TRAILBLAZERS IN THE
VEGETABLE AND FRUIT SECTOR

FROM
TRADER
TO
SUPPLY CHAIN PARTNER
Welcome to the changing world of the AgriFood business. In this booklet, you will read about the main developments which businesses within our sector will very soon no longer be able to ignore. The booklet includes, of course, examples of businesses that are already responding to these developments with smart approaches. Businesses and experts offer their views on the sector. Use it to your advantage and create your own future.
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“IT WOULD BE INTERESTING TO DISCUSS THE ISSUE WITH THE MAYOR OF NAIROBI AND TO SEE HOW WE WILL SUPPLY THE CITY WITH FRESH FOOD FOR THE NEXT TEN YEARS”
“We can earn money by working on soil improvement at suppliers.”

“Our aim isn’t to just obtain products, but also to contribute knowledge.”

“In the years ahead, our key issue is drought.”

“We are going to get much closer to our suppliers.”
The booklet that you are holding outlines the main trends for traders in the vegetable and fruit sector. Traders who want to do business with a future-oriented approach. They look for smart ways of establishing and maintaining new business relationships. They experiment with revenue models and sustainable innovations. In short, this booklet is overflowing with ideas about working towards a sustainable future, both for your own company and for the sector. It includes interviews and articles with businesses and experts active in the vegetable and fruit supply chain.

I would like to explain one basic idea: The trader of the future is not just an 'order picker', but a 'supply chain partner'. Supply chains are reducing in length and becoming more transparent. And trading companies are shifting more and more towards production. Increasingly, they work with, for example, seed growers, greenhouse farmers, technicians, agronomists, retailers, urban planners, competitors, knowledge centres and NGOs. Traders can play a pivotal role in this chain and ensure that producers throughout the world are familiar with Dutch knowledge and innovative capacity. This enables them to create added value for both the consumer and producer and prevent themselves from sooner or later being cut out of the chain.

The traders in this booklet are members of the CSR Network Food & Agribusiness. A number of new initiatives have been launched under this umbrella, such as 'The Soil Initiative' and 'TwentyOne Feeding Cities'. With the knowledge from a wide network, CSR Netherlands offers targeted support to these trailblazers. Businesses that 'cut to the chase and get down to work'. Businesses that actually set to work in chain projects, with topics such as soil quality and drought, but also with ‘more difficult’ topics, such as working conditions. They serve as a source of inspiration and work together towards our sector's future.
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FROM IMPORTER TO CHAIN DIRECTOR
What form do future business relationships take? According to Total Produce B.V. it is clear: importers and producers must work together much more. "Importing and only passing through pallets containing products will increasingly be consigned to history."

"Imagine a horizontal line. At the one end is the producer, at the other end the consumers. We are exactly in the centre. Considering that same line, my prediction is that, in the years ahead, we will increasingly move towards production", says Lennart Visser, Manager of Sustainability & Marketing at Total Produce. The Rotterdam importer of overseas fruit has been initiating projects and partnerships for quite some time. With universities, consultants, growers and producers.

Visser talks about the strategy behind this: “The traditional sourcing and sales relationship is changing because of rapidly changing customer needs. In this business, customer relationships are very important, as they were in the past, are now and will be in the future. But those relationships come under strain due to competition from continents other than Europe. For that reason, as a company, you have to differentiate yourself other than by just price and product. Today’s customers demand more than that.”
Innovation

According to Visser, the new added value for, for example, retailers can be found in service, market and product knowledge, consistency (security of supply) and innovation. In respect of the latter two, Vissers says: “Consistency is about delivering what you promise, despite the producer's fluctuation in volumes. Innovation is about continually working on new products, varieties and packaging types.

Collaboration is key for both consistency and innovation. Importing and only passing through pallets containing products will increasingly be consigned to history. We have to intensify the relationship with the producer, in order to improve the balance between supply and demand and therefore be even better at meeting customer needs. We will then become more of a chain director, as opposed to importer.”

New agreements

“We must therefore also think much more in terms of the consumer, our customer’s customer. What does that customer want and what does that mean for production? Say a customer wants sliced fruit and vegetables. We must then talk to the producer, provide information and advice, ensure that the producer has all the knowledge needed to deliver the correct product.

Innovation also comes into play here and we cooperate with a wide range of parties. Ultimately, we will both benefit from this: the producer will receive higher revenues and we will
receive better products.” This new approach may result in different agreements being reached with producers, such as contract farming and delivery in line with defined conditions.

**FUTURE BUSINESS RELATIONSHIP - SUSTAINABILITY**

According to Visser, future business relationships are all about sustainability. “Part of our policy is the focus on soil. Soil is the cornerstone of our product. Possible problems in the country of origin have repercussions on the entire chain. I therefore strongly believe in the power of soil to guarantee the sustainable supply of products. You have to focus on the source in order to have an impact.”

An example is the melon project in Honduras. Total Produce B.V. works closely with the producer on optimisation of the soil quality. Visser: “Vegetable materials from production and the environment are processed into a high-quality compost, which helps to improve soil biodiversity. By helping to improve the soil, we are working on innovation, product quality and on security of supply – consistency.”

**SOIL IS THE CORNERSTONE OF OUR PRODUCT**
CSR AT THE HEART OF THE BUSINESS
Throughout the world, Superunie sources products for 13 retail organisations in the Netherlands. In its work, the company is faced with CSR issues, including future food security and malpractices in the chain. CEO Dick Roozen says: “Sustainability throughout the entire chain moved on from being a mere paper exercise a long time ago.”

A procurement organisation which works for 13 supermarket businesses, such as PLUS, EMTE, Hoogvliet and Spar. In total, these comprise 1,800 separate stores, at which 1 in 3 Dutch people do their daily shopping. Around 6.5 billion Euros circulate in the organisation, and 90 people work there, the majority of whom are continually developing and sourcing products. These are just a few figures which demonstrate the type of company Superunie is. Dick Roozen explains further: “It is our joint size on the procurement side of things that enable our members to compete effectively in the Dutch market. As well as procurement, Superunie increasingly provides logistical and financial services for its members and it monitors quality, sustainability and food safety.”

**NO LONGER OF SUBORDINATE IMPORTANCE**

When Roozen considers the past and present of the agro-food sector, one thing strikes him in particular: “In the past, sustainability appeared to be a hype, a passing fad, but it has now become the key focus. It is an integral part of company policy and most companies and increasing numbers of people have come to realise that you can’t avoid it. As President Obama said during the climate summit in Paris: “We are the first
IN THE PAST, SUSTAINABILITY APPEARED TO BE A HYPE, A PASSING FAD, BUT IT HAS NOW BECOME A KEY FOCUS

generation to feel the effects of climate change and the last generation able to do anything about it." To give an example, when I started to work at Superunie around eight years ago, sustainability was still of subordinate importance. That has changed completely. Take, for example, PLUS, which has established itself based on sustainability.

