



Tropicultura 1983-2019. Tale of a multidisciplinary and multilingual journal for the benefit of rural development in tropical countries

Eric Thys

Eric Thys : Secretary (1995-2019)

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In 1980, three scientists of the Veterinary Department of the Institute of Tropical Medicine Antwerp (ITMA) created a non-profit association called Agri-Overseas. The main objective was to publish a journal allowing to disseminate the results of researches carried out all over the world in the frame of a direct or indirect Belgian intervention or by Belgians individually.

The General Assembly was composed by representatives of all Belgian veterinary medicine and agronomy faculties, the ITMA and individual members. On the 21st of October 1980 the three founders were elected as administrators: Prof. Jos Mortelmans as Chairman, Prof. Jacques Hardouin as Managing administrator and Prof. Pasteur Kageruka as Secretary.

After a period of organisation, fundraising and recruitment of personnel, the first issue of Tropicultura was published on paper the first trimester of 1983.

This was the start of a remarkable enterprise that is still ongoing. In a first step, this paper presents the story of Agri-Overseas and, in a second one, highlights the evolution and the spirit of the journal Tropicultura.



Prof. Dr. J. Mortelmans († 2005)
Chairman (1980-1990)



Prof. Dr. Ir. J. Hardouin († 2015)
Managing administrator (1980-1997)



Prof. Dr. P. Kageruka († 2004)
Secretary 1980-1995
Treasurer 1995-2001

Figure 1: The three founders

Beyond the scenes ... Story of the non-benefit association Agri-

Overseas

Agri-Overseas obtained from the beginning financial support from Brussels Capital Region and from the Belgian Cooperation. So it could recruit two employees and start with the preparation, the printing and the dispatching on paper of the journal. It was free of charge for subscribers as well as for authors.

The day-to-day activities were run by the Managing administrator, Prof. Jacques Hardouin, who assumed also the duty of editor-in-chief. The two staff members were Ir. Guy Chauvaux, assistant to the editor-in-chief and Mrs Marie-Jo Desmet. Annual general assemblies gathered the representatives from the different Belgian institutions under the lead of the Chairman, Prof. Jos Mortelmans. During that period, the Faculty of Sciences of the University of Namur (formerly *Facultés Universitaires Notre-Dame de la Paix* - FUNDP) and the "Department of Sciences and Environmental Management of the University of Liège" (formerly *Fondation Universitaire du Luxembourg* -- FUL) joined the General Assembly.

In 1990, Prof. J. Mortelmans retired and was replaced as Chairman by Prof. Jef Vercruyssen from the faculty of veterinary medicine of the University of Ghent (UGent), who was the representative of this faculty since 1986. In 1995, Prof. Pasteur Kageruka was replaced as Secretary by Dr. Eric Thys, member of the board of Governors since 1992, and became Treasurer.

Prof. Jacques Hardouin assumed his functions until 1997 (17 years) and was replaced by Prof. Guy Mergeai, who was previously deputy Managing administrator during one year and representative of Gembloux Agro-Bio Tech (ULiège -- formerly *Gembloux Agricultural University* -(FUSAGx).

In 1999, Ir. Guy Chauvaux, passed away prematurely and Dr. Ir. Germain Harelimana joined the team in 2000 as assistant to the editor-in-chief.

Prof. Pasteur Kageruka retired in 2001 and was replaced in 2002 as Treasurer by Prof. Bernard Losson, initially representative of the faculty of veterinary medicine (ULiège). In 2002, the office moved from the headquarters of the Belgian Cooperation to that of VLIR-UOS, the Flemish umbrella for university development cooperation. In 2003, the website [<http://www.tropicultura.org/>]{underline} was created.

In 2004, Mr Luc Sas from the Belgian Cooperation who strongly supported the activities of Agri-Overseas during all these years became Honorary Member of the association. He was followed by Mr Dirk Molderez and Ir. Jos Kalders.

Unfortunately, two founders Prof. Pasteur Kageruka and Prof Jos Mortelmans passed away in a short period, respectively in October 2004 and in February 2005. An obituary was published¹.

