Valentina Gallo on sustainable public health

It’s time for a new approach

Newly appointed associate professor at University of Groningen/Campus Fryslân, Valentina Gallo, is a Rosalind Franklin Fellow, a top international researcher on a tenure-track that will take her to a full professorship. The neurologist turned epidemiologist specialises in public health and her appointment is timely with the COVID-19 pandemic showing its effects across the board. “It’s time for a new approach to our health system. One that will make public health sustainable.”

BY TORI KELLY

With Campus Fryslân specialising in sustainability on a variety of fronts, Gallo feels she’s in the right place to develop her field. “My work has an interdisciplinary approach to public health which recognises that physical health is related to mental and social wellbeing. Factors such as international governance and the quality of housing affect health as much as environmental pollutants and other risk factors. At Campus Fryslân, my work will go a step further and look at how public health can also be more sustainable, so that it is effective, affordable and relevant, and equally open to everyone and to the generations to come.”

Stress to the immune system
“A sustainable public health system needs to consider the bigger picture. It’s a philosophical approach to health and disease where health is not seen as a commodity but as an equitably accessible and sustainable right. This will be explored by taking the results of our research at a micro level and creating a bridge to expand the scope to a population, even to a global level. For instance, at a micro level we know that stress as a mental health issue can lead to physical symptoms. We are now discovering how stress can be a long-term issue caused by lifelong social circumstances such as for instance structural racism. When we take this to a macro level, we realise that there is a whole population that is more vulnerable to a virus such as COVID-19.”

System inequality
“This pandemic is actually giving us the chance to rethink the norm. The virus is a result of ill interaction between the wild world and humankind, as was pika and swine flu. So we need to develop a relationship with the environment that is sustainable, not based on exploitation. There’s also the question of social inequality and social injustice. Our public health systems need to be accessible to everyone and work towards filling the gap between health inequalities. Systems that leave people behind are by definition simply not sustainable. As a consequence of concerns about the devastating health, social and economic effects of COVID-19, a global movement was launched this summer for sustainable health equity. It draws attention to how disadvantaged and marginalized populations run a higher risk of infection and how our current health systems are not prepared to deal with a pandemic of this extent. COVID is helping us see the problems embedded in our systems and we should seize the opportunity to create a new norm.”

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Involve the population
“Just what this new norm looks like should very much depend on input from the population. We need to look at how communities can participate in creating a better health system, in shaping what is needed to prevent ill health. The community needs to be able to say what their needs are in order to become healthier and society should take them as priorities, making the solutions accessible to everyone. It’s no good saying people should do more physical exercise if going to a gym is beyond their budget. We need to build reality into the public health message.”

Master’s programme in Sustainable Health
Gallo and her team are currently working on developing a master’s programme in Sustainable Health. “We’re using the Rosalind Franklin fellowship to work on the subject and developing the master’s programme is an important part of this. We’ll be emphasising the multidisciplinary approach and inviting local stakeholders to get involved as well as bringing in colleagues from other relevant fields. The idea is that we get to learn from each other and be inspired.”

“I’m really looking forward to meeting stakeholders and colleagues. I’ve already been lucky enough to collaborate with some incredibly talented people during my career and interdisciplinarity is so important. We get the best out of academia when we work together. And we have such talent here. The more I find out about the other Rosalind Franklin Fellows, the more honoured I feel to be part of the fellowship.”
Responsibility

One of the most commonly used words in the last six months, after science and social distancing, is ‘responsibility’. We are being called upon to behave responsibly, to take personal responsibility for the consequences of our behaviour. Responsibility is not only demanded of us as individuals, but also of groups of people, institutions and countries. How more even do we need to be mindful of the people around us, so that we can go COVID-19 under control as quickly as possible. To achieve that, we have to pull together in this own hands.

Here in the Netherlands, we have a strong tradition of self-management. After all, we are Dutch business people who come up with the ‘self-managing team’. And can go it as far as we want. It’s working. That’s why we have this system. In such situations, individual, groups and institutions also need to think: ‘I can do this, I can help to solve this problem. We can do this. And this is good for me, it’s good for society.’ And this is how we will achieve a combination of self-management, help, and responsibility. And this is how we use the political and public sphere. And this is how we will achieve the necessary standards. And this is how we will achieve the necessary standards. And this is how we will achieve the necessary standards. And this is how we will achieve the necessary standards.

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Column

BY GERARD DE JONG

The face of the GCA is former Senator-General of the United Nations, Dr. Piet Bouma – Managing Director University of Groningen/Campus Fryslân.

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Sustainable entrepreneurs and activists are not all that dissimilar

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Favourite spot(s) in Leeuwarden

The number of students that are enrolled in a bachelor degree or master degree programme in Leeuwarden is about 23,000. Find out what they like about Leeuwarden and what their favourite places are!

Ilonka Gruetzmacher, MSc Cultural Geography

“I love the city centre of Leeuwarden in general, it always looks so beautiful with the canals winding through the busy streets. However, one of my favourite streets is Oude Oosterstraat. It’s a narrow street with beautiful buildings on it. On the corner of Oude Oosterstraat and Ossekop there is a cute vintage store called De Plek Vintage. This is a place where you can find all sorts of vintage treasures, from sweaters and jackets to boots and suitcases. When you walk in, there appears to be clothes everywhere, but just start flicking through the racks of clothes and you’ll definitely find something you’ll like.”

Theresa Henne, LLM Governance and Law in Digital Society

“One of my favourite places to eat in the city is Bowls n’ Rolls. This is the first Poké Bowl restaurant in Leeuwarden. They serve really tasty vegan and vegetarian quinoa bowls. It’s not the cheapest of places for students but the quality food is worth the price. There’s a lot of choice so that can be a bit overwhelming but the staff are very kind when it comes to explaining how it all works. A loyalty card is also available so that you get your 10th bowl for free!”

Rebuild a better future

At the time of writing it has been exactly 6 months since universities in the Netherlands ceased physical teaching activities and large parts of the world entered lockdown. The initial response to the corona crisis was aimed at containing the virus and saving as many lives as possible. Over the last months, in addition, saving the economy came more and more into the focus. On European level the European Union agreed on a €750 billion recovery package, while in the Netherlands KLM was saved by the Dutch Government.

In both cases the chance to also use these rescue packages to make positive change was recognised as both measures were (partly) linked to ‘green’ goals. However, this should not be only a top-down process that happens at the highest level, as this is not sufficient. To use this momentum of change, it must become a movement within the region of Fryslân to reassess those parts of our society that have come under significant pressure due to the crisis we all face today, to re-evaluate lines of production and make them more green and more fair. Because this is the way to make them more resilient to future crises similar to the one we face today.

Therefore, I urge policy makers and businesses: make use of the knowledge that is present in our Education for Sustainable Development-institutions in the region. Such as our own Campus, Circular Friesland or the to be established Regional Centre of Expertise on Education for Sustainable Development Fryslân (RCE ESD Fryslân). Therefore: work together with students of the BSc Global Responsibility & Leadership in their living labs, cooperate with master students from the Sustainable Entrepreneurship programme and (PhD) researchers to gain a more diverse insight into solution approaches, implement more sustainable business processes or make your organisation more green and fair.

So please, do not rebuild the economy the way it was, but together rebuild a better future.