Beth Dooley - monitoring carbon content of soils as an indicator of soil health

Beth Dooley is currently the Head of Partnerships at Downforce Technologies and a Board Member at Farm Commons. Beth also serves as a member of the Editorial Board for the International Yearbook of Soil Law and Policy. With a background in agricultural and environmental policy research, Beth has worked in various roles such as Agri-Environmental Policy Specialist, Research Officer, Mediator, and Consultant. Beth holds a Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology, a Master of Laws in Global Environment and Climate Change Law, a J.D. with a Food & Agriculture Certificate, and a Bachelor of Arts in Spanish with minors in International and Communication Studies.

What is a key challenge you are tackling right now?

I care deeply about the land and those who manage it. Farming is part of my heritage – my brothers and I are the 6th generation on our family farm in north central Iowa back in the States. But having lived in Europe for 15 years, my experience has been more on the Common Agricultural Policy and how family farms across the EU continue to run thriving, resilient businesses that produce high-quality food, feed and fibre for millions of people.

Deteriorating soil quality is a major challenge facing not just European farms but also the global community, putting food security at risk not just for those directly managing the land but also for the billions who rely on the continued production of crops and livestock from functioning soils. I work for a company called Downforce Technologies that is responding to this crisis by providing at-scale assessment and monitoring of soil organic carbon globally.

Carbon content is a good indicator of soil health, building its capacity to retain and cycle water and nutrients, reduce erosion and prevent runoff, and withstand extreme weather events such as droughts and floods. Utilising publicly available data specific to the land in question, e.g. soil type, land use, terrain, climate data, etc., in combination with remote sensing satellite data collected every 10 days back to 2017, farmers and land managers can see how different crops, management practices and seasons have impacted the soil carbon. Thus, they can undertake data-driven strategic management to improve their soils' health and potentially access better financing due to the improved risk profile of their farm's base asset or price premiums from their supply chain.

More information about Downforce technologies here

Beth Dooley

Head of Partnerships at Downforce Technologies

A person, failure or pivotal moment that changed your path or perspective. What did it teach you?

A pivotal moment in my journey working in agriculture was back in 2010 during my juris doctorate training at Drake University Law School when I saw the documentary King Corn about the industrial food system through the lens of corn production, processing, use in manufacturing and consumption. The follow-up Big River was about the environmental, health and livelihood impacts of mass monoculture production, and it set me on a now 15-year path of exploring from a legal, policy, business and finance perspective how agriculture can be more sustainable.

What very concrete issue in agriculture is most on your mind at the moment, and why?

Thus, if I had to choose one issue facing agriculture that is most on my mind at the moment, it would have to be the alarmingly rapid loss of fertile soils (every 5 seconds, the equivalent of a soccer pitch of soil is eroded) and the need to quickly change the status quo to avoid declining productivity, prevent desertification and reverse the current trajectory of 95% of all soils being degraded by 2050.

Margherita Genua – helping farmers improve yields while preserving the environment

Margherita Genua is Project Manager at RISE Foundation, where she focuses on sustainable agriculture by developing policy aspects, connecting stakeholders across the EU, fostering dialogue on policy-related issues, and effectively communicating project results. With more than 10 years of experience in the EU-funded projects on circular economy, has worked at Ghent University and the European Biogas Association (EBA), focusing on fertilizers and nutrient recycling and bridging research, policy, and industry to create tangible impact.

Margherita Genua

Project Manager at RISE Foundation

Your current focus: What is a key challenge you are tackling right now, and what are you doing concretely to move the needle?

As a project manager at RISE foundation, a key challenge I am currently tackling is how to better connect research with policy in a way that truly supports farmers which are at the centre of the transition toward a more sustainable and resilient agricultural system in Europe. To address this, I focus on making research more farmer-centred and policy-relevant by translating complex findings into clear, practical messages and fostering dialogue between researchers, policymakers, and farmers. This helps ensure solutions are grounded in both evidence and real-world farming realities.

Share one practice, tool or approach you have tested that delivers real results. Why would you recommend it?

One approach that has proven highly effective is facilitating multi-stakeholder collaboration between farmers, public authorities, researchers and local communities to address agricultural challenges. By creating a space for dialogue, knowledge exchange, and joint problem-solving, this approach supports effective responses to the challenges facing agriculture today, such as improving resource management, encouraging sustainable farming practices, strengthening supply chain resilience, and enhancing adaptation to environmental and climate pressures.

I recommend it because it demonstrates how inclusive engagement can translate diverse perspectives into concrete, sustainable outcomes for the sector.

In one sentence: What very concrete issue in agriculture is most on your mind at the moment, and why?