In 2006, Agri-Overseas obtained the scientific patronage of the *Belgian Royal Academy of Overseas Sciences* (RAOS). RAOS was represented in the Board of Governors by Prof. Stanny Geerts and the Permanent Secretary of this Academy was invited ex officio. That year also the first steps were taken to obtain the collaboration of VLIR-UOS and CUD-ARES (the French speaking umbrella for university development cooperation -- at that time called CIUF-CUD).

In 2008, the office moved from the office of VLIR-UOS to the University Foundation. That year too the statutes were modernized as requested by the law.



In 2009, the institutional anchoring with CIUF-CUD and VLIR-UOS was fulfilled and a special budget line was allocated by the Belgian Cooperation to CUD-ARES and VLIR-UOS together for the edition of Tropicultura. In 2010, Prof. Roel Merckx (KULeuven) and Prof. Jan Bogaert (ULB at that time) became respectively representative of VLIR-UOS and CUD in the Board of Governors and in the General Assembly.

In 2011, the Belgian Cooperation provided only 50% of the budget and decided in 2012 after supporting the Journal for over 30 years, to drastically reduce its contribution and to withdraw its support altogether from 2013 onwards. This decision was linked to the DGD's plans to restructure and to not support activities that do not represent a sufficient critical mass. So, that decision had nothing to do with the scientific quality of Tropicultura.

From that moment Agri-Overseas faced a challenging period. Fortunately, in 2012 and thanks to the intervention of RAOS, BELSPO (*the Federal Public Planning Service Science Policy*) provided free of charge two rooms in their building, still in Brussels. To reduce the costs, the Journal was only published electronically starting with the second issue of 2012. Additionally, Agri-Overseas decided to ask a reasonable fee of 200 euros (or 300 euros for fast publication) to the authors of accepted articles. Brussels Capital region continued to finance substantially the staff wage.

From 2013 onwards, Tropicultura has always been able to count on the annual contribution of the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine (UGent). In 2013 too, Mrs Marie-Jo Desmet retired after 29 years of loyal services and was replaced by Mrs Caroline Louvet.

In 2014, the "Tropicultura Friends" group was created for authors aiming to pay 500 euros per article.

2015 was a pivot year. The cooperation agreement, which existed between RAOS and Agri-Overseas since 2007, was renewed for an indefinite period, which demonstrated the confidence of this institution in the quality of the articles published in Tropicultura. Agri-Overseas signed also a 3-year partnership agreement convention with ERAIFT (*the Regional Post-Graduate Training School of Integrated Management of Tropical Forests and Lands*).

Prof. Jef Vercruyse resigned as Chairman and was replaced by Prof. Jan Bogaert from Gembloux Agro-Bio Tech (ULiège) who was previously representative of CUD. Prof. Jef Vercruyse stayed 25 years as Chairman but remained member of the Board. As a sign of gratitude an article was published describing his important career². Sadly, that year too, the last living founder, Prof Jacques Hardouin, passed away. An obituary was published in Tropicultura³.

In 2016, the staff moved to the offices of RAOS in the same BELSPO building.

In 2017, the finances appeared to be critical and plans were made to transfer Tropicultura in *PoPuPS* and to be run by *the Presses agronomiques de Gembloux* (PAG), part of the *Presses universitaires de Liège*. End of the year, Prof. Guy Mergeai, Managing administrator and editor-in-chief, was replaced *ad interim* by Dr. Eric Thys (Secretary) for the next two years. A donation was made by the University of Liège. On his side, Prof. J. Bogaert supported articles through the "Friends of Tropicultura" initiative.

At the beginning of 2018 the financial situation of Agri-Overseas remained critical and did not allow to continue more than two years without risking to collapse. Therefor the very painful decision

was taken to consider discharging the personnel with a notice period. Mrs Caroline Louvet left end of April.

In June 2018, RAOS moved from BELSPO to the Royal Observatory of Belgium in Uccle (Brussels Region) and accepted gently to keep hosting the secretariat of Agri-Overseas.

Fortunately, a donation from BEDIM (*Bureau for Exchange and Distribution of Information on MiniLivestock*) was obtained and over-perceived money by the Social Security reimbursed, so that it was possible to organise a smooth transition to PAG.

