

CV

1971 Born in Zeist
1991 Studies Environmental Hygiene
University of Wageningen (until 1997)
2000 MBA at Tias-Nimbas Graduate School
of Management
2002 Founder and CEO NewForesight
2010 Founder and CEO SCOPEinsight
2011 WorldEconomic Forum -
Young Global Leader 2011

Lucas Simons

'The Chinese prime minister states that his country's gift to the world is the one child policy. He is right about that'

Paul van Liempt

As Young Global Leader, Lucas Simons follows in the footsteps of people such as Jaime de Bourbon de Parme and Coen van Oostrom. Recently he was in China, where he listened enthusiastically to sustainability visions from the Chinese prime minister Wen Jiabao and the British former prime minister Gordon Brown. 'Why didn't he talk about this when he was still in function?'

In his office in Utrecht, in the shadow of the Dom church, it is hard for him to curb his enthusiasm about this recent visit to China. The 'impressive speech' of prime minister Wen Jiabao still resonates in his head. The politician unfolded the contours of his five year plan in front of a room full of western guests, with an 'unknown self-confidence.' A glowing elucidation about the pillars of growth, internal markets, sustainability, innovation and education.

Lucas Simons: 'What a difference with our proposed national budget. I wish that our politicians would look five years ahead. Of course you have to economize, but do it with a vision: how do I see the Netherlands and Europe? Jiabao looked almost frighteningly self-assured towards Europe and the USA. He explained how the US and Europe were the engines of the economy, but that they have fallen silent. China does not anticipate to lend more money to them, they want equity and shares in return. And to "export to our market is also positive for your employment," he added .

Lucas Simons (39) is founder and director of NewForesight, a strategic consultancy that wants to establish systemic changes in agricultural sectors and cooperates with the United Nations and Initiative Sustainable Trade amongst others. He also founded SCOPEinsight, that aims to enhance the access to credit for farmer organisations. Simons, while trying to keep his word flow up to speed with his racing thoughts, was not only impressed by Jiabao's speech. He also looked respectfully to the industrial activity in the Chinese metropolis, and he had never seen that many cranes in one city.

The influential World Economic Forum (WEF) has chosen Simons – as the only Dutchman this year – as Young Global Leader. The social entrepreneur, who is a graduate in Environmental Hygiene at the University of Wageningen, was awarded this honour because of his 'commitment and presentations regarding sustainable trade, agriculture and rural development.' Nine years ago, Simons was partly responsible for the creation and success of Utz Kapeh (nowadays Utz Certified), that quickly climbed the stock ladders as a certificate for sustainable coffee. The much more familiar Max Havelaar brand stagnated on a share of less than 3%. Because of Utz, by fusing a so-called 'first mover' coalition, more than 40% of Dutch coffee is now Utz certified. The entire Dutch coffee sector recently committed to raising this percentage by 2015 to 75 per cent.

Who has once been a Global Young Leader, will be part of a privileged group that meets around the world, discusses options, develops plans and catches up with prominent politicians and entrepreneurs. The meeting that recently took place in China was a follow up of an earlier visit to Cape town in May, where Simons ran into archbishop Desmond Tutu; the next trip is planned for November and will take him to India. For the next five years he gets to visit all WEF meetings, where a group of Young Global Leaders will give acte de présence. A unique network of young leaders, that want to contribute to a better future, with illustrious members such as Mark Zuckerberg (founder and CEO of Facebook) and Google founder Larry Page. The other Dutch YGL's are prince Jaime de Bourbon de Parme, founder Dennis Karpes of Dance4Life, former state secretary Karien van Gennip and the largest office builder in the Netherlands Coen van Oostrom, recently praised by Bill Clinton for his efforts in sustainable building.

To his own amazement, Simons flourishes in this company, because really he doesn't like groups. As a young student he was already interested in politics and society. He stepped away from the group process by observing the influence of popular kids on all the others in the schoolyard. He describes himself as a 'weird one,' and hesitantly admits that he was bullied, but adds to this that in the end, everything fell into place. 'As a student I became a member of the corps and partied like crazy.'

When you do not commit to sustainability now, you will miss out on all the innovations that you'll need for the next 25 years.

Why do you feel so comfortable around the Young Global Leaders?

"I have never felt comfortable in a group, but this is the first one where I feel at home, because it is a group of individuals. No one is leader, we listen to one another and learn from each other, but we accept no one as our superior. The autonomy is big, just like the self-responsibility, no one has an ego. Invisible leadership, behind the scenes, anonymously working on changes, is the main thing."