A key issue on my mind is how to effectively support and reward farmers in meeting their immediate needs while progressively adopting more sustainable and resilient farming practices. This calls for supportive policies with market-based approaches that actively promote innovation as well as collaborative efforts to ensure the long-term resilience and sustainability of the agricultural sector in the face of environmental, economic and geopolitical challenges.

Link to the Nutribudget webinar here

Laila Pinheiro - advocating for a resilient agriculture

Laila Pinheiro is a public affairs and communications leader with over 20 years of experience in multinational companies across Latin America and Europe. Based in Brussels, she serves as Director of Public Affairs for Europe at Syngenta, where she delivers the company's EU advocacy strategy and government engagement. Before that, she led external affairs for Latin America and Brazil, advising senior executives on public policy, reputation, sustainability and strategic advocacy. Her broader career includes senior roles at Dow and Ericsson, with expertise spanning policy campaigns, stakeholder engagement, regulatory strategy and communications in highly regulated sectors.

Laila holds a degree in Public Relations, an MBA from FGV, and advanced training in EU policy and diplomacy from the College of Europe and The Graduate Institute Geneva. In 2024, she was named to Forbes' "50 Women Who Take Agriculture from Brazil to the World".

Laila Pinheiro

Director of Public Affairs, Europe, Syngenta

Share one approach you have tested that delivers real results. Why would you recommend it?

What has worked consistently for me is keeping engagement simple: people talking to people. This is valid in Brussels, in Latin America—everywhere. Being authentic, showing genuine interest, and taking time to understand different perspectives builds trust. In complex and fluid policy environments, resilience is essential, but it is the ability to connect perspectives and find common ground that ultimately allows you to move from positions to solutions.

A pivotal moment that changed your path

A defining moment for me was moving with my family from Brazil to Brussels. Beyond the personal transition, what stood out was how the international community embraces diversity—it's an everyday learning experience. It reinforced the importance of navigating across cultures and perspectives.It also showed me that opportunities often come from those connections, and that being open and adaptable is as important as any technical expertise.

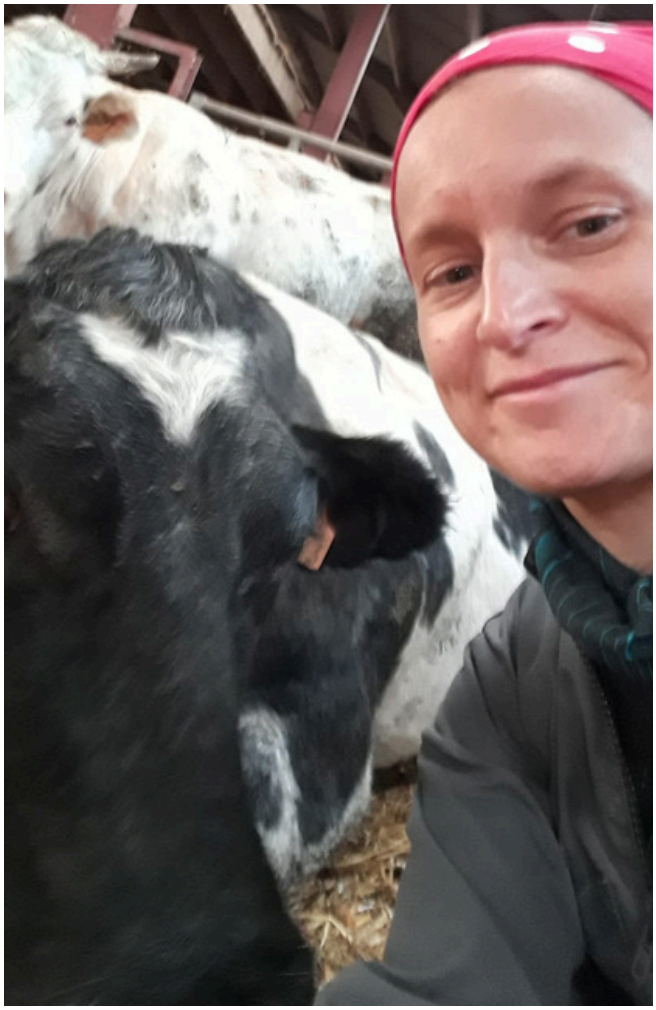
What very concrete issue in agriculture is most on your mind at the moment, and why?

A key challenge today is ensuring that simplification efforts in EU policy work across the full agricultural toolbox and support sustainable productivity. Farmers need access to the best available tools — from advanced crop protection and seed innovation to digital solutions — to produce more with less environmental impact. At Syngenta, this is precisely what drives our work: developing solutions that help farmers improve yields, reduce inputs and build resilience against climate pressures, while meeting the sustainability expectations of society and regulators.

