

UP bestowed honorary doctorate for global food systems expert to Prof Louise O. Fresco

The University of Pretoria (UP) bestowed Professor Louise O. Fresco with an honorary doctorate (honoris causa) in recognition of her outstanding intellectual and public contribution to the sphere of African and global food systems and equitable sustainable development, with an emphasis on Africa.

"For us, a borderless knowledge, opportunity and trade environment is a calling because the prosperity of one is the health and prosperity of all, as expressed through the philosophy of Ubuntu, a philosophy which is part of our UP DNA. It includes excellence, perseverance, respect, creativity, innovation, diversity, growth, kindness, making a difference and making everyday matters. Exemplifying this ethos is Prof Fresco," UP Vice-Chancellor and Principal Prof Tawana Kupe said.

Until 1 July 2022, Prof Fresco was the President of the Executive Board of Wageningen University & Research (WUR) in the Netherlands and professor at the same institution where she obtained her BSc and MSc in 1974 and 1976, respectively. She is also a columnist, writer and public speaker.

UP has had the good fortune of hosting her as a visiting professor, along with Stanford University's Institute of Earth Sciences in the US, Leiden University in the Netherlands, Uppsala in Sweden and Leuven in Belgium.

WUR is the leading university in agriculture globally. Prof Fresco has pioneered many innovations in areas such as protein transition, food chains, and gene editing, with a strong emphasis on these benefits for countries in the Global South. And during her tenure as its President, WUR has significantly strengthened its position and collaboration with universities on the African continent.

In 2014 Prof Fresco was recognised in South Africa by ASSAf – the Academy of Science of South Africa – when she was appointed honorary fellow. Four years later, in 2018, WUR and UP signed an institutional agreement for long-term,

institution-wide collaboration – including research, postgraduate education, and staff and student exchange.

Following her Master's, Prof Fresco started working for the United Nations in the late 1970s – first in Papua New Guinea, then in Central Africa, where she spent many years in remote areas doing fieldwork. Based on her research on cassava farming systems in Africa, she obtained her doctorate in Tropical Plant Breeding and Production Systems summa cum laude from WUR in 1986. After that, she expanded her work for the UN to various parts of Africa, Asia, Central America, and Southern Europe, taking an inter- and transdisciplinary approach encompassing fields ranging from soil and plant science to hydrology and agricultural economics.

In 1989, she was appointed as Professorial Chair of the Agronomy Department at WUR – the second woman professor ever at the university. She made significant contributions to the advancement of the field of farming systems research and has worked with colleagues around the world in over 90 countries in a professional capacity.

In 1996, she was appointed Director of Research at the UN's Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) in Rome, followed one year later by her promotion to Assistant Director General of the FAO. She was one of the founding members of the Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa (FARA).

Another of her appointments was at the University of Amsterdam (UvA) as a distinguished professor in 2006 in a specially created research chair, focusing on the foundations of sustainable development. During her time at UvA, from 2006 to 2014, she served on the Socio-Economic Council of the Netherlands – the official government advisory body on science and innovation.

Her leadership role at the highest level of numerous organisations and task forces are many. She chaired the review of the 7th European Union Framework Programme on Research and Innovation. She was Vice-Chair of the Scientific group of the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit, where she has made academic and significant policy contributions reflecting her dedication to promoting food security as a global public good.

"She works in a wide range of disciplines, and I respectfully call her a 21st-century Renaissance superwoman, as she is also known for her artistic and literary achievements, which are deeply rooted



Prof Louise O. Fresco

in her scientific expertise, and desire for societal sustainability transition. She uses several media, including newspaper columns, children's books and novels, to support her sustainability message and promote engagement and collaboration between the public and private sectors, which she regards as being of utmost importance for the future of food and agriculture. UP pursues the same as one of our cornerstones," Prof Kupe emphasised.

In the Netherlands, she received the Groeneveld Award for rural development, while in Italy, she was rewarded with the Giuseppe Acerbi Prize for literature and culture.

Prof Fresco's playful side is revealed in her creative interaction between art, design, and science in projects such as the design of a fully sustainable outfit – utilising materials such as residual ink, bacterial dye, pineapple leather, and mushroom mycelium – which she wore for the WUR's centennial celebrations in 2018.

She has over 240 publications to her name, a television documentary on food, TED talks and numerous scientific and non-scientific books. Her best-known non-scientific book is titled '*Hamburgers in Paradise*'; it's about the food we eat and has been translated into several languages.

The latest scientific book she co-edited and published by Springer in January this year is titled: '*Science and innovations for food systems transformation and summit actions*'. It's open access and compiles the Scientific Group of the United Nations Food Systems Summit 2021 findings and its research partners, including 28 food systems scientists worldwide.