

# 'We used to talk about it, now we do it'

How food is produced, processed and eaten, and who profits from this, must change on a global scale, say Hedwig Bruggeman and Bart de Steenhuijsen Piters. In this, they see a task for Wageningen research institutes and their southern partners, who must take the lead more than before. A conversation on campus.

Text: Joris Tielens



Hedwig Bruggeman and Bart de Steenhuijsen Piters

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'We need international cooperation now more than ever. The climate and Covid crises show that we are all connected globally and that combating poverty and inequality is crucial,' says Hedwig Bruggeman, business unit manager of the Wageningen Centre for Development Innovation.

Wageningen University & Research (WUR)—with over six thousand employees—conducts education and research worldwide, and the WCDI is one component of this. It works with partners in the South on practical change in food systems and transformation of agricultural sectors, to provide farmers with better seeds or to professionalise horticulture. It also works on developing the expertise of professionals, with courses in Wageningen or on site in African or Asian countries.

Investing in international relations, adds Bart de Steenhuijsen Piters, makes us more resilient in the future: 'For a small trading country, that is important.' He is a researcher at Wageningen Economic Research, the WUR institute that conducts social and economic research in agriculture and food systems, in the Netherlands, Europe and beyond.

Problems such as climate change, malnutrition, inequality and low incomes of farmers are becoming more acute, says De Steenhuijsen Piters. 'People in Africa are becoming much more active. When I am in Benin, people ask me why we do so little to combat climate change.

'They wonder why their interests are not taken into account. There is a new generation of highly educated people in their twenties and thirties. They no longer accept the old authority. The patriarchs who were always in the right are also falling from their pedestals in Africa.'

Much has changed in Wageningen, too, he continues. 'The con-

viction that food systems must change has become paramount—this was not the case ten years ago. At that time, the convention among WUR researchers was still strong that the Netherlands is doing well as the world's second largest agricultural exporter and that it should stay that way.

'Today, this attitude is diminishing, and the message is spreading that together—including with partners in the South—we need to understand and tackle the major problems in our food systems.'

Unlike in the past, interdisciplinary work has also become established in Wageningen, he says. 'We used to talk about it, now we do it, because a new generation of Wageningers has been trained in this field.'

Interdisciplinary research means that scientists with different backgrounds—economists, botanists, sociologists and animal scientists—jointly examine a problem from different angles. 'And that is necessary, because otherwise we will not be able to solve the complex problems of today.'

The focal point in Wageningen is no longer the scientific background, but the social problem. There are networks of researchers from all corners of the organisation who work together on various countries or research themes.

'We are involved in systemic change and see the links in food systems; that is what makes us innovative,' says Bruggeman. 'It is also about connecting fundamental research and practice, together with people in the South, local partners and development organisations such as SNV.'

WUR works on this in multi-year programmes and links it to capacity building through courses or training. 'Education is very important, not only for students, but also for professionals. Because

## Nutritious vegetables

Millions of people in Africa and Asia have a poor diet. They do not lack calories, but they do lack vitamins and minerals. A large WUR study showed that the consumption of fruit and vegetables in countries such as Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Nepal, Nigeria, Tanzania, India and Burkina Faso is too low to prevent the risk of malnutrition.

'Eating more fruit and vegetables is the easiest way to boost people's health,' says Bart de Steenhuijsen Piters, who led the study. The research shows that fruit and vegetables are too expensive or unavailable, so people are unable to buy them.

Existing investments and projects appear to be doing the wrong things: they are aimed at cultivating grains or tomatoes and onions, which do not contain many vita-

mins. These products are traded over long distances by cars and trucks, which usually makes it a business for men.

Healthy leafy vegetables—such as spinach or sukuma wiki in East Africa—are less storable and are grown locally and traded by women in the informal economy. This contributes to healthy nutrition in the cities and to incomes for women, but investments and projects are usually not geared towards it.

'Research such as this can knock over old vestiges and redirect large investments in the right direction,' says De Steenhuijsen Piters. It was commissioned by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. 'It is a break in the trend for this major investor to focus on healthy nutrition,' he says.

The study looked at the question—how much fruit and vegetables are eaten and how can this be improved?—from all angles. 'This concerns the entire food system,' he says, 'and you can only approach that in an interdisciplinary manner.'

