

Global Goals, Local action

Sustainability in the Herentals Policy Plan

Ready for the SDG Engagement Declaration 2.0

The impact of SDG Partnerships –
“International cooperation? It simply
starts in your town hall”



STEFAN DEWICKERE



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NIELS ROOS



STEFAN DEWICKERE

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On the cover: At the World Festival on 6 July, the municipality of Merelbeke-Melle highlighted its lasting commitment to the SDGs. Alderman for North-South Policy, Lieven Volckaert, was in his element. © Bart Lasuy

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Local governments leading the way to a sustainable future

Wars, a destabilised climate, and growing polarisation too often dominate today's agenda. International trust is eroding, and cooperation is giving way to the language of power. As a result, sustainable development and international collaboration risk being pushed to the background. The Sustainable Development Goals—the 17 SDGs—are so widely known that one might assume only those living under a rock have missed them over the past decade. And yet, it remains more crucial than ever to keep their importance front and centre. With just five years to go until 2030, we urgently need to accelerate. Globally, fewer than one in five SDGs are on track. That is today's reality—yet also an invitation to act.

It is precisely within this tension that cities and municipalities matter. Local governments are not mere executors at the tail end of policy—they are policymakers in their own right. Globally, as much as 65% of the SDGs cannot be achieved without the active involvement of local authorities. They step up when wars drive migration flows, when heatwaves and water stress hit our streets and homes, when inequality deepens. And they translate those urgent challenges into concrete decisions on the ground: spatial planning, mobility, housing, energy, care, safety—day after day. As one wise chair once put it: “The SDGs will be local, or they will not be.” That motto is more relevant than ever.

Local governments do not act alone. Across borders, they build partnerships, exchange knowledge, and engage in diplomacy at close quarters. This is exactly how progress on the SDGs is made: through local anchoring and international connection—and here at home, including by reaching out to other levels of government.

In Flanders, local authorities have shown leadership for years. Through VVSG, they use the SDGs

Globally, no less than 65% of the Sustainable Development Goals cannot be achieved without the active involvement of local governments.

as a moral compass for both policy and organisation. The renewed declaration of commitment offers both a clear political signal and a practical framework: municipalities commit to embedding the SDGs in their multi-year plans, to monitoring them, and to communicating about them. Many municipalities have already signed the declaration and are integrating the SDGs into their daily operations. That is what it means to take responsibility—here and now.

On **30 September**, we meet in Mechelen for VVSG's international SDG conference. There, we will bring practice and policy together, forge new partnerships, and share what works. Because those who act locally move the world forward. See you then!—

This magazine shines a spotlight on various initiatives contributing to the realisation of Agenda 2030 and the United Nations' 17 SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals). It's a mission that requires many hands, and the international level plays a crucial role—not only as a funder but also as a source of inspiration, monitor, and sounding board. Two guests join the table to take on this ambitious topic: **Wim Dries**, president of VVSG and mayor of Genk; and **Raf Tuts**, director of the Global Solutions Division at UN-Habitat.

International supports local

MARC PEIRS
editor Lokaal

“The SDGs challenge local authorities to make their municipality or city more social, cleaner, more inclusive and greener.”

STEFAN DE WICKERE







Raf Tuts:
“Sixty-five percent of the goals cannot be achieved without strong local government. Local financing is therefore essential—also here in Flanders.”

Our first question is the obvious one: How concrete is your contribution to the SDG agenda?

Raf Tuts: “We are the UN agency that has been supporting urban policy and housing for nearly fifty years. Our headquarters are in Nairobi. I coordinate UN-Habitat’s global programmes, including the programme on cooperation with local governments. Our division has 270 colleagues working across eight programs. Their job is mainly problem-solving and reporting up to senior management. What we try to do above all is to make sure those global programmes are closely aligned with what’s happening on the ground. With offices in sixty countries, we keep our finger on the pulse of what nations and local authorities consider priorities. We also seek bilateral funding to implement country-level programmes. In short, we serve as a bridge between different actors.”

