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 50+ 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.

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.

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.

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