In practice, this means engaging closely with policymakers and partners to connect innovation, sustainability, and competitiveness in a coherent way. The risk of fragmented or inconsistent policy is real — if simplification only addresses administrative burdens without preserving access to innovation, farmers lose options precisely when they need more of them. Getting that balance right is what keeps me most focused right now.

Caroline Jaspart: protecting family farms and preparing the ground for the new generation

Caroline Jaspart is a Walloon farmer and President of the Union des Agricultrices Wallonnes (UAW). Through her role, she advocates for greater recognition of women in agriculture, supports rural women's empowerment, and highlights the essential contribution of farmers to society. Deeply rooted in the realities of the field, she promotes an agriculture based on care for animals and land, practical common sense, and dialogue across farming models. She regularly contributes to discussions on the future of farming, gender equality in the sector, and the social and economic challenges faced by rural communities.



Caroline Jaspart

farmer and President of the Union des Agricultrices Wallonnes (UAW)

What is one misconception you would like to challenge, about your work or about women's place in the agri food sector?

In 2026, being a woman and a farmer should no longer be surprising. Yet some stereotypes still persist.

The myth I want to challenge is the idea that women are merely "helpers" in agriculture. On farms, women lead, invest, innovate and make strategic decisions.

I am a farmer by choice and by passion. I am also a mother of two boys and a wife. These roles do not contradict each other — they strengthen one another. Being a woman in agriculture today means combining economic responsibility, family commitment and long-term vision.

Our profession is noble. We feed the world and shape our landscapes. We work with living systems, with pride and high standards. Fully recognizing women as farmers in their own right is not symbolic — it is about building a sector that is fairer, more modern and more attractive for future generations.

What is a key challenge you are tackling right now, and what are you doing concretely to move the needle?

My priority is clear: ensuring the economic viability of family farms and preparing the ground for the young people who represent the future of agriculture. We face regulatory pressure, market instability and an administrative burden that weakens farms. Many farmers work extremely hard without real visibility for their future.

As President of the Union of Walloon Farmers, I advocate for a human-scale agricultural model that is economically viable and socially respected. Female agricultural trade unionism is a real opportunity: it allows women to represent themselves, to voice their realities and proposals, and to stop letting others speak on their behalf. It strengthens both legitimacy and impact.

A person, failure or pivotal moment that changed your path or perspective. What did it teach you?

A turning point in my journey was realizing that simply enduring decisions was not enough. If we want to influence the future of agriculture, we must be at the table. This taught me that legitimacy is not something you wait for — it is something you build — and that collective commitment is more powerful than individual frustration.

How can we ensure a fair and stable income for farmers, so that young people can still choose this profession out of passion — and so that we can continue to feed society sustainably?

The strongest innovation I have experienced is collective action. When women farmers meet and organize, they gain confidence, ambition and the capacity to act. Isolation decreases. The future becomes something we actively shape together.

Photo credit: Caroline Jaspart

Jennifer Lewis: spearheading the transition towards biocontrol

Jennifer Lewis was appointed Executive Director of IBMA in 2019. In this role, she represents IBMA in exchanges with the FAO and OECD and works closely with members and stakeholders to advance biocontrol and promote the implementation of Integrated Pest Management (IPM) worldwide.

Prior to joining IBMA, Jennifer served for 10 years on the Certis Europe Management Board, where she led Innovation, Development and Regulatory Affairs. Previously, she was General Manager of Biological Crop Protection Ltd, a company producing beneficial insects for pest control across the UK, Europe and Africa.

Jennifer has more than 35 years of experience in crop protection, having held a range of marketing, regulatory and stewardship roles in the United States, Brazil and Europe. Throughout her career, she has remained a strong advocate for IPM and biocontrol, and for their essential role in supporting more sustainable and regenerative agriculture.

She holds a degree in Agronomy, an MBA, and a Diploma in Sustainable Business Development.

Jennifer Lewis

IBMA Executive Director

What is a key challenge you are tackling right now, and what are you doing concretely to move the needle?

One of my main priorities at the moment is to help speed up the authorisation of biocontrol solutions in the EU. Today, the process is still too lengthy, and that slows down both innovation and uptake in the field. What I am doing concretely is supporting simplification measures that can make the system more efficient, encourage companies to invest in Europe, and ensure that farmers have faster access to biocontrol tools.

Share one practice, tool or approach you have tested that delivers real results. Why would you recommend it?