Wim Dries: “Since December 2016 I’ve been president of VVSG, which means I’ve been closely involved in localisation—that is, translating the SDGs’ moral framework into local policy. Within VVSG we’ve already done a lot of work in that regard. I’m also mayor of Genk, so I have hands-on experience with introducing the SDGs at the local level.”

Can you give an example of how Genk incorporates the SDGs into local policy?

Wim Dries: “There’s the question of how to integrate the SDGs into your multi-year policy plan. We use them above all as a moral compass, keeping all 17 SDGs in view as a guide for concrete policy. For example, across Genk we’re creating a ‘green-blue lung’—restoring natural areas, improving water quality, using the Stiemer stream valley as a lifeline to connect people, the economy, and nature, and building a cycle path along the stream. These

are tangible projects that fit perfectly within the SDGs. For me, the SDGs push local governments to make their cities more social, cleaner, greener, and more inclusive.”

What are the benefits for local governments that adopt the SDG framework?

Wim Dries: “It’s an international framework, building on the Millennium Development Goals that everyone knows. In fact, in September 2015, the United Nations decided: here is a framework that builds on the Millennium Goals, with a fifteen-year horizon in which we aim to achieve all these objectives together. It is a universal framework that combines the needs and ambitions of both the global South and the global North. Personally, I see it as a clear moral framework where people can come together—at the local level, at the Flemish level, but just as much at the international level. And I find that an incredible strength. Whether we’re speaking with Dutch colleagues or with people from Botswana, they all know this framework and want to think and act within it.

For me, it’s also a way of applying common sense in a structured way. Using common sense to shape a forward-looking city: inclusive, democratic, mindful of future generations. In Genk, already under the previous administration and with the former multi-year plans, we embraced the SDGs. That way, for twelve years now, we’ve been able to align our policies with this international framework.

It’s not a competition between local governments; the question is how you can create impact with your policies. And the SDGs are an exceptionally suitable instrument for that. Naturally, you won’t have a single blueprint for good policy everywhere. Fighting poverty, to give just one example, will look different in Knokke-Heist than it does in Genk. And



in Genk, that fight against poverty will again look different from how it does in a city in Africa.”

Mr. Tuts, for Wim Dries the SDGs form a moral framework. From the perspective of the global South, isn't that something of a luxury? Don't people simply long for a better life?

Raf Tuts: “It's more than just a framework for aligning priorities. It's also a framework for generating real impact and translating it into concrete policy. We're talking about 169 specific targets and measurable indicators that are made binding at the country and regional levels. That allows us to see where and how municipal investments are most effective—whether in fighting poverty, building urban infrastructure, or providing clean water. It's a broad spectrum, but at the end of the day it's all about impact.”

At what stage do cities and municipalities come to you—before drawing up plans, during projects, or afterwards to request an evaluation?

Raf Tuts: “Mostly during the preparation of multi-year plans. Administrations ask us to conduct an audit, mapping out the city's ambitions and checking whether and how available funding can match those ambitions.”

If your advice is often sought during the drafting of multi-year plans, your offices must be very busy now?

Raf Tuts: “We work worldwide, not only in Europe, and in the past three years we've seen the number of cities requesting a local review rise from 120 to 360. Of course, that's still just a fraction of all municipalities, but requests are coming from all over the world. In every region there are frontrunners, and we try to

share their success stories with countries that have been less engaged with the SDGs so far.”

A question for Wim Dries: can VVSG, as a Flemish umbrella organisation, still add something to the audits, advice, and cooperation that Mr. Tuts's organisation already provides?

Wim Dries: “I think we use many of the tools that Mr. Tuts's organisation also provides, but we always translate them to the local level. I believe we have three main tasks.

First, bringing people from local governments together, organising knowledge-sharing, and showcasing many good practices to colleagues.

Second, how do we translate all that knowledge into practical, usable tools? Even at international forums where I am present through VVSG, I notice that people look at how well Flanders is doing in this regard.

Third, coordination with other levels of government. Both the Flemish and the federal governments have significant policies around the SDGs, and the same goes for the European and international levels. Mapping all of this and distilling it into clear policies—that is a key task for VVSG.”

