



Doctorat Honoris Causa

Remis à la Fondation Urgenda

Par l'Université Saint-Louis Bruxelles

Le 26 septembre 2019

Présentation d'Urgenda

Par la Professeure Delphine Misonne, PhD, LL.M

Your excellencies,
Dear students,
Dear colleagues,
Ladies and gentlemen,
Beste Marjan,

This is very unusual, even if not unique.

Instead of honoring a person, our University decided this year to highlight the achievement booked by a Foundation: Urgenda.

Urgenda gained a reputation on the world stage in June 2015, because it obtained the condemnation of a State, the Netherlands, in a lawsuit concerning climate change.

Is the University now going to procure a PhD to all plaintiffs being successful in Court?

Let me explain.

If the University honors Urgenda tonight, it is due to the way Urgenda approached the rule of Law to provoke advances in the governance of the climate issue

and, in so doing, to let the role of the judiciary power emerge in the plain limelight, as it should be, in a democracy.

Remember that, at the time, when the proceedings were first launched in November 2013, climate change policies were stuck.

The well-known Kyoto Protocol had more or less expired. The Paris Agreement had not yet been adopted and no one was sure it would ever be!

Where was the international community heading to?

Urgenda was getting nervous.

Created in 2007 by Marjan Minnesma and Prof. Rotmans from the Erasmus University Rotterdam, its goal was to promote a fast transition towards a sustainable society. Fast. Speed matters for the Fondation. Its name is made of two words: Urgent and Agenda.

But they felt a bit at a loss. Where was the impetus, beyond loose promises made on the international scene? What was the direction society was supposed to take in relation to climate and energy transition?

And then they thought. Couldn't we make something out of the existing? Isn't there something we could claim in Court, for the judge to decide?

The Government was in a comfortable position. It asserted that the ambition it pursued was a political question and that the Courts had not right to interfere.

However, Urgenda found a way.

Its trump was to innovate by coming back to the basics. Civil law. Liability.

The fundamental question it raised before the district Court in The Hague was how does a Government need to behave towards its own citizens and even future generations, when those are at risk of serious harm due to climate change?

Most importantly, especially before the Court of Appeal, the lawsuit reactivated the debate on the link to be drawn between human rights and climate change.

An action before the Dutch Supreme Court, the Hoge Raad der Nederlanden is still pending. But even though the judgment is not yet final, it already had a tremendous inspirational impact. On policies, on legislation, on litigation, on activism.

Not only in The Netherlands but also beyond and abroad. Including in Universities and at the General Assembly of the United Nations.

Another aspect the University wants to highlight tonight is the importance of the role non-governmental organizations play in defending nature and what we call "our environment".

Environmental issues are supposed to be best handled with the participation of all concerned citizens.

Citizens are the ones who see, the ones who know, the ones who endure. Therefore, they are supposed to be the most appropriate watchdogs or guardians.

But they can't exercise such role without the rise and consolidation of core principles that are quintessential to democratic systems: the need for access to information, the need for access to the public debate and the need for access to Court.

Still, in the parts of the world where this has been made legally possible, like in Europe, getting standing, access to Court for a group of citizens in order to ask concrete answers and enforceable decisions about, say, climate change, needs some effort.

This is again where Urgenda makes the difference.

The Foundation managed to transform the lawsuit it brought forward into a festive, participative and emotional challenge engaging society. One does not often describe a lawsuit as an "action out of love"!

The last dimension I want to raise here is about solutions and, yes I dare to say, pragmatism.

Urgenda does not sit and wait. It does not let the Government being condemned and wait till something happens next.

It proposes and develops an agenda of very concrete measures figuring out how a quick transition towards a low carbon society is actually possible, effective, now.

When we went to Amsterdam to meet Urgenda, Prof. Jogchum Vrieling and myself, we were told to wait across the water.

We had to take the boat behind the station and wait on the other side, near the bus stop.

We were wondering:

How will Marjan Minnesma come and join us?

Will she arrive walking, will she arrive cycling, kayaking, will she ride a horse, will she get down the bus?

Then we got a phone call.

“ I am waiting for you - in the red car over there, hurry, she said.” A red car!

And she took us quite far in the middle of a brownfield-in-full-development area.

We were circulating physically through an economic planning process.

The offices were located in a former industrial facility.

This was made clear to us: Urgenda’s work is rooted in a real-world context. It is not about candle lights.

And, yes, don’t worry, the car was full electric.

Tonight, Urgenda is represented by its director, Marjan Minnesma.

She studied business administration, philosophy and law.

She had a life before Urgenda. She worked five years for the Dutch government in Central Europe on energy efficiency and renewable energy projects. She was a campaigns director for Greenpeace Netherlands and worked for ten years at different universities – the Free University (VU) Amsterdam and the Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR).

With Urgenda, besides the Court case, she leads many projects, technology-focussed or not. She wrote a guide on how to positively and concretely transform society towards a “100% sustainable energy”. She was named the most influential person working in the field of sustainability in the Netherlands three years in a row.

Damens en Heren, ik ben zeer vereerd nu het woord te geven aan Marjan Minnesma, als vertegenwoordigster van de Urgenda Stichting.

Maar eerst en vooral geef ik de micro eventjes terug aan de heer Pierre Jadoul, rector van onze Universiteit, voor het begin van de plechtige ceremonie.

Delphine Misonne
26 September 2019