Wageningen nutritionists investigated which vegetables have the most nutritional value. Gender experts looked at the role of women in cultivation and trade. Botanists looked at the challenges in production.

'We need smart ideas to stimulate the production and trade of healthy food in the informal economy, rather than misdirected interventions in the formal economy. This is not easy, but it is necessary to prevent malnutrition of millions of people.'



we link it to practical work, the capacity building we offer is continuously renewed.'

The Covid crisis has exacerbated the differences in poverty, Bruggeman says, making international cooperation more urgent. Covid has also done something else, she says: it has shaken up the relationship between Dutch researchers and southern partners. 'The word "decolonisation" is being used more and more often, and people are reflecting upon their role.'

The relations have always been equal, Bruggeman emphasises. 'And we have been working for a long time towards a different division of responsibilities, with the southern partner taking more of a lead. We are becoming less of an implementation partner and more of a knowledge partner.'

However, between dream and action there are often practical objections. 'We are talking about programmes of five or ten million euros a year that have to be managed and accounted for.'

Covid has helped, Bruggeman says. 'We could no longer visit the partners, and then you see that many projects continue to run well and that leadership is taken up by our partners. We already thought so and wanted to implement this, but perhaps we didn't dare yet. And our donors in particular did not yet have the nerve to do this.'

## 'The word "decolonisation" is used more and more often, and people are reflecting upon their role'

De Steenhuijsen Piters also sees a role for Wageningen Economic Research in the future, mainly in the back seat, internationally speaking, while research networks in Africa and Asia take the wheel.

'They pose the question and are the first performers of the research,' he says, 'but can fall back on the knowledge and capacity of WUR if necessary. This partly concerns specialist knowledge, but also process supervision and bringing parties together. We want impact, and that is achieved by empowering local research institutes.'

Bruggeman nuances that we are not there yet. 'At this moment, we do not yet have any major programmes in which a local party is really leading.' However, a local organisation has been established in Uganda. After eight years of working on improvements in the seed sector, it continues to exist as an independent NGO.

A different division of roles between partners from North and South also demands something from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the largest donor of much of WUR's international work.

'Knowledge,' says Bruggeman, 'is an important export product for the Netherlands and WUR is among the world's best, but it is not the case that our partners in the South can simply hire in that knowledge.' The Ministry and other donors must be prepared to finance sustainable partnerships and to trust that these partnerships will

lead to knowledge questions being posed to Wageningen, she says.

Donors should also have the courage to finance southern organisations and knowledge institutions directly, says De Steenhuijsen Piters. 'We should at least work towards this. It will not happen all at once, because running a programme requires a lot of bureaucracy. But the capacity to carry it out in terms of content is ever-increasing.'

As a follow-up to the UN summit on food systems (the UNFSS) in September, more than a hundred countries are engaged in a dialogue on healthy nutrition, what food people want to eat and how it should be produced.

De Steenhuijsen Piters: 'That is truly an opportunity to set the agenda locally as well.'

'And then you also have to accept that it will not always be our agenda,' adds Bruggeman.

'Certainly, if we impose our standards, little will happen.'

It may lead to other choices than those in vogue in Europe. From Africa, for example, comes the theme of food sovereignty, the right of people to decide for themselves what they eat. But also the choice to eat meat.

'We think that we should eat less meat,' says De Steenhuijsen Piters, 'because the production of meat emits a great deal of CO<sub>2</sub>, but in many diets in low-income countries, meat is a welcome addition in terms of nutritional value.'

Bruggeman agrees: 'In Kenya, you can't invite guests and *not* serve meat. Then they haven't eaten.'

The UN Food Systems Summit also led to self-reflection among the two Wageningen parties. In the run-up to the summit, civil society organisations criticised the summit for being overly dominated by multinationals and science, while civil society organisations, citizens' movements and farmers' organisations were given too little voice.

Another question was whether food systems can be changed without calling into question our current liberal and capitalist growth economy. Together with the World Economic Forum, WUR organised an event beforehand and therefore seemed to be siding with multinationals.

'Moving businesses to adopt more sustainable behaviour is one way to make food systems more sustainable,' says De Steenhuijsen Piters. 'But there are also other ways of influencing food systems, via social movements, and contact with these has declined in recent years.'

