Sustainable Banking
Richard Reporting

Richard Kooloos, Head of Sustainable Banking, drops in on colleagues to talk to them about how they personally are making sustainability a reality. In this video, he visits the bank’s offices in The Hague – one of the bank's most sustainable workplaces – to discuss sustainable investment.

The aim is to make sustainability the norm when it comes to investment
ABN AMRO has set itself big goals for sustainable investment, which will eventually become the norm. In the short term, though, ABN AMRO plans to double its sustainable assets base.

Vincent Trieschijn, Investments Sustainability Manager, says defining the concept of sustainable investment is easy: “These investments are all about trying to minimise the negative effects and maximise the positive effects on our world – all without making a loss.”

Sustainable investment performance
That last point comes as a surprise to many who are new to sustainable investment, says Senior Investment Adviser Robin Landman: “One of the myths around sustainable investment is that investors sort of have to pay a price for the fact that their investments are making a positive contribution to society or the environment. The fact is, though, our own performance shows that’s simply not true. Sustainable investments can be just as profitable as non-sustainable ones.”
The call for renewable energy is now louder than ever, and we’re currently in a transition phase. For reasons including a growing demand for energy, we can’t yet do without fossil fuels, though. The good news is that we’re seeing a big increase in renewable energy sources. Rutger van Nouhuijs, CEO of Corporate & Institutional Banking (CIB) talks about the goals ABN AMRO has set for itself.

CIB recently publicised its intentions to achieve major growth: by the end of 2020, the bank will be doubling its total exposure to renewable energy, only to do so once again in 2023. The energy transition is taking place quickly. ABN AMRO’s ambition is moving in the same direction, and the bank’s exposure to renewable energy is growing rapidly. Rutger van Nouhuijs explains the bank’s approach.

Rutger begins with an overview of current macro trends. He says, “On a global scale, we’re living in an era of massive population growth and increasing prosperity. As a result, the demand for energy and raw materials is constantly on the rise. Increased trade is also generating more and more transport operations. For decades, all these developments have been contributing to a huge increase in carbon emissions, which are at the root of global warming and rising sea levels. Statistics show that the hottest summers on record have for the most part occurred since 2000. The result is that we’re seriously endangering our planet’s health and resilience. In 2015, virtually all the countries in the world made commitments, enshrined in the Paris Agreement, to reduce carbon emissions. ABN AMRO, too, fully endorses those commitments.”
**Goodbye to gas**

In the Netherlands, the energy transition is coinciding with another important development which also necessitates an accelerated transition to renewable energy. Rutger explains, “For years, the Dutch have had the luxury of tapping into the giant Groningen natural gas field, at the centre of which is the village of Slochteren. Unfortunately, production has been the source of a growing number of problems. The government has now decided that we have to move away from natural gas if we’re to reduce carbon emissions. New-build homes which are currently under construction will no longer automatically be connected to the gas main. There’s also an enormous increase in the use of electric cars and transport services. But these obviously do require electricity. These developments, too, are fuelling the demand for renewable energy – be it wind, solar or hydraulic.

“Like the gas field which has been supplying the Dutch with energy for years, we’re now seeing that our geographical location in the North Sea is also very much to our advantage,” continues Rutger. “Offshore wind offers unprecedented opportunities for generating clean energy. Just think: we have the entire North Sea, aside from the actual waterways, at our disposal for building windmill farms, which will enable us to meet most of our future energy needs. This market is rapidly coming into its own, with more and more consortia collaborating on truly massive projects. Last year, for instance, Van Oord, Siemens and Tennet joined forces to open the Gemini windmill farm north of the West Frisian island of Ameland. ABN AMRO, too, is proud to have played a leading role in financing Gemini.”