THREE QUESTIONS
Fair is fair, as a joint buyer, Superunie also deals with supermarkets that focus more on price than on sustainability. How does Roozen deal with that? Sustainability and procurement management often go hand-in-hand. For many years, Roozen has therefore wanted to know three things about every product to be purchased: “Where does it originate from? Which avenues does the product take and which processes does it undergo before appearing in the store? What are the product’s ingredients and additives? This will give you an overall picture of your product and your chain and therefore also a clear understanding of how things stand in terms of sustainability. We use this same understanding to optimise the chains, resulting increasingly in ‘direct sourcing’.”
The bar is higher

At Superunie, this policy has resulted in control increasingly being exercised in the chain, through to the very start of that chain. Roozen: “A good example is tea. For many years, we have procured our tea directly from a tea company in Sri Lanka. We have a strong relationship with that company. We therefore know exactly where our tea comes from and we work hard with the supplier on a wide range of CSR issues. At the start, especially on the social aspects, but recently increasingly also on the environmental aspects, such as the impact of CO2. Another practical example is one of the top-selling products in supermarkets: bananas. We also procure those directly from source in Ecuador and we manage the entire chain ourselves, right through to the store. Effective visibility and monitoring at source means we can now also become Rainforest Alliance certified for our Alvita bananas. That is more difficult for composite products, such as, for example, a product like tomato soup. With composite products, it is much more complex to trace, for example, the origin of all ingredients; we focus initially on the main ingredients, but ultimately we want to know everything. One hundred percent transparency is our goal.”

To focus more on the development at Superunie: whereas the company’s approach was initially relatively informal in respect of CSR, the bar has now been raised significantly. Roozen: “It is really important to us that the aforementioned three questions are answered. If companies are unable to answer the questions, we take a critical look at the collaboration, particularly if the company is located in a country with a high risk profile. Sustainability throughout the entire chain moved on from being a mere paper exercise a long time ago.”
Finally, a look at the problem of the availability of food in the future and the impact on the environment. It is a well-known story: if food production and consumption continue at the same pace, later on five earths would be needed to be able to continue feeding the population. As Superunie is involved in food production on a daily basis, the company has relevant views on this matter. Roozen: “The problem seems clear, but the solution complex. In several respects, it is worrying: in the West, we are starting to notice that our diet is not optimal – resulting in obesity – whilst in emerging markets, people are starting to eat more meat and convenience foods. There are also food shortages in other parts of the world. Compare that to all the movements in respect of environmental impact, animal welfare and social conditions in various producer countries. The solution is not always easy to come by. Some people are convinced that we should move as much as possible towards organic farming, to remove one aspect. I am convinced that you would not cope without intensive farming, that efficiency is desperately needed. You should, however, look closely at ways in which the negative effects of that can be reduced or even eliminated. In this respect, organic and intensive farming can learn a lot from one another. Regardless, it is important
that the chains as a whole should be examined and all interests, and there are quite a few, should be carefully weighed up. Fortunately there is increasing awareness of the reciprocal dependence between different links in the chain. It is for that reason that the retail sector is increasingly involved in matters in the other parts of the chain. Effective, transparent and forward-looking collaboration with our suppliers and their suppliers is required. We refer to that as ‘interconnectivity’.

FOR THE FUTURE GENERATIONS

Within the retail sector, we do, of course, contribute in many different ways and listed below are good examples of that. A recent example, very close to home, is the upgrading of residual flows. After all, within the chain, less waste means lower costs, but also in respect of information for consumers. Therefore, together we must come up with ever smarter solutions. A discipline about which we are becoming more enthused by the minute at Superunie. For me, the driver behind all of this is an anecdote given by my father, who once saw an ANWB (Royal Dutch Touring Club) poster on a bench in the woods, which read ‘As a token of gratitude for the pleasant break, don't leave any peelings and boxes behind for the owner of the woods’. Based on their own capabilities, everyone should act like that, for the future generations.”
SOIL IS BUSINESS
The power of companies depends more and more on securing ‘sourcing areas’. This relates not only to fossil raw materials and precious metals, but something that, in the past, we always thought of as a common asset and that is now increasingly important: the soil itself. Businesses that are able to maintain the fertility of their land can continue to supply products. That is not only crucial for producers, but traders and retailers are also delving into 'soil fertility'.

“There is increasing dynamism of companies in respect of our soil”, says Christy van Beek, programme coordinator at Alterra, part of Wageningen University & Research Centre. “Why? Companies see their production reducing and their continuity of supply under pressure. That has an impact on the entire chain, from producer to retail.”

WHAT IS HAPPENING?

“We spend billions of dollars on crop failures and every year, 10 million hectares of fertile land is lost, because we manage it poorly. Whilst the demand for food is steadily growing. In the past, it was stated that the government would have to resolve the problem, but it is now evident that more and more companies are delving into this problem. That is an interesting development, because solutions can then develop further.”

“When we grow crops, we take nutrients out of the soil. We transport those, in the form of vegetables and fruit, to focal areas: cities and densely populated countries, such as the Netherlands. This results in a shortage of those nutrients in the production areas. The land becomes depleted and more crops
fail. In densely-populated areas, there is therefore a surplus; that is evident, for example, from the 'waste mountain' and the green ditches in our landscape.”

**IN THE RED**

“That soil depletion is comparable to a bank account: if you withdraw money from the account – even if you only withdraw small amounts – your account will gradually become empty. You continually have to replenish the account and if you are in the red, you have to deposit a little more. That applies to soil too. If you want to keep your agricultural land fertile, you have to add nutrients. Otherwise it will gradually become depleted and ultimately nothing will grow in it.”

**BACK INTO THE GROUND**

“We therefore have to return the nutrients from urban areas to production areas and put those nutrients back into the ground. For example, in the form of artificial fertiliser and compost (organic fertiliser). A combination of those two is actually best. Artificial fertiliser gives a short-term boost. That can be used very effectively and can be tailored to specific crops and seasons. The use of compost enables you to ensure that the soil will remain healthy in the long term too.”

“There is a lot of scaremongering about artificial fertiliser, but it doesn’t matter to plants whether the nutrition in the soil is chemical or natural in origin. Artificial fertiliser is, however, a difficult product: production can have an environmental impact and if you do not use it properly, you can damage the environment even more. With compost, it is all about the correct quantities, the right time and clever combinations.”
Circular

“We therefore have to apply circular thinking to the matter: you must return whatever you remove. Interesting initiatives have already arisen, such as the rose sector in Ethiopia, which composts its waste (including with Soil & More). And there are also already initiatives in urban areas, where waste, sewer water and bio-slurry (waste from biomass power plants) is returned to production areas. There are many opportunities still to be explored.”