In 2019, Dr. Bernard Pochet, managing administrator of the PAG became member of the Board of Governors and Dr. Ir. G. Harelimana left end of August after 19 years of loyal services. Finally, the dissolution of the association was decided in October, and the transfer to PAG organised.

Tropicultura and its evolution

Designed initially as a journal to carry on the function assumed up until 1963 by the "*Bulletin agricole du Congo belge et du Ruanda Urundi*" and to publish mainly contributions from Belgians, Tropicultura has from the outset transcended the geographical boundaries of Central Africa and has opened the journal to contributions in four languages, French, English, Spanish and Dutch. So, from the second issue of the first volume, articles were published in English and in issue 2 of volume 2 (1984) appeared the first contribution in Spanish about a project in Ecuador.

An extended analysis of the editorial process during the first 20 years of publication was published in 2004 by Ir. Freddy Maes⁴. He showed that during the first five years, procentually, the part devoted to original research articles was lower than that of announcements, editorials, interviews of fieldworkers ... but that later on the journal moved progressively to more original research articles and to technical notes. From 1988 onwards, new and diversified authors were attracted. 91% of the articles and notes described cases in Africa. The share of Asia was reduced to just below 5% while that of the Americas was around 3%. Regarding languages, the use of English was increasing from 17.7 % in the first five years to 39.3% during the period 1998-2002. French moved from 81.0 to 58.9 %. Spanish and Dutch remained sporadic. The most important fields were agronomy, animal production and animal health, and fish farming. The topics of minilivestock, fauna and unconventional food resources (*i.a.* edible insects) appeared also in that period. Cameroon and Nigeria provided a majority of authors.

The subsequent period (2002-2009) was analysed by Thys *et al.* ⁵. During the investigated period, a total of 1,034 papers have been submitted to Tropicultura. Most of the papers (85.1%) came from Sub-Saharan Africa, followed by North Africa (11.2%), Asia (1.6%), Latin America (1.3%), Europe (0.6%), and Oceania (0.3%). The majority (97.9%) were research papers and were in French (56.8%), followed by English (42.8%), almost the same proportions as observed in the previous period. The field of research were: agronomy (60.1%), animal production (19.1%), socio-economy (5.6%), food technology (4.6%), fish farming (3.8%), animal health (3.4%), game (2.6%) and forestry (0.9%).

No specific analysis was published for the subsequent period 2010-2019, but over the years the trends remained *mutatis mutandi* the same. The majority of articles were written in French (up to 85.7 % in 2018 !). The second language remained English. Only one article was published in Spanish during that period. Most of the research was conducted in Africa and authors were in the majority



French-speaking Africans. From 2015 onwards authors from DR Congo became more numerous. The above-mentioned fields of research remained, but additional ecological topics appeared, like peri-urbanisation and environment, conflicts and landscape dynamics, land management and modelling, and so on.

Also important to mention is that from 2005 onwards, seven special issues were published at the expense of the author or institution.

In 2012, the withdrawal of support from the Belgian Cooperation (see above) forced to stop to publish a printed version of the issues and concentrate on the electronic version. All articles published in *Tropicultura* since 1983 were put on the website.

Furthermore, to validate the quality of the published papers, a journal needs a strong editorial team and competent referees. In the beginning, the editorial committee was relatively modest, but as the submission increased in the different fields another organisation was conceived. The crucial role of the assistant to the editor-in-chief (subsequently Ir. Guy Chauvaux: and Dr. Ir. Germain Harelimana) and the assistant editors has to be underlined. All over the years assistant editors and referees came and left. It is not possible to enumerate them all notwithstanding their important contribution. But some of them deserve to be named as they did outstanding work like Prof. Patrick Van Damme (UGent) who was till 2007 responsible for the complete and diversified field of agronomy; Prof Jean-Claude Micha (UNamur) responsible for pisciculture and fisheries for many decades and Prof Jean-Paul Dehoux (UCLouvain) who took over in 2006 the task of assistant editor of the second most important field of animal production.