One innovation that I have seen deliver real results is the use of beneficial insects as part of crop management. Whether in indoor or outdoor systems, these natural enemies can play a major role in controlling pests when they are allowed to establish and flourish. For me, they are also a very concrete sign that the ecosystem is functioning properly. Too often, the discussion focuses only on the negative side effects of pesticides, but in practice, what we see is that when beneficial insects are supported, they can take on much of the pest and disease control role themselves. The real key is to look beyond the crop alone and support the whole ecosystem, especially soil health and biodiversity.

A person, failure or pivotal moment that changed your path or perspective. What did it teach you?

One pivotal moment that really changed my perspective happened in 2007, in a greenhouse in Almería. I was looking at a pepper trial using beneficial insects and mites, where all conventional pesticide applications had been removed and biopesticides were used only when needed. The first-year results showed a 35% yield increase compared with a conventional programme. Honestly, it seemed almost too good to be true, so we repeated the trial and achieved similar results again.

Having already spent 20 years in the crop protection industry, that moment was a real eye-opener for me. It showed me, very concretely, why integrated pest and disease management needs biology at its core. It taught me that biological approaches are not a niche addition, but can be central to both performance and sustainability. After that, I made it a priority to work on programmes built around biological solutions.

What very concrete issue in agriculture is most on your mind at the moment, and why?

What is most on my mind right now is the slow registration process for biocontrol in Europe. Approvals can take up to 10 years, compared with just 2 to 3 years in many other parts of the world, so we urgently need to speed things up if European farmers are to have real access to these solutions.

Photo from the event Innovators by Nature

Meghan Sapp: regenerative farming is a success story

Meghan Sapp is an accredited Master Field Professional of the Savory Institute, and cofounder of the Savory Network hub Hub del Norte, serving the northern Iberian Peninsula, France and MENA. She has practiced Holistic Management together with her husband for more than seven years on their farm, Curly Creek Ranch, one of the first Ecological Outcome Verification (EOV) verified farms in Spain. She teaches farmers and land stewards as well as provides on-farm advisory and technical support to businesses for the regenerative transition. Meghan is a founding farmer of the European Alliance for Regenerative Agriculture and now serves as its Director of Advocacy and External Relations. She is also a former negotiator as part of the UN Committee on Food Security and is part of many local farming and food sovereignty organisations. Meghan has spent more than two decades dedicated to the energy and food systems transition as a journalist, policy advocate, entrepreneur, community organiser, project developer instructor and farmer.

Meghan Sapp

Regenerative farmer, EARA's Advocacy and External Relations Director

What is a key challenge you are tackling right now, and what are you doing concretely to move the needle?

Our global and European food system is complex, so the solutions to the polycrisis we are facing must also be multidimensional. I am trying to tackle it from a systemic perspective by moving separate levers with the intention of creating a shift that is greater than the sum of its parts.

On our land, we are a learning farm where we welcome people, from producers to researchers and policymakers, to see what we do, what we have learned, and where we still need to innovate. We offer everything from tours of just a few hours to deep-dive residential courses, welcoming participants from the US to Vietnam. In Madrid and in Brussels, I'm working to bring the voice of regenerative farmers to policymakers and stakeholders to share our real-life experiences regarding the transition and co-create solutions that derisk the transition at scale as quickly as possible. I also support food companies and investors to understand how to transition their supply chains with real impact rather than exposing themselves to greenwashing. So yes, I wear quite a few hats.

Share one practice, tool or approach you have tested that delivers real results. Why would you recommend it?

Implementing Holistic Management on our farm saw our horse management costs drop by 80% in the first year, which convinced us to apply it across our businesses and everyday lives. It also led us to wind down the renewable energy consulting business we had run for over a decade and build up our farming enterprise, adapting to market demands and shifting needs to produce place-based, nutrient-dense food that our customers can't get enough of.

A person, failure or pivotal moment that changed your path or perspective.

The COVID pandemic and subsequent lockdowns forced me to stop looking outside for where I could have impact, and look down at my own land. That's when we built our farm business, making regenerative agriculture real for us rather than just a theory in a book. It may sound cheesy, but it quite literally changed our lives, and we have never looked back.

Nearly a decade on, we now have high-density biodiverse market gardens; sell rainbow-coloured eggs from our pastured hens; raise pastured broilers and turkeys; use our overly spoiled horses as ecosystem restoration tools in our pastures; and have a pair of goat lawnmowers and three large Spanish Mastiff dogs that serve as livestock guardians. We market everything within 60 km to high-value direct-to-consumer markets, and we are increasing our garden production fourfold, our poultry production tenfold, and doubling our land base.

Recommendations

Podcast: *The Regenerative Agriculture podcast* by John Kempf.

Book: *Holistic Management: A Commonsense Revolution to Restore our Environment* by Allan Savory.