Soil versus energy

“Organic waste is not only suitable for compost, you can also use it to generate energy in biogas power plants. This results in immediate revenues, but only in the short term (as you incinerate the waste). If you process organic waste into compost, you will only benefit from this in the long term, because your land will remain fertile and you can continue to grow crops. In that sense, biomass power generation is actually competing with soil fertility. And the demand for energy increases.”

Companies

“The problems relating to soil fertility therefore cannot be resolved overnight, but it is very positive that companies are now also tackling these problems. Past projects often ended after 2 or 4 years, but now that we are setting up projects with businesses, including in collaboration with CSR Netherlands, we are starting something that will continue.”

“Working with businesses is very different: there has to be a short-term effect and it must be possible to use the solution straight away (‘on the ground’). That is a challenge for me; I have to try and manoeuvre between the two. The companies with which I want to work are, of course, the trend-setters. But if we are able to put good cases to them, I am sure that the rest will follow.”
SUSTAINABLE GRAPE AND SUPERIOR ORANGE
Making the fruit industry more sustainable involves quite a few challenges, referred to as such by Pascalle van Bergenhenegouwen at Jaguar, The Fresh Company. What challenges are those?

“Which pesticides can and can’t be used? How do you deal with working hours? How do you ensure safety in the workplace?” In India there is still often confusion about these questions, that Pascalle van Bergenhenegouwen (CSR&Quality at Jaguar, The Fresh Company) summarises. One of the reasons: the hierarchy within the chain. Van Bergenhenegouwen: “We import grapes through the large Indian exporter, Mahindra. But working for that company are dozens of smallholders. Those small farmers sometimes have just a hectare of land. For them, it is often difficult to meet minimal social and environmental standards, safety and hygiene aspects. It costs them money, but they also have a lack of knowledge. In larger companies, someone is always appointed who has ‘quality’ in his or her portfolio. But small farmers do everything themselves; from harvesting through to these types of managerial tasks. They often have absolutely no clue as to the Western standards.”
In an attempt to resolve this problem, IDH has created a working group in which Jaguar also participates. To briefly outline a long and thematic story: in India currently no less than 50 companies are in discussion, coming up with tangible solutions that will make fruit production more sustainable. The initial results are expected later on this year. How does this case relate to changing business relationships within the sector? Everything. Van Bergenhenegouwen: “One unique aspect is that the entire chain is involved. Retailers, traders, exporters, agents and farmers do not currently link together as such, but they are working together to find solutions. Incidentally, that is something that we, at Jaguar, like to do anyway with our suppliers: teamwork, that assists with cultivation practices. As was the case in the past, in this project it is not a case of taking a single step backwards in the chain, but we go all the way back to the start of the chain, with all stakeholders.”

A working visit to their orange suppliers in Egypt was educational for Jaguar. Yes, there was significant scope for improvement within the companies. But of equal importance: the farmers really are open to change. Jaguar was quite surprised about the fact that the Egyptian farmers genuinely wanted to do something with what the Dutch came to tell them, said Pascalle van Bergenhenegouwen. “We didn’t expect that. But they could clearly see that it was important for their own future. The market is there for their product and we can also import their oranges. However, that does mean that if they would like to supply to us, they must also meet the specific standards.”
Cultural Differences

Along with a growing specialist, in 2015 Jaguar visited various orange farmers. Van Bergenhenegouwen: “The growing specialist was of the opinion that the production methods could improve. A different method of pruning and irrigation could result in more and better oranges. Furthermore, we noticed that a system of social and environmental standards would have to be set up, which could be assessed by means of audits. In the Egyptian culture, just to mention one instance, the role of women in the labour force is different to that in the Western culture. To give an example: they wouldn’t be accustomed to me, as a woman, phoning up and asking for a certificate to be sent to me. We are now helping them to change things, because we like to invest in a lasting, long-term relationship with our suppliers. That is because this would result in win-win situations. A supplier is offered continuity, and that in turn has a positive effect on its employees. Furthermore, the approach and the products are improved by sharing knowledge and experiences. We are certain that we can supply a specific volume of products and help our supply chain to become more sustainable. The fact that we can help the supply chain to become more sustainable is also the reason why we are the co-initiator of The Soil Initiative Fruit & Vegetables. After all, by improving the soil, water consumption can be reduced.”
WORKING CONDITIONS IN THE HORTICULTURE SECTOR

ACCORDING TO PIETER GOUDSWAARD FROM CSR NETHERLANDS
From the quality of the soil to working conditions at suppliers. Horticulture businesses have more and more responsibilities. Even so, there are limits...

A meeting starting with a broad, abstract question is always rather tricky. ‘How has the international horticulture sector developed over time and what impact does that have on the business relationships?’ is a question of that type. Even so, I believe that I can come up with a clear answer. There are two main themes: Chain responsibility and shortening the supply chain.

**SUPPLY CHAIN DEVELOPMENTS**

The first is that, as a company, you are increasingly held responsible for anything that happens within the entire supply chain. In the past, your responsibility stopped at the door of your company, so to speak. Nowadays, you are accountable for the working conditions, the salary and the safety of the entire chain.

The second development in the sector also relates to that chain. Because companies wish to deliver to their customers what they have promised to deliver, but then they are contending with food shortages, they 'go back into' (as it were) the chain. A very specific example of that is a partner of CSR Netherlands, Olympic Fruit. This company is setting up its own agriculture business in Ethiopia, so that it can be assured of high-quality vegetables and fruit throughout the year. The consequence of all of these developments is that, as a company, you have to organise yourself differently. You become a different type of company and you need different specialists. After all, producing is different to checking.
As well as these current changes within the supply chain, future challenges are afoot in respect of sustainability. For example, the quality of the soil. The quality of a product depends fully on the land on which you grow. And, in the Netherlands, for many years we have been working on optimising the production. In other words: taking as little as possible out of the ground and putting as little as possible into the ground. Because of this linear, economic approach, we have overexploited the ground.

Very slowly, the realisation dawns that soil fertility is of essential importance. But it takes a long time, partly because the decline in quality of the soil is a sort of silent killer. That is because you don’t see it with your own eyes, but every year that quality declines by a couple of percent. After ten years or so, you suddenly notice that the soil has been depleted.

A different huge challenge is that responsibility for the supply chain. There are limits. Public opinion has gradually started to demand more from companies, for example, that they are fully responsible for the working conditions within the supply chain. Up to a certain level, that is justifiable, but it has to stay realistic.

Take a small company that buys just a portion of what a producer produces. Or workers in Asia who work on your product for just a very small percentage of their time. To what extent are you, as a company, then responsible for their salary and working conditions? The exact responsibility depends on many factors, such as the size of your company, the length of your supply chain and the size of the chain parties, such as the producer.
NEW REALITY

As a Dutch trader or retailer, how do you deal with the new reality? As far as the responsibility for the chain is concerned, that problem is too complicated to deal with as an individual company. The sector should join forces. That is because it is in the interest of all chain parties to jointly give substance to fair conditions in the chain. You increase the scale, meaning that, together, you can make a difference to the producers. You also share the impact that any changes made to working conditions will have on the price. Because that is currently still the main reason that many companies find this an unnerving subject: you don’t know what implications this will have on the cost. You will solve that problem by working together.

