Speech by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bert Koenders, awarding Ton Dietz the Order of Merit of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 25 September 2017

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished professors, Ton,

It's an honour for me to speak just a few short words here today. I feel humbled by the sheer amount of knowledge and experience of the continent so close to my heart. 'Humble' is a word that describes you well, Ton. You call yourself a 'world citizen' from the tribe of 'the Dutch'. Others describe you as open-minded, cheerful, intellectually stimulating, an active team player, and a warm, unifying personality. You'd have made an ideal diplomat for the foreign service. What a shame we didn't sign you up! Fortunately, our HR people are busy recruiting for a new 'klasje'. So there's hope for us yet.

But seriously, you've contributed a great deal to Africa, to research on Africa, and what I particularly appreciate your work for is that - in paradox to what I just said - you speak out clearly and directly on African affairs. You have contributed enormously to our Ministry's knowledge of the continent.

I'll keep it brief and confine myself to three points:

1) Africa is often seen as continent of myth and mystery. Yet sometimes it's presented in terms that are too simple. In the past, the media have tended to serve up images of doom and gloom: a place full of violence, hunger and poverty. In *Silverlining Africa* you set out to paint a more positive, nuanced picture. You saw many glimmers of hope. You saw the continent as 'the place to be', not a place to avoid. Of course, there are still huge problems, conflicts, and underdevelopment. But there are also now stronger institutions. Many more people can read and write. A considerable number of countries are showing economic growth. A number of countries improved in governance.

There is progress on education and healthcare. In a number of regional conflicts (take the Lake Chad region and the Gambia), neighbouring countries are actively helping to resolve crises.

For the future, a lot will depend on how the public sector and the political and economic elites perform, and whether they can generate equal and inclusive growth. But – most importantly – Africa in all its diversity and beauty is not an account of what goes well or not well. It is a formidable continent *sui generis*.

2) The people of Africa are young. When you were born, Ton, the continent had 230 million inhabitants. Now, there are 1.2 billion. Projections vary, but it's safe to say that Africa will have at least 3 billion people by the end of this century, probably more. And a proportion of them will be on the move, as you rightly mentioned. Yes, there's a demographic transition under way (though it's slow), and yes, many people will find a bright future in Africa. But migration to Europe will continue.

From a political perspective, this isn't a good or a bad thing in itself. But it needs to be managed far better than is currently the case. My sense is that your research on climate change, geography, politics and migration could play a leading role in this.

3) Relations between Africa and Europe are changing. A lot. In the past we've closed a number of embassies. That was a mistake. I'm delighted that we are opening new representations, in Niamey and possibly in N'Djamena. Relations between European and African countries need to be strengthened, not weakened. So that we can tackle the world's many challenges together. So we can collectively improve our destinies. So that we can work on energy transition and solar power, together. And above all: so we can learn from each other.

Ton, it's safe to say you've learned a lot from your time in Africa. In Kenya, Ghana, Burkina Faso and the other places you spent time and did research.

You learned from the culture, the history, the sociology, the philosophy, the economy – all the many things that intrigue you. Your research methods have empowered local people to write their own development histories. So they have also learned from you. And they appreciate your work.

The clearest proof of this, of course, was when Moi University in Eldoret, Kenya awarded you an honorary doctorate.

You made great efforts to attract more African academics to work here in the Netherlands. And I firmly believe we should do more to attract more African students to our universities.

You will now retire, and you will have more time to spend with your family including your bright granddaughter. Since I know you're always hungry for more – knowledge, projects, people - I'm sure we will see more articles from you in the years to come. Like for instance on stamps, because collecting them is another great hobby of yours.

Ton, I'd like to thank you personally you for all that you did and all that you signified. For the people of Africa. For the people of the Netherlands. For academia, the African Studies Centre and Leiden University.

For advancing our Ministry's knowledge of this great continent, and for enhancing the link between policy and research.

You played a significant part in further improving relations between Africa and the Netherlands. For all that, the Ministry is very grateful and I personally am very grateful.

Ton, it is therefore my privilege to award you the Order of Merit of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This is quite exceptional and an extraordinary decoration; only awarded in very special circumstances and to very special people. Only a few people received this honour in recent times: Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the German Minister of Foreign Affairs, Julie Bishop and Tom Middendorp. Congratulations!