**Focus and growth**

CIB has been a leading lender in the energy market for a very long time. Rutger says, “We’ve been an energy bank for many years now. We have teams in Europe, Asia and North America who are conducting more and more transactions with one another. They’re learning so much from these deals, and that means our expertise is growing by the day. I see it as a driving force for knowledge and know-how. What’s great is that we can instantly apply all our expertise for the benefit of other clients. It’s true that there’s a direct correlation between focus and growth. Partly as a result of the bank’s pioneering role, many of our clients are very involved in this area. That’s good for them, for society and for ABN AMRO.”

**Dilemmas: part of the transition**

Rutger underlines the importance of actively involving clients in the energy transition, saying, “We’re not going to change the world in a day. I mean, it’s not like we’re suddenly going to have the perfect number of windmill farms tomorrow, or even the day after. Think about it: if we were to stop using oil today, many sectors – like transport and heavy industry – would simply grind to a halt. Dilemmas are just part of a transition phase like this. Our aim is to be a leading bank in the energy transition. But some of our clients trade not just in lithium and cobalt, which are currently in great demand for battery technology, for instance, but also for risk management. Just imagine the technical and project risks involved in financing a windmill farm, for example. Then you have to deal with questions like what type of wind turbines will be used and how much maintenance will they require. What happens if they fail to generate enough energy? Or what if the demand for energy develops in a way which differs from our initial calculations? This means you have to anticipate how great all these risks are and make contractual agreements based on those forecasts. And that requires an understanding of energy issues.”
Energy transition

What do you do? Do you stop doing business with them? We can’t turn the tide at the drop of a hat – after all, we’re still dependent on oil and gas. But that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t challenge our clients, and we do. One step we’ve taken involves honing our financing policy, which now rules out the financing of new coal plants or oil sands extraction. The policy also states that energy companies need a clear transition strategy to be eligible for financing.”

Rutger is convinced that ABN AMRO has an obligation to use its influence for good. He’s pleased with all the bank’s initiatives, like those launched in connection with Mission 2030 to reduce carbon emissions from the built environment. He says, “We’re seeing that our influence is also having an effect on mortgage lending. The bank currently has a €150 billion portfolio. The properties financed by the bank will have earned an average energy label A by 2030, which makes a huge difference in terms of energy consumption and, consequently, carbon emissions. The bank has a similar aim for commercial real estate. Further, ABN AMRO is strongly committed to facilitating the energy transition and, last but not least, financing circular business models, since recycling raw materials also helps to lower emissions.”
Commercial property on its way to energy label A

Our commercial property business unit has set the bar quite high with its sustainable ambitions: by the end of 2018, the bank wants 30% of all its financed real estate to have an average energy label A, from just 1% in 2015. Although the transition is taking place at a rapid pace, the ambition does not seem entirely realistic. But Erik Steinmaier and Olaf Rutten emphasise the great strides that have been made so far, together with clients. Underlining this progress, ABN AMRO has been crowned the most sustainable real estate bank of 2017.

Transition leader commercial property Olaf Rutten explains why setting such a high ambition was a deliberate choice. “If you really want to get things rolling, it’s better to aim high. If we had set ourselves the goal of 5 or 10%, then yes, we would have accomplished the goal, but we also would not have made it as far as we have now. In three years, we’ve improved our score from 1% to nearly 15%, and the year isn’t over yet.” Just as we see in other business units, the commercial property carbon reduction plans are part of Mission 2030. By that year, all of the real estate financed by ABN AMRO is supposed to have an average energy label A.

Energy label C by 2023
Meanwhile, the government has introduced new regulations for the future, too. By the year 2023, all Dutch offices are required to have an energy label C or better. If a building doesn’t meet that requirement after the deadline has passed, it is no longer eligible for refinancing. Olaf notes that this prospect prompts action from many office owners.
The government’s regulation is especially useful in getting the stragglers to start making changes. We’re raising this topic with our own clients as well. As financiers, we will not want to keep any office buildings with an energy labels lower than C in our portfolio.”

The bank is currently identifying those office buildings that still lack an energy label C or better. Olaf: “We approach these clients with the request to make a plan to realise the transition. From our central system we monitor progress, and when needed, we help our clients meet the new requirements before time runs out. No matter what, we don’t finance or refinance before a plan has been drawn up. Fortunately, most clients are upgrading the sustainability of their buildings straight to energy label A.”

