PhD Research edition

Rural Sociology

1946 • 2021

RSO PhD alumni in the spotlight

RSO staff looking back on their PhD journey at RSO

Current RSO PhD candidates share stories from the field

Rural Sociology Group

1946
2021

2021 is a very special year for the Rural Sociology Group: as the chair group turns 75 years old, more than 100 people from all over the world have successfully completed their PhD with this group. PhDs have contributed to our understanding of the three main themes that characterise the research lines of RSO: agriculture, food, and place. They have developed a diverse range of theoretical frameworks. Former PhDs of RSO have continued their professional careers in farming, research, and project implementation in academia, the government, international organisations, and NGOs. Throughout the 75 years of RSO, we have seen a considerable increase of female and non-Dutch PhD candidates, and increasingly research sites outside of the Netherlands and Europe are studied. The trajectory of a PhD and funding structures have transformed as well.

This special edition is a tribute to PhD education at RSO. We do this by sharing stories of a selection of former and current PhD candidates. You will find a tribute to Bruno Benvenuti, former PhD candidate and professor at RSO, written by Jan Douwe van der Ploeg. We trace the trajectory of several PhD alumni. These stories provide insight in their research topics as a PhD at RSO, the rewards and challenges they faced to complete their projects, the influence of their research on their current professional jobs and vice versa the influence of previous (work) experiences on their PhD research. Other sections of this magazine highlight the life of PhDs that graduated and continued their academic career at RSO. For this, current staff wrote a letter to their "younger-selves" to reflect on the time when they were PhD candidates. Besides these retrospectives, the magazine also contains a section with stories from the field from current PhDs. In the end, the magazine offers a rich conversation between the chair holder of RSO, Han Wiskerke, Professor Bettina Bock, and Emeritus Professor Jan Douwe van der Ploeg. They reflect on their experience of supervising PhDs candidates, candidates who have inspired them, and the lessons they carry forward from their own PhD journey. In between these stories, the magazine documents a variety of interesting developments and trends among the PhD candidates and their research. Do you know when the first woman completed her PhD at RSO? Which nationality is represented most among candidates after the Dutch nationality?

This magazine was borne out of curiosity. Curiosity about former PhDs, their research and trajectories, and how PhD trajectories have changed over 75 years. The magazine was designed and edited by current and former PhD candidates: Thirza Andriessen, who studies the dignity of food aid receivers in Europe; Dawn Cheong, who investigates the relationship between gender and rural innovations; Lisette Nikol, who researches farmer autonomy in different agricultural systems in the Philippines; Claudia Oviedo, who studies how coffee policies impact the lives of coffee farmers in Mexico, and Lucie Sovová, who researched urban gardens and graduated cum laude as the 100th PhD candidate at RSO. The circumstances provided by the COVID-19 pandemic meant that all the work for this magazine was done virtually. Despite the general zoom-fatigue, the meetings for this magazine got us together regularly as we were working from home by ourselves. Making this magazine, we did not only learn more about former PhDs, but also about each other. The regular meetings brought us closer together and inspired us to achieve this project.

We wish you an enjoyable read!

THIRZA ANDRIESSEN, DAWN CHEONG, LISETTE NIKOL,
LUCIE SOVOVÁ, AND CLAUDIA OVIEDO

Content

Introduction

Over a period of 75 years, a total of 102 PhD theses in Rural Sociology have been successfully completed. The first PhD graduate was Jan Doorenbos, who successfully defended his PhD thesis entitled 'Opheusden als boomteeltcentrum' (Opheusden as tree-growing centre) on 14 June 1950. His PhD study was supervised by Prof. dr. E.W. Hofstee. The 102nd PhD graduate was Angela Moriggi, who successfully defended her PhD thesis entitled 'Green Care practices and place-based sustainability transformations: A participatory action-oriented study in Finland' on 1 June 2021. Her supervisors were Prof. dr. Bettina Bock and dr. Dirk Roep of the Rural Sociology Group and dr. Katriina Soini of the Natural Resources Institute Finland. The differences between the first and most recent PhD graduate and thesis mark some of the key changes that I came across when I developed and analysed a database of all the PhD graduates and PhD theses in Rural Sociology over the past 75 years:

1. The male/female ratio of PhD graduates. In the past 75 years we've had twice as many male graduates as female graduates. However, this 2:1 male-female ratio has not been like that over the past 75 years. In the first 55 years the vast majority of PhD graduates were men (32 men versus 2 women), and this changed considerably in the last 20 years (35 men versus 33 women).
2. The nationality of PhD graduates and countries of PhD research. Until 2000 the majority were Dutch (31, and 3 from other European countries). In the last 20 years approximately 35% of the PhD students were Dutch and the other 65% came from all over the world: other European countries, Latin America, Africa and Asia. A largely similar trend can be observed when looking at the countries where PhD research was carried out.
3. The language of the PhD thesis. In the first 50 years Dutch was the common language for a PhD thesis, with a few written in English and one in French. In the last 25 years the vast majority (75%) of PhD theses were written in English, 15% in Dutch and the remaining 10% in other languages, such as Spanish and Italian.
4. Number of supervisors. Another change has been the number of supervisors, from usually one in the first 55 years to two to three supervisors in the last 20 years. With the second and/or third supervisor usually having another field of expertise, this also points to a shift from disciplinary to multi- or interdisciplinary PhD theses.

There are many other changes that one can observe as well when looking at 75 years of PhD students and PhD theses, such as the average of less than one completed PhD thesis per year in the first 50 years increasing to almost 4 per year in the last 15 years. Examples of and reflections on the aforementioned and other changes can be found in this PhD magazine, highlighting the dynamics and diversity of Rural Sociology's PhD landscape.

Having been both a PhD student (1992-1997) and PhD supervisor (since 2001) at the Rural Sociology Group, I cannot but emphasize the importance of PhD research. First, it is an important means to implement, execute, refine and renew the overall research agenda and the research themes of the group. Many theoretical contributions and empirical underpinnings are rooted in PhD research, also illustrated by the fact that in review and overview papers and books written by senior staff members PhD research is often cited.
And with a shift from monographs to article-based PhD theses – another change during the past 75 years – it also becomes clear that a significant share of Rural Sociology's academic output is based on PhD research. Second, PhD research is a key stepping stone in one's (research) career. Many of our PhD graduates now have tenured positions at Dutch and foreign universities as assistant, associate or full professor or as senior scientist or senior manager at a research institute. And this also shapes, strengthens and enlarges (also geographically) the international network of Rural Sociology alumni; a network that we also rely on for future (PhD) research.

I look forward to welcoming new PhD candidates with whom we can further build the Rural Sociology research agenda and network. I am sure this magazine will be a source of inspiration for them, as it will surely also be a source of recognition and fond memories for our PhD graduates and group of current PhD students.

PROF.DR. HAN WISKERKE,
CHAIR AND PROFESSOR OF RURAL SOCIOLOGY

'Thousands more questions'

"I was interested in alternative food networks, and much of that literature was coming from Wageningen University, so I thought, that's the place to be", starts the story of Dr. Simona D'Amico, who first came to RSO as a visiting scholar and later became an external PhD with dual supervision. Since obtaining her doctoral degree, Simona has alternated between academia and the non-governmental sector. She looks back at her PhD experience as having been highly useful and remembers that the Rural Sociology Group felt "like a family."

"When I think of my time in Wageningen, the first image that comes up is a field", says Simona. "I lived in Bennekom, in the countryside, and cycled about 10 km every day through the fields, regardless of the weather – through rain, snow, wind. Doing a PhD was extremely stimulating, every day I got new insights. I felt like a baby learning new words. My brain was full at the end of the day, but it was a fantastic experience."

Simona's doctoral thesis examined solidarity purchasing groups in Italian Calabria, a region with a vibrant food culture and relatively low industrialisation of the agro-food sector. She asked: How does such a context shape alternative food movements? Using the Interaction Ritual theory, Simona's research focused on practices and interactions: "I didn't do a single interview, perhaps some very unstructured interviews at the start to get acquainted with the contacts in these groups." For the rest the research relied on participant observations, using particularly the purchasing group's active mailing list. As it turned out, many of the discussions were on politics and "how to change the world". People leading the solidarity purchasing group were first and foremost political activists. Food was just a vehicle. However, other participants joined the consumer group to access local and fresh food. This caused conflicts, particularly when the deliveries were mismanaged or food origin was not entirely transparent. "I didn't follow them after my research, but I think the group actually dissolved over these tensions", Simona closes.

Translating between two worlds

After graduating, Simona worked for IFOAM, studying policies for organic farming. She got interested in biodiversity during her postdoc in Pisa, and she now works at The Union for Ethical Bio Trade, a standard organisation which promotes good practices for biodiversity and people in different supply chains. "We help companies, mostly in the food, cosmetic and pharmaceutical sectors, comply with specific requirements on biodiversity and working conditions", she explains. "My role is to support the companies in identifying relevant practices for biodiversity in their supply chain. I am also responsible for monitoring and evaluation."

Simona tells us about her experience moving from academia to the NGO sector: "What I miss about academia is the pleasure of sitting and reading and having the time to explore. But already at the end of my PhD I was asking myself how to bring all these papers to the practitioners? There is so much good work, but how do we make it applied? I see a huge shift in this nowadays, many grant proposals also need to include practitioners. But in my opinion there are still a lot of findings that need to be translated. Companies want quick simple solutions, and that's not easy for researchers. I see that as my challenge, bringing together these two worlds."

But how equipped are PhD graduates to work for companies and NGOs? "When I was looking for a job outside academia, everybody told me, you are a PhD, you don't know how to work. I had to adjust to the rhythm. When you do a PhD, time is tight but you still enjoy some flexibility. In my daily work I have no flexibility, I jump from one task to another. But the structure, the rigor, the critical analysis and the ability to read anything quickly and pick up the key points or the inconsistencies, are crucial in my work. And this is what I learned during my PhD."

Another thing Simona had to catch up on was communicating with businesses: "I remember my first presentation. I thought, let's start with definitions, to clarify the words I am using. So I drafted a presentation like that and showed it to my boss, who said it was kilometres away from what it needed to be! The ability to talk to businesses and propose solutions that speak to them, that I had to learn. I was too abstract. And in their eyes I am still the abstract nerdy one," Simona laughs. But she also has encouraging words for PhD graduates: "Organisations nowadays pay a lot of attention to monitoring and evaluation, most of them cannot get away with simple slogans anymore, they need to have evidence of impact. I think people with a PhD are more and more needed, because this cannot be done by everyone."

Jane Goodall of human interactions

Surprisingly, the theory Simona used in her PhD research also proved highly useful for her daily work. "My theoretical framework was all about identifying key actors in newly developing supply chains, their networks and interactions. These things are crucial in my work. In the end my role is not to establish what exact biodiversity measure our clients need to take. We work with supply chains all around the world, from sitting in Amsterdam I cannot possibly say what are the best biodiversity measures for a pepper farmer in India. But knowing how to approach the farmers, quickly identify the key actors and put them into a dialogue – that is my key role, to facilitate this. I studied interactions and dynamics for most of my academic career. One of my supervisors used to call me Mrs. Goodall, after the researcher who studied chimpanzees. He thought my observations of people's interactions were very similar."
Apart from the stress during the final stages, Simona is very positive about her experience doing a PhD: "I would do it again for sure, just not sure if I would do it before my first job experience or after. As a student I was mostly driven by my curiosity, but after my first job experience, I would have more concrete questions, so the research might have more societal impact. Now I would have to do 3000 PhDs because I have 3000 questions based on my work!"

NAME
Simona D'Amico (1985)
PHD AT RSO
2011-2015
THESIS TITLE
Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) in Calabria: A sociological exploration of interaction dynamics
ACADEMIC BACKGROUND
International cooperation and development
CURRENT JOB
Monitoring and evaluation biodiversity expert

‘Being aware of factors that cause oppression and inequality’

NAME
Marc Wegerif (1968)
PHD AT RSO
2012-2017
THESIS TITLE
Feeding Dar es Salaam: A symbiotic food system perspective
ACADEMIC BACKGROUND
Land and Agrarian Studies
CURRENT JOB
Lecturer in Development Studies, University of Pretoria, South Africa

Dar es Salaam is the largest city that supplies Tanzania. It was here where Marc did his PhD research on food systems. He was interested in understanding how this fast-growing city is fed. He shares his journey to find alternatives to turn cities more sustainable.

He started his research approaching urban residents: he explored what they ate, why, and where they got their food. After that, he followed food: he visited the places where people bought food, such as retailers and markets. From there, he went to the place where food came from: the farmers. His research involved collecting stories from urban areas of Dar es Salaam and distant rice and corn growing areas. He shares with us: “It was fascinating to understand how this large and very fast growing city was fed, considering the pressure of fast population increases and climate change. I think how we feed our cities, in a sustainable way that works for the rural producers, is very important”.

The Rural Sociology group and WUR are some of the best places to study

Even though the group is called Rural Sociology, he was aware that it did profound studies about urban issues. He knew about Van der Ploeg, who he considers a renowned writer. He was also aware of the close connection between RSO with the Actor-Oriented Approach developed by Norman Long. He thought that these approaches could be used for his research. He could have chosen a more narrow and economic perspective, but analysing actors really appealed to him. He points out: “I am very conscious about the systemic factors that cause oppression and inequality. The Actor-Oriented approach allowed me to see how, despite actors facing the same challenges, they respond differently to them. The approach allowed me understand how people construct their economic lives despite the systemic pressures, there are important lessons in that”.

In regard to the university, he thinks that Wageningen was one of the best places in the world to do his studies. He recognises that Wageningen has a considerable reputation in agriculture. Many people he met in Tanzania knew about WUR, and some had taken at least one short course. He identifies a natural connection among the people who had been at the university: “When you meet somebody that studied at Wageningen, and you tell them you also studied there, his/her face lights up...we know what we are talking about”.

The PhD is full of precious moments

Marc recalls different precious moments while he did his PhD. One of those moments was travelling around Dar es Salaam with his bicycle: “I ended up cycling around Dar es Salaam, which coincides with the fact that the Netherlands is famous for its cycling culture. Cycling around Dar es Salaam is a very convenient way to get around in a city that has very heavy traffic and so many narrow alleys and dusty tracks. I liked that the bicycle did not remove me from those around me, or distance me from the environment in the way driving in a car does ...the bicycle does not put me on a pedestal, and if I arrive in a market with the bicycle, it is easier to sit down and talk with someone, or to share some coffee”.

After working several years in the development sector, he wanted to start thinking and writing more

When Marc was at the final stage of his PhD, he worked for Oxfam International as a land policy specialist, focusing on women’s land rights. His work involved advocacy with the World Bank, the United Nations, and the African Union. He did plenty of work about the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and land indicators. After working for Oxfam, he moved into academia. He shares why he did so: “I wanted to write and think more about things. Often in the development sector, we are doing and doing, and we do not think about what we are doing, why we are doing it, and what the impact of this is. So I moved to academia”.

After he stopped working in Oxfam, he took a post-doctoral position in the Human Economy Programme, which had a good fit with the Actor-Oriented approach. Now he is a lecturer in development studies at the University of Petroria, in South Africa. He researches food systems, which is the continuation of his PhD studies.