For local leaders, drafting multi-year plans seems to be the alpha and omega nowadays. Do you also see that as the key moment for municipalities to integrate the SDGs?

Wim Dries: “Yes, absolutely. That's exactly what VVSG has focused on. In Flanders we have a six-year political cycle, and right now about 200 of the 300 municipalities have seized the opportunity. That's a lot. The new plans for the next six years must be ready by November–December this year (2025), and we're seeing even more municipalities including SDGs in their planning. We don't yet know

Wim Dries:
“We, local governments, can be trusted. Entrust the SDG agenda to us.”



Raf Tuts:
‘There are countries where concepts such as sustainable development fall on deaf ears. But you often see that states or cities in those countries do have their own policies that pay attention to the SDGs.’

the exact number, but it’s certainly more than before.”

In Ghent and many other places, municipal revenues are declining, partly due to higher-level budget cuts. How worried should you be?

Wim Dries: “If resources are shrinking, the need to maximise impact with the money you have becomes even greater. You set a course and stick to it. Each municipality chooses its own priorities. In Genk, for instance, which means tackling poverty and educational disadvantage—issues that aren’t as pressing in many other parts of Flanders.”

Do you each have an argument, slogan, or method to convince hesitant mayors to get on board with the SDGs?

Raf Tuts: “There are two sides to this. Sometimes refusal is purely ideological, and there’s not much you can do about that. Some countries—I won’t name them, but we all know who they are—simply don’t want to engage with the SDGs. In those places, ‘sustainable development’ doesn’t resonate. But often you’ll find that states or cities within those countries still pursue policies that do align with the SDGs.”

You’re probably thinking of California, where environmental policy is pursued against the will of the national government?

Raf Tuts: “Environmental ambition is good, but there’s now criticism of overly strict environmental rules. Regulations are so tight that housing has become unaffordable. Policymakers in California now realise the rules need to be more flexible. Otherwise, you get a clash between two SDGs: environmental sustainability and affordable housing.”

Your organisations are going all out to convince boards to cooperate on sustainability, democracy, and inclusivity, but these are all concepts under severe

pressure in these turbulent geopolitical times. It is difficult to make plans in a world that rocks and sways with the waves of international politics and economics.”

Raf Tuts: “It may be precisely now that there is a need for stability. Leaders come and go, and policy is sometimes erratic, but I think that policy that keeps a cool head can be back in the cockpit in a few years. What I definitely want to advocate for is the financing of local actions. 65 percent of the SDG-targets cannot be carried out without a strong local government. So, I want to point to the great importance of self-financing; that is a very important theme, also in Flanders.”

Wim Dries: “To return briefly to the question of how to convince mayors and local authorities to get on board with the SDGs. I have said it many times: the SDGs will be local, or they will not be. I repeat to every city or municipality that everyone in Flanders is already doing quite a lot regarding SDG policy. Through the VVSG, we are happy to make knowledge and tools available. In addition, we work very broadly across Flanders. We have our own indicators, monitoring instruments where municipalities can check how well they are performing and where they might still be able to step up. Measuring is knowing, and measuring shows you your SDG score.”

Raf Tuts: “It is also a hot topic internationally. Within the UN, a coalition of fourteen agencies has been established that implement local policy in their country programmes. All projects rolled out by these programmes are first subject to intensive consultation with the local level, both regarding formulation and implementation. This includes the UN development programme, the health programme, the food programme, the children’s program, and more.”

Wim Dries: “Then I come to the conclusion: we, local authorities, are trustworthy. Feel free to put the SDG policy in our hands.” —

The SDG ambitions are widely supported but also critically examined. **Soo-Jin Kim** is Deputy Head of the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) department working on urban issues. Locally, we asked for her perspective as a useful additional commentary and reflection on the interview with Wim Dries and Raf Tuts.

“I offer a helicopter view”

“Cities, Urban Policy, and Sustainable Development, that is the full name of my department. From our work and our vision, it is obvious that we both contribute to and reflect on SDG-related issues. Because these are increasingly implemented locally, we have already worked with a tremendous number of countries, regions, and cities. Flanders is one of them; as Flanders has strong local governance, the region fits perfectly into the programme. So, I think you can say that I offer a helicopter view.”