**ABN AMRO sustainable investment tool**

“We’ve created a sustainable investment tool for clients,” Olaf continues. “Any office owner who wants to get started on their energy transition would benefit from using it. The tool first establishes the current status of the building and then outlines what needs to be done to make it energy-neutral. Furthermore, it calculates what measures need to be taken to achieve a certain energy label, and tells you the effects of doing so. Since we want our clients to actually go through with those recommendations, ABN AMRO is offering 100% financing for these improvements. The CFP Green Buildings tool is free to use, which keeps it accessible. You’d probably be spending over 2,000 euros if you hired a consultant for this.”

**Solar and wind energy**

Olaf also discusses the question of what’s holding back the broader transition. “All in all, the housing market is lagging behind. Looking into it, that makes sense. If you own an apartment building with 80 residences, you have to individually make all of those homes more sustainable. Since that takes a lot of time and money, cost-effectiveness is a factor.” Olaf says the bank is exploring other options too. “If a building has a poor energy efficiency score because it’s a monumental building with a constant draft, it doesn’t mean you should just do nothing. You could switch to a renewable source of energy such as solar or wind energy.”

**The right to copy**

Commercial property director Erik Steinmaier emphasises the importance of working together. “We could come up with an endless list of suggestions but it’s still up to the client to realise these changes. As such, we’re open to hearing their plans. We spend a lot of time exchanging experiences and we also put clients in touch with one another.” The right to copy is gradually becoming the starting point. Erik says these are inspiring times. “Recently, we were introduced to ASR’s best practices. This residential real estate investor has facilitated a **successful transition from energy label F to A** for some of its residential properties. We were given the opportunity to have a look behind the scenes, and the quick wins and plan of approach have benefited us a lot.” In turn, ABN AMRO allows others to copy from the bank too. Erik: “We regularly bring our clients together during events, such as the recent ‘Groene versus bruine kantoren’ event.”

**Towards an energy-neutral 2030**

When asked about any highlights among projects, Erik has his answer ready: the Bajes Kwartier in Amsterdam. Bajes Kwartier is to become a testing ground for sustainable energy generation, circular use of materials and healthy urban living. ABN AMRO plays the role of financier, partly selected because of its Mission 2030 sustainability ambition. Erik observes: “Energy transition and the circular economy come together in this project, with everything revolving around the user. The vision is to create a new hotspot where people can live, work and relax while pursuing an inspired, green, healthy and happy lifestyle. We’re aiming for zero climate impact.”
Circular buildings boost vitality

With Circl as a testing ground for the construction and use of a circular building, the bank has created a useful template for its other office buildings and business units. Céline Pessers, Circular Economy Manager with Facility Management, is involved in this transition every single day. After eighteen months of pioneering, tackling dilemmas and making choices, she says circularity is alive and kicking at the bank.

ABN AMRO has set itself big goals for sustainability. With Mission 2030, the bank aims to ensure that all the properties it finances or manages have earned an average energy label A. Another objective involves making sustainable investment the norm. The bank also intends to be an action leader in the circular economy.

Accordingly, all the many circular initiatives which ABN AMRO has developed have generated a wealth of experience and lessons learned. Circl is a well-known example, but the bank is also experimenting with circular furnishings at its branches in Amstelveen and Oosterhout. Amersfoort, too, is home to several exciting circular initiatives which are currently in the pipeline. As is common practice in the circular world, the bank supports the right of others to copy its achievements. That includes clients, suppliers and other stakeholders, all of whom are encouraged to build on ABN AMRO’s successful initiatives and breakthroughs.

A need for standards

“The circular transition won’t be easy, but that doesn’t mean we’re not actively pursuing it anyway,” says Céline. “We want to make circular building, renovation, design and procurement the new standard. And that’s a huge challenge. There are a staggering 114 definitions for
the circular economy, for instance, and that can sometimes make it hard to decide whether a concept is, in fact, truly circular. It all starts with determining where products come from and how they’re made. No matter which production chain you look at, there are always detrimental effects on human beings, the environment and the climate. Unfortunately, much of what is touted as circular these days isn’t circular at all when you get right down to it.