‘Best of both worlds’

NAME
Lucie Sovová (1988)
PHD AT RSO
2016-2020
THESIS TITLE
Grow, share or buy? Understanding the diverse economies of urban gardeners
ACADEMIC BACKGROUND
Environmental studies
CURRENT JOB
Postdoc at RSO, WUR

Lucie Sovová came to the Rural Sociology group through a series of lucky accidents and completed her PhD on urban gardening in Czechia as an external candidate. Coincidentally, her graduation marked the one hundredth doctorate of RSO. On top of that, her work received the designation cum laude. This came as a complete surprise at the end of the defence ceremony. “It was like getting hit by lightning!” Lucie shared.

As she learned later, the final decision about a cum laude distinction is only made after the defence, taking into account the candidate’s performance. “I would be super nervous if I knew it beforehand,” Lucie admits. “Graduating cum laude was a big honour. It helped to shut down my imposter syndrome for a bit, all the self-doubt all PhDs face. It gave the degree some extra weight, and that felt really good.”

Real-life impact

For Lucie, her research meant more than a piece of academic work and she reflected about its social contribution. One of the best moments of her PhD journey was publishing a popular article about her research in a Czech gardening magazine. The article became surprisingly popular during a debate surrounding the new master plan for Brno, Czechia’s second biggest city. The plan proposed large construction developments at the expense of existing urban gardens and other green spaces. This caused a lot of pushbacks from the gardeners, who used Lucie’s article to argue about the benefits of urban gardening. “It’s a one page article which does not appear anywhere on my publication list, but I think it had some real-life impact. I love academic writing and teaching. But I am still motivated by the idealism of ‘making the world a better place’, and I try to stay close to more applied or action research.”

Urban gardening is an everyday practice for Czechs

Through her research project, Lucie investigated how urban gardens contribute to food provisioning and how gardening translates into eating from the gardens. One of the most surprising findings was that some gardeners are not very interested in their harvest, but mostly enjoy gardening as an activity. “This was quite different from my own practice of gardening, which is quite connected to food,” Lucie explains. Furthermore, the different attitudes towards urban gardening between Czechia and the Netherlands were also interesting for her. “In the Netherlands, urban gardening is often seen as a form of activism, and as a cool and hip thing to do. In Czechia gardening skills are part of common sense, but it is sometimes taken for granted or even seen as old fashioned.”

Lucie was always interested in all kinds of food alternatives. In Czechia, her home country, gardening is widespread, with 40% of the population growing some of their food. They enjoy doing it as a hobby and home-grown vegetables are thought to be the best. Gardening is considered as a traditional practice rather than an alternative type of food production or a way towards food sovereignty. It does not relate to activist motivations such as environmental causes or resisting the global food market.

Around 2010, alternative food venues such as farmers’ markets and community supported agriculture started booming in Czechia. People became more aware of food production in terms of food quality and environmental impact. In her thesis, Lucie reflects on the interactions between traditional practices and new food trends. “Sustainable food has become a topic and many alternative food chains are sprouting, often inspired by Western examples. At the same time, something as widespread as gardening is forgotten in these debates, which I find really puzzling. “Conceptually, Lucie’s work is inspired by the diverse economies approach, seeing gardens as alternative economic spaces which operate to a large extent outside the market and provide for multiple needs – besides food also contact with natural processes, meaningful work and social relations. “Growing your own food really speaks to me as alternative to just being a consumer,” she says.

Everything pointed to RSO

Lucie discovered Wageningen University already in 2013 while doing an internship at RUAF on urban agriculture during her master’s course. She decided to do her internship in the Netherlands as it seemed that the country was leading the field of alternative food provisioning. The organisation was based in Leusden but it was difficult for her to find a place to stay there. One of her colleagues suggested checking out Wageningen as it had more short-term room rental options. “I moved to Wageningen before realizing that there was a university there, “Lucie laughs. But soon many arrows pointed towards WUR and Rural Sociology: Henk Renting, who supervised Lucie’s internship at RUAF, had connections to the group. And Petr Jehlička, Lucie’s PhD supervisor in Czechia, was a member of the PhD committee of Esther Veen, who later became her second supervisor at RSO.
In 2016, Lucie came back to Wageningen as a visiting researcher at RSO. She really liked working with RSO and wanted to have a more permanent cooperation, which eventually resulted in becoming an external PhD candidate. She recalls her first meeting with the chair holder and later also her promotor Han Wiskerke: “He was very open to me joining RSO, as my interests were similar to what other people in the group were doing. Especially with Esther Veen, my second supervisor, it was a great match, as she did her own PhD on community gardens. It was very easy to talk about my topic with her, and her research really inspired me.” Lucie also appreciates other colleagues who always took the time to help her out: “I found that quite special at RSO. Everybody has a heavy workload, and they are very efficient with their time, but they still take a moment to give you feedback or think along.”

Independent research as an empowering experience

Lucie’s PhD was supervised by two universities: Masaryk University in Czechia, and WUR. She feels like she was able to get the best out of both systems. “In the Netherlands, PhD candidates are considered as junior researchers while in Czechia they are treated more like students, and they are often expected to do odd jobs for the department. At the same time, in the Czech system you get to come up with your own PhD topic, whereas in the Netherlands PhDs are often part of bigger projects and have their topic already defined. Combining both allowed me to do my research with so much freedom. There was no pressure from the commissioner or supervisors. In Wageningen I came to the office every day, concentrated on my work then went back home. In Czechia, PhD lifestyle is more bohemian but people often struggle to find time for the actual thesis. I really enjoyed it because I did what I loved, and I learned to independently manage my own project which I find very empowering.”

Bruno Benvenuti

In his farewell address, now some 30 years ago, Bruno Benvenuti formulated an eloquent but sharp critique on the sociological enterprise of those days. “Imagine”, he said, “that the diversity of world agriculture can be expressed on a scale that runs from one to one thousand and that Dutch agriculture is located in the 694-697 range (which is, given the specific position of Dutch farming, not too adventurous). Then it surely applies that Dutch scientists are very excellent in studying and representing this specific span. They probably do better than scientists from any other country could do.”

Although much of the audience missed the point, this ironical statement clearly referred to the narrowmindedness as well as to the self-conceit of Dutch agricultural scientists. They assumed (just as their successors do today) that farming in the Netherlands and science in Wageningen represent the top of the world. “Wageningen c'est le plafond”, as was proudly said in those days.

Benvenuti continued by subtly indicating that a comparative approach (probing into the 1-693 and 698-1000 ranges) would not only render an amazing amount of new insights but also strongly help to elaborate and ask new questions about the 694 to 697 span.

The comparative approach was not strange to Bruno Benvenuti – he was, in a way, the embodiment of it. He was deeply familiar with farming in Emilia Romagna (where his father originated), Tuscany (where his grandfather taught him to manage a span of oxen) and parts of the Mezzogiorno (where he became an agricultural extensionist). Later he followed his Ph.D. research in the Achterhoek, took a job in Brussels (where he assisted Mansholt), and then acted as director of research in areas as different as Veneto and Ethiopia. These multiple experiences were not just additional to each other. Benvenuti intertwined them, tried to explore the commonalities and the dissimilarities (just as Evert Willem Hofstee strongly suggested in his plea for a ‘differential sociology’) and all this drove him to ask the inconvenient questions that, in the end, drive science ahead. “if, from a theoretical point of view, the concept of agricultural entrepreneur is inconsistent, void, and therefore basically refers to a ghost, why then do agricultural sciences, policies and segments of the farming population adhere so strongly to it?” And “how can we explain that farming is increasingly regimented and standardized?” (this was the prelude to his TATE theory). Etcetera, etcetera.

Students were fond of him, both in the Netherlands and in Italy. It often was not easy to follow his lectures. Benvenuti literally wrestled with the subjects he was discussing and invited students to join him in his skirmishes with the different and mostly highly complicated issues. He detested indeed self-conceit and students showing it were toughly dealt with. But then, Bruno was not easy on himself either. More than anybody else he struggled with the theories he was elaborating, subjecting them to critical philosophical and historical scrutiny, and was always on the outlook for black swans that could falsify (parts of) his views. He wrote a lot but probably tore even more into pieces. This critical attitude and his phenomenal grip on empirical diversity (indeed: from one to thousand) made him an eloquent scholar.

Bruno Benvenuti was also a charming person, always ready to help others, forgetful, attentive and an excellent chicken thief. Life had been rough to him at some points (especially during the second world war and after his return to Italy in the early 1990s) but generous during others. A casual meeting in a train heading for Brussels presented him with Franchetta who became his loving wife.

Many people in different parts of the world are happy to have known Bruno Benvenuti. This applies, maybe especially, to many of his students. For some of them he was, and remains to be, a godfather.

JAN DOUWE VAN DER PLOEG,
WAGENINGEN, 20TH OF JULY 2021

Dear younger self,

You are about to make an important decision: to start a PhD project as an external PhD student. As I know you, I suspect that you didn't think about this step for too long. You probably figured that such a trajectory would be worthwhile in any case, and that you would enjoy it, and so you just began. You weren't sure how to go about it, but trusted a positive outcome. After all, lots of people manage to get a PhD, why not give it a try? As your older self I would like to say: well done on this decision to plunge in, you did indeed enjoy it a great deal, it has brought you a lot and you wouldn't be where you are without it.

Don't pride yourself too much on the outcomes though. You don't know this yet, but you'll be extremely lucky to have little set-backs. You found case studies easily with friendly and cooperative members abound, your supervisors always had constructive criticism at hand and helped you to develop your work, and it was easy to devote time to fieldwork as this came down do gardening, drinking coffee and taking home fresh vegetables. There were no failed experiments, no case studies dropping out, and no crashed computers.

Moreover, your regular position at a research institute will turn out to be very valuable. You will have a bunch of supportive colleagues around you. They are interested in what you do, but don't scare you with stories about the frustrations and pitfalls of a PhD trajectory. Also, while you have time allocated to dedicate to the PhD – a luxury! – you also engage in plenty of other research projects. Of course this distracts the focus sometimes, but it helps you broaden your view, stimulates you to be efficient, and puts the PhD project into perspective. It is the perfect environment to stay sane and productive, and it prevents you from getting lonely.

That said, the chair group will turn out to be just as important for your PhD journey, as the much needed academic environment for inspiration and support. It is where you'll find fellow PhDs who recognize what you are struggling with, who know how much work 'major revisions' means and who understand how insecure one can feel at a conference. It is also where you will get to know your future colleagues, have your first experiences with education and find your academic home.

That's all I have to offer, younger self. Just enjoy the process, know that you will forget the struggles, learn as much as you can and be grateful for the supportive, friendly and inspiring people around you.

Your older self
ESTHER VEEN
Assistant professor at RSO until July 2021
Current function - Lector Aeres Hogeschool

Landbouwuniversiteit Wageningen

College van Bestuur

Nr. 680-070000.701.211-0070

HET COLLEGE VAN BESTUUR VAN DE LANDBOUWUNIVERSITEIT

gelet op: artikel 110 van de Wet op het Wetenschappelijk Onderwijs;

artikel 35 van het Rechtspositieregelement Wetenschappelijk Onderwijs;

BESLUIT:

I. dr. Dirk ROEP,
geboren 5 september 1967, met ingang van 1 oktober 1991 aan te stellen in tijdelijke dienst bij de Landbouwuniversiteit;
II. voor te dragen aan de aanstelling van betrokkene tot dien tijdelijke dienst in onderzoekcapaciteit "Bedrijfstijden in de Nederlandse Landbouw" uit te voeren en daarover een proefschrift te vervaardigen.

Wageningen, 30 september 1991.

Namens het College van Bestuur,
de Rector Magnificus,
Hoogleraar Sector Landbouw en Samenleving,

c.c. H.F. Pieters

October 1, 1999, Wageningen

You officially started your promotie-onderzoek or doctoral research October 1, 1991, when you were appointed as an Assistent in Opleiding (AIO), an assistant in training, for two years. Jan Douwe van der Ploeg had just been appointed as chair of Rural Sociology. He came to a deal with Piet de Visser, director of the Social Sciences department, to appoint Rene de Bruin and yourself as an AIO, but each of you only for half of the time, i.e. two years. This construction gave you and Rene de Bruin the opportunity to continue the research you both were engaged in, for another two years. This was quite an improvement after being appointed as a toegevoegd onderzoeker or research fellow on various short term contracts in previous three years. However these two years passed and your AIO contract ended in March 1994. Meanwhile you have been involved in action research in the Western peatland areas and gathered rich data and experiences from the field about grassroots, farmers driven, innovations. But you did not even start to think of how to compose a thesis. In the following years you were alternately unemployed and self-employed on rural development projects and you wrote bits and pieces for a thesis. Starting today you are appointed as a research fellow on the EU-funded project IMPACT for three years. You will have to do project work, but also have the opportunity to complete your thesis in about a year.

These flexible constructions by the chair and the director of the Social Sciences Department will be out of the question in the future. We are facing the internationalisation and standardization of research, and periodic peer review of research programs. Onderzoekscholen or Graduate Schools are founded to enhance and guarantee a high quality of PhD-research and its supervision. Admission procedures will be introduced for prospective PhD-candidates, and procedures and forms to monitor and evaluate the proceedings of PhD-candidates and their supervision. The Mansholt Institute will soon become the Wageningen Graduate School of Social Sciences (WASS).

In the near future prospective PhD-candidates will have to comply with strict requirements and procedures to be admitted by the Wageningen Graduate Schools of Social Sciences, such as getting a research proposal accepted, including anticipated outputs and impact, a strict four year planning, a Data Management Plan, and not in the least, guaranteed funding in advance for a four year PhD-position at the chair group of the main supervisor or promotor. Once being accepted as a PhD-candidate the proceedings will be monitored and evaluated once a year by a Training and Supervision Plan (TSP). How different this will be with how you started. You have never been PhD-candidate. You did not need to pass an admission procedure, do not have a TSP with a budget, and have no official monitoring and evaluation procedures to comply with.

At the same time research budgets of universities will be cut drastically and transferred to national Research programs managed by the Dutch Research Council. Chair groups will have to apply for external funding, but competition is expected to be fierce.

As you experienced, discontinuity in funding and appointments has its downsides. And the training and supervision will no doubt improve in the future. But all the incentives to enhance, monitor, evaluate and guarantee quality or excellence in research, is expected to come with a bureaucratic burden, high transaction costs and likely a waste of (human) resources. Hopefully in future chair groups will regain some autonomy in programming and funding of (PhD) research.

DIRK ROEP
Assistant professor at RSO

An artist-in-residence project on food in Athens

BY YI-LING HUNG

Photo credit: Francesca Della Seta; copyright: Laboratelier

In July 2019, I carried out an artist-in-residence project in Athens together with another artist Ching-Yu Chen who is based in Portugal. We name the project: The Rolling Food Project with the ambition to create a series of community projects around and through food. The cultural organisation that hosted our project is Victoria Square Project (VSP), a place seen by locals as the "living room" of the neighbourhood. VSP is located in the neighbourhood around Victoria Square in Athens. Many residents who live in this area are not ethnic Greeks, but from Russia, India, Georgia, Turkey, Italy, German, USA so on and so forth. There are also refugee centres in which refugees were temporarily living until receiving official permission for staying. As a guest artist, I couldn't fully understand this area's whole history and background stories, but I grasped that this area around Victoria Square is very diverse in cultures. However, it's also seen as a problematic neighbourhood.

