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Interview

Professor Louise Fresco (agricultural scientist and Professor of International Development and Sustainability at the University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands) is a recognized global leader in sustainable agriculture and food security¹⁶.

What first triggered your interest in environmental issues?

My interest has grown gradually over the years, in part fed by important environmental developments. When I started my studies as agricultural scientist in the early seventies, we were trained to think solely in terms of production. In those same years, however, the first UN conference on environment took place and the club of Rome published its report, which triggered me to think more broadly. This broadened scope on how we produce food and at what hidden costs we would now call sustainable production. It has obvious scientific dimensions, but it is also on the agenda of industries, governments and consumers.

What are the key sustainability challenges?

The real challenge is to look at sustainability as an opportunity. Yes, we did make mistakes throughout human history and especially the industrialisation of agriculture created erosion, groundwater depletion, chemical pollution and loss of biodiversity. But in the last decades we have learned clear lessons and are remediating the situation in many aspects. Sustainability presents exciting opportunities. In my view, it is a sum of challenges that constantly change and always requires optimizing on various dimensions. Today's most urgent challenge is to match the growing world population and the economic transition with associated elevated levels of welfare. There is not one answer to this, but many, location-specific answers.

Why is it important to link nutrition to sustainability?

Nutrition is the most intimate way we deal with nature; we are made of what we eat i.e. what nature provides us, and what we eat impacts the environment. This interaction is present at individual level but also decisions at country or policy level will have an impact on sustainability. For example, policies to stimulate intakes of vegetables will impact sustainability because of what is grown, where and how. Consumers show an increased awareness and wish to consume more consciously but do not want to be bothered with the details.

Eating less meat is promoted as a solution; should we all become vegetarians?

There are many reasons why people eat meat and keep eating meat – evolution, religion, taste, traditions and a decrease in meat price – but foremost it is about how much meat we eat and how production takes place. In most areas plant-based protein has lesser environmental impacts than animal-based protein. In any case, in affluent societies a moderation in meat consumption is needed. Forcing people to become a vegetarian however will not work. The concept of flexitarianism - enjoying an occasional vegetarian meal, which also has nutritional benefits in populations who overconsume on animal proteins – is more likely to change consumer behaviour. Another solution is to partially replace animal proteins with plant-based proteins in meat products.

If you look at sustainability as a movement, who should lead?

I see a constructive dialogue evolving between NGOs, politicians, civil society and industry. I am favourably impressed by how business now shows more initiative than many governments. What is required is that we think outside our own sector. Particularly health care professionals need to create a dialogue with others, not about environment per se, but about how health and sustainability can be matched. For example, if they promote more physical exercise, this requires that people can walk or cycle safely in their neighbourhood, at the same time it helps actions to reduce pollution by cars and improves the safety of the area. A joint approach is truly essential.



Prof. Louise Fresco

¹⁶ http://www.louiseofresco.com/HTML/Index_UK.html