



LOUISE FRESCO,¹ DUTCH NATIONAL PLATFORM RIO+20

“REKINDLE THE SPIRIT OF RIO”

“Twenty years ago, expectations were high. We had the Rio Declaration and the Agenda for the 21st Century. Since then that Spirit of Rio has become a small pilot flame, hardly discernible in the international forums”, says Professor Louise Fresco, president of the Dutch National Platform Rio+20. “Now is the time to rekindle that Spirit of Rio to stimulate the bottom up initiatives for a green and inclusive economy.”

What are your expectations for Rio+20?

LOUISE FRESCO - My expectations for Rio+20 are not very high. This has nothing to do with the topic; many companies and organisations are still acknowledging the importance of sustainable development. My pessimism is mainly due to the changing relations in the world. Up and coming industrial nations are fighting for a place and the older generation of industrial nations are finding it difficult to adjust. This leads to a blame game, which has led to the blocking of agreements that were made back in 1992, on topics like climate change and biodiversity.

In 1992, the city of Rio de Janeiro hosted the United Nations Conference on

Environment and Development, which gathered 172 countries.

In your opinion, what has changed since then?

LOUISE FRESCO - Twenty years ago, over a hundred heads of state attended the UN conference and ambitious plans and agreements were drafted like the Rio Declaration and the Agenda for the 21st Century. It is sad that the fire that was ignited back then is hardly more than a pilot flame now in international organisations and forums. At the same time we see that others are reigniting this flame. Charities and organisations have left doomsday prophesying behind them and have started inspirational initiatives to lead to a greener economy and to implicate sustainable development ideas.

In the Netherlands, for ex-

ample, some young people came up with the idea to make soup and jam from fruit and vegetables past their sell by date. Companies are also increasingly aware of sustainable growth. On the one hand they realise that their raw materials will not remain available at low cost forever. This is why they are investing in a sustainable supply chain. On the other hand, they are taking their social responsibility seriously. And it is paying off for them; Dutch multinationals that are highly ranked in the Dow Jones Sustainability index can also be found high up in the Dow Jones index itself.

What can the government do to stimulate and strengthen sustainable development?

LOUISE FRESCO - Sustainable development is not about having growth or no growth. Growth will be here; it is derived from the want of people for a bet-

ter life. Four out of every five people on this planet do not yet have access to the basic living requirements: enough to eat, a roof over their head and access to healthcare. This alone will keep the world economy growing over the next few decades.

Sustainable development is about efficiently organizing our production and consumption; like those youngsters that are finding a new use of food that would have otherwise been discarded. It is also about closing product cycles, allowing us to drastically reduce our use of primary raw materials. It basically means we have to organise our production and consumption processes like an ecosystem, where the waste of one process is used as the raw material for another.

The government has to create the conditions that will allow these ecosystems to develop. For example, making ▶

1. “THIS INTERVIEW WAS GIVEN IN HER CAPACITY AS CHAIR OF THE NATIONAL PLATFORM RIO+20, A CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM ESTABLISHED IN 2011 TO ORGANISE STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATIONS IN THE NETHERLANDS PRIOR TO RIO+20.” VIEWS EXPRESSED DO NOT NECESSARILY REFLECT THE VIEWS OF THE NETHERLANDS’ GOVERNMENT.

landfill and incineration of waste more expensive, would provide incentive for companies to (let others) reuse their waste streams. Dumping waste into the atmosphere or into the water should be heavily taxed. Not just to stimulate reuse, but also to clean up the environment.

Eventually this should lead to us paying the 'true price' for products and services, which includes the cost to society of a certain product. This does not just mean pollution, but also exhaustion of natural resources, and underpayment and exploitation of workforces. By simultaneously lowering taxes on labour, many 'green' jobs can be created in the areas of recycling and repair.

How does the Dutch government interact with the Dutch companies in order to deal with environmental issues?

LOUISE FRESCO - Twenty years ago, it was mainly a command and control approach: there were legal limits to emissions that were translated into permits and the government checked whether the permits were complied with. At least in theory. In practise it did not work so well, which from time to time allowed companies to ignore the emission limits for years. This all changed after the first Rio-conference. Instead of strict regulations, agreements were made between the government and companies to, for example, reduce the emission of nitrogen oxides by 80 per cent over the next ten years. Companies were left free to work out the methodology to achieve this,

as long as the targets were met. This allowed them to be more flexible in their operations.

Companies now realise that they form part of a chain that starts with the supplier of the raw materials and ends at the end-user of the product – or even further – at the waste processing facility. If you want to have an impact on the environment, you should not look at each link in this chain individually, but look at the chain as a whole. The government in the Netherlands plays a role in this by brokering 'green deals', where the individual members in a chain agree to reduce the environmental impact of the whole chain and save on raw materials.

One example is the Green Deal that was made last year to close the phosphate cycle. More than twenty parties – from producers of chemical fertilisers to the wastewater cleaners' branch organisation – have agreed to the obligation to keep as much secondary phosphate in the cycle.

In your opinion, should developed countries work together with emerging countries to elaborate more integrated projects related to environmental as well as developmental and sustainability issues?