Our project was creating 24 recipes in responding to 24 solar terms -- the concept of solar terms is still practised in Taiwan nowadays. The concept of it is that we have a sub-dividing system of a year under the four seasons (i.e. under per season, there are six solar terms). For each solar term, many people in Taiwan and China eat a certain food or prepare food in a certain way to maintain the balance of their body from the weather/climate (such as temperature, moisture and so on). Ching-Yu and I spent a month in Athens visiting different local markets and food places, studying their climate and creating a cooking book with 24 recipes. Our project ended with a live-cooking dinner with 24 dishes for 30 guests.

All the guests needed to make a reservation in advance. Many of them didn't know each other or us before. They got to know the event via VSP's network. The interesting part was that we expected to host 30 guests, but there were probably more than 40 guests in the end. Since the dining/cooking event took place in a "semi-public" space (at the courtyard outside of VSP), people who lived in the neighbourhood just naturally blended in during our dinner. It was totally not a problem for us (we enjoyed it very much, actually!), as both of us initiated this project with the belief that food is a medium in generating conversation and social interaction.

This is one of my artistic projects that embodies the idea that food has the power to affect human interactions and the evidence that food-related events can influence our spatial experiences. Although this project took place before my PhD trajectory officially started, the experience in Athens definitely contributes to shaping my research plan, which focuses on food, experience, and cross-nationality.

Family in the field

BY LISETTE NIKOL

Doing fieldwork for my PhD has been an amazing and rewarding experience – fieldwork takes you to places, connects you with people, and entails experiences that ordinary life or work simply does not. My research on organic small farmers in the Philippines has taken me to the homes of several of those small farmers, all of whom are members of a large national farmer network called MASIPAG. And while I had to miss my own family back home for several months, I found family in the MASIPAG network and homes of the farmers that hosted me.

In the Philippines, like in other Asian cultures, we use a set of terms to address especially those who are older than oneself as a sign of respect. In Philippine culture, these are derived from kinship relations. The most frequently used are *kuya* ([older] brother), *ate* ([older] sister), *tatay* (father) and *nanay* (mother), depending on gender and the degree of separation by generations. Thus, I would come to address the farmers who housed me during my community visits as *tatay* Efren, *nanay* Virgie, and *nanay* Mellie. While this started as a way of showing respect and adapting to my host culture, it also symbolises the relationship we developed over time and how I was received: treated like a guest yet cared for like family. If I had been treated like family, I would have had to do chores as well, something I was exempted from (correction, generally forbidden from!) doing in all three homes. Being a respectful guest, I begrudgingly complied. Tatay Efren, nanay Virgie and nanay Mellie have shown me the wonderful ways in which Filipino culture values family – and how values of family can help forge relations with complete strangers in unexpected ways.

Fieldwork is rewarding, yet it is also rough and challenging: The challenges lie not only in its importance to the dissertation, but the personal sacrifices we sometimes make as we embark on its journey. The biggest sacrifice we make when doing fieldwork on a different continent is not seeing our families and close friends for such an extended period of time. It has therefore been an immense honour to have spent this time in a culture, an organisation, and a group of people that have made me part of a family 'in the field'.

Me & Nanay Virgie

This flower is for you!

BY CLAUDIA OVIEDO

I did fieldwork in a Mexican coffee region. One of the things I appreciate the most is how lucky I was with the nice treatment I received from my informants. A person that illustrates this is Pepe, who used to be a coffee farmer but stopped doing so because of the coffee crisis that the sector faced. I met Pepe in a coffee shop from Unión Juarez, which is a very small Mexican town that borders Guatemala. When I met him, I noticed that even though he does not farm anymore, he was very aware of the current situation. Back then, I was looking for data from Guatemalan workers. Since I did not know any of them, I asked Pepe if he could introduce me to some workers from his region. He agreed to do so and set a day to take me to talk to them. I assumed that he would take me to the house of one or two workers and then leave to attend his personal activities, but that day, he spent the whole morning and a big part of the afternoon to be with me. First, he took me to the lands where he used to harvest coffee. There, after walking around some trees, he came out with a rose: "This is for you" he claimed. I received the rose in a quite surprising way since I never expected that a farmer would give me a present without knowing much about me. After this pleasant surprise, he took me to a rusty path: "here, you will find workers that move from one country to another one by foot, every single day, no borders needed". I had been to Unión Juarez a couple of times already, but it was until Pepe took me there that I realised this "secret" path. When he was done showing me this area, he took me to three different houses where Guatemalan workers lived. In the first house, he carefully heard the questions I made to the workers, but in the following houses, he started participating in the interviews, and he even asked some questions he thought I would place: "and do you like picking up coffee?" "What coffee species do you prefer to cut, Arabica or Robusta?", Pepe asked the workers. When we finished those interviews, we headed to the centrum of the town so that I could take the public transport to go back home, but on our way back Pepe saw another coffee worker: "Juventino, come here, she wants to talk to you" Pepe told the person, and another unexpected interviewed was done by both of us. That day I left the town feeling glad that I obtained that data that I was looking for, but I also felt very satisfied knowing how happy Pepe was to give much more attention than the one I would have expected.

Confronted with my privileges

BY THIRZA ANDRIESSEN

I always love to go on fieldwork, getting to know people I would otherwise probably never meet and being encouraged to step out of my comfort zone. Researching food aid organisations, while not having experienced a situation of poverty myself, being there and meeting people who depend on these organisations makes me reflect on my own standards, my privileges and certain inequalities in our society. In each fieldwork, there are several situations or people that really touch me and unexpectedly confront me with things I take for granted. It's just regular daily situations that remind me of people I met or experiences during my fieldwork, such as:

When I travel by bus, I regularly think of Julia. At the social grocery [a food aid organisation with a shop setting] in Antwerp various customers were undocumented immigrants. Among them was a small, Asian woman, with the friendliest eyes you can imagine: Julia. She always asked everyone how they were doing, even when she was in pain or worried. She really enjoyed giving manicures, and this organisation provided nail polish for her to give manicures to other customers and volunteers. She also polished my nails and gave hand massages with caring oils while we were chatting. But suddenly, on a Wednesday, she wasn't there. They told me she took the bus the other day to attend a choir for immigrants but was caught by the police. That made me realise what it meant for her and other undocumented immigrants to travel by public transport.

When my sister got a son, and her husband went to the store to get extra diapers, this reminded me of a customer at the social grocery in Amsterdam. I sat at the coffee table, and he walked from the store to the coffee table with a big smile: "I get another one!" and he held a package of diapers in the air. "Congratulations!". He pointed to the diapers and said, "these are expensive things, so I am glad I can get these here. Every time I shop, I take one package to build a stock of diapers". It was still six months before the baby would come. To regulate the distribution, clients with young children are allowed to buy one package of diapers each time they shop at the social grocery, which they buy for a highly reduced price. The man asked another customer at the coffee table, "how many diapers does a baby actually need per day?". The other man answered, "two or three per day?". The man responds, "oh, then I have to build a huge stock".

When I do my grocery shopping, and after paying, don't even know what I exactly paid for my groceries, I regularly realise this is a huge privilege. My last case study differed from the social groceries in Antwerp and Amsterdam, as people pay with a charitable budget. One could say that the products are for free. Yet, the budget is limited and the products in this food aid shop are labelled with prices comparable to other supermarkets. The customers at this store amazed me with the complex calculations they made to spend their charitable budget optimally. Some mentioned a whole list of price differences between supermarkets and compared that with the prices in the social grocery to decide where they wanted to buy which products. And this was not only about optimal spending but also about saving face. As one customer shared, "I make sure I never take more than my budget allows me to buy, because then I have to put things back and that hurts, makes me feel embarrassed". This made me realise how engaged they are in calculating while shopping. I often wondered how I would spend this charitable budget and how much time and energy such calculations would take.

Praying for peace

BY DAWN CHEONG

Even after spending more than a decade out in the farming fields working with farmers, meeting farmers is always a humbling experience for me. Whether it is in the Andean mountains, in the middle of Sahara, peri-urban villages of Vietnam, or a corner of the Himalayan valley, farmers stories are fascinating and powerful in different ways. Particularly, this one, my half-done field research in Kachin, was even more overwhelming as I am not sure when I can go back or if I can ever go back.

Kachin is located in the northeast of Myanmar, bordered by China. The state has long been in the protracted conflict between the ethnic Kachin and the union government. It has numerous gemstone mines, fertile land with incredible potential in agriculture, and astonishingly resilient communities. But Kachin is everything that we ever read from a development text-book. Land grabbing, the curse of resources, internal conflict, extreme poverty, rapid agrarian changes, border issue, the infamous drug problem, you name it. Even before the military coup, most parts of Kachin were restricted to access even to its own citizens. Once fertile agricultural lands are now dotted with landmines, thousands of peasants lost their homes and land, forced to live in IDP camps relying on aid. Farmers who tried to go back to their land during the short seize fire lost their arms and legs to landmines. My research partners are the daughters of those farmers who fled from the conflicts in the jungle. Their mothers have to go to Chinese banana plantations to make a living. Their brothers are working for military-owned mines, others go to serve Kachin Independent Army and come back for planting and harvest seasons to help out their family. Youth are left with no education. Whether their government is democratic or not, there was hardly any attention paid to the farmers living on the edge of such a big country. However, now their hope to set up their own democratic government and go back to their farming land seems to be lost.

As a researcher from a country that has been through painful colonial occupation, civil war, American trusteeship, military regime, and daily protests to demand a democratic government, the suffering of Myanmar is mind-numbing. Someday, I would go back or not. I pray for peace in Kachin and Myanmar. That is what I could do, at least for now.

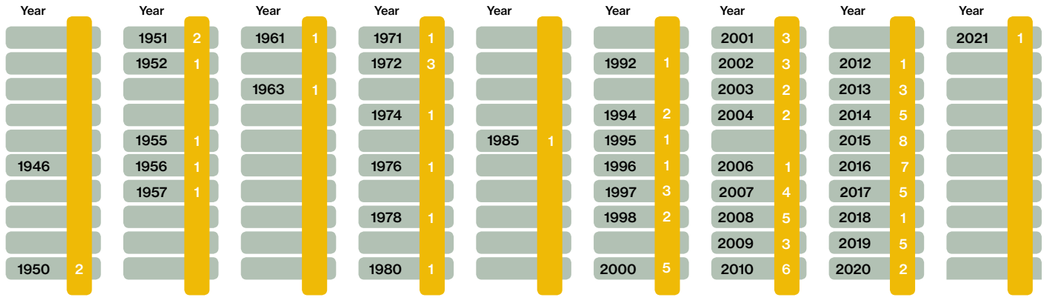
Working in my field

BY PAUL DE GRAAF

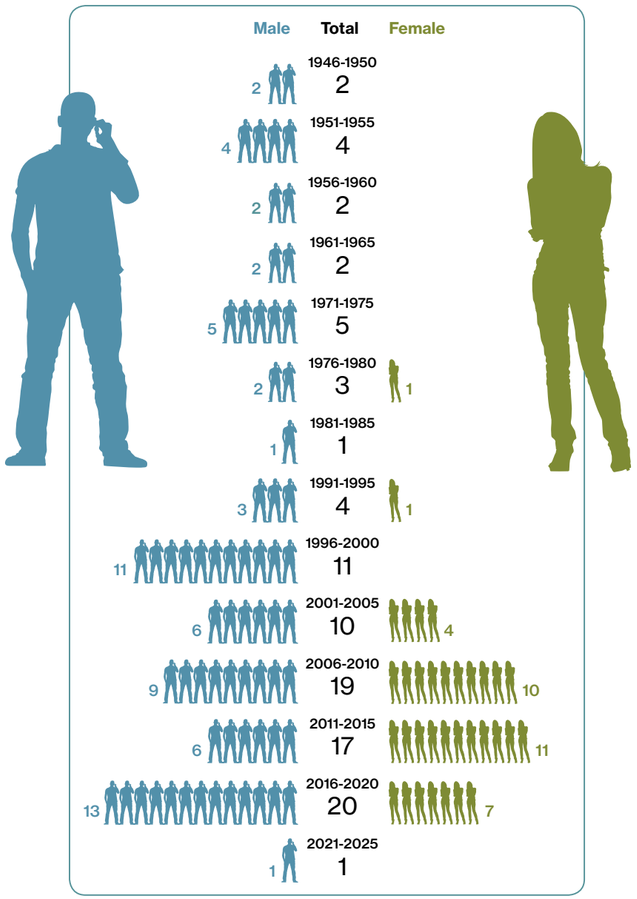
My fieldwork is in more than one sense situated in my backyard, in Rotterdam where I live and work, in the landscape of urban agriculture initiatives that I have been a part of for the past 13 years. And even the garden at the back of my house is subject, as the place where meetings took place with urban gardeners, planners, civil servants, experts, researchers (sometimes interrupted by the sound of neighbours fighting). It is a complex field that I have personal and professional connections with. This field I now have to re-enter as an observer, an investigator, to find out what happened and what became of the hopes of aspirations of the urban agriculture movement to change the city landscape. At the same time, I am still active in this field as an independent professional, older and hopefully, a little wiser, working on the next steps, new plans in different constellations.

The observer and the professional sometimes meet and continuously discuss lessons learnt, insights, strategies, and moral stances. Methodologically I have found an acceptable form for dealing with this entanglement through triangulation, making biases explicit and a multi-disciplinary approach. Personally, and professionally, the experience is more mixed. Sometimes these different perspectives co-exist and even seem to work together symbiotically. At other times they compete and even clash. As a researcher, I, therefore, approach the field cautiously, circling around it, slowly spiralling in. I am both curious and a bit worried about what I will find when I arrive at the centre, and if my findings will agree with me.