“When mapping out a particular production chain, it can be very difficult to get a full picture of all the data,” Céline continues. “Often what you run into is a black box. That goes for businesses in the chain itself, too. Things aren’t always as transparent as you might think. After all, certifications and labels can only ever be part of the solution, since they don’t address the question of how materials should be put back into circulation at a later stage – which is, after all, the very essence of circularity. The market clearly needs standards for circularity when it comes to production, purchasing and reporting.”

**Making an impact**

“Doing nothing is not an option,” Céline says. “To make headway, we simply have to experiment, try new things and learn from our experiences. Last year, we mapped out all the flows of building and raw materials for the bank’s 250 branches. This gave us a good picture of how we can make the greatest circular impact in our purchasing. We discovered that construction waste and office furniture generated the two biggest waste flows. So that’s what we’re focusing on at the moment. We’ve joined forces with several start-ups to launch multiple initiatives. Our aim over the next few years is to create standard circular branches and workplaces together with various market players.”

**Three concrete examples of circular initiatives**

1. **The chain for floor covering**
   Céline has high hopes for the projects now under way. She says, “Since we recently switched to agile working, we’re modifying the physical layout and furnishings of all our branches to support the new approach. Obviously, we’re talking about thousands of square metres of flooring. So we wanted a circular solution. We teamed up with a provider of circular procurement software called Rendemint and have carried out an impact analysis of the entire production chain, the use phase and post-service life for several floor finishes. The floors scoring the highest in terms of circularity are now being used on a large scale for renovations to our Amsterdam Zuidoost branch.”

2. **Cataloguing circular furniture**
   “The second experiment we undertook involves office furniture. Working with CircularIQ, we generated product circularity sheets, which function like passports detailing the raw materials a piece of furniture contains, the level of carbon emissions and whether the product can be disassembled. This process is meant to raise staff awareness about their working environment. It also serves as input for a conversation with our suppliers, which has to go further than the quality of their office chairs. Our aim really is to set the entire chain in motion.”

3. **A Living Lab for radically sustainable catering**
   The circular developments at the bank’s offices in Amersfoort are of a completely different order. Céline explains, “The starting point for the initiative here was high-quality, circular coffee. ABN AMRO has formed a partnership with Selecta and Peeze to find out what a fully circular coffee concept looks like. We’re mapping out the whole journey of the coffee bean to explore with manufacturers the possibility of modular coffee machines. Amersfoort will also serve as our Living Lab for radically sustainable, healthy catering. We’ll be serving mainly vegetarian food. The Lab is 100 per cent PET (or polyethylene terephthalate)-free, and 0 per cent...
waste. We’re also aiming to generate the very minimum in carbon emissions. We then plan to adopt the most successful aspects at other ABN AMRO offices and branches.”

**Boosting vitality**
Staff vitality is another important area of focus in the circular philosophy. Céline explains, “In Amersfoort, we’re soon going to be measuring how the building and catering impact on the health and vitality of our staff. Healthy food, lots of daylight, good air quality and views of greenery rather than concrete benefit all of us in a big way. Fit employees are more productive and absent less often because of illness. I’m in favour of taking a broad, integral approach to the investments we make in our buildings and, by extension, indirectly in our employees. And that means we’ll be working closely with our HR colleagues.”

**Taking a holistic view**
Céline says these are exciting times: “I believe we’re at a crossroads. If I’ve learned anything over the last year and a half, it’s that we can’t build a new economy within the structure of the old system. But fighting a broken system is a lost battle and can wear you down. It’s about enticing others with different ways to produce, consume and think. Once you look at the world from that perspective, you see that the new economy is actually already in full swing. My wish for the future is that circular thinking becomes second nature to every single one of us.”

