

INTERVIEW WITH ARNOUD PASSENIER
Ministerie van Infrastructuur en Waterstaat
The Hague, June 25th, 2018

[continuation after getting authorization for recording]

ARNOUD:

It [the agreement regarding raw materials] started from 2008, 2009. At the starting of the crisis in the whole world. So, we saw a lot of price increase of raw materials, and also oil and gas. But we didn't know what would really happen. So, we started an investigation on the scarcity of raw materials in the context of climate change, biodiversity laws, and geopolitical shifts in power. So, the upcoming economies, like China and India, and what that would mean strategically for our Dutch international policies. And by looking at that we saw first that we should have a Strategic Raw Materials Policy, which we didn't have before. And that, at the same time, there were opportunities to close the phosphate's cycle, because there was a huge abundance of phosphates out of animal manure and etc. Elsewhere, there was scarcity of phosphates. Specially if you know that 70% of the phosphate rock is extracted in phosphate mines in Morocco. So, the phosphate reserves are there. So, if something happens in Morocco, then we have big problems in future for all productions of food, because you need phosphate for fertilizers, and if you don't have fertilizers, then you don't have...

So, that was the start of my involvement in the scarcity, but also in the circular economy, which we didn't call like that before. Resource efficiency... And after the success of that process, which was... Where a lot of people, from different sectors, were involved, they said well... Is there a possibility that you can arrange something, the same, with another topic? And I said, well... Then I want to start with plastics.

LUISA:

Oh! So you chose plastics?

ARNOUD:

Yes, because plastics... There was a growing of public awareness on the plastic soup, at the same time there was a lot of NGO's, but also companies, interested in working along the value chain to innovate with partnerships. So, it was a real opportunity to look for a value chain agreement – we called like that. So, I first had a value chain agreement on phosphates, and then a value chain agreement on plastics, in 2013.

To get all those stakeholders together and see if they agree opportunities to initiatives to promote innovation along the value chain to make it easier to scale up those innovations. And, well... That was a great success. And after that...

But in the context of this value chain agreements, with all those stakeholders, I said well... We have to... Because there were a lot of people engaged in cleaning up rivers, and lakes, and etc. So I said, that's interesting. And Boyan Slat was one of them.

LUISA:

Oh! I was going to ask it...

ARNOUD:

So, I said... Well, we should have a sort of ultimate goal for the next couple of years. Because then... People are engaged enough, so we take concrete steps. And I said, well... There is one urgent matter, and that is the Olympic Games, in Rio. So, people were really interested, engaged, and also the Consulate General of the Netherlands in Rio was very enthusiastic and wanted to organize a seminar, etc etc. And they said, well, if you want to come here you are most welcomed, and we can organize an event. And I said, well, I want to come with a business delegation. Because we need to have an overall. We can do something as a government, but, at the same time, you need private action to solve the problem of the pollution of the Guanabara Bay and of the Lagoa Rodrigo de Freitas. Because there the events on sailing, and rowing, and swimming, will take place. And I organized that mission to Rio, in March 2015. So we had one year and a quarter to solve the issue.

(both laugh)

LUISA:

Almost no time to do...

ARNOUD:

Yes, but there were a lot of people thrilled with the idea of solving the issue. Because also the organization of Rio 2016, they said, well, please help us with that problem.

LUISA:

We had a lot of news regarding that during this time.

ARNOUD:

The State of Rio said, well, we are coping with it. But they didn't cope with it... They denied in public. But in the meantime they said, well... Interesting that you want to work with us, and I came with a plan to have 20 concrete projects on cleaning up, but also introducing new forms of waste management, organic waste and plastic waste... But also on creating manufacturing industry in the favelas in Rio. Also using opportunities to link it to tourism, with the Christ statue, and the favela Santa Catarina. And they said, come back to us with concrete plans. So, we developed a **booklet** with the vision on collaboration between the Netherlands and the State of Rio, accompanied with 20 concrete projects in which we said, well, if you do this, not only you can solve for the short term the problem of cleaning up the Guanabara Bay, but also for the long term you spread the seeds for the circular economy. So, start small, and you can scale up from this. With the involvement of the favelas, so...