PhD graduations per year from 1946 - 2021



Gender ratio of PhD candidates over time

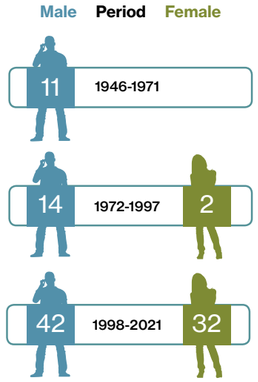


First female PhD
to defend
her thesis at RSO:

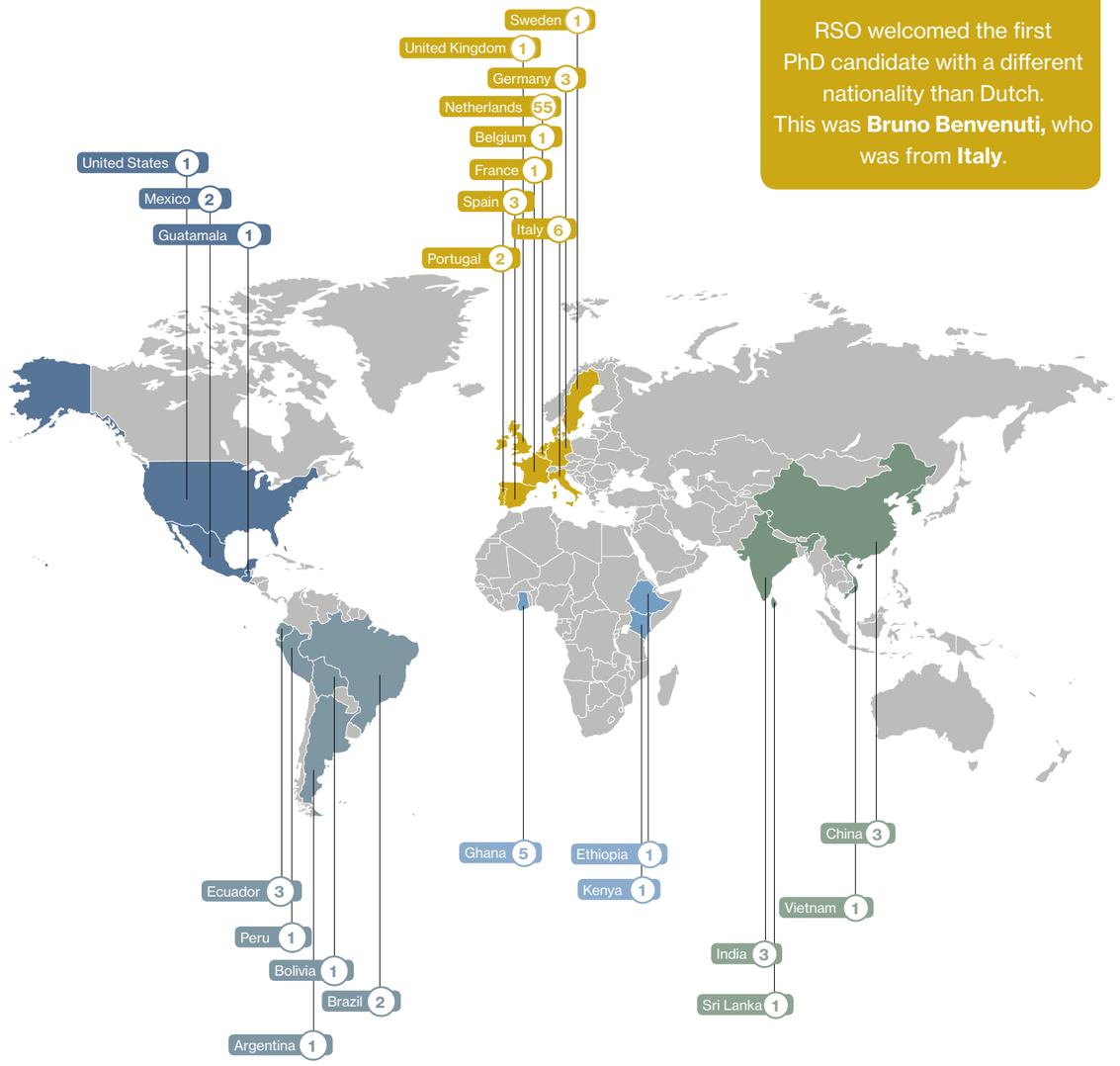
1978

Marijke W. de Kleijn-de Vrankrijker

Gender balance in 25, 50 and 75 years



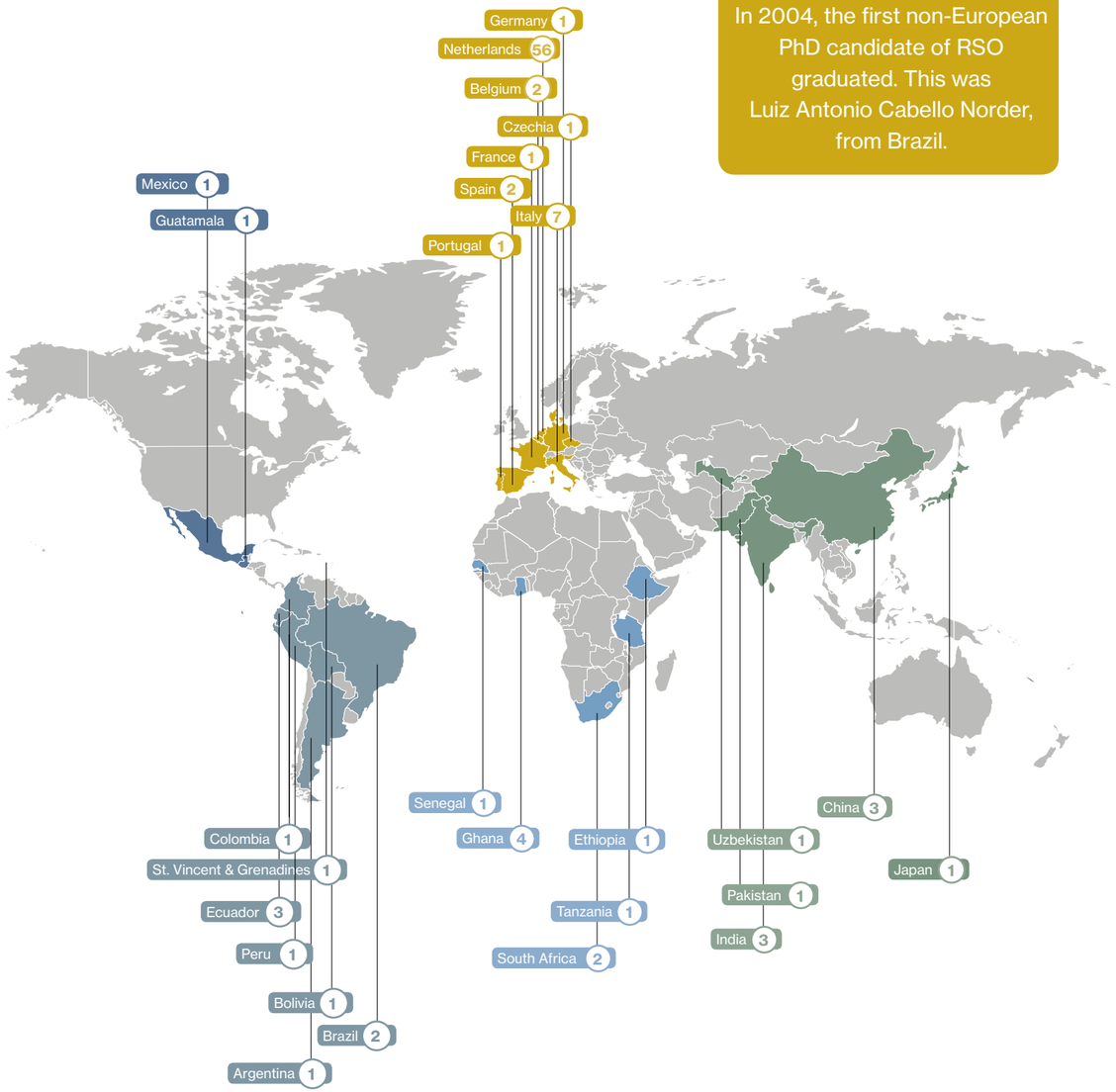
Where do our PhD alumni live now?



1954

RSO welcomed the first PhD candidate with a different nationality than Dutch. This was **Bruno Benvenuti,** who was from **Italy**.

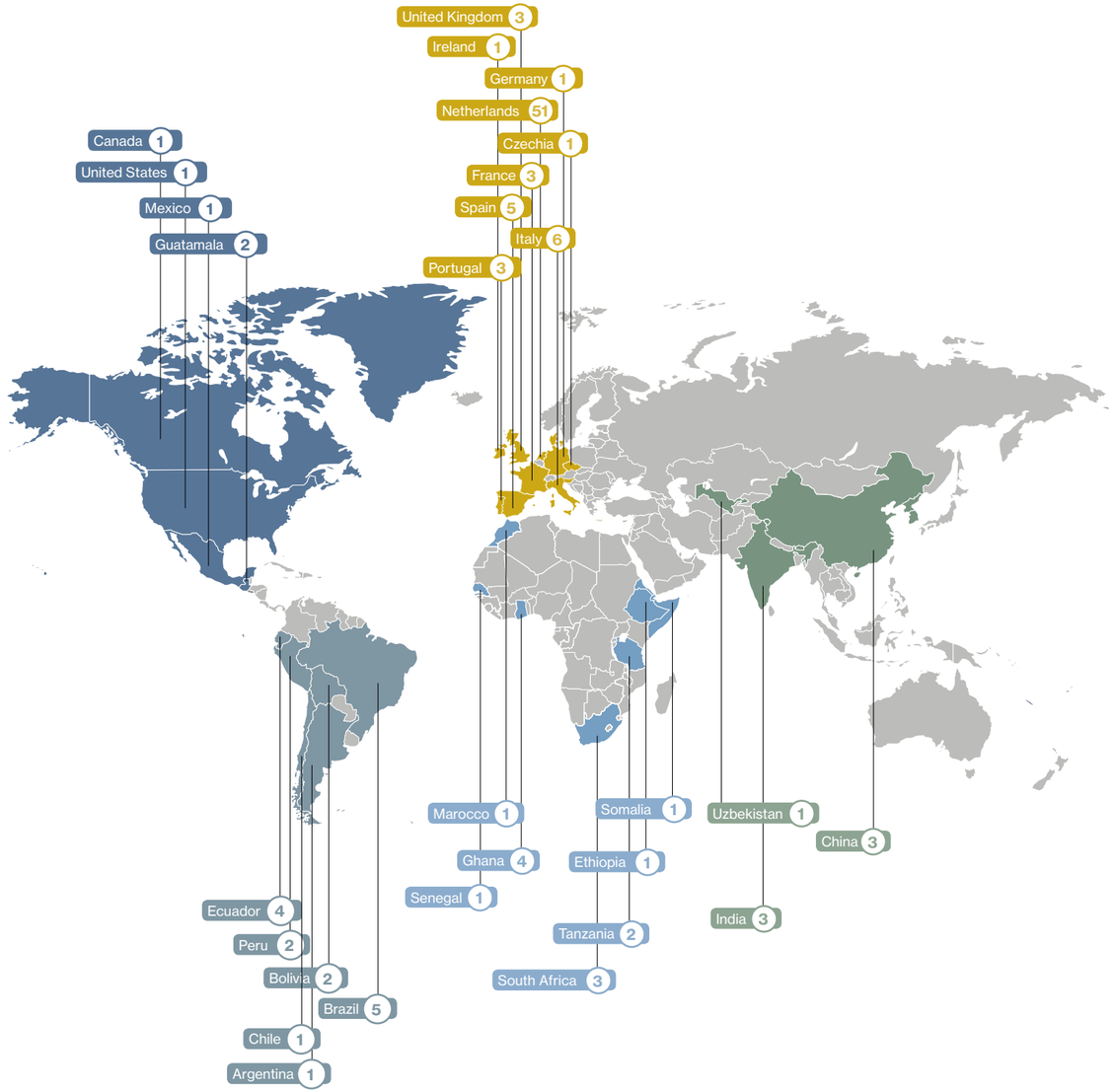
Nationalities of our PhD alumni



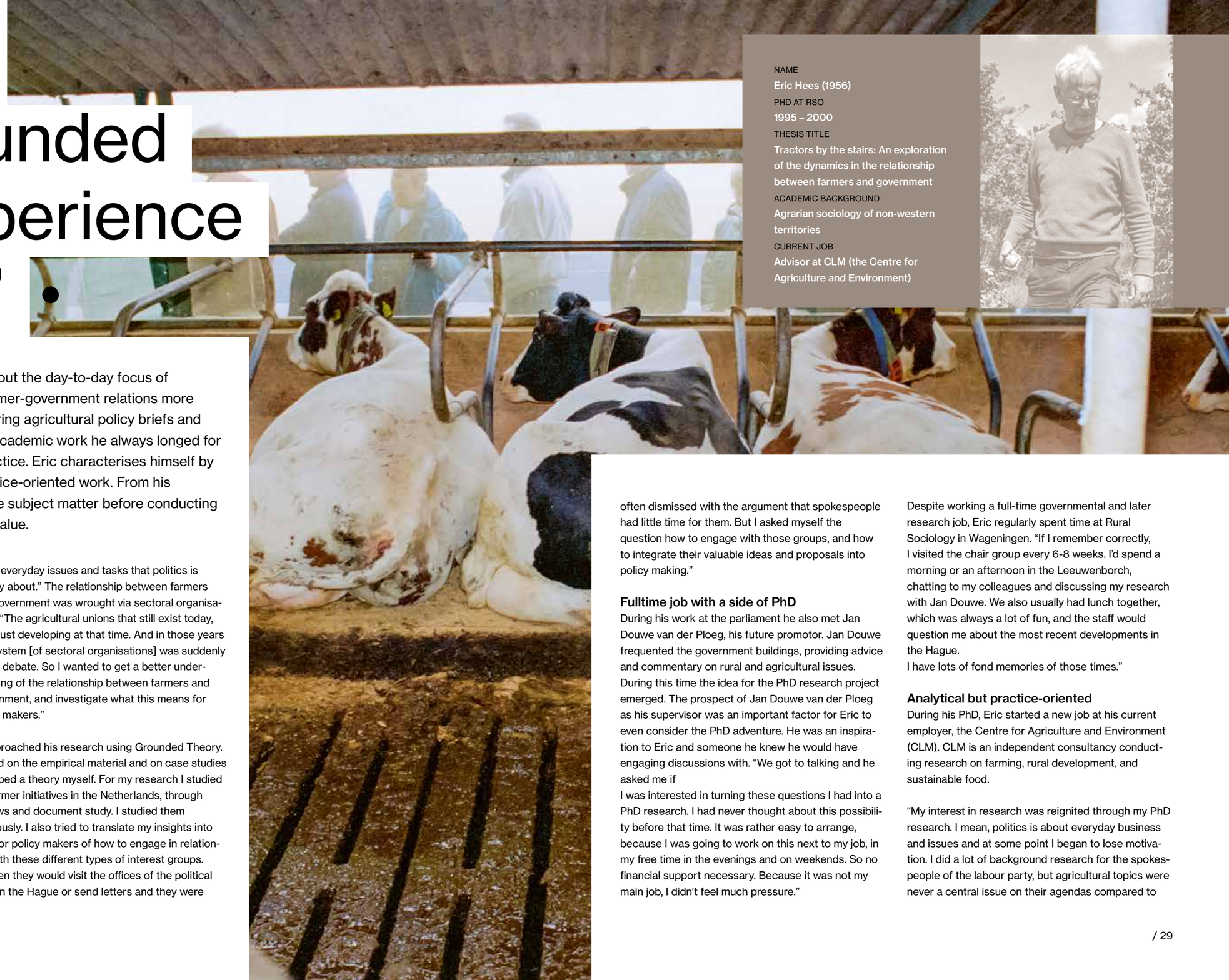
2004

In 2004, the first non-European PhD candidate of RSO graduated. This was Luiz Antonio Cabello Norder, from Brazil.

Where did our PhD alumni do their research?



