

## Make sustainability trendy and sexy

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**How will we deal with energy in the future? And how are we going to get people to consume in a more sustainable manner? Young, creative thinkers Gaya Branderhorst, Lucas Simons and Stijn Otten about the chances and opportunities.**

Amsterdam is quiet on this summer weekday. However, this is not the case at Artis, where the parking lot was full even before 11am. Inside, in the Tijgerzaal, we meet **Gaya Branderhorst, Lucas Simons** and **Stijn Otten**. Young thinkers, that all share the same inspiration for sustainability. During the conversation we look out on a large, dramatic painting by Charles Verras, on which a tiger cruelly jumps onto a buffalo. In the background we can hear fitting shrieks. Is it from the animals or from the not yet worried generation behind us, to whom we do not want to leave the earth too depleted?

**Gaya Branderhorst** (30) worked in econometrics after her study as financial analyst and would later set up StoereVrouwen, a front of [young women](#) dressed in army clothing that consume consciously and sustainably and carry this out through all sorts of striking actions. She is currently a policy officer at [De Nederlandsche Bank](#) (her statements are on her personal title).

Entrepreneur **Lucas Simons** (39) has for three years been managing sustainable advice agencies NewForesight & ForeFinance. Before that, he was director at UTZ Certified, a sustainability label for sustainable coffee. The World Economic Forum named him 'Young Global Leader' earlier this year, because of his services in the sustainable trade sector.

**Stijn Otten** (27) was a member of the youth delegation that took part in the [climate conference](#) in Copenhagen. He is currently president of the Dutch branch of the Young [Club of Rome](#) and also works for [The New Motion](#), a company that aims at the (breakthrough of) electrical driving.

Conversation leader Floske Kusse, issue manager at [NUON](#), asks the three about their involvement with [sustainability](#).

**Lucas Simons:** 'Since about ten years I actively work in achieving sustainability. In 2002 I was part of the creation of the sustainability label UTZ Certified; currently 45 per cent of the worldwide coffee market has been certified. Right now I am working with NewForesight to achieve a sustainable market transformation in food – and resources chains. Think for instance cacao, sugar, coffee, tea, soy and flowers. We not only focus on individual products or suppliers, but on changing the rules of the game in a market or sector. We get the pioneers together, and then put the spotlights onto their initiatives hoping that the rest will follow. With ForeFinance we try to establish a rating system that can map the credibility of farmer cooperations. That transparency has to result in banks giving out credits sooner than they do now.'

**Branderhorst:** 'Since 2007 I lead StoereVrouwen, a group of young women that focuses on companies and consumers to spread the message of conscious consuming. Many people don't know how to do that, they have become idle to all world problems. However, you consume every day, and with the choices that you make, you can already make a good start. We don't point the finger at others, but are only positively involved; we show people through all kinds of actions what they do well and how they could do better. We have for instance worked with Oxfam Novib in launching the Groene Sint, so that from next year onwards people will only be able to buy honest and sustainable chocolate letters. I'm currently working as

a policy officer at [DNB](#), and try to work at sustainability there from the inside out.’  
**Otten:** ‘An important moment for me was the climate top in Copenhagen, at the end of 2009. The outcomes were very disappointing. We as young people walked around there in T-shirts with on it the text ‘How old will you be in 2050?’ This straight away fired off some discussions, because what the decision makers did in there, or did not do, directly influences our [generation](#) and the generations after us. Last month I had the opportunity to go to Spitsbergen, and what I learned there is that the planet doesn’t care whether we burn everything; the planet will survive, but we will make it very uncomfortable for ourselves and the generations after us if we don’t start living in a more sustainable way. I now work at The New Motion on the breakthrough of electrical transport. We try, amongst other things, to make it more trendy. We try to make driving in electrical cars fun and trendy. We’ll for instance put an electrical sports car somewhere that you can plug into a new charging pole. And around that, we have a party. Cars are emotion, we draw a very diverse public with it. From people that want to better the world to fast MTV types.’

### **Where are we going with the way we use energy?**

**Branderhorst:** ‘I think that the perspective of [energy](#) and clean air becoming scarce, is quite frightening. This can enlarge our dependency on oil rich countries only further, and that is not a dependency that makes me happy. I also see an ideal world where everyone generates their own energy. The possibilities are there. Scientists have calculated that the sun sends eighteen times as much energy to earth than we all use per year. And that, by using one per cent of the unused land surface on earth for the production of [solar energy](#), we can produce more than three times our total yearly energy consumption.’

**Otten:** ‘As long as there is oil and we’ll be able to extract this for a reasonable price, we will keep using oil. Definitely for medications and plastics, for which you really need oil. In the northern hemisphere, our whole infrastructure is aimed at oil. You could more or less say that the southern hemisphere lacks this infrastructure. Because of that, you can make big steps right away. Put solar panels in African villages and they’ll have energy. I can see that happening. In the Netherlands, we’ll suffer from our natural gas addiction for a while. It smothers every form of technological invention when it comes to new forms of energy. Our CO2 emission went up by seven per cent last year, simply because we don’t use sustainable, renewable energy in the Netherlands.’

