

A handful of questions: Lucas Simons

“Change the rules of the game”

His efforts for the preservation of production chains have not remained unnoticed. Lucas Simons, who made 40 per cent of the Dutch coffee sector sustainable in ten years' time with UTZ CERTIFIED, was proclaimed Young Global Leader earlier this year by the World Economic Forum.

1. Are you proud of being a Young Global Leader?

“I mainly like the fact that I get to go to all the meetings of the World Economic Forum. Of course it is amazing to talk to people such as Desmond Tutu or Kofi Anan, but I am mainly impressed by meeting some thinkers that no one knows. People that try to change the rules of the game, so that everyone will start acting differently. Those are the real heroes!”

2. How do you change the rules of the game?

“For a long time, unsustainable behaviour in the resources trade was rewarded. In the coffee sector, it was profitable to snatch up as much as possible, make a lot of profit and put the consequences of this down to future generations or coffee farmers 10.000 kilometres away. The thing is that you should try to get the trade incentive high enough so that everyone competes for sustainability. This will only work if you change the whole sector and show that change is in everyone's interest.”

3. What is the value then of the Nestlé's and Douwe Egberts companies of this world?

“If the farmers are well organized and are producing more sustainably and more efficiently, the production and quality will go up. To keep access to the scarcer resources, a good relationship with the farmers is something that comes in quite handy as well. Convincing big players that sustainable production is in their own interest, has a way better outcome than shielding the farmers from the world market with development projects or minimum prices. You offer these farmers a safe haven, but as soon as the project is finished, the market forces will undo most of what you have achieved.”

4. In the meantime, Max Havelaar, with less than 3 per cent in market shares, is a familiar brand.

“Many certificates are indeed not as well known, but have a much bigger market share and reach much more farmers with that. And that is the way it should be. You shouldn't bother the consumer too much with various quality marks and ethical choices. People already have to make so many choices! The consumer just has to be able to trust the fact that the coffee that he drinks has been produced sustainably. Nowadays you are confronted with so many double messages in the supermarkets. Indeed, it is not logical at all that tuna, a threatened fish species, can be found on the shelves for discount prices! We can produce a million fish guides, but let's just make sure that those threatened species won't be for sale at all anymore. And this is the case with many more products.”

5. If the change does not come from the consumer, where does it come from?

“Renewal never comes from the consumer and hardly ever from existing institutions. Universities, communal organisations, they all have to score within the existing system. That is why problems are often solved in a linear way. Are you poor, then money is the solution. No education? We'll just build a school then. That is how we find ourselves now with thousands of development projects around the world that all compete with one another. But changing the system, changing the rules of the game, needs time and is not as cute and sexy. You cannot claim that you've helped farmer x or y. People that are doing that anyway, against all obstacles, need recognition, networks and money.”