

Vision of a zero-waste and zero-carbon Flanders

Roughly 35 years ago, in 1972, the Club of Rome published its report entitled Limits to Growth, which initially focused on scarcity, i.e. the fears that the supply of mineral resources would not be able to keep pace with industrial production and that there would not be enough food to feed our planet's growing population. Today, our world is facing a different situation: it has 'limited sinks' and maybe 'limits to waste'.

The preparation of the first Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change and the successive gatherings of experts, scientists and official representatives since 1979, have all been accompanied by considerable efforts in the domains of scientific research and mathematical modelling in a bid to gain as full an understanding as possible into the complexity of climate change. It is extremely important to recognise that the phenomenon is taking place on a non-linear time scale, meaning that the pace of global warming is far more rapid than was thought a few years ago. The melting of glaciers, the poles and the ice cap in Greenland appear to be decisive parameters of our changing climate. The seasonal disappearance of glaciers, as in the Himalayas, will dramatically change the biosphere of four main river basins, with disastrous consequences for the food supply of hundreds of millions of people.

Alarm for the planet's survival?

The concept of an 'ecological footprint' captures how society behaves to meet its needs and above all fulfil its desires. It expresses our industrial society's insatiable hunger for natural resources, resulting in the destruction of our natural capital, which humankind needs to guarantee its own survival. Indeed, humankind



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will have to reduce its global ecological footprint and restore a safe balance with nature. Put another way, industrial activities on earth must not exceed the planet's capability to accommodate them. Most calls highlighting the extreme urgency of sustainable action have come from scientists and social activists. James Lovelock⁵⁶ even speaks of 'sustainable retreat' (as opposed to sustainable development) to ensure that our planet is free of natural disasters and steers clear of irreversible changes. In a similar way, we should probably start thinking in terms of 'negative economic growth' (sometimes referred to as degrowth).

A number of enlightened political leaders, e.g. in New Zealand, are calling for direct action to considerably lower CO₂ emissions. They are even endeavouring to create a carbon-neutral nation and a zero-waste society. The realistic deadlines cited are 2030 or 2040. Furthermore, initiatives by individual companies are leading to minimal-waste or even zero-waste production processes. And more and more initiatives are being taken along similar lines.

From 'Flanders in Action' to a 'Waste- and CO₂-free Flanders'

A socioeconomic action programme for Flanders provides an innovative perspective for how we deal with and develop socioeconomic progress, a desired outcome that is reflected in the following statement: "Flanders must increasingly transform to an innovation-driven economy". Sustainable economies will be innovation-driven economies, based on technologies and industries that are capable of providing solutions for eco- and biodiversity. To this end, a massive reduction of waste and CO₂ emissions has to be managed in a structural way. Clearly, this can be achieved by mobilising ideas on a large scale and strongly motivating the entire population. If that happens, Flanders can become an exemplary zero-waste and zero-carbon region in the EU within the reasonable time horizon of 2030 to 2040.

So what are the prerequisites for the success of such an undertaking? Investments in new industrial production processes, and the creation, development and

installation of renewable energy facilities. Suitable public-private institutions will also be required that effectively accelerate investment in research and development. Finally, the young generation and the remainder of the population need to be acclimatised to 'the new way' and the mindset and actions it entails.

Some inspiring examples

In New Zealand, the prime minister has announced a raft of measures, including plans to increase renewable sources of energy for power generation to cover 90% of the country's requirements by 2025; the halving of CO₂ emissions by the transport sector by 2040; the expansion of forests into areas for carbon sequestration; and "to dare to aspire to be carbon neutral". Of course, simply extrapolating this plan to Flanders would be an over-simplification, even though Flanders shares similar objectives and policy goals.

Closer to home, Denmark has made some major pledges regarding waste and CO₂ emissions. Today, Denmark generates

20% of its electricity from wind farms, but it plans to raise that figure to 50%. According to the Flemish newspaper *De Tijd*, Denmark has started installing a network for charging the batteries of electric cars and is on track to have installed a basic electrical network by 2010.

A vision for Flanders

Achieving a zero-waste and zero-carbon Flanders by the middle of the century is a realistic proposition. Countries like New Zealand have already announced similar goals. Moreover, such an ambitious objective fits perfectly in the renewed **Flanders in Action**⁴² programme, and in a way this proposal is its long-term expression. In this connection, the goals associated with Full Talent – as set out in Flanders in Action – are highly relevant.

A **zero-waste** Flanders will require the support of all citizens. Our throw-away, consumption-driven society is unsustainable. The aim of creating a **zero-waste** society opens up fresh perspectives for the development of goods and industrial production processes. In the long run,

Flanders would genuinely and substantially benefit from becoming zero-carbon. All the benefits are really fundamental: the realisation of an export-oriented industrial complex familiar with sustainable technological solutions in the renewable energy sector and a lesser dependency on the supply of fossil fuels from politically unstable areas. Surely these are sufficient reasons to set to work immediately. Flanders in Action, right now!

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56 See <http://www.kennislink.nl/web/show?id=11293>.