LOUISE FRESCO - The key to sustainable development, in both developed and developing countries, is education and research. Developing talent and technological and social innovations – combined with good governance – are the key conditions for sustainable economic growth.

If I had the choice, I would give talented people from developing countries a fellowship to study in the Netherlands with the obligation to stay here or in their homeland and work their chosen trade for a number of years, for example in health care or agricultural research.

I would also invest heavily in scientific research, both in the Netherlands as well as in emerging countries in all areas relevant to sustainable development: human and animal health, energy, transport, nutrition, material science. This would kill two birds with one stone: The resulting innovations would provide answers to the grand challenges we are facing now, whilst at the same time they would lead to growth and creating jobs.

Do you think that an advance of the sustainability debate will affect international trade?

LOUISE FRESCO - Free trade was and is an important driver of progress and therefore of sustainable development. So no, I think that the steps we are taking towards a green economy will not impair the free exchange of goods, services and information. There are, however, a few matters that will need some attention.

For starters, free trade can be an impediment for countries to develop their own industrial capacity, resulting in an unnecessarily long delay in the development from a traditional agricultural economy to a modern economy based on industry and services. Protectionism can be a factor here and agreements would have to be made.

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The second issue involves the volatility of capital. With the speed of light money crosses the globe looking for that quarter percentile profit. Investors do not tend to look beyond the horizon of next quarter's profits. Companies that are investing in sustainable development need continuity, also from investors and shareholders, to realise their long-term vision. I do not know whether a tax on flash capital would be the best solution, but it is a problem that warrants consideration.

The third problem involves the creation of a level playing field. Companies that do not just look at profit, but also take the planet and its inhabitants into account sometimes incur more costs than those that do not. It would be good if the international trade systems would ▶

introduce measures that would prevent the distance between the frontrunners and the laggards from growing too large.

How do you see Brazil in this process?

LOUISE FRESCO - I think the Brazilian model offers perspectives for sustainable progress in combination with democracy and justice. Over the last twenty years this country of 200 million inhabitants, has developed into a world player. In parallel with this progress for large parts of the population, Brazil is attempting to manage its natural resources as efficiently as possible. Of course there is criticism of the management of the Amazon area, but Brazil has developed a very advanced method for the real time monitoring of changes in rainforest vegetation. New

laws are ensuring that large parts of the rain forest are being protected.

The Brazilian model could be an example to other countries. It is based on a successful marriage between progress, democracy and social justice. This has led to the emergence of a self-aware middle class. In my opinion this offers a better perspective on sustainable development than the state-led market paradigm of China, or the bureaucratic capitalism practised of India.

Is there any partnership between Brazil and The Netherlands in the area of sustainability?

LOUISE FRESCO - Brazil and the Netherlands have a common interest in sustainable development. It has brought us

together for instance on the issue of bio-energy. Both governments are committed to develop clean and affordable sources of renewable energy. The cooperation covers the whole value chain: from production of energy to logistics and transport. As the main access to Europe, the Port of Rotterdam plays of course an important role in export of Brazilian bio-fuel. The agreement between our countries on bio-energy also includes the transfer knowledge of renewable energy production to developing countries and helping them in setting up their own projects. Another example is the Round Table on Responsible Soy (RTRS). The Netherlands is the second largest export destination of Brazilian soy after China. RTRS and its certification system guarantee sustainability throughout the supply chain, from the production in South-America to the Western-European end-user.

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The Netherlands data

CAPITAL AND LARGEST CITY	Amsterdam
OFFICIAL LANGUAGE	Dutch
GOVERNMENT	Constitutional monarchy / Monarch: Beatrix der Nederlanden / Prime Minister: Mark Rutte
Independence Recognized	January 30, 1648
AREA	- Total: 41,848 km ² - Water: 18.41 %
POPULATION	Estimate (2011): 16,654,200 inh / Census (2001): 16,105,285 inh / Density: 404/km ²
GDP (PPP) / ESTIMATE 2011 (USD)	Total: \$704.034 billion / Per capita: \$42,183
SOCIAL INDICATORS	Gini (2006): 30.9medium / HDI (2011) 0.910 very high / Life expectancy: 79.8 years Infant Mortality: 4.59/1000 birth / Literacy: 99.0 %
CURRENCY	EURO (EUR)
ISO CODE	NL
INTERNET CODE	.nl
PHONE CODE	+31
WEBSITE	www.regering.nl

Do you believe that the current international financial crisis can divert the debate to environmental and sustainability issues?

LOUISE FRESCO - The international financial crisis is stimulus to adjust our economic system so that seven (and soon nine) billion people can live a good life within the limits of the planet's resources. What those limits are, we do not yet know. What is important is that we minimise the negative effect of our production and consumption.

We should not live with the illusion that we can design and build a new economic system. The current economic system

was not designed either, but emerged accidentally, with its ups and downs along the way. What we can do is to try and develop tools to minimise the negative effects of our production and consumption. I mentioned green taxation earlier, which would include the costs to society into the price of a product. Another possibility is the public ownership of our public goods, such as oceans, the atmosphere, but also biodiversity. I will be a very happy person if we can rekindle the Spirit of Rio from twenty years ago, and make some real progress towards a more sustainable development. ■