‘A PhD grounded in work experience adds value’ •



NAME
Eric Hees (1956)
PHD AT RSO
1995 – 2000
THESIS TITLE
Tractors by the stairs: An exploration of the dynamics in the relationship between farmers and government
ACADEMIC BACKGROUND
Agrarian sociology of non-western territories
CURRENT JOB
Advisor at CLM (the Centre for Agriculture and Environment)

Eric’s PhD adventure started with dissatisfaction about the day-to-day focus of governmental work and a longing to understand farmer-government relations more deeply. The latter he encountered daily when preparing agricultural policy briefs and discussing agricultural policies with farmers. In his academic work he always longed for ‘a next step’, eager for insights to be brought to practice. Eric characterises himself by his affinity for being analytical and a desire for practice-oriented work. From his perspective, gaining relevant job experience with the subject matter before conducting PhD research profoundly shaped his thesis and its value.

A PhD grounded in work experience

Eric’s story started with education in Wageningen and civil service with the Evert Vermeer Stichting (a development organisation affiliated with the Dutch labour party). After a few years of work abroad he found a job as policy officer for the Dutch labour party (PvdA) at the Dutch House of Representatives. His time at the parliament was marked as a time of farmer protests, much like today. Farmers would park their tractors on the entrance stairwell of an important government building - hence the title of his thesis:

> “After a few years I felt the need to understand a bit more in-depth the events and processes that were happening. I worked on agricultural policies and in 1990 there were large protests by arable farmers. They came to The Hague and we started a dialogue about compensations and policies that were too strict for them. This got me much more interested in thoroughly understanding the relationship between farmers and government, more than being caught up in the everyday issues and tasks that politics is usually about.” The relationship between farmers and government was wrought via sectoral organisations. “The agricultural unions that still exist today, were just developing at that time. And in those years this system [of sectoral organisations] was suddenly up for debate. So I wanted to get a better understanding of the relationship between farmers and government, and investigate what this means for policy makers.”

Eric approached his research using Grounded Theory. “... based on the empirical material and on case studies I developed a theory myself. For my research I studied eight farmer initiatives in the Netherlands, through interviews and document study. I studied them meticulously. I also tried to translate my insights into advice for policy makers of how to engage in relationships with these different types of interest groups. Back then they would visit the offices of the political parties in the Hague or send letters and they were often dismissed with the argument that spokespeople had little time for them. But I asked myself the question how to engage with those groups, and how to integrate their valuable ideas and proposals into policy making.”

Fulltime job with a side of PhD

During his work at the parliament he also met Jan Douwe van der Ploeg, his future promotor. Jan Douwe frequented the government buildings, providing advice and commentary on rural and agricultural issues. During this time the idea for the PhD research project emerged. The prospect of Jan Douwe van der Ploeg as his supervisor was an important factor for Eric to even consider the PhD adventure. He was an inspiration to Eric and someone he knew he would have engaging discussions with. “We got to talking and he asked me if
I was interested in turning these questions I had into a PhD research. I had never thought about this possibility before that time. It was rather easy to arrange, because I was going to work on this next to my job, in my free time in the evenings and on weekends. So no financial support necessary. Because it was not my main job, I didn’t feel much pressure.”

Despite working a full-time governmental and later research job, Eric regularly spent time at Rural Sociology in Wageningen. “If I remember correctly, I visited the chair group every 6-8 weeks. I’d spend a morning or an afternoon in the Leeuwenborch, chatting to my colleagues and discussing my research with Jan Douwe. We also usually had lunch together, which was always a lot of fun, and the staff would question me about the most recent developments in the Hague.
I have lots of fond memories of those times.”

Analytical but practice-oriented

During his PhD, Eric started a new job at his current employer, the Centre for Agriculture and Environment (CLM). CLM is an independent consultancy conducting research on farming, rural development, and sustainable food.

“My interest in research was reignited through my PhD research. I mean, politics is about everyday business and issues and at some point I began to lose motivation. I did a lot of background research for the spokespeople of the labour party, but agricultural topics were never a central issue on their agendas compared to

other parties like the CDA. And in 1998 we had elections which seemed like the right time to leave this position. I had gotten to know the CLM as a group that visited all parties in the House of Representatives every year to advocate for certain issues. So I had always considered them an interesting group of people and when I saw the vacancy, I knew it was the right fit for me. They also knew me from their visits to the government, so everything was arranged within a week. I've always enjoyed myself at the CLM because I could apply my analytical affinities more than in the political sector. I enjoyed the experience of working for the government and learned a lot. But I was able to do a lot more with my analytical interests and skills in my new job."

His new job also enabled him to bring insights from his PhD research to practice. "Life in The Hague happens much more on a day-to-day basis. In the first few years I was able to work with the approach I had developed in my PhD research, but only in my work with CLM I was able to genuinely apply my insights. In particular, I was able to apply my insight that it is important to recognise why certain groups have particular view-points. We need to avoid simply lumping everyone together since this runs the risk of eradicating differences between those groups."

Eric has found his calling with the CLM where he enjoys his work. He declined an invitation from his former promotor to work for RSO. He had done a few smaller projects with RSO, but upon wrapping those up he always wondered what would happen with the results, and how they could be put to practice. He considers himself an analytical person, yet someone who greatly values research that is practice-oriented and whose outcomes find application in the real world. He mentions an example from his work, a certification scheme used by Dutch supermarkets. "We were asked to develop the subject matter of such a certificate, and to consult with growers how it can be achievable and affordable. This kind of assignment grounds your work in practice, and the odds that it will actually be used is quite large. Of course, it is never 100% guaranteed, but it is quite probable. And just like that you go from one assignment to the next. The downside is that I sometimes get the feeling of not having enough time to provide aftercare as these projects are often quite short. But it is great to get assignments that are grounded in practice."

"In hindsight, I would not have changed a thing"

"When I started my studies, doing a PhD was quite rare. Later it became much more common or even self-evident to do a PhD, also because the study trajectories were being reformed. At that time, the AIO position was just emerging as a new trajectory, and it was still more common to do a PhD next to one's job. But my experience is that doing a PhD when you already have some job experience can have added value. Then it's not a continuation of one's university education in the form of research or an additional degree. What I experienced was that after more than 10 years on the job you approach this kind of research very differently." He has also seen quite some people doing their PhDs at the end of their careers, about which he says: "it enables you to put so much experi-ence into the project, which often makes it incredibly interesting for third parties. It almost becomes like a manifesto to conclude your career. But that is maybe an extreme. Nonetheless, I would not have been able to do my PhD research project straight after my studies, because it was completely informed by the work experience I had gained in the preceding years. Both, topic and case studies, I knew from my work, and that was a huge advantage."

'Our agricultural system has to change radically'

Meino has cared about sustainability since he was young. He always wanted to become a farmer, but he was unable to take over his parent's farm because he was not in the line of succession. Through other means, he still set up his own organic farm cultivating arable crops. His experiences on a few 'conventional' farms and the possibilities offered by his own farm yielded a lot of questions about the sustainability of the Dutch agricultural system. This gave him the idea for his doctoral dissertation. He conducted his research next to his work on the land and for the regional water board. His thesis distinguished itself from others at the time because it was written in Dutch. His PhD research still earns Meino invitations for talks and discussion with interest groups engaged with Dutch agriculture.

A dissertation grounded in experience

The idea for Meino's dissertation was rooted in his own experiences on his family's farms and his own: "I've spent my whole life caring for sustainability. When I became a farmer I looked around and I could not believe what I saw was happening – increasingly heavier machines, compacting soils, ever increasing energy use. It did not seem right to me. In agricultural magazines I read that our farming system was supposedly so very efficient, but I started to question this claim more and more. When I discussed this with Jan Douwe van der Ploeg, he offered me to research this issue for a doctoral dissertation. This is how I ended up at RSO." He knew Jan Douwe van der Ploeg already-he had been to many of his lectures, including a lecture in his home province of Drenthe. "I always agreed on his theories. He uses a sociological approach, but I reach the same conclusions with facts and hard data – using different approaches we both conclude that our current agricultural system is not tenable, not sustainable."

His family's farms were diverse, especially for the current standard. "In the past, an arable farm – even if its main product were arable crops - usually still had about ten cows, a few pigs, and, for example, 100 chickens. They would also grow a range of other crops. Back then, a farm was often quite diversified. This was possible because they had hired help. Most farmers today are alone. Hiring labour is too expensive. In my dissertation I showed that we can achieve a greater diversity once again, but in order to do so we need to allocate more labour to agriculture. So we need conditions that ensure that the relation between the price of technology and the cost of labour changes in favour of the cost of labour.

Meino's own farm is quite diverse compared to the current standard. This is a conscious achievement for the sake of sustainability. "But of course, I am also part of the current farming system and hiring labour is actually too expensive for me as well. In the past, before I started my dissertation, I did small experiments on my own land with small hand-driven machines. I was engaging with the challenges posed by sustainability for quite some time already. It is great to examine such a problem as part of a dissertation. Then it is not only a hunch or a claim, but you have to prove it. My dissertation showed me that the situation of our agricultural system is worse than I initially thought."

Harsh lessons about the 'sustainability' of Dutch agriculture

"I investigated how agriculture developed in terms of sustainability from 1950 until today. I defined sustainability as causing as little as possible negative effects on the environment. When looking at the history of agriculture, you'll see those negative effects have increased." Meino researched this by inventorying those negative effects – in particular the use of energy, natural resources, and land. "I did not only look at direct factors, but also indirect ways in which agriculture uses energy, natural resources and land. We claim that labour productivity is high in our agricultural system, but this claim does not acknowledge//include the amount of labour needed for all the inputs that go into it. An important element of his research was to map the variety of entire upstream input value chains, all the way down to mining. "Almost all technology starts with mining and every step requires energy, resources, and labour. This shows that upstream value chains have grown, and are increasingly responsible for use of energy, resources, and labour. Our agricultural system therefore actually became less efficient. In 1950, agricultural production was fine with few inputs and today we need such a huge volume of inputs."

Meino's research illustrates a diversity of ideas about sustainability and reveals a key role for governments. Actual sustainability of agriculture is determined and enabled by the conditions set through agricultural policies. "The core of my methodology was to consider the indirect factors of agricultural production. This shows that indirect labour is greater than direct labour. It shows the same for energy and land use. If you don't take this perspective, you make decisions based on incomplete information. Current trends are still headed in the wrong direction. The Dutch government should pose quite strict conditions, but is currently only battling symptoms. It aimlessly addresses one problem after the next. There is always something that needs to be done, but they don't structurally address the problem. Government should simply provide conditions that pushes farmers towards sustainable production. But this applies to more societal problems, agriculture cannot be addressed on its own."

Continued Interest

Meino continues to experience interest in his dissertation and research results. "I have done quite a few lectures and people contact me for advice. Much of this attention comes from the organic sector where people generally agree with me. Sometimes groups of citizens express interest. But I have also told my story to conventional farmers, who told me it was an eye opener for them. It seems they are open to the ideas. This was also shown by a survey done 2 years ago, with input from RSO. 80% of farmers indicated they wanted to be more sustainable but they did not know how to do that. Among farmers there seems to be a large group who senses they are not on the right path, but who are unable to get out of the system they are in." The topic of his research is not solely responsible for this unwavering interest. Meino also attributes this to the language of his dissertation. PhD theses these days are commonly written in English, among other reasons because of the internationalisation of research topics and PhD candidates at RSO and WUR in general. Meino however carefully chose to write his dissertation in Dutch. It was important to him that his research would be relevant and accessible to those it was about – Dutch farmers and the Dutch agricultural system.

Combining science and farm work

The work on an arable farm is seasonal, which enabled Meino to combine his work on the land with writing a doctoral dissertation. Especially in winter he had a lot of time to spend on it. Writing was an enormous job. "But the most difficult part of course is creating a coherent whole, and seeing the connections within your entire data set. That is the most interesting, and the most difficult, part." Switching between physically labouring on the land and sitting still behind a desk, thinking, was not difficult for Meino. "After I spent two days in a small office in Wageningen I was always happy to be able to do something completely different. And you're also able to think while working on the land."

NAME
Meino Smit (1949)
PHD AT RSO
2010 - 2018
THESIS TITLE
The sustainability of Dutch agriculture 1950 – 2010 – 2040
ACADEMIC BACKGROUND
Landuseplanning and watermanagement
CURRENT JOB
Organic arable farmer

Meino never aspired to obtain a PhD degree. His personal objective for his doctoral research was the topic. Looking back, Meino considers his PhD trajectory an invaluable experience and he is not yet finished with science in his life. "I'm still writing about what I found during m research. Many insights are not included in my dissertation. I am also developing an energy scenario for the Netherlands, to show how difficult it would be to transition into sustainable energy. I do this because I think it is important and interesting."
His experiences in conducting PhD research showed Meino how the agricultural sector would benefit from farmers being open to new ideas and continually reflecting critically on their practices. "This is something we are currently missing in the sector. A large share of farmers are part of the system and cannot escape it anymore. Neither physically nor mentally. You can also see this in the farmer protests, because they are protesting against what would be in their best interest. Looking at the mainstream, you will still encounter the common perception that our agricultural system is highly efficient and that our challenges will be solved through more technological solutions. Doing more with less labour is seen as key, even though this is not tenable because we have a climate problem. That's why it is important that people from outside enter the sector. I see graduates from Wageningen or people from the Warmonder Hof starting a small horticulture farm. That is great. That's how you get different ideas and mindsets represented in the agricultural system." Being open to new ideas is not restricted by advancing age, mentally Meino feels young. And in case you are wondering whether Meino always had this critically reflective attitude? He did, but it was strengthened through his PhD research.

Dear younger self,

You should realize that you chose for a rather unique scientific carrier. It took you more than 20 years at RSO before starting a PhD. After graduating as a rural sociologist and being employed for a period of 2 years in Portugal within an European research project, you returned as a researcher at RSO, working for a longer period exclusively on national and European funded projects. Something that you liked for several reasons. It allowed you to collaborate within international teams around all kinds of research topics that had your interests. After exploring a topic in depth, mostly for periods of 3 of 4 years, and before becoming bored, it made it possible to continue with another research topic, to start working with other researchers, often with other disciplinary and institutional backgrounds. You liked the short-time horizons of European research-project based working and happily accepted that this went along with temporal labour contracts, sometimes short breaks between contracts and not always transparent employment constructions. At the moment that WUR started to restrict opportunities to work on these type of temporal contracts, you decided to accept earlier offers to synthesize your research experiences into a PhD. It turned out the only way to continue to work within a setting that you appreciated for its degrees of freedom. You got the opportunity to concentrate for a period of 12 month exclusively on a PhD trajectory, starting send the end of 2013, resulting in a formal thesis defence in March 2015.

In hindsight you have somewhat mixed feeling about this PhD-period. Certainly, it allowed you to dive more theoretically and analytically into your commitment to family-farming and its closely associated conviction that its resilience does bring important social benefits. In that sense you certainly did appreciate the opportunity to write a thesis. At the same time you do remember this PhD-writing process as a period with less interaction, collaboration and discussion with colleagues than you used to have. Put differently, you remember your PhD-period primarily as a somewhat solitary exercise that allowed you to continue to work within a pleasant and appreciated work environment. And it made you realize that you have been in that respect rather lucky as there is now a days no longer room for similar PhD trajectories within our WUR environment.

