

Published in NRC Handelsblad International  
Friday 26 September 2008 by Louise O. Fresco

## **Reforming agriculture - urgently**

It is a sad thing that now that the issue of food has finally returned on the agenda, governments are collectively incapable to think beyond their common divisions and short term interests. The fiasco of the Doha Round of global trade liberalisation talks last July shows that they lack a visionary framework to agree on reforms, in particular in agriculture. Yet it is not too difficult to imagine new ways to restructure farming.

This has to start with the recognition that agriculture serves many purposes in society, from producing food, feed and fibres to maintaining biodiversity, preserving landscapes and water storage - green and blue services respectively. Not all farmers should be obliged to provide all these services. A logical distinction has to be made between farmers who work in favourable areas in terms of natural resources and infrastructure, and those who do not. In such areas, farmers should be able to compete on the international market and - perhaps after a transition period - should not receive income or production support. These farmers must comply with agreed standards of emissions to the environment. Only if these farmers are required to make additional efforts to provide green and blue services, they need to be compensated.

In less favourable areas, governments may want to continue farming for social or environmental reasons such as maintaining valuable cultural landscapes or sustaining remote areas which would become unlivable without agriculture. Here some type of support is in order as long as it does not affect world market prices. For example, farmers could be paid, on a contract basis, to manage floristically diverse meadows through low grazing densities (simply put: more flowers, fewer cows).

The bottom line of agricultural reform, whether in North America, the EU or anywhere has to be: no intervention where the market can function properly, and contractual payments for specific social, environmental and ecosystems services in other cases. In poor, developing countries, a transition period with some degree of protection of the domestic sector ought to be negotiable. In the long term the only justifiable support to farming everywhere would be for the development of innovations for enhanced sustainability. Such innovations are urgent, not just to increase efficiencies of land and resource use, but also to meet new consumer demands to reduce ecological footprints, health and animal welfare. This approach would greatly enhance public appreciation of agriculture and hence the willingness of consumers to pay for what is, after all, a most essential ingredient of life: our daily food.

More on Dutch and EU agriculture policy can be found here:

[http://www.ser.nl/en/Publications/Publications/2008/2008\\_05.aspx](http://www.ser.nl/en/Publications/Publications/2008/2008_05.aspx)

—

*Louise O. Fresco (1952) is a cross-disciplinary professor, focussed on international sustainable development, at the University of Amsterdam. Before moving back to Amsterdam in 2006 she was the Assistant Director-General in the Agriculture Department of FAO, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, in Rome. She is Visiting Professor at Stanford University's Institute of Earth Sciences and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation in Palo Alto, United States, and Distinguished Professor aan de Wageningen University, where she received her PhD in 1986. Fresco is a columnist for NRC Handelsblad (in Dutch) and has established herself as a novelist.*