It sounds too good to be true.

"I'll give you an example. After Wen Jiabao's speech, one of the young leaders stood up: "We are in China now, but I would like to talk about Europe." In no time forty people were debating. We determined that we are the first generation that has been raised after the fall of the Berlin Wall, with an unknown prosperity. We also concluded that we owe this to integration. But now, the first time things get a little more complicated, you can see that the pro-European sound of politicians is undermined. We therefore put a story together: what is our vision of the world and what are the European values in there? This resulted in a broader vision about sustainability and labour participation. And about the question of how to involve the youth into this story, because that is essential. Half of all the people on this earth is younger than 25 years. You have to give these people a vote about how they want to approach the future. We will show this plan to the world and no one knows anymore which part was put in by whom, or who was the one that got up first and took initiative."

Can you tell us a little bit more about this? What part does Europe have to play?

Europe should not become humble and lean back. It is the only continent that can peacefully solve problems, even the US needed a civil war. Some sort of political board needs to be established that represents the whole of Europe. If one country has profited from a united Europe then it has to be the Netherlands, with its open economy. Why is it so difficult to convince a large public of this? As a politician it is your job to be able to do that well."

Do politicians have more success with the issue of sustainability, or is there a fear that this will also slip away into a story no one really wants to listen to anymore?

'People that see sustainability as an ideology are behind, we've been there and done that now. Calling out that sustainability will earn you more money doesn't sound good enough, either. I want to take it way further: without sustainability everything will stop in ten years. When the food industry does no longer have any access to coffee, cacao and tea it stops and everything will be over if we do no longer have access to our resources. It starts to become a strategic story, comparable to oil. If we don't make a transition to other fuels, there is nothing else when the oil is finished. When you do not put everything into sustainability, you will miss out on all the innovations that you'll need for the next 25 years.'

And you think that those messages have not fully resonated with politicians yet?

'I notice that politicians normally don't embrace that mission until they're no longer in their functions. Think of Ruud Lubbers and Bill Clinton. In China, we listened to a fantastic speech by Gordon Brown, about how we can make everything more sustainable, why did we not hear this from him when he was still prime minister? As a politician you apparently have to hold up too many balls at once to fully be able to express this. If China says that the CO2 emissions have to be cut back with 16% within two years, you can assume that this will happen.'

You are not pleading for a centrally lead European economy, are you?

'No, no, don't worry, despite all limitations I still believe in democracy. On the other hand, I also continue to see China's positive side. The prime minister said: "Our gift to the world is our one child policy." He is right about that. We are heading towards 3.9 billion people, other countries miss China's discipline.'

The European politicians in their functions have failed until now, you say. What about the companies?

'They've known for a long time. They buy soil in Africa because otherwise they won't have access to resources anymore. It is therefore unbelievable that the Dutch government does not even think about the question where we will get our resources from in the future. In the Netherlands, and in most parts of Europe, we know more about climate change than anywhere else, but we are way behind when it comes to energy transition. The positive exceptions are the Scandinavian countries and Swiss.'

You were chosen as a Young Global Leader because you put all your efforts into preserving production chains. Utz Certified managed to acquire 40% market share in ten years with that working method. What is Max Havelaar doing wrong?

'Max Havelaar doesn't understand that 98% of the world population is too busy with surviving to want to hear about deforestation and poor farmers. You shouldn't bother people too much with these kind of issues. And you should definitely not force them to change brands. Whoever buys Douwe Egberts, does not think about green but just wants to drink a nice and cosy cup of coffee. You have to make sure that you set up the system in such a way that people will show the right behaviour automatically. Don't bother them with labels, but make sure that your clients make agreements about sustainable certification. And with my own company, SCOPEinsight, I have developed a rating and reviewing system that will give farmer organisations easier access to capital. You will make them stronger like that and after a while also more independent, because they can grow. For too long now, the principle small is beautiful has been preached, but with that you keep dependency in existence. Up until now, there is still no organisation that does no longer need Max Havelaar.'

You are looking for money for projects. Does the government work with you?

'Yes and no. The policy of the Dutch government is to bring innovation into the field of development cooperation and that more market driven initiatives need to be set up. The policy that accompanies this however is something that fits this new way of doing business. The policy seems contradictory now: it has to be innovative, but you are not allowed to be as new as an organisation. And they do not aim at relatively low amounts. I don't need a hundred million! This policy stops innovation. But if you hang in there long enough, you'll get there. Recently we heard that the ministry of development and the Dutch development bank FMO are going to support us. Changing the system apparently has its ups and downs.'