LUISA:

So, also the social dimension.

ARNOUD:

Yes, the social dimension. Also education projects... Not only high tech solutions, but also low tech solutions on water management, for example, using ___(inaudible), specially

in the favelas, where you don't have the infrastructure with sewerage system, etc. It is very interesting to work on that... And we had the involvement of the World Bank, the Interamerican Development Bank, and the Brazilian Development Bank. So, also the financial sector was involved. Because we said... You need, for all those problems, a holistic approach in which you not only focus on technical innovation, but social innovations as well, and governance. So, governance is very important to implement all the policies. You can have a lot of regulation, but if you don't look at the implementation, how to do it, how to work together, also in the region... It is crucial for success. And the finance. So, technical innovations, social innovations, finance, and governance, are the three pillars of the approach. In which our government and private sector has the wish to cope with.

LUISA:

So, both Dutch government and Dutch companies would engage on this?

ARNOUD:

Yes. They were both engage. And also the ___(inaudible) fund... Those are some social enterprises. They were involved as well.

LUISA:

Were those parties the same then those of the deal that you had here on plastic, or different parties?

ARNOUD:

No... They came together in the context of our value chain agreement on plastics.

LUISA:

So, the thing evolved gradually.

ARNOUD:

Yes. The whole approach of the Dutch government was totally different from the of United States, or Israel, or Japan.... But, in the end, it failed because the government of Rio was almost bankrupt. There was a lot of corruption, of course... And the problem politically with Roussef... It came all together, and in the end it was... The federal government didn't want to invest more in the Guanabara Bay, because they didn't have enough belief that the government of Rio was capable of doing the right things now. Because before there was 600million dollars invested in solving the pollution of the Guanabara Bay, and things got worse instead of better. So, they didn't want to invest more into it.

But a lot of institutions, like the World Bank, and the Interamerican Development Bank, and the Brazilian Development Bank, were ready to invest.

LUISA:

Even with the crisis the banks were willing to invest but the government said no?

ARNOUD:

Yes!

LUISA:

Oh! That is so weird! Because the government should be the first one to trust that...

ARNOUD:

Yes. And we had a really good plan.

I can send you the link to the booklet, so you can download it.

But it was an interesting development, and well... We learned a lot about it and it's a pity that we couldn't implement it. Although I think that there is one project out of those twenty, which has been implemented. I don't know the situation at the moment, but... The WWF Brasil, they took the initiative to... They said, well, we will take the coordination of this project. It was about the Rio Carioca. To clean up the Rio Carioca, which is, of course, going through the city of Rio. But it was really filthy. To clean it up, to use old water reservoirs, on top of the hill, near the Christ statue. And involving the people of the favela, to use the whole society of favela, to link to tourism, but also to have a better water management, and waste water management. But also to create out of plastic waste new products, which they could sell to the people.

So there was a real integrative project there. And the Rio Carioca is also very important for the mayor of Rio, so, well... It is in the heart of the carioca... It was the easiest part, I think. But I don't know how far they are now at this moment in the project. But it was really inspirational for them to start that project.

Well... That's only the Rio case. But I don't know... Maybe you can introduce what you are doing for research now at this moment... Why did you come to me?

(both laugh)

LUISA:

It's a long story actually... But my research focuses on the international law, because my focus is on the international waters. So, the plastic pollution in the oceans, but the part of the oceans that belong to nobody. That is why I started with international law, because you have to solve sovereignty issues, no-man-land issues... So you have all those problems. But my main course is to go through the relationships between government, civil society, and companies, because companies are a big part of the problem, and my hypothesis is that you do need regulation, but you also need to know where you don't need regulation. So, how to start, how to not push it to much, because otherwise you would have everybody against the regulation, and you don't have compliance, and so on. But of course I have to prove all those things, this is only my hypothesis. And we don't have a very good example nowadays in the international scenario, where I could test those aspects. And with the Dutch Deals... Well... First I saw about the Green Deals, that's why I contacted you regarding them, but now I'm learning that the Dutch government has a history of working with companies and the private sector... And it seems to be working! So, it got my attention because I wanted to know how did it start, how do the parties engage, does the government go with a plan and ask, or do the companies come... What do they gain with it, is it working, and so on...

