

Introduction by the Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Ron van Dartel, on the occasion of the meeting of the Association of Agropress

Dame i gospodo, (ladies and gentlemen),

- Dozvolite mi da izrazim zadovoljstvo sto sam danas ovde sa vama. [Allow me to express my satisfaction for being here today with you).
- For me it is a special honour and a great pleasure to accept this award from the Association of the Agro journalists. The award strengthens me in my view that the focus of the Netherlands Embassy regarding the agricultural cooperation with Serbia has been right over the past period. And it encourages me to keep on the present course.
- I believe the Serbian agricultural press contributes significantly to the wellbeing of the entire sector. Journalists such as yourself play a key role in educating consumers on food safety standards, in informing all kinds of farmers on global trends in production and in making the general public aware of health requirements. This is a very important job.
- People associate my country, the Netherlands, with flower bulbs, cheese and eggs. This is no coincidence. The agriculture sector is a strategic pillar of the Dutch economy. The Netherlands is both a major producer and an international trader of agro products. Our main products are flowers, meat, meat products, fruit, vegetables, beer, dairy products and chocolate.
- A few facts and figures on my country may help illustrate the importance of agriculture.
 1. The Netherlands is one of the smaller countries of the European Union: Serbia is about twice as big. This limited area is inhabited by 16.5 million people. That makes the Netherlands one of the most densely populated countries in the world. But we make excellent use of the limited space we have. The Netherlands is, after the United States, the second agricultural exporter in the world.
 2. The total production value of the agriculture and horticulture sector in 2006 was over 20.000 million EUR. Arable and horticulture crops accounted for 11.000 million EUR and the value of livestock and animal products was 9.000 million EUR.
 3. The trade in agricultural products to and from the Netherlands is diverse. Potted plants and cut flowers make up the bulk of agricultural exports. In 2006, the value of these exports totalled 8.000 million EUR, which is almost 15% of the total agricultural product export value. Other major export products are meat and meat products (6.000 million EUR) and dairy products (4.500 million EUR). In addition to these exports, a substantial amount of agricultural products is imported into the Netherlands, mainly meat and dairy products.
 4. The Dutch economy has an open character and a strong international orientation. The agricultural sector is no different. Most exports go to other Member States of the European Union. The Netherlands imported agricultural products amounting to 31.000 million EUR, or 11% of the value of total Dutch imports.

Our international orientation in the agricultural sector is also evident in our interest to cooperate with emerging markets. Emerging markets, such as Serbia, are future partners for Dutch business.

There are several ways that the Netherlands tries to promote cooperation in the agricultural sector between our two countries.

One of our main activities is promoting new cooperation between our private companies in the agricultural sector. Since 2001 we supported 20 different Business-to-Business projects with around 14 million EUR. This initial investment was then followed by investments of the partners involved.

This evening we are in Garden Centar. In fact, Garden Centar was one of the first companies that we supported in this way. It is a pleasure to see that Garden Centar has expanded its business and that the cooperation with its Dutch partners went far beyond the government assistance.

We also try to help companies in the more initial face, with viability studies on new business ideas. Over the last few years we invested 1.35 million EUR in different feasibility studies.

Apart from our role in supporting private business cooperation we also show an interest in the Serbian efforts to make agriculture more sustainable. Proper care for the nature and the environment are very important. Over the last 4 years we supported around 20 different small-scale nature conservation projects.

Preserving nature and biodiversity is not only linked to agriculture, but concerns society as a whole. To be effective, we need strong NGO's. They act as a trigger for society, the government institutions and the business community. To support these developments we invested 2.3 million EUR in a large nature preservation project.

The Netherlands recognizes the important role governments have to play to assure that business and the global market requirements are met. Our Government-to-Government programme enables us to link ministries and institutes from our two countries. This is a very practical way for Dutch and Serbian government professionals to exchange ideas and build capacity. One of the present G2G-projects has been initiated on the explicit request of the Serbian Ministry of Agriculture. It concerns close cooperation in the development of phytosanitary inspection. But there are also huge opportunities to join forces in veterinary inspection, the dairy sector and water management.

Finally I would like to draw your attention to innovation. Innovation is needed to adapt to new circumstances, such as changes in the environment, a push for energy efficiency and changing tastes and needs of the consumers. These innovations are necessary to stay ahead of the game. But, on the other hand, these innovations are always depended on a solid knowledge base. For the Dutch agro-sector to continue to operate successfully and competitively, the knowledge infrastructure needs to undergo continuous renewal. Applied science is very important. For that reason we pay utmost importance to this field. Through the cooperation between our ministeries and companies we can share the results of these effersts with Serbia.

Let me end on a more personal note. I have lived in Serbia these last 3 years and have enjoyed your agro products enormously: the taste of your fruits and vegetables is excellent; I'm a big fan of prebranac; and the rich variety of meat is almost unparalleled. needless to say I quite naturally also became a regular visitor of your wineries and a fan of your local rakija, such as dunja and sljivovica. The only problem I encountered down the way was to find the right balance between the sizes of your portions and what I can actually digest – but as you can see – I have managed!

I wish you all pleasant evening and enjoy the Serbian specialities!

Uzivajte! (enjoy)