Bruggeman: 'A divide has emerged between the knowledge institutions and NGOs. Until a few years ago, we regularly carried out large projects together. We want to seek out that cooperation again, so that we can continue to talk to each other about global issues.'

In the past, NGOs such as Oxfam Novib, Cordaid or ICCO received substantial co-financing from the government, which enabled them to hire researchers from Wageningen. This funding stream has been cut back, which means that the link between WUR and NGOs has also largely disappeared.

'Nevertheless,' says De Steenhuijsen Piters, 'I think that we have to serve all the major *stakeholders* in the field and the impression may have been created, certainly around the UN summit, that we cared too little about what the civil society thought. And we need to address that.'

Within WUR, there are different views on this and there is also

## Inspiring future leaders

Thirty future leaders in agribusiness received a four-month leadership training last summer, which was followed by six months of coaching. They participated in the African Food Fellowship, which has the ambition to form a continent-wide network of food system leaders.

'In fifty years' time, Africa will feed the world,' says Janet Ngombalu, one of the participants. 'We are the continent with the

largest area of fertile land. We just need to get our systems in order.' She is an expert in agro-finance, with fifteen years of experience, working in ten East African countries.

It is people like her who the programme is targeting, says Joost Guijt, the director of the new Fellowship. They are emerging leaders in business, government or NGOs, and it strives for African ownership and leadership.

'It will deeply hone the skills and insights of these emerging food systems leaders,' says Guijt, 'and lead them to where change is needed and possible.'

The first thirty participants will work in the fields of fish farming, horticulture and agro-finance in Kenya, forming the first cohort of the training. Later, similar training will follow in Rwanda and other countries.







## The formation of a local NGO

The *Integrated Seed Sector Development* project in Uganda brought lasting change to the country's seed sector. With support from WUR, the local team developed into a Ugandan NGO, which has been operating independently since the summer. The next step is direct donor funding, says Patrick Oyee, the former project manager.

The Dutch Embassy's funding of the ISSD projects ended last summer after eight years, says Oyee. In that time, the project has tackled one of the fundamental problems in Ugandan agriculture, he explains.

'Ten years ago, only fifteen percent of farmers in Uganda used good quality seeds to sow their fields. Good seeds for crops like beans, tubers, roots and oil crops were especially hard to find.'

The project has helped farmers to produce their own quality seeds in three-hundred established, farmer-managed local seed companies across the country.

Government policies have been influenced, so that the Seed Act now recognises a new quality mark called Quality Declared Seed. This label is specific to seeds produced by local farmer-led seed companies. 'This was a breakthrough for

the sector, because it guarantees the quality of these seeds.'

ISSD Uganda also worked with the government and Ugandan research institutes on the implementation of the new policy. In addition, education was provided on the importance of quality seeds so that the demand for them will increase in the future.

**Oyee believes that lasting change** has been brought about in the sector, because the conditions for a stronger sector have improved. 'There is more awareness among farmers, but even policies have improved. The sector is more united and there is better cooperation. At the decentralised level, there are now quality controls.

'And those changes—chiefly the farmer-led seed companies—are lasting, because it is based on *business*. We have never given things away for nothing. We don't give fish as a gift, we teach people how to fish.'

Nevertheless, he says, it is a pity that the project has now ended, because there is still much to do. 'We have determined that in the areas where the label has been introduced, 35 percent of the farmers are using that seed. That is a significant improvement.

But I estimate that overall at least half of the Ugandan farmers do not have access to good seeds.'

To implement the project, a local implementing organisation was established at the outset. It is now continuing as a Ugandan NGO, independent of WUR. 'We were still part of WUR, as the implementing party,' says Oyee.

He hopes to find new donors, however, this has not yet been successful. 'The Dutch Embassy is now focusing on other matters, but is positive about our independent organisation and encourages cooperation between us and other potential donors.' The Embassy is currently supporting a horticulture programme.

Oyee says it would be a good idea in the long run if donors would partly fund Ugandan NGOs directly, rather than through an international partner. 'The capacity to carry out such programmes is available, and if necessary, specialised knowledge can be hired in from elsewhere.'

Since Ugandan consultants' fees are lower than those of their international counterparts, more can be achieved with the same money, he says, if more use is made of local capacity.



