

Speech on the presentation of the Max van der Stoel Human Rights Award 2014

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Universities: Indifference is not an option

When I think of Max van der Stoel, I think of the man I happen to meet a number of years ago. Van der Stoel lived round the corner of my house in The Hague. During one of what must have been his last walks, he approached me. Although appearing vulnerable by old age, he took the time to compliment me; with the fact that my daughter was wearing a helmet when cycling. This small incident is indicative of a man who sought out human contact in order to make the world a better place. This largely agrees with what others say about him. Van der Stoel was adamant in addressing people on what good living is. He was a realistic idealist; a doer, who acted upon his beautiful words. Tilburg University is still proud that this former Minister, former High Commissioner on National Minorities, and former UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights was in its midst as an endowed professor.

Shortly after the statesman's death in 2011, publicist Bas Heijne wrote the following about van der Stoel, "More than anyone else, he understood that idealism is not a matter of big words but an unrelenting process that takes place behind the scenes. His legacy is the realization that ideals have to prove themselves in an imperfect world."

Van der Stoel was prepared to fight for his ideals. What he was absolutely dedicated to were human rights. These are the values we owe to the 'never again' feeling we have had ever since the Second World War. Van der Stoel experienced this war first hand. This explains why his driving force to rise to injustice was so powerful. The word indifference was not part of his vocabulary.

What can you expect?

As the university that hands out the *Max van der Stoel Human Rights Awards*, we must ask ourselves: do we do enough to stand up for values like human rights? Do we feel sufficiently responsible for the world around us? Are we courageous enough to address others on this issue?

Something can be expected from universities. After all, we educate a new generation of managers, judges, politicians and scientists. The community needs people who can think critically and have a conviction on what good living entails. Part of education and training is the transfer of values. After all, who wants 'valueless' leaders. We, as universities, need to set a good example. And Tilburg can have an important task to fulfill as a driving force. We are a society-oriented university. Our institution builds on the legacy of Martinus Cobbenhagen, a professor of economics who highly valued ethics and social sciences. Discussions on good living belong to the core of the university, according to Cobbenhagen.

There is no need to discuss whether or not universities have to stand up for human rights. After all, these are universal values. And this has become more than evident ever since the *National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights* by the Dutch government. This one-year-old plan obliges businesses to show their respect for human rights. They have to know in which areas they run the risk to violate human rights and to indicate what they do to minimize these risks. When, despite this, human rights are violated, victims should be able to receive redress (compensation) if need be by legal means. Universities are also bound by this action plan. This means we are supposed to prevent human rights from being violated. We have to do this by signaling risks, taking measures, and being open about it.

CSR

The *National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights* goes hand in hand with a trend in society in which the focus on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is growing. During the previous ten years, companies have become increasingly aware that they should take more responsibility for the societal impact of their actions, directly or indirectly. As investors and purchasers we, often unconsciously, participate in practices we really ought to avoid. Think about cluster bombs or clothing produced by child labor. In buying a cheap t-shirt, we are part of maintaining working conditions we shouldn't want to maintain. The disaster that happened in the clothes factory in Bangladesh in April 2013 was a wake-up call in this matter. You may remember the haunting photograph of the dead couple embracing each other in the workplace for the last time. This image has now become the symbol for bad working conditions due to cheap clothing.

A good way of paying attention to human rights in a company is CSR policy. Dutch universities are not at the forefront in this area. The visible front runners can mostly be found in the business sector. An increasing group of businesses are putting a lot of effort into this. The same goes for the large Dutch pension funds. Following a Zembla documentary in 2007 on investing in cluster bombs, the implementation of CSR policy has greatly accelerated in this sector. When companies, the pension funds invest in, are suspected of violating human rights, they engage in a dialogue with these companies. Those who do not wish to engage in this dialogue will see investors leave and will be placed on an exclusion list. Large investors join forces more and more often in holding

companies to account, e.g. in the UN organization linked to the treaty United Nations Principles of Responsible Investment.

