

The AgVocate
The Evergrowing Awareness of Louise Fresco
S01E04 Transcript

{The AgVocate theme starts}

Voice Over: Welcome to The AgVocate. The podcast that advocates for agriculture. I'm your host Simon Pampera.

With this series of podcasts we'll be telling stories from the people of this ever-growing community, be it industry leaders or those just starting out, because each and every one of them shares a passion for Ag and are doing their part in feeding a hungry planet.

{The AgVocate theme ends}

Voice Over: Louise Fresco is someone you should know about. Starting off as an undergraduate student at Wageningen University and Research, she is now the President of its Executive Board, in charge of one of the world's best agricultural universities.

Louise Fresco: Yeah yeah yeah but hang on, hang on, hang on, there were many steps in between... *{laughter}*

Voice Over: In a career spanning more than four decades Louise has accumulated a long list of achievements. But if ambition for prestige or money was the goal, Louise would have fulfilled this need a long time ago. Instead, what drives this trailblazer, is something beyond career achievements. It is a desire to understand the hardships of people around the world, the reasons why they suffer, and the ways in which that suffering can be stopped.

In her words, it is a lifelong search for awareness.

{music starts}

Louise Fresco: I grew up not in the Netherlands but mainly in Brussels in quite easy circumstances but I was always aware that I was very lucky to be alive and to be in quite comfortable conditions... especially because of the Second World War which was then still quite recent in people's memories.

Voice Over: Comfortable conditions were something denied Louise's parents.

Louise Fresco: My mother was born in Indonesia and my father was Jewish and he was born in Berlin and of course they couldn't stay there and so on... they luckily both survived the war but in quite difficult conditions obviously... and although that was that not something at the time you spoke about very much it was somewhere always in the background.

Voice Over: As a child, Louise suffered many bouts of ill-health. Yet the circumstances that her family had endured gave her a lot reasons to be grateful, despite her own hardships. Her periods of illnesses presented an opportunity, time to read and think.

It was in her teens that her awareness of the world began to extend beyond her native Europe. Biafra, a territory of Nigeria in West Africa, had declared independence. That triggered a civil war, the consequences of which had a profound impact on Louise's life.

Louise Fresco: In '68 there was the Biafra famine and for the first time we saw pictures in Europe of really emaciated children... and I realised also that the famine was actually of human making, it was not just food shortages but it was also politics. So it made me aware of the fact that it was so terribly a coincidence that people were born somewhere and not elsewhere... and that's really that's no merit of yours that you're born in comfortable Netherlands or in the outskirts of Calcutta or somewhere in the bush in Africa. You enter life with an advantage or a disadvantage and I felt I was very privileged for many reasons.

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{music ends}

Voice Over: Once Louise had this realisation, there was no going back.

Louise Fresco: It really made me think 'okay I want to do something' because I have been lucky to have been born in a situation where I will never lack food... but here are people who haven't got the same start at all in life and I said to myself 'I have to do something useful'. I can't just sit there comfortably and be a pampered young girl and lady... I want to do something.

Voice Over: But that something was yet to be defined.

{music starts}

Louise had the desire to help those less fortunate, but she needed to focus that desire... so she got to work on understanding herself. She started keeping a diary.

Louise Fresco: I've really always felt - and I say this very often to my students - keeping a diary however simplistic it is at that time and of course it was very simplistic you know, I was 15 or even younger you know, what do you know about yourself in the world? Very little. But still, by writing it down it makes you more self-aware.

So I started to think I have to go to Africa and I have to become a medical doctor. But actually at that time I already realised that doctors have their limitations because, put very simply, you can easily give people medicine but if they have nothing to eat, what happens? So I have to start earlier I have to start doing something about food and agriculture.

Voice Over: To Louise, after all her reading and research, the career path she was embarking on made complete sense, but to her parents it made no sense at all.

Louise Fresco: I'm not at all a girl from a farm. In fact my father was a university professor in philosophy, classical philosophy on top of it. So I grew up with all kinds of philosophers, Albert Schweitzer and people like that, but not at all with farms or things. So here it was and I said to my parents [that] I want to go to an agricultural school... and they thought I was absolutely mad. I mean they wanted me to do something decent like history of art or languages but not something practical like that and not at all an agricultural thing. So I said 'I want to be an engineer and I want to do agriculture and food'.

So I got into quite a battle with my parents because the last thing they wanted for me was to go to an agricultural school... but in the end I just sort of - by myself - decided that the best agricultural school in Europe was Wageningen and so I went to study at Wageningen. Which was quite difficult for me in the beginning because nearly everybody there was from a farm... and here I was sitting at the back of the tractor with my French accent and my little chain of pearls and my nice little twin sets... *{music ends}* and so it was a bit of an adjustment. But I loved it because at the time in Wageningen - and it still like that a little bit - there was an incredible freedom.