### **Who has to take initiative to come to a more sustainable energy supply?**

**Otten:** ‘I think it has to happen from the bottom upwards. We definitely don’t have to expect anything from politicians. I believe in the power of the individual consumer, who does something because it makes him feel better. Consumers already buy cheap power collectively through auctions, they can set up cooperations to buy windmills or solar panels, they will cooperate more in the future.’

**Branderhorst:** ‘I agree with you that the [Dutch government](#) does not give any impulse right now whatsoever: then yes, then no. It’s not good for entrepreneurs, because they no longer know what they can expect.’

**Otten:** ‘As a consumer, you should definitely not assume that you’ll get some sort of subsidy. As we [recalculate scenario’s](#) at The New Motion, we will look at governmental subsidies as realistically as possible. It can only turn out better that way.’

**Simons:** ‘I don’t agree at all with the point that it should start from the bottom. With Fairtrade, that hasn’t succeeded either, because after 25 years Fairtrade has a market share of no more than three per cent. The majority of consumers only reacts to primary incentives. What will my friends think? What tv show should I watch so that I can join the discussion tomorrow? They don’t have the energy or the thinking capability to

think further than the daily routine. I think that is very sad, but that's the way it is. If tuna is almost extinct, you shouldn't hope for consumers to no longer buy the tuna or launch a well meant fish guide. No, you should simply stop offering that tuna in the shops.

### **Are you the only ones out there or do more people around you feel the need to come to a more sustainable society?**

**Simons:** 'I definitely see some sort of feeling of urgency amongst young people.'

**Branderhorst:** 'Me too, but at the same time people don't really care. As soon as they have to give up something for it, they quickly think that it's not really their business. You have to adapt to people's feelings in a smart way. As soon as something becomes trendy, people want to be part of the solution.'

**Otten:** 'People have different roles. As a citizen, they think sustainability is very important. But as consumer they simply go for the cheapest product. You therefore have to create a context for people wherein you make it comfortable for them to make sustainable choices. A sustainable product not only has to be more expensive, but indeed trendy and attractive. And when it is also sustainable, then people think of it as a bonus. I have that myself, I want to buy sustainable clothing, but only when it looks good and is reasonably priced. Especially with green power: great choice, as long as we don't have to pay more for it.'

### **What solutions for the energy questions do you envision in the short term?**

**Otten:** 'I strongly believe in decentralisation. That fits into a society wherein networking becomes more and more important, and wherein existing structures are being torn down. While we'll need the fossil fuels for a while to be able to fulfil our total energy needs, there are great solutions. Take for instance the BlueGen, that is a small power plant that you can simply put in your attic at home. It works based on fuel cells and is as big as a washing machine. This machine can generate energy with biogas even more efficiently than the most modern power plants. And it will also decrease your CO2 reduction.'

**Simons:** 'For structural solutions, you have to look at system level. There first has to come a shared vision for the energy mix that the country wants to have in the future. Companies need to create an innovation pipeline of new concepts in the areas of decentralized generation, of tidal movements, etc. And then, you should be happy when a few of those ideas seem to work. As an entrepreneur, I know: don't count on the big companies, universities and large research organizations. We need the small, innovative companies and creative individuals. Minister Verhagen might have put aside five hundred million for an innovation fund, but that is old economics. I don't see anything back from that in my world.'

**Branderhorst:** 'Suppliers, and this also goes for energy companies, need to assume win-win solutions. As a consumer it needs to be relevant straight away, otherwise they'll lose you. I really think that it is an illusion to play it via the consumer's consciousness. With that, you'll only reach a few per cent of consumers. Always go for the masses, it is better to have a large group of consumers that consume a little bit sustainably, than a small group that does everything right.'

**Simons:** 'If you want to come to [innovative energy solutions](#), then it will help if more recognition comes for concrete forms of social, sustainable innovation. Innovation is a lonely act. Recognition is interesting, because the subject can then become sexy.'

**Otten:** 'The numbers show that the Netherlands is spending less and less money on innovation. That to me is a sad image.'

**Simons:** 'I never see people of our innovation platform. I do meet individuals with smart plans. The other day I talked to something that wants to stop desertification by following the deforestation via Google Maps, and then dig trenches at the right places so that the desert can advance no further. A brilliant and cheap plan. We should recognize such innovative people way more.'

**Otten:** 'If you think about innovation, you shouldn't just think about production, but also distribution. Are Led-lights expensive? Then you think of a construction to lease them, which is happening right now. Stick that massive wall along the A2 near Utrecht full of solar panels, rent them to consumers that can drive past their own 'solar plant' in their cars. People will really like that. In short, sustainable innovation can be done in a much better way, if you creatively use existing measures together.'

Above article with Gaya Branderhorst, Lucas Simons and Stijn Otten about Sustainability appeared in the special **De Toekomst van Energie** in collaboration with [NUON](#).