“If you ask me to highlight one success story from Flanders, it is of course the SDG policy. But allow me to direct attention to an initiative that we found very inspiring for other cities and regions, which is the Week of Sustainability, driven by the VVSG. It is particularly fascinating to see how, during that week, an active approach is taken to engage both citizens and local stakeholders. If I remember correctly, this is an annual initiative where more than a hundred Flemish municipalities essentially honour their ‘sustainable heroes.’ I understand that almost two-thirds of all Flemish municipalities have participated. That is an impressive score, and I think this initiative can serve as an example for other cities and regions.”

The eternal money

“At the Department of Urban Policy, we have insight into the most demanding and most difficult aspects in setting up SDG policy. We also conducted a study on this among cities and municipalities themselves. One of the problems is the actual translation of sustainable policy.”



Soo-Jin Kim:
“The role of organisations like mine or the VVSG is therefore not to preach about the SDGs but to demonstrate that the SDGs exist in practice as a problem-solver. It is not a story of theory or ideology, but one that begins with scientific evidence and data.”

“An obstacle that many authorities mention, and which was no surprise, is money. Financial resources and shortages—that is a problem that comes up promptly for most people. No less than two-thirds of the national authorities said that the lack of money is their biggest challenge.”

“The good news is that local authorities do not sheepishly wait for money from higher government but also actively seek it themselves. For example, you can impose financial requirements on project developers in your region. Or you can levy specific taxes in favour of SDG projects. Models of public-private partnerships can also help. And there



“We share the lessons; we share the good practices. Nothing convinces a mayor more than the successes of another mayor.”

is growing potential in peer-to-peer networks where people can learn from each other. Innovative financial solutions—that is at least one solution.”

“The second challenge mentioned in the study was the effects of political instability. But the opposite also applies. Political stability and political quality prove to be very important. As many as 70 percent of local and regional authorities report that good political leadership is a top factor for successful SDG policy. But of course, once elections take place and a change of power occurs, sometimes you have to start from scratch. Local and regional officials try to overcome this barrier by planning long-term strategies. This is how they survive possible political transitions.”

“Another problem local authorities report facing is the lack of experienced, well-trained staff. Almost 50 percent of survey participants mentioned this as a decisive factor. Therefore, training and education of municipal and regional staff is a priority. This can be done in many ways and does not always have to be in a traditional, school-like setting. Training can also be peer-to-peer, through collaboration with universities or with practical learning kits. Such collaborations help civil servants make SDGs more understandable. With creativity, the right tools, the right support, and the right mindset, the problems

highlighted in the study—lack of money, political instability, and shortage of well-trained staff—can be made more manageable and addressed.”

Problem-solving

“If I were to meet a mayor of a municipality not yet participating in SDG policy, my strongest argument to convince him or her would not even be to point out the added value for their city and their own political career. It is actually not about selling SDG policy to a mayor. It is about showing that the SDGs are a tool for mayors and local authorities to solve real problems. These are problems that local authorities are struggling with today, here and now. The role of organisations like mine or the VVSG is therefore not to preach about the SDGs but to demonstrate that the SDGs exist in practice as a problem-solver. It is not a story of theory or ideology, but one that begins with scientific evidence and data.”

“This way, everyone can also consult the SDG scores of their own city or municipality. This shows citizens where ‘their’ city stands compared to other cities in the same country or with comparable cities abroad. When a mayor sees that their city scores poorly, he or she will likely be inclined to adopt SDG policy. Again, behind the numbers lies hard reality. Regarding social housing or air quality, the SDGs suddenly are no longer

abstract. They become a means to make your city more competitive and therefore attractive. Such success stories can then stimulate word-of-mouth. We share the lessons; we share the good practices. Nothing convinces a mayor more than the successes of another mayor.”