Because, although it is a national initiative, in a more national context, the problems that you face... They are similar. Of course when you go international then you have the problem of scale, but in the starting point the problems are similar. Like... Would companies engage in environmental protection initiatives if they don't have profits out of this? Why do they engage? Would they continue it in long terms? Because sometimes they just do it for PR purposes... But then, do you still have good outcomes out of this? Even if it doesn't work, does it help the government and the civil society to have better information to then, maybe, do better regulation out of this? So, those are my main problems, that I think that even if you look at a national context you have the same issues. So, I can start here to then say... Yeah... We can relate this problem with this international problem, and then we could look at the problem in the international scenario and know how to start. Because, currently, we have pretty much nothing. Nothing is too harsh, but we don't have much on plastics on the international arena, so my main goal with my research is to try to give suggestions on how to start. So it's not about which is the solution, but which is the best direction to try to start towards a solution.

So... those are my goals.

ARNOUD:

First... There are two interviews with the news-site Apolitical... I don't know if you know... It is an international site... If you google it, then you will find it. First on the Rio, but the second on phosphates.

But in the end it dealt with this exact question... You can do a lot with voluntary approaches... Collaboration between private companies... If you want, if you are open to what... To that sort of collaboration. Being a partner as government, instead of directing what should be done by the industry. And, of course, you have to keep in mind that the Netherlands is always a country with a culture of collaboration. We couldn't do without it. Because of the water issue – we are living below the sea level – so we have to collaborate together. It's also smart business... It's business wise to collaborate together with government to have enough room for the business as well. But at the same time, it helps the government a lot to approach things through collaboration with the private sector instead of regulations. What you say is very recognizable... If you want to change systems in the economy... If you do it with regulation, well... The start is easy. You create a lot of resistance against this regulation. You should enforce your regulation with a lot of capacity that you don't have, or... So, it's not easy to do that. Sometimes it works very well. I always say... It's not or, or. You need regulations to have the right frameworks for the industry. But the culture of what we call ___(inaudible) it is essential for the success of our voluntary approach. It is easy for us to talk with industry. If we look to Germany, they find it very difficult to trust each other: industry and government. And that's something that we don't have. We just talk with industry. Of course we have our own public interest, and sometimes we have to say that, well, it's nice that you want things, but we have to cope also with other interests other than the individual interest of a private company.

But it works very well to collaborate with industry, specially on plastics, because the industry have different motives to work on the circular economy. One is that the plastic industry is really afraid for the image of plastics in society. So, for the image it's good to collaborate in such a way that plastics is not associated with problems all the time. And

they are facing now a lot of articles about plastics, and they say... Oh... People won't trust plastics anymore. And we and the European Commission always trust as well, that plastics is good and has done a good job for climate and environment as well. Because it's light, it's flexible and strong at the same time... So, it has done a lot for saving a lot of energy in the past. But the way we are dealing with it now... Well, we have to change our behavior, because as humans we have to try to solve the issue, so...

But at the same time, the industry has other motives, like if you save plastics, or if you save materials, then it costs less than... So, you can have a cost reduction, making the process much more efficient. And that is also the circular economy. To not only close the cycle, but also to do that with efficient use of the materials themselves. So, the cost issue is one that is very important for the industry as well. And another issue is the climate change. CO2 emissions, you can reduce it by recycling or reuse, refurbish products again, so you can meet climate goals with creating the circular economy. It is not only about the energy, it is also about material use. So, there are a lot of drivers for the industry to work together with the government to solve those issues. And sometimes it helps – and it is my personal experience – if there is a government coming along and saying well, let's try to solve the issue of unsustainable production and consumption together. Let's find ways to solve the issue. Because if the government is with you, as a company, it's easier to find other companies working together with you. It is easier to solve some legal barriers, sometimes. But it is also easier to find finance for innovation. Because one big risk for financiers is a government which is not consistent in their policies. And if the government is not only consistent with their policies but also working along together with industry, it is also easier for financiers to invest in new innovations.