HENK OOSTINDIE
Researcher at RSO

Looking back, it seems like an eternity since I did my PhD. 2002 – that is almost twenty-year – a different stage in my life and a different context for doing a PhD. I never was a PhD student in the current form. I collected and analysed data while being engaged in multiple consecutive projects as a researcher. Combining bits and pieces of data, money, and chapters, and step-by-step developing a storyline, collaborating with different colleagues and commissioners in various projects.

Most of the time, it was fun to work like that, exciting too. Of course, there was uncertainty: a young family with two temporary jobs. I remember deliberating the financial risks and deciding that this was the time to take a chance. I never regretted it. It felt good immediately. Stress hit me only in the last phase, the one year I had, partially unpaid, to write it all up. I was offered a job as an assistant professor under the condition that I finished the PhD within one year. The pressure was tough, but it worked well as it forced me to focus and to say no to projects and tasks that otherwise had diverted my attention.

I look back on my time as a 'PhD' with pleasure and pride. It was great to have the autonomy to organise most things myself and have the time to go into depth and looking around and enjoy the diversity of changing projects. I had lots of freedom and lots of fun with colleagues and friends working on comparable projects. I also received a lot of support from colleagues, especially Rudolf van Broekhuizen, with whom I shared a room. He knew everybody who mattered for rural development in the Netherlands, was always ready to listen and discuss and was a genius in finding novel opportunities for funding. I also enjoyed giving presentations for rural women, visiting the new rural entrepreneurs – the farm women who practically started what is now called multifunctional agriculture. Inspiring women and real innovators. I also, for the first time, experienced being pushed to my limits intellectually. To concentrate and strain my brain to understand what was going on and to put it into words. To give ideas also time to develop.

I still profit from the lessons I learned in that period. There are times when I worry if I can manage because there are just too many things to do, too little time or because the tasks seem too complicated. Then I fall back on what I then learned – how to cope by organising my time, pushing myself to focus and thinking hard, and allowing thoughts to come and combining hard thinking with working out and taking a break.
I also learned that to write - you need to start writing – ready to delete later what was only required to get going. I remember my supervisor saying, 'I can see why you needed to write it, but why should I read it?"

I also learned the value of following my curiosity and intuition. Starting a PhD meant leaving a permanent job for an uncertain and temporary project. But I longed for something else, and having the time to study processes more in-depth felt like a great luxury. And it worked out well – of course, there were times when I worried and wondered what to do – but overall, the university has always been a good place for me to work.

BETTINA BOCK
Personal Professor at RSO

‘So, I put a ring on my finger’

NAME
Sabine de Rooij (1949)
PHD AT RSO
1982-1992
THESIS TITLE
Work of the secondary kind: female farmers on dairy farm
ACADEMIC BACKGROUND
Rural Sociology
CURRENT JOB
Retired

Three main topics have been central to the work of Dr. Sabine de Rooij: the sociology of families, farmer’s lives, and gender roles. Within her PhD she focused on the work done by female farmers in relation to processes of upscaling and specialisation of Dutch dairy farms. Her research showed that “the tasks of female farmers degraded in terms of quality of labour and that they needed less knowledge while the labour time remained roughly the same”. While doing this research, Sabine de Rooij simultaneously challenged gender norms in academia by being the second woman to do a PhD at RSO and fighting for maternity leave arrangements during her PhD.

From studying plant science to the establishment of a female farmers group

Before starting with her PhD, Sabine was involved in several other activities concerning women and farming. After trying to study plant science, where she cut her fingers constantly under the microscope, Sabine switched to the bachelor - and eventually also the master program - of Family and Rural Sociology.

After she graduated, she conducted research about the labour market position of women graduated from Wageningen University. Next, Sabine joined De Boerengroep, a critical group of students and graduates who connect theory with practice according to farmers’ issues. They address critical issues together with famers with a view towards influencing policies. When the women’s movement rose in the 70s, Sabine helped establish De Boerinnengroep [the female farmers’ group]. Based on a series of interviews with female farmers, they made a movie that was shown all over the country to support conversations about women’s work on farms.

Having these various experiences, Sabine felt like “you know a lot, but it all stays on the surface. You don’t know exactly what is going on”. Her wish for a deeper understanding grew when farms were scaling up along with processes of specialisation. Sabine started to wonder how these processes influenced gender roles on the farms. This triggered her to write a research proposal for a PhD project. “At that time at Wageningen University you could apply for one of around ten PhD spots. You had to formulate and write your own research proposal and to get one of the spots the chair group had to approve this.” So, Sabine wrote her own research proposal and got a PhD position at RSO.

A test of conducting research on your own

Sabine describes a PhD as an examination to design and carry out research on your own. “That is what a PhD is all about of course. I had to search for literature I could build on. I would write about the quality of labour, but it was also about gender roles. At that time, there was some research about gender, but often written in the context of third world countries and not about the Netherlands. So, that was quite hard for me. But what was easy for me was the practical side of the research. So, you had to think about what am I going to ask these women, and why do I do that? That was quite easy for me, because I had all these experiences with the female farmers group, and I had experience conducting interviews. And I did preliminary research, which enabled me to explicate some issues.”

When we talk a bit more about the practical issues, Sabine also talks about the data analysis phase, which was quite different than it is now: “during my PhD we didn’t use SPSS, we coded the data by hand and used punches... and that had to go through such a huge computer with all kinds of data and then you got those huge rolls back with your data on it. You had to calculate your chi-square (x2) from scratch”.

Concessions for pregnancy

An important experience Sabine tells us about, was getting pregnant during her PhD. She became pregnant of her first child in 1983 and there was no arrangement yet to get maternity leave. So, the weeks she couldn’t work because of her pregnancy would be stripped from her research time. “I raised this concern at the emancipation commission, and I got these months back. But such conditions were not pre-arranged at the time for research assistants and women”. During her PhD, Sabine gave birth to two children. She shares “from my experience, when you get pregnant two times during your PhD research – that is quite a job. I started with my PhD doing it full-time, but since my first pregnancy I reduced that to four days a week and that was already hard enough. If I remember well, I spread my four years over six including the pregnancies.” After these six years her funding stopped but her PhD wasn’t finished yet. She moved to Italy with her family, participated in some other research projects, and when they got back to the Netherlands she thought: “I got to do something with it, I have to finish it, because I asked so many people for their time, and I already invested so much of my own time... I cannot forgive myself if I do not finish it. So, then I finished it at the kitchen table. [...] But I did it and I was quite proud of that.” Additionally, Sabine talks about the time she was pregnant while conducting interviews. She explains that to keep the focus on the topics she wanted to discuss as a researcher, she did a concession: “I was pregnant at a certain time and then I visited these women and well... many of them were religious. So, I put a ring on my finger to not have discussions about being pregnant but not married.”

Proud cheesemakers

When we asked Sabine what she learned from the female farmers she spoke with, she tells us “that you need to stand for what you do. You have to put energy into what you do, believe in what you do and also when it doesn’t go that well, hang on or try to work together. Stay positive, keep fighting. I have been at so many beautiful farms where I really thought ‘how did you do this?’ and ‘how amazing!’ and these female farmers are so creative and inventive. But I also saw how broad this job is, how much and various kinds of knowledge they need to have. What I also learned from them is pride. Those cheesemakers were so proud of their work, of the cheese they made, of the prizes they could win, and of all the knowledge they had.”

Many projects followed

“I have stayed in research, apart from a few organisational and management functions. In many projects I worked together with colleagues and that is different than doing it alone. During your PhD you have to realise it all by yourself”. After her PhD she worked for sociology and women’s studies at WUR, participated in various projects for e.g. FAO, Mama Cash, ETC, did two research projects in Italy about multifunctional agriculture and chains of agriculture, and a research in China about youth and agriculture. She enjoyed conducting research for all these different projects and living in various countries. If one thing becomes clear in the interview it is that she is rich of experiences.

‘From China’s best agriculture university to the world’s best agriculture university’

NAME
Meng Xiangdan (1987)
PHD AT RSO
2009-2014
THESIS TITLE
Feminisation of agricultural production in rural China: A sociological analysis
ACADEMIC BACKGROUND
Rural Development and Management
CURRENT JOB
Lecturer and Researcher at Jilin University, China

Meng currently teaches bachelor and master students on social policies, rural sociology and rural social work at the Sociology Department of Jilin University, China. She also researches rural left-behind populations, rural education, rural new labour relations and governance, including gender issues.

Why don’t you study at the best agricultural university in the world?

Meng did her bachelor and master’s at the Chinese Agricultural University, the best agriculture university in China. When she decided to do her PhD, her master’s supervisor (and her PhD co-supervisor, Prof. Jingzhong Ye) advised her to study at the best agricultural university in the world. Prof. Ye also studied at Wageningen University, where he was supervised by Norman Long. He knew Van der Ploeg, who later became Meng’s promoter and introduced Meng to him. She received a full four-year scholarship from the Chinese Scholarship Council to come to study at Wageningen.

Gender is still an overlooked topic in China, but I try to bring the topic into my teaching and research

Meng’s PhD research was on the feminisation of Chinese agriculture resulting from male outmigration to urban areas. The lack of agricultural labourer adds more burden to rural women. They suffer not only through unpaid care and domestic work, but now also agricultural labour. She studied the impact of this male outmigration on agricultural production. Her research found that women’s educational attainment and social status affect gender relations within the family. Men usually generate more monetary income, and this influences the family gender dynamics as well. However, male outmigration has not changed women’s participation in rural public affairs. In the absence of men, women have more chances to make decisions in agriculture, family and rural public affairs, albeit often only minor decisions. Big decisions are still made by men remotely. This change reinforces gender inequality in rural China. While she is trying to continue her research and bring gender discussions to her classrooms, gender is still a rarely discussed subject in China. It is challenging to publish her work on gender as there is only one closely gender-related journal in China. So, it is a struggle to continue her gender work. She is still doing research about rural women and paying more attention to rural governance.

They thought that I was a spy!

Meng conducted her field research in a rural village in the north part of Jiangsu Province in China and stayed there for a while with village families, one family each week. Her research assistant was a local primary school teacher who lived in the village and had many relatives around. It was a great help.

“In the beginning, villagers thought that I was a spy. They were suspicious about me. But I stayed with one woman respondent each week and tagged along where they go, such as village shops, to see what they buy. I just had to hang out with them to let them trust me. Eventually, they opened up and started speaking out about their stories. Still, I needed some techniques to make them talk about gender questions.”

Even my half-finished jokes were warmly received by RSO colleagues

In China, Meng used to live with her classmates as many Chinese students do. She shared a dorm room with another five girls at the university, then another three when she did her master’s degree. Meng always had friends around. But in Wageningen, she was alone in her room. This was very new to her. She very much enjoyed her life in Wageningen. She learned how to live independently (doing grocery shopping and cooking) and to be positive. “This is crucial as many students suffer from mental issues in a PhD life these days”, she emphasised.

“I was lucky. I had my Chinese friends around, and RSO colleagues were very kind to me even though my English, in the beginning, was not very good. I wanted to make jokes with them, and sometimes I did try. But once I could not get the right keyword out. I was embarrassed, but my half-done jokes were still warmly received by my colleagues.”

A memorable group outing day

Every year, RSO hosted a “group outing day” in spring and summer. She loved those outings as she visited different Dutch farms and learned how multi-functional farms work in the Netherlands. She was impressed by how people can communicate with animals by hugging them and interacting with other people in nature. On one group outing day in June 2013 she went to a farm producing asparagus with colleagues. They experienced how to dig asparagus and ate the asparagus there. It was a great and memorable day. However, there was another reason that she will remember it for her whole life. Just a while after arriving at the farm, Meng and three or four colleagues went to find the toilet in the farm’s backyard. On the way, there was a small field covered with cloth. She had no idea what was underneath, probably some grass. Accidentally she stepped into it then fell into the water. It was a swimming pool! She was terrified and panicked as she cannot swim. Luckily others rescued her and gave some of their own dry clothes to her. Then, they also tried to ask for help from the farm owner to dry her wet clothes. The drying process needed time, and she left the clothes there at the farm. She was embarrassed and tried to keep it a secret until they left the farm. When everyone left, she could not go directly with her colleagues because she had to go back to the farm owner’s house to get her wet/dry clothes. At that time, everyone else got to know that the “little Meng” stepped into the swimming pool.

‘Allowing multiple challenges in life’

Petra Derkzen did not only successfully complete her PhD, but also became assistant professor. Yet, she decided to leave academia to find more balanced work in biodynamic agriculture. In her inspiring story, she shares what the university gave her and why she decided to change course.

In her PhD, Petra explored participation and decision making in rural development in the Netherlands and Wales. In the Netherlands, she looked at negotiations related to the so called reconstruction policy which followed the swine fever: “The government came up with a plan that intensive livestock farming would only be located in certain clusters, so in case the swine fever would strike again, not the entire countryside would be affected. This idea meant that farmers would have to move further away from the protected NATURA2000 areas. And this process was discussed with all stakeholders at the table.” The discussions were heavy with many different actors and interests. “The idea was that if there are too many seats at the table, the decision making sure will be impossible, so they tried to limit the number of people involved. For instance, farmers had one seat at the table, so different groups of farmers all had to agree on a shared viewpoint beforehand.”

In this heated context, Petra found a unique entry point to the field: “I got into contact with a group of rural women, who fought for their seat at the table to talk about the liveability of the rural areas. They said if we have to move the farms, it also means our kids have to go to different schools, so this has a huge impact on the communities and the quality of life. They got a seat but they were not organised as a real union. A farmers’ union has paid staff that can plough through tons of policy proposals, but these women did not have this.” Petra took it upon herself to carry out this function and became “staff” of the women’s group. “What was really nice about working at Rural Sociology was the trust that was laid in me. I got a lot of freedom to do such things, and it was my responsibility to finish and to deliver articles,” she reflects. Thanks to this engagement, the women’s group was able to deal with the paperwork, and it added an applied dimension to Petra’s work.

PhD as self-discovery

Petra sees her PhD also as a personal learning journey, and shares some insights she took with her. “I asked my colleague to read the draft of my first paper. He said, you always talk about interactive participatory decision making, and the word power is not at all mentioned, but aren’t you in fact researching who has the power? And I was just flabbergasted, it was my blind spot. I was not getting any further with my interactive ‘all is nice and fine’ theories. This led into a deep search, into Foucault and the whole philosophy of power but also to thinking of what do I think is power? How do I want to exercise my power? What do I feel is wrong and right? It really changed the train of my PhD, in a good way. But it also opened a possibility to think about how I, as a person in this life, look at power. This has really helped me, even now – I am not studying it, I am not outside of processes of decision making and power, I am right in the middle of it, trying to create biodynamic agriculture with a huge amount of people together, seeing who has influence where.”