Photo credit: Meghan Sapp

Dr Laia Llenas Argelaguet: opening the doors to circular models

Dr Laia Llenas Argelaguet is a Chemical Engineer with a PhD in Chemical Engineering and currently serves as Deputy Director of the BETA Technological Centre at the University of Vic – Central University of Catalonia.

Her work focuses on circular bioeconomy, sustainable water management, waste water reuse, membrane technologies, and nutrient recovery. With extensive experience in national and European research and innovation projects, she is particularly engaged in bridging scientific knowledge and practical solutions for the agri-food and environmental sectors.

Dr Laia Llenas Argelaguet

Chermical Engineer

What very concrete issue in agriculture is most on your mind at the moment, and why?

Helping farmers become co-creators of resilient agrifood systems by translating research into actionable insights and providing continuous, grounded support.

What is a key challenge you are tackling right now, and what are you doing concretely to move the needle?

As Deputy Director of the BETA Technological Center, my focus is to ensure that our research truly generates impact in the rural areas where it is most needed. I am deeply motivated by contributing to the transition toward agrifood systems that regenerate ecosystems, empower rural communities and make environmental responsibility economically viable. This means moving beyond isolated improvements and rethinking how we produce, transform, and manage resources across the whole agrifood chain.

One of our greatest challenges is making sustainability actionable for the people who operate on the ground. At BETA, we collaborate closely with farmers, cooperatives, food industries, municipalities and policy makers to develop solutions that are both scientifically rigorous and operationally feasible.

We design new technologies, processes and digital tools that open the door to circular models: nutrient recycling, improved waste and water management, regenerative agricultural practices and low-emission production systems.

We move the needle by combining advanced technical expertise with a permanent presence in the territory, engaging with farmers in a language and approach that reflect their practical needs and everyday experience.

As a woman in a leadership role, I prioritize proximity, listening and long-term engagement with all the actors of the agrifood value chain. This allows us to bridge science, practice and policy effectively, and to ensure that innovation is co-created rather than imposed.

By translating research into practical solutions, we work alongside the people who face these challenges daily.

This proximity ensures relevance, accelerates adoption, and strengthens our mission of supporting a fair and resilient transition.

At BETA, we have learned that innovation becomes transformative when farmers, policymakers and scientists shape the future together rather than reacting to problems once they appear.

Share one practice, tool or approach you have tested that delivers real results. Why would you recommend it?

One approach that consistently delivers impact is co-designing solutions with end users from the very beginning, using ex-ante impact strategies.

This ex-ante approach allows us to anticipate barriers, align expectations and design technologies, models and governance frameworks that are not only scientifically solid, but also socially accepted and economically viable. It shifts the focus from research that hopes to create change to research engineered for impact.

We apply this model across nutrient circularity, water reuse, regenerative agriculture, climate change mitigation and adaptation and biodiversity monitoring, among others. Instead of developing technology first and searching for users later, we involve end-users from the earliest design stages. This fosters shared commitment, accelerates adoption, and ensures that innovation responds to real needs and real constraints.

I recommend this approach because it changes the trajectory of projects: it reduces implementation gaps, builds trust, and transforms innovation into a collective journey. When impact is co-designed (not imposed), it becomes deeper, faster and more resilient.

Photo credit: Laia Llenas Argelaguet

Sabina Vandeweyer: from the field to the political institutions

Sabina Vandeweyer is a dairy farmer from Wuustwezel, Flanders, where she runs a family farm with her husband and three daughters. Alongside her farming work, she is deeply engaged in agricultural representation and advocacy: she serves as regional and provincial chair of Ferm voor Agravrouwen, acts as spokesperson for Landelijke Toekomst, sits as an effective member of Flanders' Strategic Advisory Council for Agriculture and Fisheries (SALV), and is politically active within CD&V. She is a strong voice for legal certainty, protection of productive farmland, and a viable future for young farmers.

Sabina Vandeweyer

Farmer & member of the Agriculture Council

What is one misconception you would like to challenge, about your work or about women's place in the agri food sector?

I am convinced that today's female farmers in Flanders are powerful women, each with a clear vision for the future of our agricultural sector. They are full-fledged partners in their businesses and a strong force in their own right. They successfully balance extensive administrative responsibilities, physical work on the farm, and caring for their families. I believe that, over the past 50 years, we have already made significant progress.

What is a key challenge you are tackling right now, and what are you doing concretely to move the needle?