That is... The importance of governments using collaborative approaches in a – what I call – a horizontal approach, being a partner of industry... Of course, projecting the public interest, because we are collaborating having the public interest in our mind. But, at the same time, looking for the chances of the individual company to invest in sustainable innovations. So, that is the combination of which is very strong and very very... It helps to develop your policies as well. So, there is a common interest to work along in a specific topic, like plastics value chain.

And sometimes the industry says well, we would like to have a better legal framework. So, we have examples of the industry saying well, you should thrive for more regulations or even a ban. Like a ban of microplastics added to cosmetics. So, what we did in the past is one good example, is the microplastics in cosmetics. It is only a small portion of all the market plastics coming into the environment. Marine litter is biggest source of plastics coming in the environment. But with adding the microplastic in cosmetics, you have a choice to do it or not. So, that was the start of our talk with the cosmetic industry. We said, well, you should ban it. You should try to use other materials than the microplastics put into the cosmetics. And within two and a half years, 85% of the industry – and also the big companies – banned the microplastics in the cosmetics.

LUISA:

Voluntarily?

ARNOUD:

Yes. Voluntarily. In the Netherlands.

And they added now more nature based – some seeds, etc – as a substitute for the microplastics. Within two and a half years.

LUISA:

Wow. That's fast.

ARNOUD:

And the other 15% is not involved in the branch organization of cosmetic industry, but they are more nature-based companies, so, in the end, almost all cosmetic industry in the Netherlands has solved the problem within two and a half years.

LUISA:

Because the other 15% they were already kind of more nature-based.

ARNOUD:

Yes. Exactly.

So, now they are pleading for ban on intentionally added microplastics in cosmetics, together with the Dutch government, in Europe. Because they say, well, we are doing it already, and we want to have it as a... All the free riders, they should do the same.

LUISA:

I love to hear that, because a thing that I hear very commonly when I state my hypothesis is that you have a lot of free riders. And I say, yes, but you want to be the leader, not the laggard. Because you want to be with the government once they say now it is done. Now everybody has to join. So the laggards are behind, so it is more costive.

HENK:

Yes. Exactly. And that is interesting because they are now promoting a European ban, together with the national government. That's what my state secretary likes to see. So, she names it as a good example how to do that.

LUISA:

And when was this?

ARNOUD:

It was in the last couple of years.

LUISA:

So, you are now working on going to the European Union level?

ARNOUD:

They have already launched the initiative to create a ban. But it always takes time to organize that. So, they ask ECHA, which is the European Chemical Agency, in Helsinki, to organize restriction procedures, which in the end leads to a ban, by using regulation on that. And at the same time oxidegradable plastic are also going to be banned within Europe.

Oxidegradable are presented by the industry as solution, but they are not, because they break down into microplastic, so it's not a solution.

LUISA:

And you can't even see that it's there, so it's even worse.

ARNOUD:

Exactly.

So, that's one example of collaboration. But it started not only with collaborating together, but of course challenging the industry. So, sometimes, there is a combination between collaboration and challenging the industry by the government.

And also now with challenging the industry with the single use plastic products as well. Like the straws. We need to think about other solutions. And also last Friday I talked with Mc Donald's Netherlands, to ban the straws... To ban all the single use plastic which they use in their shops and restaurants. And it is very interesting to see that they are moving ahead very rapidly.

You see you can do a lot with collaborative approaches. But it's the combination of framework and the collaborative approaches. So, sometimes it works also very well to have a ban. Like the ban on single use plastic bags, which we had in January 2016. Within a few months, 70% of all the plastic bags were not used again. So, that was a tremendous effect on the environment. Also, almost 50% of the production of plastic bags on the beaches is seen. So, actions, interventions, of the government is still needed. I am not saying that we can do it without regulation. That is not the case. But it helps. If you have a combination of those interventions.

Another example is with Boyan Slat. With Boyan Slat we helped. It's an Ngo, but they are organizing as if they are a company. So, they have 80 (?) employees at this moment, working on getting the installation right to clean up the Pacific Ocean. And of course we help. Sometimes... I know Boyan already since 2012... He is now 24. He was 17 or 18 when I knew him. I encountered him because he had a TED Talk that was viral. So... he did a lot of crowdfunding to finance his research. Also with a lot of researchers in the group. But he did some practical research as well. So... Collecting samples in the Acoures, in the Bermudas, etc. And then he encountered a lot of authorities, and he didn't have any permits to do the research. So, he called me... Well, the problem is now... Could you arrange something? I had two calls with the Embassy of Portugal or Consulate in the Bermudas, and they could arrange that he could do his research. So, only with a few calls you can do, as a government official...