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**Amstelveen: a fully functional circular branch**
The bank’s Amstelveen branch is a great example of circular thinking and expertise. Together with the construction team, project manager Bart Bos has blended many of the lessons learned from Circl and newer experiments. The building was equipped with energy-saving features during renovation, which resulted in an energy label A. Suppliers were tasked with deploying as many previously used materials as possible during the renovation process. Visitors enter the branch on a tufted floor made from empty PET bottles and recycled twine from nets produced in the Dutch fishing town of Urk. The wall panels are made of old pallets. There are tables fashioned from grass fibres, chairs made of old industrial uniforms and recycled plasterboard. Any new materials are at the very least cradle-to-cradle certified and sustainable. All the materials are soon to be recorded in a Madaster materials passport so they can be reused after their life at the bank. But a circular building is about more than just the materials it’s made of – it’s also a mindset. Right up to the last day of construction before the branch reopened, the construction team were constantly working to ensure optimum sustainability and circularity.
The impact of Circl

It has almost been a whole year since ABN AMRO’s circular pavilion had its grand opening. And a great year it has been, say director Merijn van den Bergh and ‘ambassador’ Petran van Heel – who has already introduced numerous clients to the pavilion. So what is it that makes Circl so special? More and more high-rises are being built in Amsterdam’s Zuidas business district. Close to the ground, and at the district’s heart, lies Circl: the bank’s circular pavilion. The wooden ‘cabin’ with pretty garden features appears as an oasis among what is mostly tall and concrete development. For Merijn van den Bergh and ABN AMRO’s Petran van Heel, the opening year was a great one. Circl has become more and more widely known as a circular hotspot, and has carved out a place for itself as a driver of circular ideas.

For Circl’s director Merijn, the year had a number of highlights. ‘One of them was working with the best people and the best products based on a single shared ambition, and finding the best group of customers to match. But I also mean the building itself, and how it’s functioned optimally from the moment that it went into operation, even with all the innovative technology and unusual partnerships. And then there are our staff with impaired employability. I can’t overstate how much respect I have for the way that they use their ambition and passion to turn their impairments into strengths – it’s just wonderful to see. And I haven’t even mentioned all the events that bring together amazing circular initiatives.’

Circl draws 65,000 visitors
Real estate sector banker Petran van Heel has assumed the role of ambassador with relish. ‘I see Circl as a positive lever. All kinds of
individual ideas, initiatives, people and companies come together here to create something amazing, something that’s bigger than the sum of its parts. I think it’s very remarkable that the bank had the courage to just go ahead with this project. I frequently show people around here: the bank’s business relations, delegations from abroad, students and charities.’ In its first year Circl attracted 65,000 visitors, and gave guided tours to 6,000 people. ‘That includes people from all over the world, from Scandinavian architects to an official delegation from Taiwan. Yesterday alone we gave ten tours,’ Merijn adds.

Visitors are not interested in the building alone: they want the full experience. During the interview, Merijn notes that the webcam is showing a stand-up meeting of people from the bank in the rooftop garden. ‘People come here not only for the circular narrative, but also for the experience and inspiration. These totally different surroundings, with so much wood and green, produce other ideas and understanding. The Dutch Banking Association was here recently for a meeting about banking and meaning. Because Circl removes you so completely from the corporate world, this place amplifies the theme.’ Petran agrees. ‘That’s why I love coming here with business relations: the conversations are completely different and clients are much more open to change in general, and sustainability and circularity in particular.’

**Building as a source of vitality**

Petran has noticed that the construction world is evolving at a rapid pace: ‘As well as sustainability, vitality is also becoming more and more important. Buildings need to have the capability to send you back outside with more energy than you had when you entered. Nowadays you can even obtain certificates that measure a building’s well-being. Besides carbon emissions, wasted energy and waste flows, the focus is shifting more and more to people. If you incentivise people by creating an attractive place for them, where they can also get healthy food, they feel better and perform better as well.’ Merijn has noticed that more and more customers prefer a fishless or meatless option. ‘Even aside from the environmental aspects, vegetarian food is many times more nutritious. It also gives much more energy. Rudolf Brand, our chef, creates amazing dishes that revolve around vegetables and legumes.’

