



‘We are going to open up’

‘Connecting’ is the key word for Louise Fresco. The new president of Wageningen UR wants to find new ways of involving society in the generation of knowledge. ‘My dream is to salvage public debates which are now being crippled by fear, hostilities and conspiracy theories.’

PHOTOGRAPHY HARMEN DE JONG

The first thing that strikes you when you meet her is her thoughtfulness ('You have had something to eat, haven't you?'). But Louise Fresco is not just a considerate and hospitable person: she is also a person who gets things done. Someone with a vast store of experience and contacts with influential people on every continent. A woman with a mission, and every bit as eager to do her bit to make the world a better place now as she was in 1970 when she embarked on a degree in Non-western Rural Sociology at Wageningen Agricultural College.

Where does that tremendous drive come from?

'I have always realized that I am privileged: I happened to be born in the Netherlands and not in Biafra or a slum in Calcutta. There is absolutely no merit involved in being born in the Netherlands. In fact, such a privileged position gives you a responsibility to do something for the world. That is still a theme running through my life, a self-imposed mission. That mission first became clear to me in a Geography lesson when I saw a slide of the River Ganges in India. Something that at first looked like no more than a blob on the river turned out to be the corpse of a child. That was a decisive moment in some way. A moment of realizing the gulf between people, and the insight that those who are lucky must help those who have less.'

Have we managed that?

'It is hard to answer that with a yes or a no. There will always be a difference between rich and poor. But I do think great strides have been taken in recent decades. We have already achieved a lot, especially if you look at food security and life expectation. Just a hundred years ago we lived no longer than 40 years, on average. Now we have more knowledge and can make better use of what we know. Science has had a massive positive impact there. We should draw much more attention to that. Because there is a feeling now among the general public that



scientists are 'tinkering' with life and that they should stop it.'

But you say we must definitely go on?

Absolutely. But not in splendid isolation. The questions that scientists study are going to have to come from society as well. Combatting poverty, for instance, is one of the big issues in the world. The natural sciences, as well as applied social science and the life sciences have an important role to play in that. Consider for example the use of information technology in rural areas: getting every farmer in the world online. How much faster and better could we then get new knowledge out to people? Knowledge they could then use to get better yields. Knowledge that could help people address health issues better. And, for example, cheaper solar panels can ensure that millions of people don't have to sit in the dark anymore. It is a lot easier to study with some light than in the dark. In that sense, technological progress brings human progress with it. We can still do so much for each other.'

Isn't that exactly what scientists often get accused of? That they think everything can be solved with science?

'We need to make a change there. To stop just making assertions and saying we know what's what. True strength lies in forging connections. Asking together what the needs are, so that you work towards solutions

together and can reconnect what is technically possible with what is socially feasible. It is all very well for us to calculate how many piglets a sow can have, but the public have other considerations in mind. And we might say that cows are perfectly fine in megabarns, but people want to see cows out grazing in the meadow. From the science side, you don't just put the facts on the table; you also show what the consequences are and engage in dialogue about them. I am very keen for Wageningen UR to take on that role. By organizing gatherings on the campus, bringing thinkers together, inviting artists in residence or organizing a film festival. We are going to open up.'

Don't you think Wageningen scientists are open now?

'Oh, they certainly are. And in some senses science is part of society. But there is a difference between what people know and what they feel. And that difference seems to be getting bigger. And that is why, in my speech at the opening of the academic year, I appealed to scientists to strengthen the links with society. Now, specifically. Because the distrust of science has been growing. That worries me a lot. There are more and more conspiracy theories. As if we at Wageningen UR had made a pact to harm animals through large-scale livestock farming, for instance. There is no one here who wants that, but it still gets thrown at us.'

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Why is that, do you think?

‘It is partly because of the internet, which can sometimes be a breeding place for distrust. The internet is a triumph of technological knowledge and a tremendous source of advancement. But the consequence is that people nowadays have an opinion on everything and reinforce each other through online discussions. That sort of discussion is unfiltered and often baseless. Another factor is the reluctance of scientists to engage in the public discussion. Then they get cross because people cast doubt on the facts. Two angry people together; that seldom leads to fresh knowledge because they stop listening to each other respectfully. Then you only stand in opposition to each other, rather than side by side. The important thing is to understand why someone reacts the way they do. By seeing and understanding the underlying emotions, you can actually help each other. Then you really enter into a dialogue about a shared goal.’