LUISA:

And for him it would take years, maybe...

ARNOUD:

For him it was crucial. So, sometimes small actions are really crucial. But you have to find someone in those governments looking for opportunities and seeing that it is important to help those individual companies, but also dreamers like Boyan Slat, to take things forward. At that's not money, that's is not regulation... That's something you can

use with your relationships, networks... Even I didn't know the people at the Dutch Embassy in Portugal. I didn't have contacts, but I was a government representative saying help that guy there, and they did.

Of course we had also with our State Secretary... That she wanted to help as well with Boyat, his experiment. Also in the North Sea.

But one good example of collaboration could be as well is that he is going to launch his system in the Pacific. In the international seas.

LUISA:

He is now basing in the United States, right?

ARNOUD:

Yes. From California. From San Francisco he will launch, in a few weeks, the first installation. But the installation is not a ship. So, in the international Sea Law it is very difficult to find the right framework to have his installation being approved... That it is a legal entity.

LUISA:

That it "exists" legally.

ARNOUD:

That exists and that there are enough precautions for environmental risks and also shipping law and maritime shippings, through the oceans. Because there are a lot of shippings...

LUISA:

And is it solved already?

ARNOUD:

Yes. But it was dealt with... Only a few weeks ago we signed a covenant. It is a private agreement between the Ocean Clean Up and the Dutch Government. So, my State Secretary, on behalf of the State of the Netherlands, signed a private agreement with the Ocean Clean Up to say that if they organize all the environmental precautions in their installations, then we take the responsibility, as State, for those installations. So, in the end, under international law, we are responsible. You can say we are the flag state. With those installations it doesn't work like that, but...

LUISA:

So, it's the "flag state" of the installation, although it is not a ship. That is very interesting.

ARNOUD:

Yes. Because there was no public [inaudible] in which we could organize that.

And it is interesting to see that all different parts of that ministry worked together. So... The maritime department, the water department, the sustainable department, and our

legal department. Worked really together to solve the issue together with the Ocean Clean Up.

[...]

This is also an example of how we can work together. Of course, they have to say with all the risk involved what are the precaution they take to reduce that risk as much as possible. So, it means a lot of work as well. But within a few months we were able to solve that. So, that is also how to be creative as a government as well. But, if the goal is right...

LUISA:

If they match the public interest...

ARNOUD:

Yes. Exactly.

And it is a good example of collaboration between the Dutch Government and the private sector as well.

LUISA:

Yes! And I had no clue of that. Because in the website they say "we are launching", and I just thought "ok, that's interesting". But the small details... you never reach them.

ARNOUD:

And one of the things we said to them is that once the plastics come to shore, they have to be recycled. So, that was one of our conditions.

LUISA:

So... What are they doing with the plastics?

ARNOUD:

It should be recycled.

LUISA:

And they have to recycle it?

ARNOUD:

Yes. They have to find a recycling installation in California. So, recycling.

LUISA:

Yes... But at least it is California... haha

ARNOUD:

Yes haha

But at the same time, California is looking at the Netherlands, for inspiration on how to deal with plastics.

[a third person arrives]

And this here is my next appointment.

LUISA:

Hi! Luisa. Nice to meet you. I am a phd candidate at Maastricht University.

ARNOUD:

International law, and...?

LUISA:

And the plastic pollution in the oceans.

[inaudible]

THIRD PERSON:

I can leave and come back later.

ARNOUD:

No... That's ok. I have to move further.

LUISA:

Yes. I know you have an appointment.

ARNOUD:

I can send you some data from the convenet...with Boyan Slat. That is interesting. The clean [inaudible]

LUISA:

And also the value chain on plastics.

ARNOUD:

Yes. I can send you some more details. And if you have further questions.

LUISA:

Just a quick one, if you don't mind.