## Providing trust and opportunity

**Sheila Assibey-Yeboah likes** a professional approach to her work in horticulture. 'It not only leads to improved performance in the sector, but also gives local businesses a sense of dignity and pride,' she says. Assibey-Yeboah is programme manager of *HortiFresh*, which strengthens horticulture in Ghana and Ivory Coast.

Fruits and vegetables are becoming increasingly popular in those countries. Due to economic growth, people have more to spend and the awareness of their health benefits is growing.

But the horticultural sector is struggling to meet demand, both for the domestic market and for export. A more competitive and innovative sector would provide opportunities for many farmers and companies working in the sector.

Since 2014, the Wageningen Centre for Development Innovation has been supporting programmes in West Africa to strengthen horticulture. Until 2017, the programme *GhanaVeg* was running, and from 2018 until the summer of 2022, *HortiFresh* will run, working not only in Ghana but also in Ivory Coast.

A business platform has been set up where companies can meet regularly and

work together on investments that benefit each of them.

The programme focuses on both the local market and exports. Before 2015, Ghana was exporting about five million dollars worth of fruit and vegetables to Europe every year.

**That trade came to a sudden halt** when the EU closed its borders to fruits and vegetables from Ghana in 2015. According to EU standards, they were too often contaminated with harmful organisms. For Sheila Assibey-Yeboah, it was the beginning of a major transformation in the sector.

'There had been a lot of consultation,' she says, 'but that had not led to sufficient improvement in 2016, when an inspection by the EU again led to a rejection. Then, with the new Vegetable Export Taskforce, on behalf of all horticultural companies, we took control.

'We ensured that horticulturalists received training in more sustainable and cleaner working methods and we organised our own inspections to check whether things were going well. Experts from Grenada and Uganda came to help us.'

It led to great improvement. In 2017, the EU import ban was lifted. 'That brought about a lasting change in the sector. The quality

of products for the local market has also improved.'

She has years of work experience in improving supply chains in Ghana and saw many projects come and go. 'Compared to other projects, we have a very professional approach,' she says.

Companies and farmers were often used to getting things for free from development projects, such as fertiliser, seeds or subsidies. 'We finance investments, but on a 50/50 basis. Companies must contribute half themselves.'

Initially, this was difficult and companies were reluctant. 'But along the way they have learned to invest. It gives them a sense of pride not to be dependent on a donor, but to own their own investment. Companies now have a better position in the dialogue about the investments they need. Donors no longer decide independently.'

She herself finds the cooperation with the Wageningen Centre for Development Innovation very positive. 'It supports my growth as a professional, I have followed various training programmes and I am not told what to do, but I have a voice and am given opportunities. I want to transfer that kind of confidence to the companies I work with.'

discussion within the organisation, he emphasises. 'It's best to conduct it more openly. We don't have to speak with a single voice. The value of a knowledge institute like WUR is precisely to respect this pluriformity and to provide space for it. We don't do that enough and not enough in public.'

**How food is produced, processed and eaten**, and who profits from all this, is a social discussion. How this is all managed can vary greatly from country to country, says De Steenhuijsen Pijters. In the Dutch policy in the field of Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, the so-called 'Dutch Diamond' is the holy grail, he says.

This is the idea that companies, government, knowledge institutions and civil society organisations work together in good consultation to find solutions. 'In many other countries it does not work like that at all,' he says, 'because there the different parties do not have an equal and healthy relationship with one another.'

As far as he is concerned, the emphasis on aid and trade in the policy paper of a new Minister should be replaced by dialogue.

'How you manage a food system will differ from country to country. A suitable form must be sought through dialogue, where it is beneficial to identify the positive forces and how you can contribute to them.

'Proper education is crucial. I think that what we are now seeing in Africa, the increased empowerment and self-confidence of young people, can be traced back to a generation that had better access to education.'

Bruggeman would also like to see this emphasis on education reflected in new policies, but she does see added value in combining aid and trade. 'There are good examples where development cooperation and the efforts of companies go hand in hand, but then companies have to take responsibility for the chain.'

She believes that the end of voluntary covenants—in which companies strive for sustainability, but the government does not impose any rules—is nigh: 'Government policy on corporate social responsibility should be more stringent. Then the Netherlands and its business community can lead the way in sustainable chains.' ●