Regarding the editorial process, following steps were carried out. Firstly, the secretariat checked the consistency of the manuscripts with the author's guidelines and sent those in conformity with the requirements to the assistant editor in charge of the field of research of the manuscript. The readers (including the assistant editor) reviewed the manuscript according to a single-blinded peer review where author's names are known by the reviewers. Special attention was paid to the relevance, originality and the quality of the information presented in the manuscript. Major reasons of rejection were poor experimental design, mistakes in the interpretation of the results, outdistanced data or obsolete bibliographic references.

The review policy of *Tropicultura* implied a commitment of the referees to give detailed feed-back to the authors about any deficiencies of their manuscript and to precise the specific work needed to improve it. In case of rejection due to methodological problems, the referee also accepted to make suggestions about what the authors should do to correct their future work. This commitment was included in the Charter signed by each referee. The consequence of this procedure is that the manuscripts are often corrected more than once in order to improve the writing skills of the authors. Coaching young scientists in the editorial process remained part of the spirit of *Tropicultura* throughout its existence.

Finally, In 2019, the issues of volume 37, were the first to be published in *PoPuPS* (<https://popups.uliege.be/2295-8010/index.php>) with reference in DOAJ and with a DOI. The articles are no longer published in pdf on the site <http://www.tropicultura.org/> but the history of the previous 36 volumes remains of course online. To ensure the transition of the editorial process, a new OJS (Open Journal System) server was opened in early August 2019 (<https://ojs.uliege.be/index.php/tropicultura>).

And now ...

Nowadays, albeit it has no impact factor, Tropicultura is well-known in the world and papers are quoted in international databases (AGRICOLA, AGRIS, CAB, TEEAL, SCOPUS etc.). For instance, the CAMES (*Conseil Africain et Malgache pour l'Enseignement Supérieur*) considers papers published in Tropicultura as relevant for promotion of researchers in French speaking Africa and Madagascar.

Tropicultura is at the threshold of a new era. Still published exclusively online, the journal found a new site, a renewed submission system and the constitution of a new scientific committee and editorial board is almost complete. But, Tropicultura is still keeping the same spirit and philosophy aiming to support and increase the capacities of scientists of the South in publishing and disseminate properly their knowledge and analysis of the rural development *sensu lato* in the developing world.

However, bringing Tropicultura at that stage would not have been possible without the voluntary participation of many people to keep this tool functional throughout these years.

Prof. Jos Mortelmans expressed at the end of his "Letter of the Chairman" published in the first issue of Tropicultura in 1983⁷, following predictive wish : "... *in this way, we can all together, Belgians and former students of our Belgian institutions, help to forge a bond of brotherhood between people who, having Belgium as a link, want to give the best of themselves in favour of the third world*" and he added in the Dutch version "Agri-Overseas counts on you".

Looking back to the 37 years of publication of articles of good quality it can be humbly concluded that the successors of the founding fathers - including all actors, devoted personnel and publishing scientists of numerous countries - have largely fulfilled that wish.

Long live Tropicultura in PoPuPS ! Leve Tropicultura in PoPuPS ! Longue vie à Tropicultura dans PoPuPS ! ¡Qué viva Tropicultura en PoPuPS !

Notes

- ¹ Vercruyssen J. (2005). In memoriam. Tropicultura, 23 (1): 64.
- ² Dorny P., Geldhof P., Claerebout E. (2015). Jozef Vercruyssen's Love for Parasites: a 40 Years Carrier. Tropicultura 33(4): 261-264.
- ³ Thys E. (2015) In memoriam--- Prof Dr. Ir. Jacques Hardouin (27.09.1929 - 18.10.2015). Tropicultura 33 (4): 351-352.
- ⁴ Maes F.(2004). Vingt ans déjà. Tropicultura, Special issue : 17-25
- ⁵ Thys E., Harelimana G., Mergeai G. (2011). Analysis of the editorial process of the multidisciplinary rural development journal Tropicultura. Tropicultura 29 (2): 107-113.
- ⁶ Since 2002 sent as electronic version by e-mail
- ⁷ Mortelmans J. (1983). Brief van de Voorzitter. Lettre du Président. Tropicultura 1 (1): 3-4.



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