

date: 7 December 2023

Code of ethics VVSG International

1. Introduction

This Code of Ethics sets out the guidelines for ethical behaviour that all employees and representatives of the VVSG's Administration & Strategy Department, competent for international matters - hereafter referred to as 'VVSG International' - must observe when acting on behalf of the VVSG. The Code of Ethics contains the fundamental rules of conduct expected of every employee, wherever in the world VVSG International works. The code aims to promote an ethical culture at VVSG International and its partners and prevent misconduct.

This code of ethics does not purport to be exhaustive. Rather, it serves to remind employees and stakeholders of the key standards of behaviour that should guide their decisions and actions when responding to a wide range of situations and challenges they may face during their employment at VVSG International or their involvement in VVSG programmes on international municipal cooperation.

1.1. Scope of the code of ethics: for whom?

All employees of VVSG International and all municipal officials involved in the implementation of projects and programmes of VVSG International sign the code of ethics. In addition, the code of ethics is a guide for every partner and stakeholder of VVSG International. If anyone suspects or believes that the code of ethics was not followed in any of the activities in which VVSG International is involved, they can contact the complaints manager through the [online complaints form](#). The complaints manager treats all reports confidentially and undertakes to respond within two weeks. If you do not (yet) wish to file an official complaint, you can contact the [integrity counsellor](#) with questions and doubts.

VVSG International takes appropriate measures to ensure that the content and understanding of the code of ethics and complaints-handling procedures are communicated to all persons involved in the implementation of projects and programmes. The code is reviewed during the welcoming of new colleagues and of new municipal officials (in Flanders and in partner countries) involved in the implementation of programmes. The code is also presented for perusal to all delegation members on international working visits and to all actors with whom VVSG International concludes a partnership agreement. Both the code of ethics and the complaints procedure are available [on the VVSG website in Dutch, French, English and Spanish](#).

1.2. Situation VVSG International

The VVSG is an advocate, service provider and network organisation of and for local authorities in Flanders. The VVSG and its more than 200 staff members work in all areas that concern its members - the Flemish cities and municipalities - such as governance, poverty, waste, childcare, care for the elderly, and so on. Within the Administration &

Strategy department of the VVSG, specific staff members are responsible for international affairs. They support local administrations in international cooperation and initiatives for international solidarity. The VVSG is an institutional actor in development cooperation that does not work exclusively in this domain.

2. Mission, vision and values

2.1. Vision

Major inequalities still exist both between countries and within countries themselves, and the world today is still very inequitable. Through international frameworks such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, various actors are committed to a more sustainable and just world. VVSG International wants to contribute to this sustainable world and international justice, and we want Flemish local authorities to play their part in this.

2.2. Mission

We want Flemish local governments to be aware that their behaviour, policies and actions have global impact, to choose local global policies and to be open to global partnerships. VVSG International supports them in this through support on local global policy (solidary policy choices, world citizenship and global cooperation) and the local translation of the SDGs. Furthermore, we strive for Flemish cities and municipalities to be structurally involved in intergovernmental consultations on international solidarity and sustainable development, and for their good practices and strategies to be adopted by national and international partners.

VVSG International carries out this mission, together with external partners, from 3 core roles being advocate, knowledge sharer and network builder.

2.3. Values

VVSG International's reputation relies on the behaviour of its employees. We assume that every employee and representative contributes to maintaining the good reputation and reliability of VVSG International. In doing so, we apply the following 5 values: **collegiality, service, integrity, sustainability and professionalism**. These values were chosen participatively within VVSG and are supported by the entire organisation.

3. Code of conduct

We translated the five values into concrete rules of conduct for the members and representatives of VVSG International.

Collegiality

"We work together as one team. Respect, consideration for each other and helping each other are key words here."

Collegiality in practice means:

- You respect and value differences and treat all people equally.

- You consider sensitivities around everyone's customs, traditions and beliefs and avoid behaviour that is not desirable in a particular cultural context.
- You never display discriminatory or offensive behaviour - in both physical and online manners - based on someone's skin colour, origin, gender, sexual orientation, age, religion, political beliefs or disability.
- In conflict situations or resentments, communicate directly with the person concerned in the first instance.
- You give each other constructive feedback in a rational and tactful way.
- You will contribute to a stimulating and pleasant working atmosphere.
- You are willing to listen to colleagues.