As soil fertility is still slightly less of a focus, it will take longer for something to happen in this respect. In fact, in that case you need a few large, important parties to take the lead. The rest will then naturally follow. The NURTURE scheme of Tesco, the English supermarket chain, is an example of a step in the right direction.

Pieter Goudswaard is the Sustainable Business Developer at CSR Netherlands. In this article, he outlines his vision regarding the current and future developments in the horticulture chain.
Perverse incentives
Few people are as convinced of the importance of transparency as Volkert Engelsman, Director of Eosta. In his view, the entire chain should communicate openly and honestly about, for example, the social and environmental impact of a product. Eosta itself provides a good example, with the ‘trace & tell’ system Nature & More.

“No sustainability without transparency.” By means of this explicit statement, Volkert Engelsman, CEO of Eosta (Director of fresh organic vegetables and fruit), clarifies in one fell swoop where, in his opinion, the future of the horticulture sector lies. The supply chain has to be more transparent. Engelsman explains this further: “Old school business relationships were mainly all about new logistic processes, about technological innovations. Consider, for example, greenhouse cultivation with higher efficiency. Don't get me wrong, that continues to be important, but in the future people will be of prime importance in the entire chain and sustainability and transparency will make the real difference.”

**THE CESSPOOL OF ANONYMITY**

As far as Engelsmans' vision is concerned, this means transparency in three areas. “To start with, health. Consumers increasingly recognise health is not only the absence of illness, but is also about healthy eating. There should therefore be a greater degree of transparency about the health-related aspects of food. Various organisations should be involved with this, from NGOs to healthcare insurers. Once that transparency is there, parties within the chain can
make more informed buying decisions.” More clarity is needed in respect of: the environment. Engelsman: “Water, climate, soil, biodiversity, animal welfare, energy. Consumers want to be informed about these planet–related subjects. In today’s situation, information about how these are dealt with within the chain usually disappears into the cesspool of anonymity. The same applies to the social impact of a product. Whether it concerns working conditions, salary, education, equal rights: there is a severe lack of transparency about these. In the future, it cannot be the case that 50 percent of the proceeds of a product disappears into the pockets of a retailer who is driven by short–term profit, and that just 5 percent finds its way to the grower. Led by consumer demands, those perverse incentives will increasingly become a thing of the past. Things have to be more transparent, sustainable and fair. It can no longer be the case that we pass on the costs of health and the environment to the future generations.”

**NATURE & MORE**

Eosta has taken an important step towards a greater level of fairness and transparency. “We devised the ‘trace & tell’ system Nature & More. This makes sustainability more transparent, measurable, manageable and realisable. Realisable, because using this system parties in the chain can be accountable to their stakeholders.” Engelsman eagerly explains how Nature & More works in practice: “In effect this means that you find on, for example, a mango, a stamp with the face of the grower and a QR and numerical code. This gives everyone in the chain, including the consumer, access to information about the impact of that mango on social, environmental and health–related grounds. That is done with the sustainability flower, an elegant model which unites various ecological and social evaluation systems. The petals of the flower say something about what the mango grower in question does in respect of, for example, soil quality or biodiversity. The heart of the flower provides information about ‘freedom, justice, solidarity’, in other words: how does the mango grower deal with his staff and with the
local population? Through all of this information, it may be the case that one organic mango has a higher sustainability score than another mango. Within the supply chain, an economical value can then be given to that.”

**ACTUAL PRICE**

As far as that is concerned – the economic value of a product – Engelsman wants to add something else. “We even go one step further than ensuring the transparency of the ecological and social impact of a product. Recently, at the Grüne Woche in Berlin, we launched the Nature & More True Cost of Food initiative. The main idea is that food prices have to show the true costs of food production, including hidden social and environmental costs. Consumers are entitled to this information. Whilst international policy makers have just discovered the promise of full cost accounting and write thick reports, Nature & More is bringing The True Cost of Food to the market. In this way, we ensure that the true costs of organic as opposed to mainstream products are transparent on the shop floor. The True Cost of Food campaign has been developed in conjunction with the FAO, which published a ground-breaking Full Cost Accounting study in 2014.

The campaign is supported by the organic umbrella organisation IFOAM and the German Stiftung Ökologie und Landwirtschaft. The initial calculations clearly show: organic is not too expensive, mainstream is too cheap. The Berlin retail chain BioCompany will be the first to communicate the true price. This will therefore ensure that consumers are not only well informed about the impact of a product, but also the true price of food will be made clear. Talking about transparency...”

**ONE ORGANIC MANGO HAS A HIGHER SUSTAINABILITY SCORE THAN ANOTHER MANGO**
PROOF OF PROFIT
Partly because of his Ahold background, he has experienced quite a few developments within the horticulture sector. In terms of food safety, for example. Nevertheless, Roland Waardenburg, consultant at TheRockGroup, has still not yet seen the real sustainability breakthrough. “There are too many promises, too few achievements.”

“In recent years, in the horticulture sector a huge emphasis has been placed on promoting food safety. Farmers and growers have had to make all sorts of changes. Traders and retailers have not had to do a lot in that respect. They had to ensure that they fulfilled food safety requirements. Things are now very well arranged from a food safety point of view, right down to the regulatory fines in the event of infringements.”

“After this, more thought was then given to the sustainability aspects in the chain. But this is far from being as well organised as the food safety. Let alone that the government imposes fines on anyone whose affairs are not in order. Things have, of course, been achieved, but surprisingly enough, mainly from a social point of view. Child labour, working conditions, those kinds of things. In terms of the environment, there are many promises but few achievements. Consider Fairtrade, 75 percent of their requirements relate to social standards.”
A SUPPLIER LIKES TO HAVE CERTAIN GUARANTEES BEFORE HE CAN INVEST

GOOD BUSINESS CASE REQUIRED

“What is that? There have to be a couple of good business cases. These must show that a trader has invested in improving the ecological footprint of a grower and that he has then earned back this money. That appears to be difficult, partly because environmental improvements are generally more difficult to measure than social improvements. After all, it is more than simply a checklist. Working hours? Tick. Forced labour? Tick.”

“There are, of course, successful sustainability projects. But then you have to make a distinction between the proof of charity and the proof of profit. Because the projects that do really well, are all sponsored, by the government or by other public organisations. If a project of this type then has to be scaled up to make it more widely applicable, the reality becomes unmanageable, because it costs more money. Or the result is not evident until far in the future. That is why, for true change, a proof of profit is essential: an investment must be proven to be profitable in order to have lasting success.”