Currently, I closely follow regional policy dossiers concerning the growing pressure on our agricultural land, including water projects, pipeline corridors, and nature management plans. I also place great importance on expanding my network, both among policymakers and fellow farmers. To achieve this, I attend as many meetings and receptions as possible, and I have seen my network grow steadily. Inviting policymakers to our farm and showing them around also creates opportunities for fresh inspiration and new insights.

Share one practice, tool or approach you have tested that delivers real results. Why would you recommend it?

Recently, at a reception, I wanted to get in touch with an important person who had just been appointed by our minister to mediate between nature and agriculture in our region. When I noticed that this person was speaking with a colleague of mine, I went over to greet him. He then introduced me, which gave me the opportunity to speak for half an hour with someone I had not known before and exchange contact details.

A person, failure or pivotal moment that changed your path or perspective. What did it teach you?

In 2023, around eight women farmers from our region, together with other farmers and future farmers, took action to prevent a Natura 2000 area in our region from being designated as a National Park. Together, we distributed flyers and apples in many places to inform citizens about the consequences that a National Park label could have for our sector. The fact that we succeeded has given us both the courage and the recognition to continue standing up for our rights and concerns.

I am committed to securing legal certainty for the agricultural sector, particularly through robust permits, and especially for the young farmers of the future.

What very concrete issue in agriculture is most on your mind at the moment, and why?

For me, it was always clear that I would become a farmer. And that is exactly what happened. Today, many young people are equally eager to enter the sector, but uncertainty around permits, ever-changing regulations, administrative burdens, labour, and finances presents a major barrier to starting out in agriculture. Sometimes, they do not dare take that step and choose a job outside the sector instead. I would like to help change this.

Photo credit: Sabina Vandeweyer

Saskia Visser: connecting soil scientists, farmers, policymakers, and financiers into one shared ecosystem for the green transition

Read more about Green Horizons

Dr. Saskia Visser is Strategic Partnerships & Opportunity Development Lead at Climate-KIC, where she connects capabilities across the organisation and translates them into cross-cutting propositions for cities, regions, funders and strategic partners. With over 25 years of experience in sustainable land use, agriculture and climate innovation, Saskia works at the interface of partnerships, research and business development to shape opportunities that embed agricultural value chains in regional contexts and accelerate systemic transformation of food and land systems. She is the lead initiator of the Soil Innovation Partnership, building on the legacy and network of EJP SOIL, and continues to develop initiatives such as the Green Horizons Farmers Network, supporting farmer-led innovation, validation and scaling of climate-smart and soil-healthy agricultural practices across Europe and beyond.

Dr Saskia Visser

Strategic Partnerships &
Opportunity Development Lead at Climate-KIC

What is one misconception you would like to challenge, about your work or about women's place in the agri food sector?

A myth I want to challenge is the idea that farmers resist change, despite the strikes we have also seen. The farmers I meet through my work are courageous innovators. They face climate risk in their fields every single day, and they experiment because they have to. What slows transformation is not their mindset, but fragmented systems that fail to connect them with science, finance, and each other.

I would also challenge the idea that women must adapt to the old structures of agriculture. The future of food production requires collaboration over competition, and long-term stewardship over short-term gain.

That is not about gender; it is about having the courage to redesign systems. And many women are brave enough to step forward and do exactly that.

What is a key challenge you are tackling right now, and what are you doing concretely to move the needle?

My work today is about building bridges that should have existed long ago. Through the Soil Innovation Partnership and the Green Horizons Farmers Network, we are creating spaces for radical collaboration across countries, connecting soil scientists, farmers, policymakers, and financiers within one shared ecosystem. I recently stepped down from the management team in my organisation because I truly believe this needs to happen and want to dedicate my time to it.

We organise Soilathons across Europe to turn research into real-world trials. We support farmer-led validation initiatives across different pedoclimatic zones. We create peer networks in which a practice tested in Ireland can inspire a farmer in Spain, and insights from the Netherlands can strengthen resilience in Greece. It is also my dream to go beyond Europe and expand into a truly global network. Farmers in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas face different realities, but their wisdom is deeply interconnected. We have so much to learn from one another if we build the structures that allow that learning to travel. For me, this is not just innovation. It is solidarity across borders.

The farmers I meet are courageous innovators. What slows transformation is not their mindset — it is fragmented systems that fail to connect them to science, finance, and each other.

Share one practice, tool, or approach you have tested that delivers real results. Why would you recommend it?

The most powerful innovation is farmer-led validation embedded in international peer networks. When farmers test practices together across regions and countries, supported by science and connected through structured learning platforms, something shifts: trust grows, confidence grows, and momentum builds. Innovation stops being a project and becomes a shared movement. In both SIP and Green Horizons, we see farmers not as recipients of solutions, but as co-designers of the future. That shift changes the pace and depth of transformation.