Universities hardly ever work together

It would be positive if universities also worked together just like the pension funds. The *National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights* could well be a good inducement. This acting together hardly ever happens now as it appears from consulting the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU). The fact that we do not join forces sufficiently can be explained by the universities' desire for autonomy. The VSNU aims to meddle as little as possible in the business operations or the content of education and research.

It also appears that the sense of urgency for CSR is not very strong in universities. In any case, less so compared to pension funds and front runners in the business sector. This may be because we already 'do well' with our education, research and valorization. Unlike organizations that cause visible societal damage, we may not feel the obligation to justify ourselves. This argument of 'a good primary activity' was also put forward as the reason why the healthcare business was not in the lead concerning CSR. However, a group of front runners in the healthcare business are now, with the support of MVO Nederland, working on serious CSR policy. They also designed a 'clean' clothing line for uniforms which was presented recently. This clothing line is innovative because of its antibacterial coating and electronic wearables that give warning in case of work overload, but not only this. It is also case that the clothes do not cause unnecessary damage to humans and the environment. The clothes are manufactured in factories in Tunisia and Bangladesh that pay their factory workers a fair wage and offer a safe working environment. Attention is also paid to environmental friendliness. The material the clothes are made of complies with the highest sustainability standards. They are easily recycled which helps reduce the waste mountain created by healthcare institutions. This is an example that may inspire universities.

I think there may be another cause that could possibly inhibit the sense of urgency in universities and this is the strife for neutrality. The gowns worn by professors indicate that we want to make as little distinction as possible between religions, political preferences and so forth. Whilst CSR, on the other hand, forces us to take position. This has been out fashion for a while after the compartmentalization and liberalization. This, however, should not stop us from addressing others on the violation of human rights. As was said before, these are universal values. As a university, we would not want to buy goods produced by child labor or made of materials that lead to disproportionate damage to our health or the environment. Already a growing number of professors and lecturers consider this sufficient reason for paying attention to sustainability when buying the very same gown that serves as a symbol of neutrality.

What are our people doing?

Returning to the question whether or not we, as an organization, defend human rights. This moral question has two components: do our people do enough and does our organization do enough?

I am pleased to answer the first question with a wholehearted yes. Our scientists develop inspiring initiatives with which they make a difference. They each have their own driving forces, just like Max van der Stoel had. For example, Associate Professor Anne-Marie de Brouwer. As a law student, she became interested in international law. During her studies, she read more and more about sexual violence in war zones. She found out that these victims had a poor legal status. She became fascinated, at first from an academic point of view. She contributed in improving the legal position of the victims of sexual violence. However, she also contributed on a personal level. She did this with the book *The Men Who Killed Me* in which we can read stories of victims. This has increased awareness of the seriousness of the problem. Furthermore, she is also active through the Mukomeze Foundation.

I see another beautiful example in the efforts our scientists make for the often forgotten group of stateless persons. They have no nationality and no passport as a result, they do not have the same rights as nationals do. Stateless persons feel excluded because they cannot prove who they are. They want to be treated as human beings and receive the same opportunities. This position without prospects can lead to depression or fear for the future. An important group of stateless persons are women who do not have the right to convey their nationality to their children. These stateless mothers are worried about what will happen to their children when they are no longer around. With our research results and our education, we help local organizations with making their activities more effective and we exercise pressure on governments. Those efforts are not in vain: Last year, legislation was adjusted in Senegal. In that African country, woman can convey their nationality to their children now.

And we haven't even talked about *Business & Human Rights*. In the spirit of Max van der Stoel, this research unit ensures clarity in the application of the principles of human rights. Worldwide, there is a growing awareness that companies carry responsibility in respecting human rights. More often than not, multi-nationals, for example, need to account for the damages they caused to humans and the environment in distant countries. Our people help to clarify the legal framework; when do we consider something to be a violation and when do we not. This is an example in which the research group advised the peace organization PAX on the writing of the report on 'blood coals'.