INVESTMENT IN ASSOCIATES

“The role of the supplier is also important. Just imagine that, as a supplier, you hear that you have to obtain specific certification which costs 5,000 Euros. Then you would like your customer – who asked for that certification – to still be a customer next year. A supplier would therefore like to have certain guarantees before he can invest.”
“I have a nice example of this from my Ahold time. We worked with Blue Skies in Ghana to bring fresh fruit salads to the Dutch supermarkets. Ultimately, we started to do long-term business with the producer, and that was found to be crucial to achieve social changes. That agreement gave the producer security, a sort of guarantee. This resulted in him investing in his staff. He always wanted to invest anyway, the owner was truly intrinsically motivated. He knew: if I am good to my employees, those employees are good to the product and, ultimately, the customer is much more satisfied. The long-term contract was the final push in the right direction. And the consequences were significant. For example, back in 2005, the company had a female director; that was unprecedented in that culture. Our investment in the relationship with the supplier therefore resulted in social changes.”

**MEETINGS**

“Back to the environment and that proof of profit. So much happens from an environmental point of view – climate change, soil fertility, droughts, feeding the global population in the future. In my view, what growers and traders should do is work out a business model which would benefit the environment and through which they earn back their own investments. Because that is what it is about: if profit is made, sustainability can be rolled out further.”
Therapy for artificial fertiliser

Everything had been farmed to nothing and fertilised to death.
Improve the health of the land. And make healthy land even healthier. In essence, that is what Pius Floris does with his company Plant Health Cure. Soil fertility offers perspective for growers and businesses.

Healthy land means healthy fruit. Problem: much of the soil in the world is diseased or even lifeless, caused by the use of artificial fertiliser and pesticides. “Regardless of the type of soil, within two years the use of artificial fertiliser alone will result in a wholly dependent addict. That ruins itself and no longer seems to be able to do without,” claims Pius Floris, Director and Advisor at Plant Health Cure. His therapy consists of vegetable fertilisers in combination with mycorrhizae. These are fungi that enable plants to absorb nutrients more readily and that generally improve the soil organisms. “Regardless of the type of soil, within two years the use of artificial fertiliser alone will result in a wholly dependent addict.”

Fungi as a natural solution
Like a true ‘soil doctor’, Floris has put soil fertility firmly on the map. “Mankind lives from the soil, the only source of life that we have. Technology would like to have us believe that the soil is not particularly important, because we have artificial fertiliser don’t we? But a truly fertile soil is able to produce healthy plants and is also the best CO2 binder in the world. But because people handle the soil incorrectly, this has changed and a lot of agricultural land actually even emits CO2. Mycorrhizae help to restore the soil. Mycorrhizae fuse with the plant roots, which results in perfect absorption of minerals.”
Because plants with mycorrhizae absorb more elements from the soil, the food is also actually more nutritious. The curious thing is that absolutely no fertilisation guideline in the world takes account of these mycorrhizae. To stimulate the growth of plants, more artificial fertiliser and phosphate is used, resulting in deterioration of the soil. Whilst the solution with mycorrhizae is just as logical, natural and necessary.

**OPPORTUNITY FOR BUSINESSES**

Logical, natural, necessary and economical. For the local grower, for example. Floris: “His own land will not deteriorate but become richer through the use of mycorrhizae. He cultivates a reliable crop with fewer diseases. It is also the case that if your farmers learn how to handle the soil better, production increases. Dutch businesses can help with all of this. For example, by disseminating the knowledge about mycorrhizae amongst growers throughout the world.”

The many advantages sound almost too good to be true. If mycorrhizae are Columbus’ egg for the soil, and map out the future for the entire chain, why isn’t the method more widespread? Floris: “Oh, we are the pioneers of this development. The knowledge to reliably use mycorrhizae has not been around for long. The biggest obstacle to using these fungi are the producers of artificial fertiliser and phosphate for the agricultural sector. They depend on the sale of artificial fertilisers and pesticides. If mycorrhizae are used, there is a significant reduction in what the plants need in terms of water, pesticides and artificial fertilisers.
The use of artificial fertiliser alone will result in a wholly dependent addict. If mycorrhizae are used, there is a significant reduction in what the plants need in terms of water, pesticides and artificial fertilisers.

ANYWHERE IN THE WORLD

In recent years, the approach was tested during a project in Spain. Floris: “Along with universities and local companies, we treated a 50-hectare plot of totally lifeless ground. Just imagine it: nothing was growing, everything had been farmed to nothing and it had been fertilised to death. The soil's ability to retain water just didn't exist. We started to treat the land with mycorrhizae and we changed the soil biology. Within two years, this had returned to agricultural land. By way of illustration: the roots of the crops that we treated reached a depth of 1.30 metres, meaning they had access to an unlimited supply of water. Whilst those crops in the control group remained at a depth of 25 to 30 centimetres.” “Everything had been farmed to nothing and it had been fertilised to death.”

In response to the question whether Spanish soil is comparable one-to-one with soil in, for example, Ethiopia or Costa Rica, Floris resolutely answered: “Provided that just a small amount of water is present in an area, we can do something with it. In short, the method really can be applied anywhere in the world. We also work in a similar manner with potato farmers in Georgia, organic fruit growers in Romania and vegetable growers in Azerbaijan.”
It really is time that the world learns that 90% of the plants throughout the world live in symbiosis with mycorrhizae. Every agricultural system that does not utilise this knowledge is doomed to failure. We can no longer rely on chance and the unpredictable resilience of nature. “Provided that just a small amount of water is present in an area, we can do something with it.

**GLOBAL AGRICULTURAL INNOVATION**

According to Floris, there are now very few critics. “Ten years ago, people had a good laugh about what we were doing. According to the fertilisation standards, mycorrhizae really couldn’t work, could they? We reasoned differently: how do you know that if you have never tried it? People are inclined to stick to what they have already learned. We are now taken seriously, even though there will still be one or two who don’t understand us. No, I have no idea exactly what they object to. It doesn't actually interest me either, I just think to myself 'ignorance breeds intolerance'.” According to Floris, the fact that so many people are completely changing their opinion is also because of the agricultural innovation that is happening globally. “Very slowly, but very surely, businesses are starting to act differently. “Very slowly, but very surely, businesses are starting to act differently.

For example, a group of pioneering businesses work with CSR Netherlands on soil improvement projects at their own growers in developing countries. By 2030, the Dutch fruit traders only want to be importing fruit grown sustainably. Fertile soil contributes significantly to that and is the future.”
SLOWLY, BUT SURELY, BUSINESSES ARE STARTING TO ACT DIFFERENTLY
The 3 main developments in the horticulture sector

According to Peter Verbaas from Groentenfruit Huis
Currently three large developments are happening in the horticulture sector: Two international and one national. Dutch businesses are no longer able to ignore these.