What very concrete issue in agriculture is most on your mind at the moment, and why?

What keeps me awake is how we move from fragmented sustainability pilots to courageous, cross-border collaboration at global scale — because soil health and climate resilience are shared responsibilities, and our solutions must be shared as broad as possible.

Photo credit: Saskia Visser

Costanza Michelini di San Martino: Hands-on innovation in agriculture

Costanza Michelini di San Martino is an agronomist and entrepreneur working as a freelancer in agricultural land management, agricultural assessments and certifications. She is particularly passionate about the restoration and maintenance of historic rural buildings, their parks and agricultural land, promoting the repopulation of rural areas. She is also the co-founder of BioVerdissimo, a start-up specialising in the sustainable aeroponic cultivation of raw materials for the cosmetics industry. After completing an internship at ELO several years ago as part of the EU-funded FARMELDER project, she has continued to support ELO periodically in the development of EU project proposals.

Costanza Michelini di San Martino

Agronomist

What is one misconception you would like to challenge, about your work or about women's place in the agrifood sector?

One of the most common one is that agricultural work is monotonous, reserved for older men with a low level of education, and based exclusively on physical strength. In reality, agriculture offers countless career paths: some require strategic thinking and long-term vision, others involve manual labour that demands precision and delicacy. There are roles where you will never sit at a desk, others where you may never walk in a field, and some where you get to do both. My favourite!

The key is to find your own path and give it your best shot, without being intimidated by the fact that you are in the minority. Workers are always needed, and being part of a minority can, in some cases, be an advantage: it allows you to stand out more for your technical and soft skills, thus becoming a recognizable and indispensable professional.

Has a person, failure, or pivotal moment ever changed your path or perspective? What did it teach you?

A crucial moment in my journey was the transition from working as an agronomist in close contact with farmers in the fields to an office job at the European Parliament. I believed that the biggest changes were happening in Brussels. However, I realised that to help the agricultural sector, it was better to stay with my hands in the soil and with a few good contacts in Brussels.

My past has taught me the importance of never losing touch with reality, keeping my feet firmly on the ground and constantly learning from the people who have lived and worked in the fields for generations.

Policies and strategies are fundamental, but can only be written if you have a deep and concrete knowledge of the territory. Agriculture is first and foremost knowledge of the nature and then regulated on paper.

In one sentence: What very concrete issue in agriculture is most on your mind at the moment, and why?

What matters most to me right now is the social aspect of agriculture. I would like to find a way to address the shortage of agricultural labour by supporting homeless people, providing them with accommodation, helping them to integrate into the community and involving them in jobs that bring them into contact with nature. In my opinion, this exchange of help could have a positive impact on individuals, on the community, on health and on the economy, while also helping to revitalise rural areas.

From LinkedIn: Costanza with her colleagues at BioVerdissimo

Sarah Lake: redesigning our diet to save our health, economy, and planet

Sarah Lake is a leader of climate change solutions for agriculture emissions with an extensive track record working on protein transition, diet shifts and deforestation-free supply chains.

Prior to Tilt Collective, Sarah co-founded Madre Brava, a science-based advocacy organisation working to elevate protein transition as a critical climate solution and helped unlock hundreds of millions of dollars in climate funding for meat reduction strategies.

Earlier in her career she worked at WRI where she helped design the first science-based target for land-use, and co-led Trase in partnership with the Stockholm Environment Institute.

She has a PhD in Economic Sociology where her research focused on the environment and social harms of livestock supply chains.

Sarah Lake

CEO, Tilt Collective

What is a key challenge you are tackling right now, and what are you doing concretely to move the needle?

A key challenge is that our food system is not working: it's not working for producers who earn less and less each year, while facing the very real impacts of climate change and corporate consolidation in the agriculture sector. The food system is also not working for consumers who are experiencing rising food costs, limited access to fresh foods, and unprecedented rates of diet-related disease and malnutrition.

Tilt Collective is working to rebalance our food system towards a more sustainable, healthy, and just approach.

By diversifying production towards sustainable and nutritious foods - focusing on whole, plant-rich and minimally processed foods -we stand to make enormous strides towards improving public health, reducing future climate impacts, and supporting producer livelihoods. This kind of transformation is possible - the food system has changed dramatically before, and with the right investment, it can change again.

Share one practice, tool or approach you have tested that delivers real results. Why would you recommend it?

A key principle of our approach at Tilt Collective is that there cannot be a one-size-fits-all model for agriculture and food. Food is cultural, political, and very locally defined.

As we work to build a better food system, the definition of 'better' must be determined by local stakeholders, with strategies that are co-created by local organizations and communities, not imposed from the outside. Tilt Collective's country directors work very closely with stakeholders across the system, from farmers to civil society groups to researchers.