Last but not least, I would like to mention Professor for Development. Our Professors (Emeritus) from different schools are working to improve the standard in African universities free of charge. With a little good will, this can be regarded as a contribution to the right to education. This has been laid down in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In this declaration, it is written that higher education shall be available

for everyone on the basis of merit. What's more, the right to education can be found in many treaties and constitutions.

What does our organization do?

I would now like to address the second moral question: does our organization sufficiently defend human rights? The truth is: there is room for improvement and we are working on that. In recent years and in line with societal development, our organization has become aware that we need to work on this more actively. We need to look further than just our own management operating activities. We do this through CRS policy. Some modesty is in order here. CRS has only recently taken a prominent place in our strategy. We have actively started a program as a result of our present Strategic Plan 2014-2017. We wrote an extensive CRS inception report. We are now working on a baseline measurement on which the implementation of the improvements will be based.

As far as the environment is concerned, we are on the right track. We save energy, stimulate the recycling of resources, reduce waste and contamination, make ICT facilities sustainable, and we encourage sustainable transport. We think it is important to make the campus greener. After all, it should be an inspiring spot for young people who have a long future ahead. Something else we find especially important is that we educate students into becoming responsible world citizens. We want them to think about their own responsibilities and those of the companies they will work for. This is the reason why we determined the strategy that a variety of master programs intensively focus on sustainability. Totally in line with the spirit of Copenhagen, I think. A society-oriented university goes hand in hand with 'social' ambition. We would like to work together with social partners to work on innovative solutions to societal problems. A beautiful/fancy term for this is social innovation. Part of our social ambition is that we take human rights seriously. This is a core theme of our CSR policy. We would like, in line with the *National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights*, to address others in this area. With this kind of ambitions, we need to make sure that our own business is in order. This forces us to be introspective. We shall have to ask ourselves: How do we deal with our members of staff? Do we prevent discrimination? Are we diverse enough? Do women receive equal pay compared to men? Do we give disabled people sufficient opportunities? I challenge you to share your opinions on this issues.

CSR does not function properly if the program is imposed top-down. As I just said, we have very driven employees. What's more, we are bursting with young talents on campus. The more reason for us to challenge researchers, lecturers, support staff, students, and our relations to spurt out ideas during the so-called CSR Labs. Students are very critical in this area. Should our CSR policy lag behind, I am sure they will correct us. As happened in the United States. There, an anti-sweatshop student movement gave the university an incentive to formulate CSR policy. This was in order to prevent the university merchandise (like sweaters bearing the university campus logos) from being manufactured under appalling circumstances.

Conclusion

I strongly believe in CSR policy. Also because it is more than a moral obligation. If we succeed in distinguishing ourselves in CSR we have an advantage in the increasing competition for student and research talent. As a matter of fact, the university's societal relevance is an important aspect of our appeal. What's more, I believe that thinking about CSR innovation is stimulating. A good example of this is Tony's Cholonely chocolate bars; they came into being as an initiative for slave-free chocolate. And more than anything: working for a better world gives satisfaction and it makes it easier to mobilize people. As far as mobilizing people is concerned, we mustn't forget the other universities. It would be naïve to expect Tilburg University to do this alone and to make a good impression on its own. From examples in the healthcare and pension sectors that I mentioned before, it is apparent that joining forces can be effective. Universities can learn from these examples. For example with our purchasing strength, we could create more impact together than alone. And why would every university invent the wheel on its own in relation to the *National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights*?

I think that Tilburg University should take the lead concerning human rights policy. Even if it requires effort to get other universities to join us. In that case, we need to be aware that realizing ideals is a slow and difficult process that mostly happens behind the scenes. After all, that is what we learned from van der Stoep. But, just like the person these awards are named after, we must never stop asserting human rights.