

Speech Aalt Dijkhuizen

Opening Academic Year

Programme

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Speech Aalt Dijkhuizen Chairman of the Executive Board of Wageningen UR Opening Academic Year Wageningen UR, 1 September 2008

Ladies and Gentlemen, Distinguished Guests,

On behalf of the Executive Board of Wageningen UR, I would like to welcome you all here in Wageningen. Formally we celebrate today the start of the academic year of Wageningen University, but for us it is a joint starting point for the entire organization, including the specialized and applied DLO research institutes and the Van Hall Larenstein University of Applied Sciences. A special welcome to our speakers, Mr Kofi Annan, former UN Secretary-General, and Mr Wout Dekker, CEO of Nutreco. We are extremely pleased and honored to have you with us today and are looking forward to your contributions.

The theme of the opening this year is 'Feeding the World'. A theme that has been put on the top of the agenda worldwide, due to the recent increase in food prices. A re-appreciation of the food and agri-sector is happening, and deservedly. There is much debate about why food prices are so high, with bio-fuels being often seen as the most important reason. A Wageningen UR-wide group of scientists headed by Prof. Ruud Huirne and Prof. Rudy Rabbinge identified a variety of reasons, including severe droughts, low stocks, high oil prices, increasing food demands, underinvestment in agriculture, and intensified export restrictions. In the longer term they expect food prices to decrease again, but remaining at a higher level than before. This is because the demand for food will double in the coming decades due to an increase in world population and a higher income level. A tremendous challenge to meet these demands. Our scientists think this possible, but not without significant investments in the development and application of new technologies and new production systems.

Wageningen UR is well-positioned to work on these challenges. They fully fall within our domain, which we describe, as mentioned before, as 'healthy food and living environment'. Within this domain, we distinguish three interrelated core-fields: (1) food and food production, in which we pay attention to subjects such as a sustainable agriculture and fisheries, international food chains, nutrition and health, and the bio-based economy, (2) the living environment, with special attention to issues such as landscape and land-use planning, biodiversity, water and coastal management, and adaptation to climate change, and (3) health, lifestyle and livelihood, focused on people's attitudes towards issues such as human health, food security, food safety, animal welfare, and technologies, including biotechnology.

A domain that also has the interest of young people, which makes that we will again welcome more new students from the Dutch secondary schools than the year before. For the second year in a row, Wageningen is the fastest growing university in the Netherlands, with this time an expected increase of between 15 and 20% compared to last year, which means about 50% more new Dutch students in two years time. Also at Van Hall Larenstein a significant increase is expected. A tremendous success for all people involved and solid evidence that our domain has a great future. It also means that we need to build additional teaching facilities. Next to extending the hard infrastructure, we are adapting our teaching program to the latest developments, with new Master programs in the management of marine ecosystems, climate studies, and water technology. Moreover, programs on sensory science and gastronomy are under development. We trust that these new programs will prepare our students even better for a successful professional career than before.

Also in our research program we were able to develop interesting new projects. First I would like to mention the initiative to develop a Center for Photosynthesis Research, together with Leiden University, the VU University Amsterdam and the University of Groningen. Aim of the project is to realize breakthroughs in the efficiency of photosynthesis of plants and to capture sunlight directly through bio-solar cells, the so-called third generation of bio-energy. We are happy that the first part of the funding for this ambitious program has become available and trust that the remaining part will follow. A second initiative is an extensive program together with the Wetsus Technological Top Institute and the private industry, on the use of algae for the production of bio-fuels. Algae are much more efficient for energy production than crops like rape, corn and palm oil and do not compete with food production. A third initiative to mention is from our Central Veterinary Institute, and focuses on the spread and control of emerging vectorborne diseases. These diseases increase in frequency due to climate change and people travelling and are a risk for animals and human beings. The research is done in collaboration with the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine in Utrecht, the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment in Bilthoven and the Onderstepoort Veterinary Institute in South Africa. A next group to mention are the projects obtained through the 7th Framework Program of the European Union. In total Wageningen UR was able to get between 80 and 90 projects fun-ded in this program sofar, with between 25 and 30 million Euros of research funding. An interesting example is a project using traditional Wageningen knowledge in the human medical area. This project focuses on the signalling of complex diseases accounting for 60% of the death in Europe. Another is on malnutrition in sub-Saharan Africa, carried out together with five African universities. A final one to mention is on the public perception of genetically-modified animals with universities and institutes throughout Europe. A project under development for funding through the EU is

on request of FAO and part of an intended renewed partnership between FAO and Wageningen UR. The project will focus on the development of an enhanced food market information system to better analyze and predict the impact of fluctuations in world food markets. Lastly I would like to mention three new regional initiatives. In the first place with the Province of Gelderland where we aim to strengthen our collaboration in the field of the bio-based economy, next to our joint Food Valley initiatives. Secondly, with the Province of Flevoland to jointly become the knowledge center for wind energy. And finally with the Province of Zeeland where we extend and strengthen our collaboration in aquaculture. Three examples that show the importance of our regional links.