NAME
Petra Derkzen (1976)
PHD AT RSO
2003-2008
THESIS TITLE
The politics of rural governance: case studies of rural partnerships in the Netherlands and Wales
ACADEMIC BACKGROUND
International Agricultural Trade
CURRENT JOB
Farmer and coordinator for the biodynamic movement

Another more practical learning experience was dealing with writer’s block: “Imagine you are trying to get a lot of sand in your hands. You have to hold it very loose, otherwise it runs between your fingers. So if you want to grasp your writing with a lot of willpower because now it has to be finished, the spirit goes out of the flow and you get stuck. I learned that every now and then I really need to let go – and again here RSO was super helpful, because I was able to do little side projects like doing 2 weeks Erasmus project in Portugal. I was away, out of the content, and I came back completely new and stepped back into the writing process. So I learned that I just need to trust it, it’s there, it’s in me, I just need to create the conditions in which it comes out. This was really helpful as a general lesson for life.”

Ten-thousand-litre cow

After her PhD, Petra worked for a year as a researcher before becoming assistant professor to develop a new course on food culture. “I enjoyed this opportunity to create something new completely from scratch. Working with ideas is something I still find really nice. Lots of sociology and political science is also about vision. It is not only about what happens. It is also working out what society do we want, what food culture? What is good quality, when it comes to nutrition or when it comes to organizing the food chain?” Being able to articulate such visions was another thing she appreciated about the Rural Sociology group.

Petra was among the first researchers who had to enter the newly established tenure track system, and

she is critical about the work pressure this entailed: “I felt like I’m a kind of a 10 000-litre cow, it doesn’t really matter how I stand on my feet as long as I produce. Whereas in organic agriculture cows give 5000 litres but they live twice as long, and they can go outside, it is much more akin to the integrity of the animal. I really missed this human level. This thing of not getting a fixed contract for so many people, who are then hindered in setting up life, with a family, things like this. This is so contrary to the fact that the university only has one thing, and that is human capital. There is nothing more, this is what makes the university the university. It doesn’t produce anything material, the quality comes from the quality of the people.”

The institutional environment of academia as a whole was one of the reasons Petra decided to change the course of her career: “It was a combination of too much work pressure, too much computer and too much demands – publish or perish, student evaluations, PhD students... I was busy too one sided. And also more and more feeling I am too far away from real practice. I was only studying things, but I had the need to be myself actively shaping sustainable agriculture. It felt like I was standing on the side, looking at people doing really great things – urban agriculture, sustainable food networks, box schemes... super great to look at, but more and more I had this itchiness that I wanted to be in this myself, doing it.”

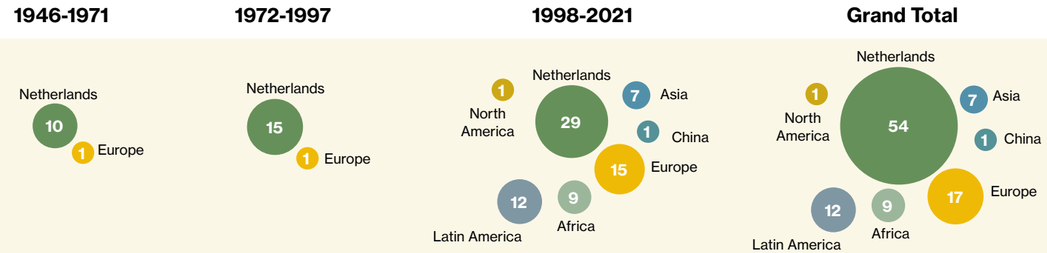
Working hard, yet balanced

In 2013, Petra left the university to become a certifier for the biodynamic movement. “It wasn’t really my cup of tea, but it was an opportunity to step out, and to have a job, and be somehow much nearer to the practical life of agriculture. Of course my qualifications were a problem. If you want to do something else after ten years at the university, there is a gap. I have no idea how it was looked at inside the university, that I was going to do a sort of an admin job after obtaining a PhD and having a permanent contract as an assistant professor. It might have seemed crazy and you could say it was high risk, but I didn’t experience it like that, because I was sure that I had to make a step.”

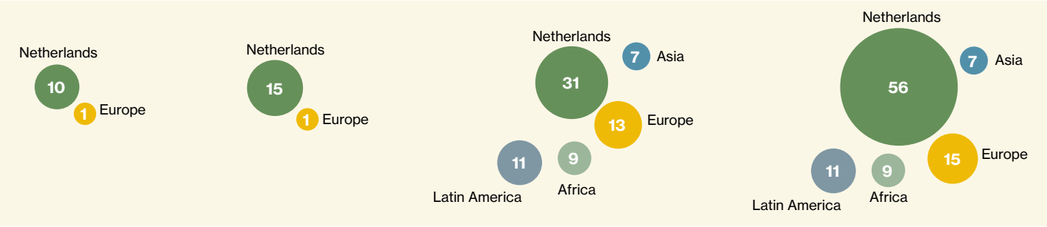
This step eventually led to Petra’s current occupation, which combines small-scale farming and a home-office job with the international biodynamic movement. “I live in the North-West of Germany, just over the border from Groningen, on a place with 2,5 ha which is in conversion to organic. My plan is to go further with what I did inside a bigger farm near Wageningen, where I grew calendula for tea production. I can now diversify to more medicinal plants and small scale gardening.” In addition, Petra coordinates international networks in education and advisory, and facilitates a research network on biodynamic agriculture. “I still work hard, but this combination brings me more balance. I need more physical work, but also contact with nature, with plants, soil and with myself, in order to be on a healthy level also behind the computer. Many friends often told me, you also need this intellectual challenge. If you would become a full time farmer, it also would not be you. Indeed also have satisfaction in being busy on the international level, trying to slowly move things, to coordinate. That is a contribution to sustainable agriculture that I could never do on my 2,5 hectares.”

Finding the right balance is a theme that closes our conversation: “Maybe in 30 years time we look back and we say wow, that was the high point of specialisation. It began with industrialisation and the conveyor belt, and it culminated here. And now we are beyond this point, because we allow multiple challenges in life. We don’t need to do 100 hours a week of academia only. I have the impression that young people are more aware that other skills are also worth developing, and they wish to combine things perhaps more than my generation. Maybe society develops to a point where this is allowed, and where there are spaces for such meaningful combinations.”

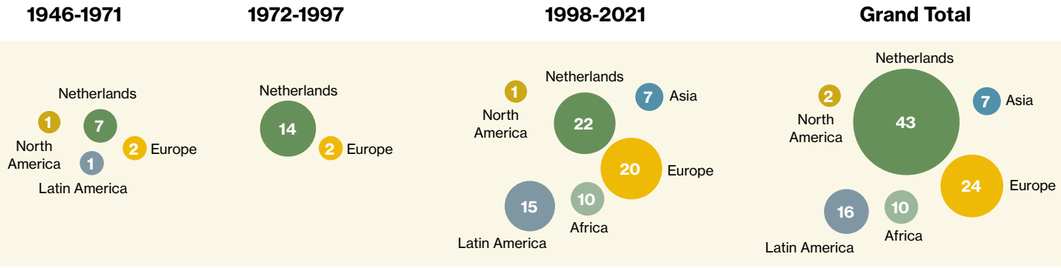
PhD alumni through the years: where did our PhD alumni go to live?



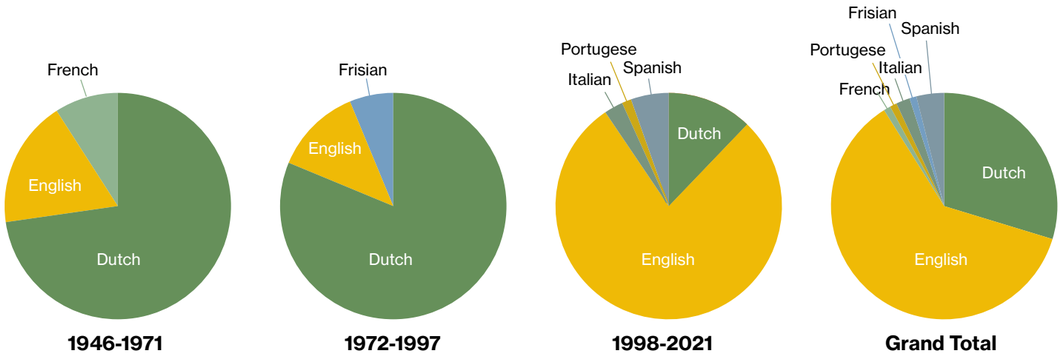
PhD alumni through the years: Where did our PhD alumni come from?



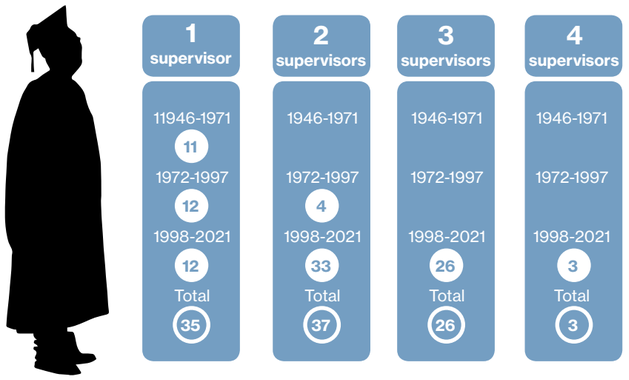
PhD alumni through the years: where did they do their research?



Thesis language through the years



Number of supervisors through the years



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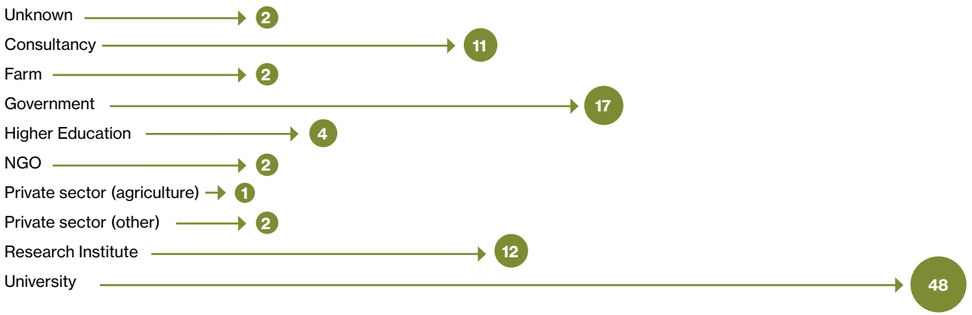
former RSO PhD candidates continued to work at WUR at some point in their career.

Current employment of former PhDs



101 dissertations characterised in keywords

Our promoters: **proud and inspired but also concerned**

A trialogue between Jan Douwe van der Ploeg, Han Wiskerke & Bettina Bock

A promotor is a Dutch term for a professor or associate professor granted as a doctoral supervisor, who is responsible for the supervision to be well-organized.

A promotor keeps an eye on the academic quality of the candidate's work, plays a critical role in the dissertation research process, and needs to approve the PhD thesis for a candidate to defend. On June 15th 2021, Jan Douwe, Han and Bettina talked about their role as promotor. They shared their experiences, their concerns, the way PhDs inspire them, and reflected on the role of promotor over time. While their experiences resonate in the way doctoral candidates inspire them, the conversation also reveals their different preferences between dissertations based on articles or monographs, which further develops into a discussion about the critical potential of doctoral candidates and a shared concern about the monetary flows financing doctoral research.

NAME
Prof.dr.ir. Jan Douwe van der Ploeg
PROMOTER SINCE
1992
SUPERVISED PhD'S
Around 50

Was the promotor of Han and Bettina

NAME
Prof.dr.ir. Han Wiskerke
PROMOTER SINCE
2004
SUPERVISED PhD'S
Around 31

Currently supervises 18 PhDs

NAME
Prof.dr.ir. Bettina Bock
PROMOTER SINCE
2004
SUPERVISED PhD'S
Around 12

Currently supervises 12 PhDs (both at WUR and RUG)

Different candidates, varying supervision

We opened the trialogue by asking the three promotors how they experience this role. **Jan Douwe** responds: "I always experienced it as a very nice part of my job. There were a few with their own topic, but a large part of the doctoral candidates' topics was clustered. It was like we worked together on the same program and developed it further; piece by piece, connected to each other."

Bettina follows: "There are some which are super fun, from whom you learn a lot, who inspire you and with whom you collaborate as partners in the research. Some become friends. Others are more difficult and those require you to work hard. I have also stopped supervising two doctoral candidates because I thought it was not going to work. But most of the times it is nice."

Han adds: "What stands out for me is that it varies a lot in terms of supervision that is needed. Some are very independent, need little supervision. Others take a lot of time, pushing, pulling, dragging to get it done. And I saw several PhDs whereby it goes well until the moment they start writing. Then the problems begin, to get all the experiences on paper. That can be difficult sometimes. In the end, you cannot write it for them. From some I just learn a lot. For others I feel more like a mentor. What you give and what you get out of it varies a lot in my opinion."

A dissertation based on articles or a monograph

Han explains that the role as promotor differs when a PhD candidate develops a dissertation based on articles compared to a monograph: "It depends on the kind of thesis. In case of a monograph, as daily supervisor you often have a more active role and feedback is more provided throughout the whole piece. In the case of articles, I experience that correcting or providing comments focusses more on the introductory chapters and the discussion part. With articles there are already several rounds of revisions based on feedback from reviewers. However, I am still a huge advocate of monographs."

Why?

Han explains further: "I think, especially when you have data of good quality, it can be difficult to fit that into eight to ten thousand words for an article. And sometimes I experience the article-based set-up as boring, because you start every chapter with a repetition of the same theoretical framework. Sometimes I miss an in-depth analysis for which you can create space in a monograph. There are also a few examples where it went very well with articles, which were a few, clearly demarcated pieces of work. But with some, who had the ambition to create a dissertation based on articles, we decided it was better to create a monograph and to see afterwards if they can make articles out of it."

Bettina disagrees: "I see monographs once in a while that can be very boring too because they are less focussed. That is a bigger risk when writing a monograph. You also have boring articles, especially when the theoretical framework stays the same. That does not necessarily need to be the case of course, you can start with a different theoretical framework every time. In the case of articles, you need to be more to the point, more accurate in describing your results, and it becomes a bit more analytical. The monographs I saw lately were very long-winded and descriptive. That is not necessarily always the case. It is also a difference in quality of course. The advantage of articles is that you already publish, which is the smart thing to do when someone aspires to a career in academia. I am almost always a co-author, so I get to publish as well. You are more actively involved when you are a co-author, because you think along in a more active way and guide the research much earlier on, to sharpen it. Otherwise, in case of a monograph, you fulfil more often a corrective role, an editing function, and that is not the idea. I wrote a monograph myself. That was more common back then and I thought it was easier, quicker. Well now I am not so sure of that.. Back then it was quick... quicker than four articles." Bettina laughs.