So you want to engage in dialogue in order to reduce the gulf between science and society?

‘Yes. Holding a dialogue means you look at a subject together and can make use of each other’s knowledge about it. But don’t forget that the dialogue must be purposeful. It is not enough just to have some nice chats. What we are aiming at is to achieve something together that we couldn’t achieve separately. I want Wageningen UR to play a >

BRIDGING THE GAP

At the opening of the academic year on 1 September 2014, Louise Fresco outlined for the first time as newly appointed president her vision on the role of Wageningen in society. In her speech she argued for a new and colourful Enlightenment.

‘We are in the midst of the third revolution’, declared Fresco. After the agricultural revolution and the rise of fossil fuels, we now have the information revolution, which is bringing about an irreversible turning point in world history. One of the biggest consequences of this, however, is a growing gulf between science and society: ‘It seems easier to believe an internet full of unfounded accusations than peer reviewed science.’

The lack of trust in science is not new, however: a great deal of human history has been marked by collective anxieties, rather than by openness to scientific research, said Fresco. This changed at the end of the 17th century, with the dawn of the Age of Enlightenment. In this day and age, trust in science can be restored through communication with the public, and by developing ‘embedded technology’ which meets the needs of society and individuals in all their diversity, says Fresco. Current systems, such as the much-lauded golden triangle of government, research and the business world, are not always adequate, Fresco notes: the general public need to be integrated into that model as well. And for that, engaging in dialogue is essential. This applies equally within Wageningen UR: ‘We need a greater diversity of minds and cultures and scientific views. An institution where the light shines in all colours.’

For a full report on the opening of the academic year, see: www.wageningenur.nl/en/opac2014

Watch the video on the opening of the academic year at: <https://wurtv.wur.nl>





PHOTO MARIJET VAN VEELLEN

THE LIFE AND WORK OF LOUISE FRESCO

- 1952 Born in Meppel, grew up in Brussels
- 1970 Started a degree in Non-western Rural Sociology at Wageningen Agricultural College
- 1986 PhD Cum Laude in the field of tropical plant breeding
- 1990 Appointed professor of Plant Production Systems at Wageningen
- 1997 Director of Research at the FAO
- 1999 Assistant Director-general at the FAO
- 2006 University Professor of Sustainable Development in an International Perspective at the UvA
- 2014 As of 1 July President of Wageningen UR

Additional positions Louise Fresco is a member of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences KNAW, and of four overseas academies. She is on the board of the Royal Concertgebouw orchestra, a non-executive member of the board of Unilever, a member of the Praemium Erasmianum Foundation, and of the editorial board of the Dutch higher education guide *De Gids*.

Writing Fresco has written nine non-academic books in Dutch, including three novels. One of her novels, *De Utopisten*, was shortlisted for the Libris Literature Prize in 2008. She also writes a biweekly column in the Dutch newspaper the NRC.

TV At the end of 2013, the six-part documentary *Fresco's Paradise* was televised weekly in the Netherlands. In this series Fresco went around the world visiting special places related to agriculture and food. This series is released on DVD, with English subtitles.

pioneering role in this, to actively attract dialogue. Even on controversial topics.'

Such as?

'Some time ago we organized a meeting on potatoes that had been made genetically resistant to the potato disease *Phytophthora*. We showed what we had done, and in particular what the significance of it is. There were opponents present who discussed the consequences of this with us. The discussion was very transparent and open. That worked: it generated more understanding of the various interests. In past communication about genetic modification, some big blunders have been made by scientists and policymakers. As a consequence, Europe has slammed the door shut. The discussion is at a standstill. For that reason this continent is lagging behind and we are not getting the opportunity to pass our knowledge on the subject on to farmers. Genetic modification is helping small cotton farmers in India enormously, to give one example. When they grow transgenic cotton they need far less pesticide. That saves farmers money and is good for public health as well.'

So would you like to revive the debate about genetic modification?