1. Work together more to remain the best in the world

The Dutch horticulture sector is definitely the best in the world. In the Netherlands, we are able to supply all products throughout the year, products that are also premium-quality products and that go hand-in-hand with excellent logistics and a high standard of service. Partly because of its favourable maritime climate and, of course, the Rotterdam harbour and Schiphol airport. But also mainly because of ongoing progressiveness. Consider, for example, the vegetable varieties developed in the Netherlands and innovative climate control technologies for greenhouses and logistics facilities.

For example, the Netherlands, as a small country and a very important international trading partner, is a country that can sometimes be underestimated, for example at European political level. The fact that we want to remain the best in the world does not mean, however, that we will automatically remain there. We must therefore continue to develop. Historically, the Netherlands is a cooperative country, in which people shared a lot of knowledge with one another. Because of the increasing competition, companies do not share information quite so easily. This is partly offset by very large companies, which do their own research and development. But if we, as the Dutch horticulture sector, want to remain a prominent international player, individual companies must work together more, perform more as a cooperative. As a small country with joint strengths, to invest in research and development.
2. A SHIFT OF PRODUCTION ABROAD

This is the biggest trend. The Netherlands is not the Walhalla, as was the case in the past. Through relevant legislation and price, to companies elsewhere in the world, the Netherlands is a less appealing trading partner than it was in the past. Therefore, you must increasingly ensure that you have the goodwill factor, so that products will still be sent from foreign countries. As a Dutch company, how do you get that goodwill factor and appeal as a trading partner? For example, by helping growers from developing countries to set up a market, with the promise therefore of a better future.

Dutch knowledge and innovation have to be used to strengthen production in other countries. Examples are the aforementioned growing of vegetable varieties, greenhouse technology and knowledge about the logistics chain – from seed to export – but also structures that are required for a local sales market. This results in a win-win situation. A local market can develop, which is extremely positive for the local economy, and ultimately the Dutch business community also benefits from that. The destination of some of the products is the local market, the remainder of the products come our way and enter the global marketplace.

It would be pure illusion to think that you can only continue to produce in the Netherlands, but equally we mustn’t bring in all products from other countries. Dutch companies most focus on niches, on innovative products. Apart from local demand, the rest of the production has to take place elsewhere, in Europe, or other places in the world. The challenge for the Dutch business is to play a clever role in that, to organise that correctly.
3. ENERGY UTILISATION REQUIRES CREATIVITY

This is more of a national problem. Energy utilisation in the Dutch horticulture sector remains tremendous; consider the heating of greenhouses and the cooling of stocks. Two things are required for an energy-neutral situation: creativity and investments. Unfortunately there is hardly any financial leeway in the sector. Therefore a good degree of creativity is needed to resolve this CSR problem.

Fortunately, great initiatives have been identified, for example, industrial CO2 is reused. A lot also happens in Westland. It is being investigated whether the residual heat from Rotterdam harbour can be used in Westland. In addition, a group of companies and public services, under the name Federatie VruchtgroenteOrganisatie (Federation of Fruiting Vegetables Organisation), are currently rethinking the situation in Westland. They are also looking at the energy issue. This is immediately a good example of the collaboration that is so necessary.

*Peter Verbaas is the deputy director of GroentenFruit Huis. In this article, he gives his views about national and international developments in the horticulture sector.*
A STORY ABOUT EQUITABLE COFFEE
The poor end of the supply chain earns a very small amount, the rich end earns an enormous amount. But if it were down to Guido van Staveren van Dijk, quality will be the magic word in the future. He argues for a revolutionary different way of doing business. Through Moyee Coffee, he shows how it can be done.

Moyee Coffee is merely the umpteenth coffee brand that ‘wants to do something good’. It is more radical, more rebellious, more resolute and more revolutionary. That is because Moyee Coffee really does give the coffee farmers a fair price. Later on, more about the ‘how and what’, but first about the ‘why’. Guido van Staveren van Dijk established Moyee Coffee when, through a project in Congo, he more or less accidentally came into contact with the coffee supply chain: “To my horror, I discovered that the chain is managed by five large multinationals. Over the years, these companies were responsible for less and less money remaining in coffee-producing countries! In addition, gradually less value is being added in these countries, i.e. now just 2%. Almost all coffee that we drink comes from countries that receive development aid. Absolutely no need. Activities such as roasting coffee takes place, for example, in Europe, including all associated employment. Nevertheless, this was not even the real trigger to start Moyee Coffee…”

Because Van Staveren van Dijk was shocked by the malpractices within the supply chain, but he also knew that sustainable coffee was on the up and up. According to his information,
around 44 percent of the coffee was already sustainable, and that percentage was increasing rapidly. Until he investigated further. “When I properly examined the work of organisations such as UTZ Certified, Rainforest Alliance and Fairtrade, I became really angry. Because their work – as noble as it is – has little to do with the economic development of a country, with living wages and truly fair prices for farmers. As soon as I realised that, that the parties that we trust cannot actually effect any significant changes in a country, I knew that a change was drastically needed.” Altering the course resulted ultimately in Moyee Coffee from Ethiopia and the underlying FairChain principle. In brief, this principle means that: the farmer grows the coffee and receives a 20% higher price for this, the coffee beans are then processed in Ethiopia, as a result of which 300% more money remains in the country. Finally, Moyee Coffee is responsible for the export and sales. Van Staveren van Dijk: “Equality is one of our basic principles. Equality in line with the 50/50 idea: half for the country of consumption and half for the coffee-producing country”
Put mildly, those farmers were initially sceptical when he heard about the plans. Van Staveren van Dijk: “Over the years they have seen convoys of gold-diggers passing through, who came to fill their NGO pockets at their expense, those poor farmers. To remove this justifiable scepticism, in one fell swoop I bought their entire harvest, to show that I was serious. Because of that, I suddenly had 24,000 kilos of coffee, but no customers as yet.” I do now have a good customer base, and Moyee Coffee itself continues to develop.

According to Van Staveren van Dijk, the FairChain principle doesn't only relate to the economic and social aspects of sustainability. “But also to environmental sustainability. We are currently exploring that topic. You should consider questions, such as how we can increase the coffee yield whilst retaining the biodiversity. And how we can restore degraded land. So there are plenty of challenges.”

Yes. Van Staveren van Dijk is convinced that FairChain is also applicable to, let's say, the horticulture sector. “FairChain is much larger than Moyee Coffee. Cacao, salt, vegetables and fruit – the FairChain principles would also work well with those products. Think of it as follows: every product that you take from a shelf in a supermarket, can be much much better.”
LET'S GO TOPLESS
Going along with scaling up or focussing on a niche. Nowhere else in the 'Potatoes, vegetable and fruit' sector are there as many flavours, according to Hugo Vermeulen and Nic Jooste from Cool Fresh International. They developed a pineapple range for various target groups.