**Storytelling at its best**

Circl is not a book that you read once and then close: more than anything, it is a source of inspiration. According to Petran, it generates a high level of spinoff. ‘During the construction phase, we invited pretty much all our major contacts in construction and real estate, showed them around and explained what was what. This triggered people’s interest, and paved the way for further circular explorations and initiatives. Now we also organise circular innovation days for business relations who want to do more. We challenge them to develop business cases for their own companies, with our help. The entire concept also carries over to our people: I’m certain that using 16,000 pairs of denims as insulation material has changed our people’s mindset.’

Merijn also sees that the circle around Circl is visibly expanding. ‘More and more external parties are coming to visit us, and that makes me very happy.’

‘The building was always intended to be more than the bank’s clubhouse,’ Merijn continued. ‘The Urban Mining Collective – in which Petran represents the bank – is a networking platform that was founded here. It focuses on the question of how to avoid demolishing buildings in the future, but instead dismantling them to give the materials a new life: harvesting instead of demolition. Our reach is extending further all the time. For example, the bank recently helped to organise an event called “We make the city”: a five-day festival at 150 locations around Amsterdam where...’
people addressed the question of how to improve the city. This included topics such as climate, safety, health, sustainability and affordable homes. Circl was one of the festival’s hotspots.’ Petran takes out his phone to show a report in the Taiwan News. ‘And the visit by the Taiwanese delegation has also led to concrete action in their own country.’

**Circl as a living lab**

It is becoming increasingly clear that Circl – tucked away in the heart of the Zuidas business district – is not invisible. Petran continues, ‘During the World Economic Forum in Davos, the bank won a prestigious award in the Circular Investors category – in part because of Circl. Twice we were voted the second-best building in the Netherlands. I love that a building that is built on biomass and second-hand materials can be given an honourable mention, and I find it very encouraging.’ Circl is entering the second year of its existence. Merijn adds, ‘Our premise is, and always will be, to share knowledge, encourage action and motivate people. We want to achieve the best possible impact, which means that we’re going to further improve the focus of our activities. The bank wants to further emphasis its role as an action leader in circularity, and of course Circl is the ideal base of operations.’

**Guided tours**

If you would like to see for yourself how Circl brings circular ideas to life, book a guided tour for your party (business or private), and combine it with coffee, lunch or drinks in the rooftop bar.
Elephant grass: a circular all-rounder

After a holiday in Borneo, Jan-Govert van Gilst had an epiphany. Seeing that entire swathes of jungle had been cleared and the beaches were overflowing with plastic, he knew something had to change. With the encouragement of his wife, Jan-Govert started with a clean slate and embarked on an adventure into the unknown. Now, five years on, thousands of bioplastic packs are rolling off his conveyor belt every day, and soon tomatoes, cold meats and biscuits – all in sustainable packaging – will be available in Dutch supermarkets.

Jan-Govert’s first major achievement was winning the Zuid-Holland Prize at the end of 2012 for his idea to grow bamboo on building sites which had been abandoned as a result of the financial crisis. The crop would be used for co-firing in coal plants. With the €50,000 in prize money, he was able to develop this idea further. But it soon became apparent that bamboo wasn’t the right choice. Even when grown on a large scale, it has little effect in terms of sustainability. Jan-Govert refused to give up. He got in touch with Wageningen University, where they pointed him to another fast-growing crop: elephant grass.

A journey of discovery to achieve a real impact

Self-proclaimed Chief Elephant Grass Officer of his company, called NNRGY, Jan-Govert got straight to work. He says, “I learned that elephant grass contains cellulose, which you can use to make all sorts of things. It’s amazing because the grass is easy to grow and requires little or no care. You plant it once, and can harvest it for the next twenty years or so. The first field we planted filled up fast. You plant it in spring, it loses its leaves in September and dries out in winter. It’s ripe for harvest the following spring. The chopper then cuts it up into small pieces – this is the actual raw material we work with. The
product name, Vibers, was born by chance when an adman accidentally misspelled the English word fibres in his notes. All the products we manufacture are released under the Vibers label.”