'That won't be the first subject to be raised, because there is still too much emotion involved. And conducting a dialogue is something you have to learn to do. In that situation it is better to start with a different topic, such as animal welfare, obesity, or agricultural production versus nature management or biomass production. A theme with many different points of view, with a lot of interest groups with an opinion, and on which not all scientists take the same line either. Society faces choices and science can help with that by proposing options. I am keen to get involved in that process.'

Conducting a dialogue is one thing, but running an organization is another. What are you going to tackle?

'To sum it up in one word: connecting! I realize that sounds vague, but for Wageningen

‘The distrust of science has been growing. That worries me a lot.’

UR, forging connections is the key issue for the future. The first area I want to tackle is to strengthen the bonds between the university and DLO. There is so much knowledge in the organization. If we can bring it together even more effectively, we can achieve so much more.

One thing I would like to do is to invite more DLO people to contribute to the teaching on courses. I also want to stimulate collaboration between the sciences groups, so that they do even more interdisciplinary work. And I want to bring fundamental and applied research even closer together, for example around an issue such as creating a biobased economy. That is something we mustn't do alone, but in collaboration. I want to form partnerships with individuals, organizations, governments and companies who would like to realize our ambitions with us. That will increase the impact of our knowledge.'

So it is more about impact than about knowledge?

'Indeed, knowledge for its own sake is not enough. It has always been a characteristic of Wageningen UR that we can make our knowledge applicable. It is a tremendous advantage that we can translate questions from the field into fundamental research – and vice versa. Nowhere else in the world do you find this combination of social and natural sciences, including both fundamental and applied knowledge, focusing on the life sciences. And precisely at this time, the world needs our knowledge. But we in turn need the world, in order to have the right impact with that knowledge: impact on people's lives.'

The collaboration with the business world has raised questions about the independence of researchers. Won't that particular connection backfire on Wageningen UR?

'We must be open and transparent about that. We have nothing to hide and we observe very good codes conduct. Indeed, it is one of the challenges for science to

create a place in today's dynamic world where justice is done to science and to the needs of society. You cannot separate them. But you cannot buy facts. We will never say something works if it doesn't. Companies know that and respect it. Successful companies set great store by ethics.'

You also want even more efforts towards internationalization?

'Research has shown that diversity gives teams important advantages. And then I don't just mean diversity in gender and culture, but also in age and experience. You need a range of opinions and backgrounds. I advise students, for instance, to go looking for difference perspectives and not just to stick with their own little club. But I have the human resources policy in mind as well. We will soon have our first immigrant professor. In spite of many international staff and students, Wageningen is primarily a Dutch organization, and that includes its culture. I would like to see world-class scientists coming to Wageningen and feeling at home here.'

Alongside your job you also find time to write columns and books, to make TV programmes and make public appearances. How do you do that?

'Fortunately I have a lot of energy. And I can do a lot in a short time, because I am a fast reader for instance. But apart from that, I want to make time for literature and art. They are an incredibly enriching presence in my life. That's why I called on students to read. Read! Be open to being surprised by new insights from other cultures. And in my novels I can explore dilemmas much better. What happens when ideals meet the hard

world of reality? That is the subject of my novel *Utopisten* [nominated for the Libris prize, ed.], for example. The main character is an environmental activist who becomes secretary of state because he wants to have some influence on things. Writing keeps my mind sharp and that carries over into my executive work.'

Was it hard to say goodbye to your post as university professor of Sustainable Development at the University of Amsterdam?

'In Amsterdam I was in a very good position to get issues onto the agenda. But it was also a little bit 'Louise against the rest of the world'. What I can do here at Wageningen UR has a big impact and I very much want to do it together with other people. The motivation you feel among most Wageningers appeals to me very much. I was a student at Wageningen, I did my PhD at Wageningen, and I was a professor at Wageningen. Coming back to Wageningen feels like coming home. Full circle, as it were.'

Where will Wageningen UR be in four years' time?

'I would love to see us having defused the tension in the discussion, which is caused by fear and conspiracy theories. I hope we'll be organizing open, respectful discussions and that we'll have brought different parties together and developed new, high-impact knowledge. And that Wageningen has led the way in this. I want to be able to look back with pride on everything we've done for education, for science, for the Netherlands and for the world.' ■

www.wageningenur.nl/en/LouiseOFresco