Travel! That is the advice that Nic Jooste, Marketing & Director of CSR at Cool Fresh International wants to give to other businesses. Because only by travelling a lot are you able to respond to the developments in the horticulture sector. Jooste: “One of those developments is the scaling up. Smaller producers affiliate with large export organisations that, because of their size, benefit from the logistics chain. Consider cost savings and bundling of volumes.”

“In our eyes, there is just one alternative to going along with scaling up and that is, as a smaller business, focussing on niches in the market. Niches in which you can offer added value. The mousy types – the companies that don't choose to scale up or opt for a niche – are at risk. Choosing a niche automatically means a lot of travel. To new producer countries, such as Peru. But also to customers all over the world. What form does the local community take? How are stores structured? How do people eat? How do they transport their food? The most important question being: as a company, how can we offer added value to that customer?”

“The mousy types are at risk.”
A BRAND WITH A STORY

One of the many examples of how Cool Fresh has responded to that niche development is the pineapple. General Director Hugo Vermeulen: “We deliberately did not jump onto the 'large volumes' bandwagon, but decided to develop a brand. BonSweet is a brand with a story, with great packaging and with different labels for different target groups. These niche markets were prepared to pay for the specific taste sensation and the story around it.”

One thing in common between all of these pineapples that originate from Costa Rica: they are Rainforest certified. Vermeulen: “This is a becoming a requirement of the majority of supermarkets. Products without CSR certification simply have less of a chance of finding their way onto supermarket shelves. In the future, CSR certification for products will become just as normal as certification for food safety.”

GREEN AND RIPE

Apart from this certification, the BonSweet labels differ significantly. Nic Jooste: “BonSweet Blue is the ‘mass pineapple’ for the large supermarket segment. Quite a standard green, high-quality pineapple, that is available in large volumes. BonSweet Black is tailored to the specific palate of South European countries. This pineapple is a little more yellow and riper. The BonSweet Select is an absolutely superior pineapple, a premium product, perfect for restaurants. Finally, we are developing an extremely 'environmentally aware' pineapple: the BonSweet Topless. Because we think that this responds to the future needs of all parties.”

“We are developing an extremely 'environmentally aware' pineapple: the BonSweet Topless.”
The Topless is a pineapple without a crown. Why is that? Jooste: “That crown does not offer any added value, it is only cosmetic. Furthermore, it is a potential hotbed for fungi. A pineapple without a crown saves money during shipment, money which goes back to the farmer. Instead of six pineapples with crowns fitting into a box, eight without crowns fit into that same box. In that same way, this pineapple also emits fewer CO2 emissions. There is also less waste, ‘less waste, same taste’. In Costa Rica they are assessing whether the crowns can be processed into clean energy there, or whether the crowns can be used for other things.”

“In respect of the BonSweet Topless, some difficulties still need to be surmounted. The retailer is totally aware of the benefits, but the customer doesn’t yet see the benefits. To customers, it seems that something is wrong with pineapples with no crown. In addition, production methods have to be tailored to pineapples of this type. The chain is accustomed to pineapples with crowns and must therefore readjust. In any case, we believe in the future for this niche product.”

THE RETAILER IS TOTALLY AWARE OF THE BENEFITS, BUT THE CUSTOMER DOESN'T YET SEE THE BENEFITS
GREAT OPPORTUNITIES FOR AGRICULTURAL BUSINESSES

MANY COUNTRIES WITH PROBLEMS LOOK AT US, AT HOW WE DO IT!
Production shifting abroad and a growing global population. The foregoing are significant developments which the Dutch agriculture and horticulture sectors have to respond to, said Niek Botden from HortiSolutions Holding BV. “Because of their network, knowledge and competence, good opportunities lie ahead for Dutch agricultural businesses.”

“We are a small country, but despite that we are an international mega-player in the agriculture and horticulture sector. In terms of production and trade, for example, but also in supplying hardware and knowledge. Did you know that the Netherlands is one of the largest coffee and cacao traders in the world? Whilst in our country, we do not grow any coffee or cocoa beans! But also from a production point of view, we are highly regarded, consider cut flowers, potted plants, (greenhouse-grown) vegetables, potatoes, seeds and dairy. This is all down to our roll up the sleeves and get on with it mentality. And the superior knowledge that we have built up over all those years.”

“We are now about to embark on a new chapter, in which with new business models, we have to retain our superior position. Entrepreneurship and perseverance are then a 'must.'” Bringing together supply and demand, networks, knowledge and skills, that is what Niek Botden focuses on. He has many international contacts and is therefore aware of the important role that the Netherlands plays on the global agricultural stage."
Even so, is change is afoot: “Primary production is slowly but surely shifting to other countries, as far as mass production with little added value is concerned. In the Netherlands, labour costs, energy and environmental costs have resulted in an increase in the prices of products. That makes it difficult to compete internationally. In foreign countries, people are increasingly realising that by using new production techniques, production can also take place within their own regions. In short, in countries where the cost is lower, they are now also producing.”

According to Botden, Dutch companies should not perceive this negatively. “You should see Dutch knowledge and expertise as a huge export product. Many businesses and knowledge centres do that too, they sell that knowledge. Logically, because one way or another, the competition from abroad will acquire that knowledge at some point. Then, as a Dutch agricultural business, it is better to make sure that you are part of those new chains.”

Dutch companies that move their own production (in part) abroad is another solution that is chosen. Botden: “The growth of the horticulture sector in, for example, East Africa – in countries like Kenya and Ethiopia – is largely because of Dutch businesses that have started to produce there. To keep the cost competitive, but also to use the excellent growing climate.”

Even so, Botden has other advice for Dutch businesses: “Exporting knowledge and moving production abroad is good in the short-term. In the long-term, as a country, we would then lose our superior knowledge, but foreign countries are not sitting idle when it comes to acquiring knowledge. And Dutch agricultural production and knowledge centres can only continue to offer innovation if there are also many companies in our country that are willing to invest in research and development. And they will be less aware of that need if they leave
the country. For the future prospects of the Dutch horticulture sector, it would therefore be good if companies in our country were to unite more, invest jointly in research, development and chain innovations, in order to maintain the exemplary position.”

**EFFICIENCY AS A SOLUTION**

This surplus of network, knowledge and expertise in the Netherlands will also be very useful in the second significant development outlined by Botden: the growth of the global population. “It is a well-known story: by 2050, there will be around 9 billion people on earth. The highest growth will take place in the non-Western world, and then mainly in cities. Big question: how are we going to feed all of those city dwellers? The metropolises in especially Asia are grappling with that question. More people have to be able to eat healthily and safely, whilst they have less land and water available to them. And whilst costs for production, such as artificial fertilisers and crop protection, are rising.”