Next to these successful examples in research and teaching, continuous efforts are made to further improve the structure and efficiency of our organization, and thus make more of the incoming money available for research and teaching. In this respect, we have investigated whether a merger of our Animal Sciences Group and the Animal Health Service would be of mutual benefit. Various areas were identified to intensify the collaboration, but unfortunately a full merger turned out to be too complicated. We owe many thanks to the people who worked on this project and consider the joint symposium held today on innovation and developments in animal production, a visible start of the next stage in our collaboration. Another development concerns the publishing of Resource, our Wageningen UR weekly. After an intensive debate in our organization, we have decided to publish it in-house again, as other Dutch universities do. In this way, independent news gathering and reporting can still (and will) be guaranteed, while avoiding commotion due to an unpredicted outcome of a tender procedure. A procedure that is required in case of outsourcing. A final development to mention is that we are currently re-thinking how to best position our organization in the entire knowledge chain, which extends from fundamental university research on the one hand to applied R&D in institutes and private companies on the other. This to better prepare ourselves for the future, especially as far as our specialized and applied DLO research institutes are concerned. These institutes increasingly need projects and funding from the private market to fulfill their tasks and hence face more volatility. Whatever scenario turns out to be the best, we will maintain our basic values of top-quality and independency.

Ladies and gentlemen, Wageningen UR is in good shape with many new opportunities ahead. A good shape can only be achieved with great efforts and involvement of our staff and students. We are pleased and proud to have so many good and dedicated people in our organization and I would therefore like to thank them all for the tremendous amount of work that has been done again. It has become a tradition to mention some of them at this occasion, of whom we are extra proud. That is this time in the first place of course Prof. Willem de Vos, Chair of Microbiology, who was granted the Spinoza Prize, the highest scientific award in the Netherlands. We are extremely pleased and proud that this prize was awarded to a Wageningen scientist for the second time in a row. In the second place Prof. Pierre de Wit, Chair of Phytopathology, who was appointed by the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences to the prestigious position of Academy Professor. A great honor for a life-time work on fungal diseases in crops. And then Prof. Pavel Kabat, Chair in Earth System Science and Climate Change. Prof. Kabat is the initiator and one of the driving forces behind our research and teaching in climate studies. Next to all his activities, he recently became director of the Wadden Academy, the new institute of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences focusing on the sustainable development of the Wadden Sea. Furthermore Prof. Martien Cohen Stuart, Chair in Physical Chemistry and Colloid Science, who became Member of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, a reward for his top-quality research and next to that also received the AKZO Nobel Science Award. And then Dr Piet Sonneveld, and his team of Wageningen UR Greenhouse Horticulture, who developed a very innovative electricity-producing greenhouse. They managed to develop and combine a parabolic shape of the roof, spectral-selective cover material and a solar energy system. A concept with a great future. And finally we are extra proud of our young scientists who received a prestigious and competitive grant in the Veni-Vidi-Vici program of the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research, NWO. Nine got a Veni-grant to further develop their own scientific career during the next three years. These are Stan Brouns (Microbiology), Aalt-Jan van Dijk (Bio-informatics), Jochem Evers (Crop and Weed Ecology), Joost Keurentjes (Genetics and Plant Physiology), Liesje Mommer (Nature Conservation and Plant Ecology), Mark van Passel (Microbiology), Roxina Soler Gamborena (Entomology), Wladimir Tameling (Phytopathology) and Don Weenink (Rural Sociology). Three received a Vidi-grant of up to 600 thousand Euros each, aimed at further developing their own research field in the next five years. These are Piter Bijma (Animal Breeding and Genetics), Harold Meijer (Phytopathology) and Wouter Peeters (Meteorology and Air Quality). We wish them all the best for this next step in their promising scientific career.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me end with formally welcoming Prof. Laurent van Depoele as a new member of our Supervisory Board. Prof. Van Depoele studied Political Sciences at the University of Leuven in Belgium, Public Law and International Relations at Columbia University in New York and was Fellow at the Center for International Affairs at Harvard University. He served as Director with the European Commission, where he was highly involved in the European integration and also in the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy. Since his retirement from the Commission he has been Visiting Professor at the University of Leuven at the Institute for International and European Policy.

This brings me to the end of my introduction, but not before wishing our staff and students another successful year. I formally declare the academic year 2008-2009 open.

Dr. Aalt A. Dijkhuizen
Chairman Executive Board Wageningen UR

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