

FROM PARTNER COUNTRIES TO CORE GEOGRAPHIES – PLEADING THE CASE OF COASTS AND SEAS

The current consultation commences with a clear statement of motive: “The Netherlands stands to benefit from a stable, safe and sustainable world around it.” The argument made below is that, rather than taking the entry point of themes or partner countries, as is current practice, foreign policy stands to benefit from focusing on a specific type of geographical region, namely the coast. Coastal zones are interfaces of land and sea, frequently defined as extending 100 km land inwards, and seawards to a depth of 50 metres (MEA 2005).

The Millenium Ecosystem Assessment (2005) recognized coastal zones as being particularly fragile and subject to degradation. Pontee (2013) refers to the process of habitat degradation as ‘coastal squeeze’. Squeeze is emphasized through sea level rise, that will ‘eat up’ land areas in many parts of the world. This would not make much difference if coastal regions were sparsely inhabited and little-used. Reality is another, however: coastal zones are prime development zones, with large-scale economic investments, a profusion of large cities, and ever denser populations. The UN Atlas of the Oceans points out that two-thirds of the world’s populations actually live within 60 km of the sea. The combination of socio-economic pressures and climate change creates challenges that require urgent addressal. They are therefore highlighted in the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly under Goal 14 (Life below water) and Goal 13 (Climate Action).

But coastal zones are not only under threat; they are also the sites of prospective ‘Blue Growth’. The OECD (2016) expects the ocean’s contribution to the world economy to double by 2030, and the EU too has committed itself to a blue growth strategy, focusing on five high-potential maritime sectors (COM 2014/254/2). In Asia, Africa and Latin America too, the blue economy has emerged as a major field of activity. Mineral exploitation, green energy, tourism, aquaculture and other economic sectors are vying for attention. Food from the oceans is viewed as an important way of meeting the needs of a growing world population (SAPEA 2017). To, prevent hard-nosed ‘ocean-’ (Bennett 2015) and ‘coastal-grabbing’ (Bavinck et al. 2017), and the marginalization of vulnerable populations such as fishermen, appropriate governance approaches and marine spatial planning are required. Skills of this kind are available in the Netherlands, such as with the Netherlands Environmental Assessment Agency (PBL), IMARES and DELTARES, but also with the social-science Centre for Maritime Research (MARE), and the members of CERES Research School for International Development.

Balanced and non-exclusionary economic growth in coastal zones, combined with thoughtful protective efforts, will assist in lowering the extent of poverty and reducing migration incentives. A focus of the Netherlands development policy on coastal zones, not only as the site of engineering works, but of inclusive development, stands to build on Dutch experience expertise (from natural, technical and social sciences), and will contribute to the Netherlands being contained in “a stable, safe and sustainable world.” I look forward to discussing this further with you.

Maarten Bavinck, 21-3-2018