Voice Over: After studying at Wageningen for a few years Louise took on her first challenge of field research in Africa. This was a time to put all her study and planning to the test under a program the university called 'Tropical Orientation'.

Louise Fresco: I was 21 and I went to Africa for the first time - to Zambia and Tanzania. Of course that meant living in a village without electricity and water and I did my first work on cassava and nutrition there, which was quite something because, you know, thinking about Africa was something different from actually living there... and one had to be realistic about what one could achieve *{music starts}* but this fascination with agricultural production and nutrition was only reinforced.

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Voice Over: During her first visit to Africa, Louise realised that the nutrition people got from their food was something strongly linked with their farming practices and the influence of market forces. It would become a focus of her efforts from then on.

Working with the FAO - The Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN - Louise would take further field trips to continue her work on cassava cultivation, an important food source in the tropics.

In the central region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo she was tasked with dealing with the agricultural and rural development of a section of the country 4 times the size of the Netherlands. There, she worked with many farmers who were growing their crops with little or no experience. Louise was part of project to increase production for a growing urban and rural population. Her work was in no small measure, to directly increase the nutrition and prosperity of entire communities.

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It was also work she took part in on the other side of the world, as a field scientist in Papua New Guinea.

Louise Fresco: That was another dimension altogether. Not only was there no electricity, water, etc. but the country had just been getting on its feet in terms of its independence... and I worked for quite a while in very remote areas where they had never seen a white woman before particularly in western province around Lake Murray that's on the border with Irian Jaya.

Voice Over: There were many obstacles Louise needed to overcome...

Louise Fresco: There was no transportation apart from boats so I learned how to repair the motors on the engines of a boat etc etc *{sound effect}*

I had a two-way radio to communicate - there were no telephones of course - so the two-way radio got hit by lightning within a month. *{sound effect}*

And then the only communication was a missionary plane that came about once a week if the weather permitted and they actually landed in my backyard. *{sound effect}*

{jungle soundtrack ends}

And on top of everything else the job was to grow crocodiles. *{sound effect}*

Voice Over: Instead of cassava production, Louise's work in Papua New Guinea was to bring people out of poverty through crocodile farming. In a region with few options for agricultural development, crocodile rearing became the main source of income for many people living in swampy areas or river basins.

Louise Fresco: I mean, you know, I still have ten fingers but I must have measured thousands of crocodiles over time. So it was a commodity but it had to be regulated of course because the eggs were still harvested from the wild because you can't get crocodiles to breed in captivity.

Voice Over: Unregulated hunting caused enormous damage to crocodile populations in the wild before 1970. Louise's work was part of an assistance program - supported by the FAO - to give technical support and program management for a precious natural resource. Louise was part of the team teaching people how to farm crocodiles in a sustainable and ethical way, ensuring a stable population and income for future generations.

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It is an illustration of Louise's pragmatic approach to helping people in developing countries.

After years of arduous work, in extreme conditions, Louise recognises how far her search for awareness has taken her.

Louise Fresco: Well, I think that the most important thing that's a real asset for me is that I've done really serious field work for a long time. Not just visiting for a week but years on end. So you know I have a real in-depth knowledge of what realities on the terrain are but I also, because of my later work, first here in the Netherlands and then my nearly ten years at FAO, *{music starts}* I started to understand that it's not a matter of just technology and, you know, being with the people, that also policies and politics shape so much what the conditions are under which people can actually hope to grow and hope to develop.

All my later life has been about getting the policies right and getting people, particularly people in power, to be aware of poverty, of rural poverty, of the need to have a balanced agriculture and have healthy food not just for the rich who can afford to buy all kinds of expensive organic smoothies but really to people who need it most.

Voice Over: In the years since her field trips to the tropics of Africa and Papua New Guinea, Louise has gained enormous experience of the global food chain. She has learnt about the interconnectivity of many different countries and people with vastly different wealth and access to resources. The understanding she now has about food is a starting point for a much bigger discussion she wants to have with us, and for us to have with one another.

Louise Fresco: Our food is our entry point into civilisation, into culture, it's a window on people's personalities but also on history and to understand where your food comes from - which is so taken for granted in rich countries - is absolutely essential to understand where you are and who you are. And so my emphasis, strangely enough, I mean I've never wavered (and this is not merit of mine it just happened) from my fundamental understanding that food and agriculture have something to do with one another and that you have to understand that whole food chain in order to get the right picture and get people's link also to what happens today.

Voice Over: For many people living in affluent, developed countries, the idea of ethical food production is analogous to what is known, depending on which country you're in, as biological or organic farming. But for Louise, it is more complicated than that.