> *'This is something I keep questioning; how much supervision do I believe is right?' - Han*

Jan Douwe responds: "I think there are two aspects related to this. I have always refused to co-write with doctoral candidates. That goes against my standpoint. I said to them: 'listen, content-wise it's your story, you are responsible, you will express yourself through it. I am here to check whether it is methodologically strong, to see whether it is well defendable, if it fits with the literature, but the twist you give to your story is yours'. Of course, I have helped people with the writing when they had writer's block. That just happens once in a while. That is a sort of technical support. And there is a second aspect about the choice for a monograph or articles, which concerns me. I have the feeling, but I hope that I am wrong and in that case Bettina and Han can correct me here, but I feel like the current procedures reduce the critical potential in the

process of doing doctoral research and writing a dissertation. If you want to pass the long procedures, you must associate a bit with the 'communis opinio,' the prevailing views. Taking a deviating standpoint makes everything more difficult, it takes more time. You have to deliver manageable chunks to argue for a new position and connect it to different fields. That makes it difficult. Moreover, you have to get it published, so you have to adjust it a bit towards what is going to be accepted by a journal, another reason not to be too difficult. Those are all small innocent steps, but together they can have a cumulative effect, like: I cannot put on a bigger pants than the procedure allows me to. That concerns me. Slowly, a sort of conformism emerges. But again, I hope I am wrong. That's something Han and Bettina can say more about."

'It is not about us agreeing or not. The point is to make it convincing. To make it defendable'

Jan Douwe

Bettina opposes this view: "I don't experience it that way. My experience is that it creates focus and saves time later on. For me, a proposal of good quality is very important. I was part of the committee of the research school. So no, I do not think the procedure reduces the quality and I also do not think it becomes less critical. To learn how to publish requires certain training and if you want to stay in academia that's quite handy. But I do not think we see this effect that Jan Douwe describes. That would mean that 80 per cent of our dissertations that pass are not critical and that is definitely not the case in my opinion."
Han agrees with Bettina: "I share that view. I do not think there is a problem with the assessment of the proposals by the graduate schools. But what you see is a change in the funding landscape that is relevant to this point. When I started as a doctoral candidate there were 'assistent in opleiding' functions [read: AIO, trainee research assistant], those were assigned to the chair group. So, we were quite free to choose the subject. Today, we are increasingly dependent on third money flows, and funders often direct what you can and cannot do, although it depends where the money comes from. So, my concern is more on the financing side than on the assessment side of the graduate schools. I am not so much worried about a decreasing critical competency, but I do have my concerns about the dependence of third money flows for research."

Changes over time

Continuing on Han's concerns about money flows, **Bettina** reflects: "Yes, also back then, when we were doctoral candidates, there was a need to find money to support your PhD. It was a bit more common, I think, that new professors got a so-called dowry. But in Groningen I have three PhDs based on a scholarship, that is a way to offer more PhDs. So there are all kinds of PhD positions. I am not sure if the opportunities became less, because in the past it was a lot more common that you first started working at the university and then you did your doctoral research besides your function as a teacher. Then we are talking about the 70s, 80s."

Han further reflects: "Yes, when you look back at the history of RSO, you have a period in the 70s, 80s when several employees got their PhD. And I think the first ten, fifteen, were mainly people working for the government, and as a part of their function people wrote their dissertation. But that has been their only scientific activity as far as I could see in the databases, because their dissertation was the only publication I could find except for a few people. That has changed a lot. In all, to have a career in academia you need to graduate as a PhD, it is not something you can do anymore when you already work for the university for 20 years, because you just cannot enter without a PhD anymore. So, that is a big change."

Jan Douwe continues: "At the same time, you could say that that reflects an impoverishment. Look, the main mindset at this moment is: you study, you graduate, you start a PhD, you write your dissertation, you become a post-doc, and after that you join the subsequent race, which is called tenure track these days, which helps you to rise in the sail of the nations. The inflow of people who first work for many years after their graduation, in the peace corps, in Brussels to shape agrarian policies, who are consultants for a while, who gained enormous experience as a practitioner and wanted to process that and create an in-depth understanding; that inflow almost totally dried out, exceptions excluded. Only when people have enough money themselves, but that is of course rarely the case. People who already work for a long time, have a family, that is not doable. So, doing a doctoral research, if I say it in a bold way, is limited towards those people who actually have minimal practical experience, no societal experience, who have not tried and are not tested in society and its associated debates. That becomes a specific group, filtered, and that is a drop that contributes to a reduction of the critical potential. Simultaneously, we see the general financing issues and other issues Han and Bettina just mentioned. How you should break through this, that is an important question."

Bettina follows: "It has indeed become an important mechanism of entrance, which it wasn't in the past. I would say it isn't the best way for yourself, as well as for science, to do your masters, your PhD, and then become a teacher, while not having the experience of 'playing outside.' I agree that is an impoverishment. Also in scientific sharpness. Of course, those who followed this path can also do a lot besides their job, develop activism without getting paid for it, and of course you can 'play' outside. But it can be difficult to switch from the student mode and think in a different way: this is my topic. It makes it harder to develop a vision of your own apart from your promotor. I think that is not very good for the scientific world."

Creative and independent candidates provide a new perspective

After these shared concerns, the three promotors turn the conversation to a more positive note, and start talking about PhDs who inspired them.
Han starts sharing: "I can share two recent examples; Jan van Loon, someone who was a potato breeder his whole working life and wrote a dissertation about the history of the potato breeding. He is still a hobby breeder, so he spends two days a week on that. If you manage to write a book of 400 pages within four years next to that ..." the way Han says this resounds his respect for this accomplishment. "Every time those chapters came in, I learned a lot about the history of

potato breeding. Also a very pleasant writing style, and we had a nice team of supervisors, with interesting fields of expertise for this case. He took the initiative for meetings, asked questions. One of the other doctoral candidates, Lucie, who started her doctoral research directly after her master's degree in Czech Republic and eventually ended up at RSO and stuck around here. What I liked about her was that she was extremely independent and creative in research methods and extremely good to connect a few theories in such a creative way, which I read about before and even write about but made me think like 'ah, that's also a way to look at this, that is not how I looked at it before'. Empirically you learn from this, but also in a theoretical and methodological way it was very inspiring for me. Very independent, being in charge. Those are the candidates I prefer working with. It is also easier, so maybe it suits my laziness in that way." He laughs.

Bettina tells: "An example which comes up in my head is Petra, although many years ago, who defended in 2008. That was my second candidate. Every time I said to her 'what if we turn it around, put it upside down?' and like that we started thinking from paradoxes, and that worked great." Bettina sounds enthusiastic. "Very independent and a lot of brain power, but it was also clearly brainstorming together until we had new ideas. Another was Birgit, from animal science. I learned a lot from working interdisciplinarily and again. often you think 'they think in a different way' but that difference is not unambiguous. So, what is different and what is your own, is also turning around. Those are two that pop up into my head, but there are more. Often it is about being challenged to think about things in a different way, running into new things and being surprised and less about being a teacher."

'It is this enormous blooming period with all kinds of questions and life events unfolding' – *Bettina*

Jan Douwe follows:
"I don't have much to add. A while ago I realized that the work of my doctoral candidates has produced a whole series of new and refreshing frameworks. Frameworks to view the world in different ways. Doctoral candidates read a lot and often my exploration of the literature was based on what they read, preselected, translated, but also new ways to use the theory. I had an Italian candidate, from who I learned to understand the agrarian economy in a whole different way, to grasp the economy of the farmers' business in a completely different way, so that enriched me enormously. That was also the case with the joint research. We had several programs where teams of five or six candidates worked together, and when we were walking through the field, the unsuspecting remarks with questions, the altercation like 'that isn't the case, 'that is the case', 'how can we find a solution for this', that really is working on science, tinker to develop a new microscope, a better way to look at things, those are fascinating aspects."

Retrospect on when they were doctoral candidates

The conversation ends with a reflection on their own experiences of writing a dissertation as a doctoral candidate, which translates into advice for current PhDs.

Jan Douwe reflects: "I promoted together with someone else through a joint dissertation. We had three promotors, which all strongly shared the mindset: 'you want to tell your story, do that. It is not about us agreeing or not. The point is to make it convincing. To make it defendable. This does not imply if it is true or not, let alone if you as a promotor agree on it or not. The point is: is it defendable?' Well, I learned a lot from that mindset and I tried to continue this mindset in my role as a promotor. I have noticed that this is rare. In commissions, people say 'I don't agree with it'. But that is not the point, that is not the question. The point is: is it defendable? That is what a part of the highly educated community loses sight from."

Han shares: "The only difference with when I was a doctoral candidate is that the whole publication culture wasn't that much developed. I don't think I ever discussed with Jan Douwe 'let's write a dissertation based on articles', that wasn't a thing. At a certain moment I was done, and then I was asked to publish an article or contribute to a book chapter. That is a skill you still have to develop at that point. I see among some PhDs who write their dissertation based on articles, that this is a skill they develop along the way. Furthermore, I learned two things from Jan Douwe. I remember when I started and was focussed on getting results very quickly, I don't know why. Jan Douwe said 'don't forget, doing doctoral research includes a lot of preparation, reading, building a network, thinking about methodology and just a fraction of the whole PhD period is about the data and results'. So that is a lesson I pass on to a lot of the doctoral candidates I supervised. Make sure the foundation is strong. Invest time and energy to lay the foundation and then the results will follow automatically. Also, I think the supervision was mainly needed in the beginning and in the end, thinking about the design, what to do first and then towards the end the writing comes in. When we had a meeting, it always started like: send me the table of contents. That is also one of those things, every time I have a meeting with candidates, especially further in the process, we have conversations about the table of contents and what needs to be written, how does it fit in the bigger story. With several PhDs, a lot of time to supervise is needed, although this is something I keep questioning; how much supervision do I believe is right? When I compare that with when I was a PhD candidate, the time I spent with Jan Douwe for supervision was limited. Maybe I am wrong, but I mean in the sense that Jan Douwe also expected a certain level of independence of us. His mentality was 'If you want this, show me you can do this'. Not as something negative, but that is how I experienced it. You have to show that you can and want to do it. Based on this experience, I keep question myself: how much supervision do I think I should provide? That is something I doubt about, I don't know."

Bettina responds to the latter: "I think that last part is for me also the main difference. Although I was not a PhD candidate, because my course was a combination of various things which I puzzled into my dissertation. Therefore, a direct comparison with the supervision I got and how I supervise now is not possible. But I think I supervise more, provide more structure, with more organization and more planning. While I always say 'it is your story and it is your initiative', I more and more start to plan it. Because the own initiative is fine and that is correct, but for some that is difficult and it takes a long time. So I think I have more conversations and because of that I supervise more along the process. And you do it together with other supervisors, so that is something I experience as pleasant. You can complement and alternate each other."

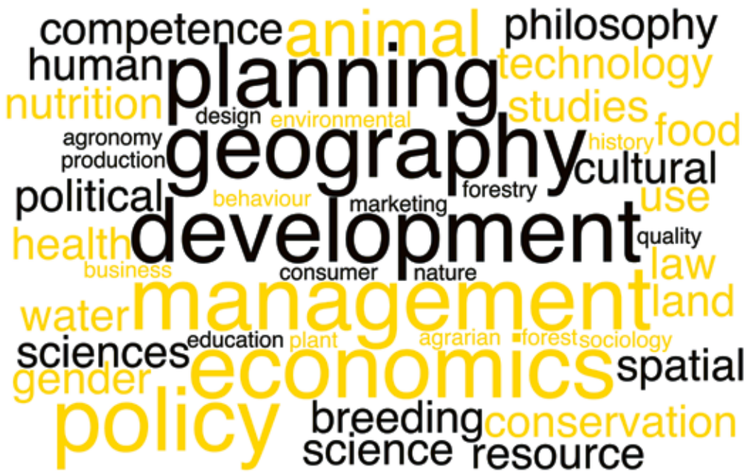
A final note

Jan Douwe emphasizes: "I think that of those 50 PhDs I supervised, 10 or 12 became professors themselves. So, I really like that as a sort of proof of quality. Like, we are approved, we have done well. Two of them are in this conversation of course. This notion delighted me."

Bettina underlines: "It is of course very pleasant to work with people who are super interested and who work with a lot of passion to grasp certain questions. In addition, it is a very engaging period of people's lives, in which a lot changes. It is this enormous blooming period with all kinds of questions and life events unfolding. Maybe that is also because I have supervised a lot of women. Questions come across about children, relationships, and yes that is very nice. So, being a promotor is intellectually very pleasant. Although it is not always a bed of roses, it really is a blooming period. That is beautiful."

Han closes with: "Yes, I complained about several things here, but that doesn't mean I don't enjoy this part of my job. The main issue for me was that at a certain moment the balance was gone between the time I wanted to invest in a PhD candidate as a promotor and the time I had available for everyone because of the number of PhDs I was responsible for. So, I am happy we are now in a situation in which the responsibility can be divided over more people, that is nice. And, in addition to Jan Douwe, it stands out for me that actually all our PhDs find their way. I have also looked at those data, where they ended up or work at this moment, and then you see that around 70 to 80 per cent has worked or works at a research institute or a university, often fulfilling high functions as professor, research leader, team manager or the head of a department. I actually didn't expect it would be that much. We do quite well."

101 dissertations connecting with other disciplines



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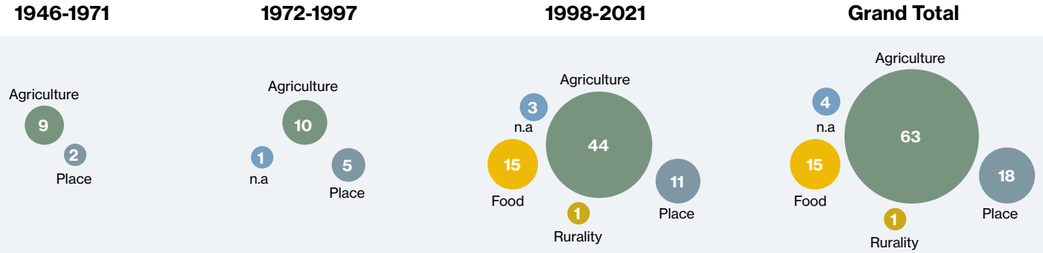

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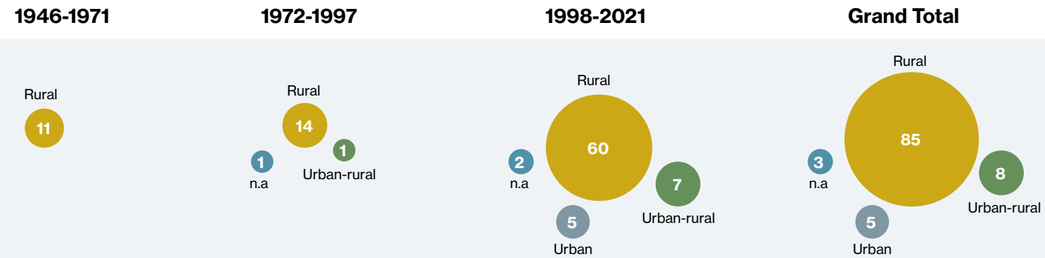

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As the RSO PhD team who initiated this magazine, met monthly for over a year to realize this magazine, thought of forms to represent RSO stories in different, creative ways, communicated with all the persons involved, conducted the interviews with alumni PhDs and our promotors, wrote the alumni stories, the trialogue, our own field story and the introduction, and collected the pictures, we also want to thank each other for the pleasant collaboration and all the time and energy we put into the magazine to celebrate the 75th anniversary of RSO. It made us even more proud of the inspiring, warm chair group RSO is and was over the last 75 years.

Colofon

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