

# Executive Board meets XR

The Wageningen Extinction Rebellion campaign group has been protesting for over a year now and efforts have been made to start a dialogue with the Executive Board. Are they getting any closer?

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Extinction Rebellion (XR) demands transparency from WUR about collaboration with the private sector. They want a strong policy on the climate and ecological crisis, and they want students and staff to be involved in decision-making. Since the group started protesting they have met with the Executive Board and engaged in a climate policy dialogue with Rector Magnificus Arthur Mol. But XR keeps on protesting. Time to invite one of the XR students Solina Diallo and Executive Board member Rens Buchwaldt and ask them if they are getting any closer.

**Solina:** 'We want to know what reasons and risks are considered when WUR starts a collaboration with private companies. When Unilever started on campus we found it difficult to find detailed information about the process that led to the decision.'

**Rens:** 'We can't find all the solutions and answers on our own anymore. There are a lot of challenges in this world and we want to have a positive impact. We feel

the need to work together. This means working together with NGOs and other universities or institutions, as well as private companies. We have a policy on how we would like to engage with companies, which you can now find online. If new companies come to campus there are criteria and intentions that need to be in place. First, they have to be open to being part of our WUR ecosystem. Knowledge institutes have to be active within the domain of WUR and be of interest for our students or researchers. Also, they should share their facilities with us, and vice versa. Can they add something and help us create impact? That is the process we try to engage in with them.'

**Solina:** 'Of course we should not stay in our ivory tower. But we think that WUR is sending the wrong message. The companies that are on campus are not diverse. They all have the same vision on, for example, the future of the food system. There are many other food systems and visions of sustainability. Right now WUR is focusing on multinationals which create new demands that require a lot of

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to something'



# ‘WUR is sending the wrong message’

technology and resources, and centralize power within the food system. This sends a message that WUR aims primarily at private sector collaboration.’

**Rens:** ‘You have a good point about the diversity of the ecosystem. We are a scientific institution and we need to widen our horizon. On the other hand, we have 180 parties and companies on campus, so there are many different views present. I agree with you that the companies on campus tend to be the bigger ones. But we recently purchased Nergena, a building between the fields to the north of campus. It is a chance for the smaller organizations to join us that don’t want to be in the industrial heart of the campus. NGOs could move in there.’

**Solina:** ‘It is helpful to get an explanation like this. But I still think you should show students and staff more about the processes that are going on, and show us that you see that certain decisions can be controversial.’

**Rens:** ‘If we plan collaboration or new policy, we interact with different stakeholder groups like the WUR Council and the Student Staff Council. But one conversation about a topic is not enough, I agree with you on that. So we also try to engage with others outside these official parties, for example the session Rector Arthur Mol held with XR about the climate crisis. We need to work together.’

**Solina:** ‘And to work on a fundamental change. Wageningen aims to create science with societal impact which is an inherently political act, but shies away from taking a political stance on climate change.’

**Rens:** ‘WUR is a big mix of opinions and we take these into account. So if you look at the future of food, there is not one vision we can declare to be *the* vision. We need to constantly engage in all these different aspects and move forward. Different paths lead in different directions.’

**Solina:** ‘But the political aspect is still missing. The argument we usually hear about this is that WUR is not a political organization. I would love to see WUR acknowledge that there *is* a political component to food production. This should be part of the conversation.’

**Rens:** ‘We have our Social Sciences group that deals with the political side. And in other groups too, we have the socio-economic side, as well as the technical side. The answer isn’t only in a political solution or in a technical solution. It’s a combination.’

**Solina:** ‘In the strategic plan you can read that we create societal value and are pursuing science that is close to society. Don’t you see a conflict there? Don’t we inevitably create something political with the science we promote to the world?’

**Rens:** ‘The primary aim is that we want to achieve impact. But to do that, we need to be independent, reliable and honest. We should not make one-sided statements, or we will lose our ability to have an impact. And we will lose our position as a source of knowledge and factual information.’

**Solina:** ‘I’m glad we are having this discussion, but it is a process and we will keep on demonstrating until something



fundamentally changes in the way students and staff are being engaged.’

**Rens:** ‘You should, as long as we can engage about it. It needs to lead to something, not just be demands.’ ■

See also [wur.nl/transparantie](http://wur.nl/transparantie) and [wur.eu/transparency](http://wur.eu/transparency)

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