Louise Fresco: I can sympathise with the need to feel that you know where your food comes from and also the feeling that we have been, you know, quote unquote 'messing with nature' but, you know, we have been changing the ecology around us right from the first invention of Agriculture 10,000 years ago. What we have learned in the last half-century which most people haven't really caught up with is that we are much better now at minimising our interference than we were before. In the 1960s and 70s in most rich countries we used tremendous amounts of the most dangerous chemicals including DDT and so on, we're not doing that [anymore]. In the Netherlands for example we have reduced by about 90% - nine zero percent - the amount of chemicals we use. We are producing much better, our animals are much healthier, but there is a disconnect that people's image is still the traditional image. On the one hand, agriculture as a kind of nearly religious experience of being in connection with nature, which of course it hasn't been, I mean, most agriculture was brutal.

Voice Over: Louise says that growing food without any interference is a luxury that many people in the world simply don't have.

Louise Fresco: Biological agriculture is attractive to people who have enough but if you say a biological agriculture in Africa, it just means very low yields. Because you don't use fertiliser and you have very little animal manure. Poverty leads to tremendous erosion, tremendous interference in the landscape because the less you produce per hectare the more land you need. So I'm

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certainly not against biological agriculture as a niche for the middle classes and upper classes who can pay for it, but we also need to increase production. But we have to do that in the in the best possible way and that will take some time. My prediction that is that in the next 10 years we will probably see a merger of the best elements of biological agriculture with the best elements of conventional agriculture.

Voice Over: In countries with the good fortune of a secure food supply, consumers can enact change through their purchasing power. But not every problem we face with food production can be solved through market forces alone.

Louise Fresco: Consumers in most cases, and understandably so, will still choose the cheaper stuff. So I think governments have to ensure that whatever you buy in a supermarket or on a market stands up to scrutiny in terms of sustainability, in terms of food quality, [in terms of] safety and so on and that I think is something that any politician needs to ensure, however short his or her mandate, because this is an investment for the future. Poorly nourished people are not what you want to leave as a legacy as a politician. The problem is not so much the ill-will of politicians, but the lack of coordination between a Ministry of Agriculture, a Ministry of Rural Development, a Ministry of Water, a Ministry of Health, a Ministry of Foreign Trade, a Ministry of Finance... I mean, there is no country in the world - and I've been battling for this for years - that has actually integrated agriculture and food policy. Not one country. Not even my own country. That's such a mistake.

You know, this is where we need to work on having an integrated policy and say okay, the well-being and nutrition of our people and the well-being of our rural areas is an absolute must because whatever you do, any generation of politicians, any political party, will need that. You cannot develop your country without developing your rural areas. You cannot develop your economy if people are not well fed. So it's a, you know, it's a no-brainer but people don't put it that way. So we shouldn't only produce the maximum, we should produce in a sustainable and healthy and safe way and as close to the consumers and as much in contact with the consumers as we can.

Voice Over: Louise's awareness now points to those who will continue her work going forward. With all the young students coming through the doors of her university, how does she feel about the future?

Louise Fresco: Actually, I'm quite optimistic. I think there is a real sense of purpose with younger generations. It may take different shapes from what it did when I was their age but I think there is a lot of awareness of food and agriculture and health and climate. So I think there's a great sense of responsibility.

I feel very strongly we should start even earlier with children at primary school and secondary school to make them visit farms, visit also food factories, visit supermarkets, to understand how actually [the] food chain works. This is an educational thing and to me it's amazing that you would grow up in a western country, you learn about history, you learn about a lot of things but you don't learn about food and agriculture? Come on! This is the basis of civilisation. Why don't we have something in the curriculum for it?

What is important now is that people in my generation make available their experiences. The nice thing about Wageningen is its great interdisciplinarity and its international orientation. We have 115 nationalities on campus most of our teaching is in English and it's fantastic to see all these nationalities mingle, discuss and learn also to question. I mean, the most important thing which you can learn at university is not just to understand how photosynthesis or chemistry works or mathematics works but to ask the right questions, to develop your analytical capacity, and to be able to discuss, to assess arguments, and to get that openness of mind. The reason why I'm also still so excited about my work is that I learn something new every day and that capacity to want to learn and do something with it, if you can harness that you'll be alright for the rest of your life.

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Voice Over: Thanks for listening to The AgVocate. This podcast is brought to you by the team behind Bayer's Youth Ag Summit. Follow us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Google 'Youth Ag Summit' and visit the website. Subscribe to our newsletter and be part of the AgVocate community.

Special thanks to Louise Fresco for making time in her very busy schedule to talk to us.

We'll be back soon with new guests and new stories, but before then please share this podcast far and wide and let us know what you think of this episode. We're also interested in suggestions for any future episodes... perhaps we could even tell your story. Get in touch with us and let us know.

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