Servitude

"The VVSG is a membership organisation. Advocacy and service to members take precedence over internal hierarchical service. The employment system of the VVSG is based on the principles of flexibility, trust, autonomy, responsibility and transparency of employees towards the VVSG and vice versa."

Servitude in practice means:

- In your work, you are always attentive to the interests of members and their (international) partners.
- You think and act organisation-wide and cross-departmentally, in the interest of members and their (international) partners.
- You are at the disposal of all members and their (international) partners: you assist members without discrimination on the basis of gender, origin, vision, political colour, and so on.
- You answer questions within a reasonable time or at least indicate when to expect an answer.
- You are open to any criticism or feedback from members and their (international) partners. You do not go on the defensive but are willing to listen and try to offer a constructive response.

Integrity

"As employees of VVSG International, we work honestly, true to the objectives of the VVSG¹. We work according to existing rules and applicable laws in our industry and country. Colleagues and members can rely on us. Our service is not influenced by gifts or favours."

Integrity in practice means:

- You avoid conflicts of interest in which both your own credibility and that of VVSG International may be compromised. You do not use your influence for personal interest or for the interest of a person / organisation with whom you have a direct or indirect involvement.

¹ See [statutes of the VVSG](#).

- You communicate and work transparently. You ensure that your position as a VVSG employee is clear in all circumstances. Everything you do within the VVSG is visible to colleagues or supervisor.
- You engage in accurate and clear financial accountability, both internally and externally.
- You will not allow your service to be bought or influenced by money, goods, services or other favours given or promised to you. Small gifts may be accepted **if** refusing or returning the gift would seriously hurt or embarrass the giver; if the handing over of the gift takes place in public; or if returning the gift is practically unworkable. When you have accepted a gift, let your head of service know.
- You accept invitations paid for by others only when the activity is part of the performance of your work and your presence is functional (e.g. formal representation of the VVSG).
- You never exercise or threaten physical, verbal or written violence.
- You do not engage in sexual exploitation of persons. By this we mean any abuse of power, trust or vulnerability for sexual purposes, including taking financial, social or political advantage of the sexual exploitation of another person.
- You do not engage in sexual abuse of persons. By this we mean an actual or threatened physical violation of a sexual nature, by force or under coercive circumstances.
- You report abuse or corruption when you observe it (without having to be directly involved yourself).

Sustainability

"Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Sustainable development seeks to reconcile economic development, ecological carrying capacity and social justice. The VVSG subscribes to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Internally, the VVSG strives for a sustainable relationship with its employees, and respect for people and the environment in its own operations and services."

Sustainability in practice means:

- In your work, you always look for lasting relationships and structural solutions. You involve colleagues, members and partners wherever possible. In the international and multicultural framework in which VVSG International works, this means that you also pay attention to the inclusion of indigenous and marginalised communities.
- You contribute to policies that focus on collaboration to achieve sustainable positive impact and outcomes. You make choices that are good in the long term, both inside and outside the organisation. Gender equality and human rights are key principles for these sustainable relationships.
- You consider the potential ecological impact of interventions and activities and do what is possible to avoid negative impact.

- In positions, in addition to the impact on local governments, let sustainability be an element. The Agenda 2030 provides a useful framework here.
- You deal responsibly and sparingly with materials, goods and finances provided by the VVSG.

Professionalism

"The VVSG is a knowledge organisation. Employees have a sound dossier knowledge and the necessary skills to efficiently engage in advocacy and service delivery."

Professionalism in practice means:

- You perform your work in line with the mission, vision and objectives of the VVSG and of VVSG International.
- You regularly monitor developments and current affairs within your area of work.
- You respect agreements and deadlines.
- Meetings and projects are well prepared and followed up.
- Your advice demonstrates dossier knowledge, creativity and realism. You have an eye for the financial consequences and long-term impact of your proposals.
- You communicate orally and in writing in correct and plain language.
- You share your knowledge with colleagues, partners and stakeholders.
- You accept the expertise of others in fields you know little about.
- You watch over the dosage of work and prioritisation.
- You work in an organised, focused and efficient manner.
- You know your own limits sufficiently and indicate them.
- You can cooperate with colleagues despite differences of opinion.
- You deal with feedback or problems in a calm and constructive manner.
- You have respect for every individual. In the international and multicultural framework in which VVSG International works, this means that respect for local peoples and partners receives special attention.

I [name & first name] , employed

at VVSG International / at local government [name municipality],

[delete what does not fit] sign this code of ethics for agreement.

Signed at at

Signature:

