



WAGENINGEN AGRICULTURAL COUNSELLORS ABROAD

‘This is the best job on the planet’

The Netherlands’ agricultural counsellors are the Dutch agriculture sector’s eyes and ears abroad. Many of these counsellors have roots in Wageningen, including Patricia de Vries-van Loon in Colombia, Martijn Homan in Poland and Alexander Heydendael, now retired and living in The Hague.

TEXT ALEXANDRA BRANDERHORST ILLUSTRATION WUR/PETRA SIEBELINK

The signatures under the peace treaty between the Colombian government and FARC had barely dried when Patricia de Vries-van Loon started as the Agricultural Counsellor in Colombia (see inset). She says she felt very honoured when the ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality asked her to set up this new function in 2017. De Vries-Van Loon, who calls herself ‘one of the old hands in this line of work’, graduated in Tropical Agriculture in Wageningen in 1987. After working for the Ministry of Agriculture, she became Deputy Agricultural Attaché in Mexico in 1995. Two years later, she started as the Agricultural Attaché in Brazil. She has had various postings since then. ‘This is the best job on the planet. You never know what your day is going to involve. You deal with a wide variety of topics, you draw up strategies but you are also working in

the field.’ In her current role as Agricultural Counsellor for Colombia, Peru and Ecuador, she looks at where Dutch expertise and technology might be needed. ‘You need to see opportunities, believe in things, set them up, and push and pull.’

VACCINES

She is currently negotiating with the Ecuadorian government, for example, to get market access for Dutch plant and animal products, such as livestock feed, bovine semen and vaccines. In Colombia and Peru, De Vries-Van Loon is mainly working on food security and improving the sustainability of poultry farming and the cultivation and processing of cocoa, coffee, palm oil, vegetables and fruit. The Netherlands also wants to promote peace and stability in Colombia by boosting agricultural development in rural areas.

Martijn Homan is just as enthusiastic. He is based in Warsaw as the Agricultural Counsellor for Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. He too loves the variety in the job. ‘Yesterday I was discussing the flower trade; today I’m talking about a meat scandal.’ His team is also helping to encourage collaboration in research, for example between three Polish veterinary institutes and Wageningen animal scientists, to get better positioning in international research programmes. In addition, he is alert to the increasing demand for flowers and plants as Poland becomes more prosperous. Homan emphasizes that the agricultural counsellor is the Netherlands’ eyes and ears in foreign parts. He provides companies, research institutes and government bodies with information about developments in agricultural policy and agrarian markets. ‘We match up Dutch and Polish compa- ➤



PATRICIA DE VRIES-VAN LOON (57)

Agricultural Counsellor for Colombia, Peru and Ecuador

1987 Tropical Agriculture, WUR
1995-1997 Deputy Agricultural Attaché for Mexico
1997-2002 Agricultural Attaché for Brazil
2002-2007 Agricultural Counsellor for the Czech Republic and Slovakia
2012-2017 Agricultural Counsellor for Brazil



MARTIJN HOMAN (44)

Agricultural Counsellor for Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic

1998 Agrarian Economics, WUR
2010-2014 Agricultural Counsellor for Hungary, Austria and Slovenia
2014-2017 Agricultural Counsellor for Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Austria



ALEXANDER HEYDENDAEL (78)

Retired agricultural counsellor

1968 Development Economics, WUR
1975-1979 Agricultural Counsellor for Austria, Switzerland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia
1979-1986 Agricultural Counsellor for Syria and nine other countries in the Middle East

PHOTO FLORIS HEUKENSFELDT JANSEN

nies, public bodies and science institutes. We aim to bolster relations between them. And we show people how we do things in the Netherlands.' For example, a Dutch garden was laid out in Warsaw's Łazienki Królewskie Park in 2016 with the help of the private sector. 'The garden shows how tradition, colour, innovation and design can be combined in order to create an appealing and sustainable living environment in accordance with the philosophy of the Green City. The garden's story inspired Disneyland

It really is a multidisciplinary approach.' His colleague Patricia de Vries-van Loon has also benefited a lot in her job from her agriculture knowledge and expertise. 'In many countries, the agricultural sector is dominated by men. So it is very good that I can hold my own in terms of knowledge about the subject matter,' says De Vries-Van Loon.

CAMPING IN THE DESERT

Former agricultural counsellor Alexander Heydendaël graduated in Development

capital of Damascus to be a particularly 'dynamic and challenging period'. He and his four deputy agricultural attachés in Damascus covered no fewer than 10 countries. During that period the Shah of Iran was deposed and replaced by Ayatollah Khomeini, while a fierce civil war raged in Lebanon. One of his big achievements was winning a public tender to deliver 5000 pregnant heifers to Syria, beating the French and the Americans. 'I was able to steal this order from under their noses because of my good connections and knowledge of the market.' He would often spend the night in the desert with the military attaché when travelling to Baghdad. They would go camping in the desert in the weekends too with their families. In 1986, Heydendaël and his family moved to The Hague, where he focused on international agricultural policy at the ministry of Agriculture. 'I had already seen at the FAO that UN agreements are far too non-committal. That was how I learned to appreciate the importance and power of the EU. The EU formulates truly overarching policies that the member states then have to implement, with sanctions if they don't.' Agricultural counsellors do not stay abroad

'You need to see opportunities, believe in things, push and pull'

Paris to construct its own Dutch garden.' Homan says his work is a good fit with his degree in Agrarian Economics at Wageningen, which he completed in 1998. 'You learn to think in a holistic way and to view problems from different perspectives.

Economics in 1968 in Wageningen. He became Deputy Permanent Representative to the FAO, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, in Rome, then Agricultural Attaché in Vienna. He found the seven years that he spent from 1979 based in the Syrian

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for years on end. Thus Patricia de Vries-van Loon spent 2007 to 2012 in The Hague working on regional fishery agreements, the bluefin tuna and preparations for the reform of the European fisheries policy. ‘Things change fast in the Netherlands so it is good to spend some time in this country so that you can follow the developments and find out what people are talking about. After all, I represent the Netherlands.’ Countries get a different agricultural counsellor every four to five years. ‘One person might see opportunities in one area whereas another has a different focus.’ When De Vries-Van Loon next returns to the Netherlands and the ministry of Agriculture, she wants to work on the policy relating to the CITES treaty, which is aimed at curbing the trade in endangered animal species.

FORMER EASTERN BLOC

There are some countries where all three alumni have worked, albeit in different periods. Alexander Heydendael was an agricultural attaché in Vienna from 1975 to 1979, where his responsibilities included Austria, Hungary and what was then Czechoslovakia. He operated on both sides of the Iron Curtain. He found the Communist system appalling: ‘There was no freedom at all.’

Patricia de Vries-van Loon was the Agricultural Counsellor for the Czech Republic and Slovakia from 2002 to 2007. ‘That was because of these countries joining the EU in 2004, a unique period.’ Martijn Homan was Agricultural Counsellor from 2010 for the former Eastern Bloc countries of Hungary and Slovenia, and subsequently for Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. ‘Collaboration is not automatic in this region and everything is more hierarchical. On the other hand, life is more easy-going and less planned and structured. In Hungary, no one runs to catch a bus as there is bound to be another one later. People are slightly more rushed in Poland but it is still

a lot calmer compared with the pace of life in the Netherlands,’ says Homan. He will be returning with his family to the Netherlands in the summer, where he will be working again at the ministry of Agriculture. He is expecting it will take time to acclimatize.

CIRCULAR AGRICULTURE

Both Alexander Heydendael and Patricia de Vries-van Loon say they are struck by how the ministry in the Netherlands has had to do more and more work with ever fewer staff. ‘That means that dossiers in countries such as Colombia do not always get the time and attention they deserve,’ says De Vries-Van Loon. Looking ahead she also thinks it is important for the ministry to keep in touch with businesses in the agricultural sector.

Alexander Heydendael sees the preservation of nature and biodiversity as the biggest challenge now facing agricultural counsel-

lors. At the end of his career, he worked on the 1992 Biodiversity Convention. ‘Agricultural counsellors need to put that into practice by encouraging circular agriculture and thinking in terms of closed cycles. The Netherlands is a trendsetter in horticulture and livestock farming but things need to change: the scale needs to be smaller, with more respect for networks of life on Earth, from insects to humans and orang-utans,’ argues Heydendael. Martijn Homan says the challenge is finding the right balance between ‘marketing circular agriculture internationally’ and the Netherlands’ current export position. He does, however, see plenty of openings in Poland. ‘The country has sandy soil, often with a nutrient deficit and few water sources. This offers opportunities for Dutch manure. Adding organic materials and nutrients would make Polish soils more climate-proof.’ ■

WHAT DO AGRICULTURAL COUNSELLORS DO?

More than 70 countries have Dutch agricultural counsellors or agricultural attachés. They spot opportunities for Dutch companies working in agriculture and help them start up projects and find business partners. They also support the host countries in taking steps to make agriculture more sustainable and circular. Furthermore, they work on removing obstacles to trade that prevent Dutch exports of animals, plants or products made from animals or plants.

The agricultural counsellors are based at 53 Dutch embassies and consulates. Some are responsible for more than one country. They also represent the Netherlands at the FAO, OECD and EU. They report to the ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality.

In the embassies and consulates, the agricultural counsellors collaborate with colleagues employed by the ministry of Foreign Affairs. They form an agricultural team together with local agricultural experts.

The agricultural attaché network is celebrating its centenary this year. The network’s coordinator, Gert Stiekema, studied Horticulture at Wageningen, graduating in 1989. He says that the agricultural counsellors keep in close contact with Wageningen researchers and regional managers. ‘Wageningen operates around the world and often approaches agricultural counsellors proactively for projects. The interaction is good.’ *Information in Dutch: www.agroberichtenbuitenland.nl*