts. But despite all this, I still miss a shared sense of urgency across the cluster. So, now that I am in the position to meddle with the horticulture industry, I would say: get your act together.'