As a result, our strategies not only have greater local support, but also reflect the lived realities of those in the food and agriculture system, and advance solutions best suited to address these challenges.

What very concrete issue in agriculture is most on your mind at the moment, and why?

The status quo is untenable - change will happen whether we like it or not, from mounting water scarcity to climate driven yield losses to farmers losing their livelihoods, and the key question is whether we can proactively steward it towards a more sustainable, healthy, and just system.

By diversifying production towards sustainable and nutritious foods - focusing on whole, plant-rich and minimally processed foods - we stand to make enormous strides towards improving public health, reducing future climate impacts, and supporting producer livelihoods.

From the Video: "The Hidden Forces Behind Your Food Choices | Sarah Lake | TED" by TED

Zoé de Spoelberch: leading the transition toward less pesticides worldwide

Winner of the Prince Albert Fund, Zoe is currently working in Colombia for Biobest analysing the potential for biological control and IPM (Integrated Pest Management) in the Latin American horticultural sector and developing Biobest's commercial activities from Colombia.

In the past, as a regenerative agriculture consultant she also helped develop rotational cattle grazing plans for a 15,000ha farm under SARA's (South American Regenerative Agriculture) carbon program, sequestering 5O+ tons of carbon per year. She also initiated a sustainable cattle grazing project to restore 5,000 ha of farm land in Patagonia by building partnerships across The Nature Conservancy, Ovis21, government agencies, and farm workers, increasing farm production by 30% and farm profitability by 90% through carbon credits.

She also helped collect natural capital and biodiversity data across Courageous Land's agroforestry farm in São Paolo, Brazil. By conducting trials to test different natural herbicides, she contributed to the fully organic management of 5 ha of land.

Zoe also managed African bee colonies in Alajuela, Costa Rica, and collected native Euglossa orchid bees to contribute to research on biodiversity conservation by the University of Costa Rica. She also helped indigenous women in Bribri, Costa Rica, generate new income streams to support their community by promoting a sustainable cacao tourist tour. As an experienced beekeeper, she's helped organizations in Belgium, her home country, with beehive maintenance and honey harvests.

Zoé de Spoelberch

Biobest business developer Latam

What is a key challenge you are tackling right now, and what are you doing concretely to move the needle?

Pesticides used in our agricultural systems degrade soil health and contribute significantly to biodiversity loss. After three years in the finance industry, engaging with multinational companies to integrate regenerative agriculture practices, I shifted toward fieldwork to create a more direct impact. I supported the development of regenerative agriculture projects across Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and Costa Rica, driven by the ambition to reduce pesticide use and resistance while protecting natural pollinators and surrounding ecosystems.

My work is dedicated to advancing Target 7 of the Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), which calls for reducing "the overall risk from pesticides and highly hazardous chemicals by at least half." This aligns with the EU Farm to Fork and Biodiversity Strategies for 2030, targeting a 50% reduction in the use and risk of chemical pesticides and a 50% reduction in the most hazardous pesticides.

To contribute to these goals, I now focus on scaling the use of macrobials (also known as natural enemies) in production systems. These biological control tools are well-established in parts of Europe but remain nascent in much of Latin America. Based in Colombia, I am researching the biocontrol market and identifying opportunities to scale these nature-based solutions locally, supporting a transition toward safer and more resilient food systems.

Share one practice, tool or approach you have tested that delivers real results. Why would you recommend it?

Integrated Pest Management (IPM) is a sustainable, science-based strategy that combines biological, cultural, and physical tools to manage pests while minimizing risks to human and environmental health.

The overreliance on synthetic pesticides is deeply concerning because it not only kills pests but also harms beneficial insects, pollinators, soils, and water sources, accelerating biodiversity loss and driving widespread pesticide resistance — making chemical controls increasingly ineffective and underscoring the urgent need to scale safer alternatives such as biopesticides and natural enemies.

By introducing natural enemies — such as predatory mites that feed on harmful pests or parasitic wasps that suppress pest populations — IPM reduces dependence on chemical pesticides and offers an effective solution in high pesticide-resistance scenarios. As agriculture faces escalating chemical resistance, biodiversity loss, and regulatory pressure to reduce synthetic pesticide use, IPM has become increasingly essential. Its potential for adoption is especially strong in European horticulture, where consumer demand favors safer production systems. Beyond Europe, IPM represents a scalable, long-term solution capable of strengthening environmental health, farmer resilience, and overall sustainability.

From the Video: "Biobest: Natural solutions to optimise global sustainable crop yields" by TBD Media Group