“To be able to continue to provide those people in the cities with food, the main thing needed is a huge efficiency drive. The production in those countries is low and there is a lot of waste in the chain. Around 40 to 50 percent of the food does not ultimately reach the consumer.” However, in the Netherlands, we are very good at efficient production and processing, partly because of the high land, labour and energy prices. Botden: “In fact, we are the world leader in that respect. Our chain is well organised, with just 5 to perhaps 10 percent waste. Working conditions are optimal, the water, artificial fertilisers and energy utilisation is minimal, the use of pesticides is the same.”

Therefore? Botden: “In my opinion, in the future there will be great opportunities for Dutch businesses. All of those countries, with their problems, look at us, at how we do it! It is the perfect time for Dutch companies to participate and invest in local producers, wherever in the world that might be.”
It is no longer a one man show.
Teamwork. That is not only the development in the vegetable and fruit sector that Kebba Colley (IDH) sees, but also the advice that he gives Dutch businesses.

“It is no longer a one man show.” With those words, Kebba Colley broadly describes the vegetable and fruit sector in the year 2015. Colley is the Senior Programme Manager Fruits & Vegetables at The Sustainable Trade Initiative (IDH). In the past, Colley has worked at Ahold, where he was responsible for a sustainable supply chain. His main job was to convince producers and get them on board, to ensure that they would comply with social and environmental standards.

At IDH, he manages the Sustainability Initiative Fruits and Vegetables (SIFAV). Colley: “The objective of that programme is to ensure that the import of vegetables and fruit from Africa, Asia and South America is 100% sustainable by 2020.” To achieve this, he works with the entire sector. “So I am once again dealing a lot with producers.” Currently, 40 organisations have signed the SIFAV covenant, and 11 producer-support projects are now in full swing. “The covenant makes sure that the sector works together towards making the chain sustainable, meaning work can take place on a larger scale and important issues can be resolved more easily with one another. In this case, it is about improvement of sustainability in respect of environmental and social aspects, such as working conditions.”
Back to Colley’s opening quote. In his view, the significant development within the sector is that all companies – from producers to traders, retailers and public services – will increasingly realise that they cannot do it alone. “It is only by combining forces that you can stand up and really achieve sustainability within the chain. It requires all involved parties to come together in order to tackle problems one by one as a group. Companies that put aside their competition with other companies will see the benefits that it brings, including a real change within the chain, and therefore satisfied customers.”

Colley wanted to explain this. “Consumers increasingly want vegetables and fruit that are grown in a sustainable manner. That means that Dutch companies have to do something about this. They can try to do that on their own, but then you never achieve as much as you do through teamwork. Large companies and public services that share knowledge achieve much more with producers in developing countries.”
It is important that, in those countries, they do not say that those local producers have to fulfil certain requirements. Colley: “No, they must primarily explain how they can fulfil those requirements. So don’t impose, but help.” Enable producers to make changes. And that is necessary, because according to Colley, many producers have heard the bell toll, but they don’t know where the clapper is.

**PRODUCT SECURITY**

The ultimate goal: producers that can be audited. Colley: “Then you can see exactly who fulfils which standards. And the progress over time.” But anyone who thinks that it is only about certification is wrong. Colley: “This goes beyond that. Because ultimately, in this way you help small, local farmers and growers to develop. This is the only way to achieve a transparent, sustainable chain. Not only does this benefit those farmers and growers, but also Dutch companies. They have future product security.”
ONIONS DURING THE SHOWERS
Smart onion growing in Senegal by Van Oers United brings numerous benefits. The company is of the opinion that the social benefits (employment!) is the most important of these. Sustainability Manager Maria Oliveira: “We are now able to offer our more than 3,000 employees more work for longer periods of time.”

Grower Van Oers United grows and supplies fresh vegetables throughout the year. The company's main trading partners are retailers. In recent years, Sustainability Manager Maria Oliveira has seen an important development in those relationships: “Within Van Oers, we see the trend that retailers are laying down all sorts of sustainability requirements, which includes requirements in relation to social compliance, which our vegetables have to fulfil. Are they, for example, grown under the right working conditions? These are all positive developments, which demonstrate the interest among retailers to encourage the sector to become more sustainable. The problem with this is that each country – and sometimes each retailer – can lay down different requirements. To give an example: in England, they work with the SMETA audit system, to audit social standards, whilst the majority of Europe use BSCI. In Germany, an important retailer recently asked that the GRASP module be used as the social standard. We have to integrate these requirements into our business operations, and that often means numerous customised solutions. Fortunately many parties realise that, in the future, this cannot continue. Through platforms such as CSR Netherlands and IDH, all stakeholders now regularly meet to see whether harmonisation is possible. Or whether it is better to streamline those different requirements, often at a detailed level.”
Furthermore, in terms of fulfilling social requirements, this is under control with Van Oers’ vegetables. An illustration of this is one of the projects in Senegal. In this West African country, Van Oers produces French beans, sweet corn, green beans and spring onions. However, it cannot produce these throughout the year. Oliveira: “Because of the climate, these crops are only grown during the winter season for the European market. To maintain the soil fertility and the health of the soil, we looked for a catch crop to add to the crop rotation. Ultimately, we opted for onions.” There is a large local market for onions, but during the rainy season (roughly from June to October), no cultivation is possible and many onions are imported into Senegal. Oliveira: “Actually within the country we started to grow a variety with a higher resistance to fungal infections. This variety can therefore be grown in rainy conditions. After being grown, these onions are cooled and stored in special rooms. This ensures that locally grown onions are now also available during a part of the rainy season in Senegal. In addition, we also entered into dialogue with public services and local partners to see how we can integrate other local growers into this project. A programme of training and exchange of knowledge was set up, that was received enthusiastically by local farmers.”

ALL STAKEHOLDERS REGULARLY MEET TO SEE WHETHER THE VARIOUS REQUIREMENTS CAN BE STREAMLINED
The ‘onion project’ offers numerous benefits, such as maintaining the soil quality. Oliveira: “In any case, soil is becoming an increasingly important topic for all of our production sites. As part of the Soil Initiative Fruit & Vegetables, we explore the opportunities for working with Dutch knowledge parties and providers of innovative solutions. An example is the ongoing process with knowledge institute Alterra (WUR), as part of which we are performing a ‘Soil–Kit Tool’ test at one of our production sites. We hope that the results of this test will contribute to the development of a useful and practical tool and methodology for measuring soil fertility.” But the key guiding principle of Van Oers in the onion project are the people who work at the farm in Senegal, around 3,000 in number. Oliveira: “Growing onions locally for the local market benefits their employment. By growing this catch crop as well as the existing crops, we are able to offer more work to our employees for a longer period of time.”

**BY GROWING CATCH CROPS, WE ARE ABLE TO OFFER OUR EMPLOYEES MORE WORK FOR LONGER PERIODS OF TIME**
From trader to supply chain partner is an initiative of CSR Netherlands in conjunction with GroentenFruit Huis.

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