ARNOUD:

Ok.

LUISA:

With the value chain agreement... How did you find it? With the plastic industry... What were the main challenges? What didn't work very well?... Because I know that with plastics sometimes you have bigger challenges, especially with the technical aspects...

Because you do need a lot of research to change the way you produce. Because sometimes it also influences if you can recycle or not, for example... So, did you find any particular challenges with the plastics or...?

ARNOUD:

With the plastics industries... To come aboard... They had the image problem, which made them sign the agreement. They should look well. And the balance between the challenges and how good plastics are is written in the value chain agreement itself. So, you notice that they really try to have a really positive framing of plastics in the value chain agreement, which is alright...

LUISA:

Yes... They also have good sides.

ARNOUD:

They have good sides. And... I don't know... I will send you some information. If you have other questions as well, we can keep in touch.

LUISA:

That is great. Thank you very much!

ARNOUD:

No problem. It was very nice talking to you.

(end of audio 1)

[inaudible]

LUISA:

By the way, why only the big bottles can be returned?

ARNOUD:

That will change in a few years, because the industry knows that they have to do something. Also the Coca-Colas of this world... And if they haven't done the right thing to reverse [?] 70 to 90% of the bottles, and recycle 90% of the plastic bottles, within 2 years, then it will be mandatory. The deposit scheme.

LUISA:

So, they have to do something, otherwise they...

ARNOUD:

So, even if they don't meet the goal, the deposit scheme will be in place in a 2-year time.

LUISA:

So... By the time I finish my thesis, hopefully it will be done haha

ARNOUD:

Yes.

THIRD PERSON:

[inaudible]

ARNOUD:

PEF is a new form of plastic, but it is not fossil-based... It could be used to diminish the use of fossil-based plastic. It doesn't help to look at reducing littering. And reducing littering is also a goal. And PEF is more about...

LUISA:

Yeah... It's more about the source...

THIRD PERSON:

You know... Maybe if you Google about Avantium... It is the producer of this PEF... If Coca-Cola would use their product then it would be a huge step...

ARNOUD:

No.

THIRD PERSON:

No? Step, no?

ARNOUD:

It is possible to have a 100% recyclable PET bottle now coming to the market. Morssinkhof is even advertising on it. They use 100% recycled PET in their bottles. And it is possible.

LUISA:

So, it is doable. If one can do it, everybody should, right?

THIRD PERSON:

And why not the PEF? Because it's new material?

ARNOUD:

Yes... It's new material. It is not compostable... But we are trying to promote recycling above compostable. Because composting is only reducing the amount of material afterwards, but you want to keep the material inside the cycle as long as possible.

In the end, all fossil-based should be replaced by biomaterial. Should be 100% biomaterial, which is also sustainably produced. So...

THIRD PERSON:

You said Morssinkhof is the first one to recycle...

ARNOUD:

To use.

[inaudible]

Morssinkhof, they produce 100% recycling bottles.

LUISA:

The bottles that they have in the end are like the regular bottles?

ARNOUD:

Yes.

LUISA:

Ahn... Because once Coca-Cola was using 100% recycling PET, but they were using this really thin plastic, so people were complaining a lot, because when you open it the water would go all over because you are squeezing it. So, people were against recycled bottles.

ARNOUD:

Innovations made the bottle exactly the same. You cannot distinguish.

THIRD PERSON:

Isn't that done world wide now? This recycling? Is it unique for Holland?

ARNOUD:

Not yet. Coca-Cola uses, [continues]

Another mineral water company uses it now.

But I'll send you some links and...

THIRD PERSON:

Coca-Colas and Unilevers of this world should.

LUISA:

Greenpeace is really pushing Coca-Cola and Starbucks now.

ARNOUD:

They are right to do that.

LUISA:

Yes... Because they are huge...

THIRD PERSON:

Is Unilever doing something about that?

ARNOUD:

Ahn... We are talking about...

Anyway... It was a pleasure to meet you.

LUISA:

Pleasure to meet you. Thank you so much.

ARNOUD:

And if you have any questions, please call or write.

LUISA:

Ok. Thank you so much.

Bye. Have a nice week.