**Pallets in the living room**

Jan-Govert says he experimented a lot before hitting on the winning formula: “My first idea was to use it to make paper, and I succeeded. We called it ‘here paper’ because it’s made here, not somewhere else. Production went smoothly enough, but we had to keep it small because we didn’t yet have access to enough elephant grass. In just a short time, there were six pallets of paper in my living room, where my wife and I would pack up the orders we got on Twitter. It was a fun adventure, but we knew it wasn’t going to make a very big impact, and we were making next to nothing out of it. That’s why I was more or less forced to go back to work as an ICT specialist for a time.”

**Cast in concrete**

It wasn’t long before Jan-Govert found a new use for his elephant grass. He explains, “I discovered there were a lot of subsidies available for developing biobased materials, so I went to see a professor in building materials. We came to the conclusion that elephant grass would be an excellent filler for concrete, the most widely used material in the world. Elephant grass can sequester, and thus store, up to four times as much carbon as other plants. In addition to the environmental benefits that organic concrete offers, it’s lighter and the fibres help make it stronger. I applied for the subsidy myself – by that, I mean I didn’t use a consultancy firm, which is what most people do. I presented my idea to a selection committee, and my application was approved. Together with Eindhoven University of Technology, we developed an environmentally friendly concrete, which can be used to make the most fantastic things. In fact, we just built a very nice set of benches for the municipality of Bergen op Zoom.”

**Packaging**

In addition to the paper and concrete industry, NNRGY is now taking on the plastics industry with an initiative launched last year. Jan-Govert says it quickly became clear that waging war against the industry is the wrong approach. A charm offensive, it turns out, is much more effective. He explains, “Again, elephant grass is the perfect component for this industry. It can be processed using existing machinery. And once the packaging bears the seedling logo (called the kiemplantlogo in Dutch), it can be disposed of as organic waste after use. I did an experiment using tomatoes in Vibers boxes in my very own window sill. I discovered that elephant grass absorbs 300 per cent of its own moisture. This brilliant feature means it can protect produce from mould and harmful bacteria, and even extend the shelf life of these products. The best bit is that absorption has absolutely no effect at all on the packaging. It’s as good as new.”

**Vibers in the shops**

Jan-Govert is now in touch with all the major supermarket chains in the Netherlands. The first Vibers bioplastic packaging has been on the shelves in BoereGoed shops since mid-May. And since pressure from consumers and lawmakers is growing by the day, the timing couldn’t be better. If all goes to plan, Vibers packaging is set to take off in a big way. Jan-Govert has teamed up with ABN AMRO to develop a growth model for Vibers packaging. They’ve reached an agreement whereby the bank as lender “grows” with the company with the guarantee of a full order book. Since one of the bank’s top priorities is to promote the circular economy, the financing of Vibers is in line with ABN AMRO’s goal to grant 100 circular financing packages by the end of 2020.

**Gratifying work**

You’d be hard-pressed to find a nicer, more dedicated “CEO” than
Jan-Govert. He says, “I do this because I want to make an impact. I enjoy it and am so grateful for the opportunity to do what I do. It doesn’t feel like work. All our staff are here because they’re committed to the cause and find the work gratifying. This year, we plan to focus on our packaging and will be expanding our concrete applications as well. We’ve also set our sights on a range of consumer products such as greeting cards and bioplastic storage containers marketed by the sustainable retail chain WAAR [meaning both “true” and “merchandise” in Dutch]. When ABN AMRO issued a press release about the partnership, the phone started ringing off the hook with calls from horticultural businesses interested in Vibers.” When asked if he ever wonders if he may have bitten off more than he can chew, Jan-Govert says, “I’m not a worrier. I just take things as they come.”
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