Hope, fear, and resilience

“If I were to take one element from Agenda 2030 to a higher level, the post-2030 era, it would be ‘resilience.’ It is already present throughout the 2030 agenda, but I would like to give resilience more attention and make it a more prominent focus. Concretely, I mean resilience against future shocks and disruptions. This can concern stronger infrastructure but also resilience in the face of a new pandemic. Every day we see new shocks or disasters. And they are becoming more frequent, more complex, and have more severe consequences. Worse still, they can undo the progress we achieved for sustainable development for years, even decades.”

“As a closing thought, I want to glide between hope and fear. Looking at the hard figures, the situation seems somewhat lost. That is not encouraging. But on the other hand, we must recognise that SDG policy will not be implemented in some conference room in New York or Geneva. SDG policy will be local, or it will not be. It will take shape in municipal policies, in town halls, and in countless projects by and for all of us.” —

MARC PEIRS
Editor



Herentals takes the sustainable path

The city of Herentals is building a solid foundation for more sustainable local policies. In preparing its multi-year plan 2026–2031, the city government is putting strong emphasis on integrating the SDGs into its policy framework. Whereas in the past legislature sustainability was addressed rather ad hoc, Herentals now aims to elevate it to a strategic level.

In Herentals, the Sustainable Development Goals are no longer a vague afterthought. They are firmly embedded in the environmental analysis and in the inspiration note prepared by staff for the incoming city council. The College of Mayor and Aldermen included the sustainability reflex in its coalition agreement, which was approved by the City Council on 6 May 2025. At the same time, it gave policy planning advisor Kaat Raeymakers a clear instruction: keep it manageable, and foster cross-cutting learning and collaboration among city staff. The SDGs turned out to be the perfect framework to connect both ambitions. They encourage staff to look beyond their own area of expertise through a sustainability lens.

An internal SDG taskforce developed a vision to embed sustainability thinking structurally into policy planning. The taskforce brings together internal experts from the Equal Opportunities Service, the sustainability officer, the policy adviser, and the alderman for internationalisation, Liese Bergen. With substantial input from both inside and outside the organisation—via surveys, benchmarking, and workshops—the taskforce identified three priority SDGs in early 2025: No Poverty (SDG 1), Good Health and Well-Being (SDG 3), and Sustainable Cities and Communities (SDG 11). Endorsed by the College, these goals now form the common thread of the city's policy and serve as a benchmark for strategic projects in the new multi-year plan.

14 projects, 1 SDG per year

Fourteen strategic projects have been defined as priorities. Project leaders were immersed in an SDG crash course, receiving training, a project fiche template, and reporting guidelines. The template invites them to reflect on what the SDGs could mean for their project. The accompanying manual includes tools such as the SDG circle exercise and the SDG test. The circle exercise visualises how a project contributes to the different goals, while the test highlights op-

portunities to strengthen it further. The test is repeated every three years. The Communication and Participation Department uses the results as the basis for a communication plan,

ensuring that project leaders promote sustainability thinking both inside and outside the organisation.

One of these projects is the cultural centre 't Schaliken. Through the SDG lens, the centre further expands the UiT-PAS programme (SDG 1), collaborates with partners such as Den Dorpel and De Fakkel on a photo exhibition created by people experiencing poverty (SDG 1), and switches all theatre lighting to LED (SDG 11). The cross-pollination between departments and external partners is widely regarded as a major added value.

The city has also decided to put extra focus on one priority SDG each year. During the Week of the Sustainable Municipality, it will launch the “Year of SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities.” This year the emphasis is on raising awareness among staff and policymakers. Over the course of the legislature, the city hopes to further strengthen this awareness through workshops, podcasts, newsletters, and awards to make sustainability tangible and recognisable.

To local governments seeking to advance their own sustainable transformation, Herentals offers three key tips: dream big, but keep implementation concrete and manageable; secure a clear mandate and assignment from the management team and the College of Mayor and Aldermen; and anchor the SDGs in projects that already work well and that

deliver on the coalition agreement, allowing you to build on a strong foundation. With a clear plan, broad internal support, and the right level of ambition, every city can contribute to the United Nations' 2030 Agenda. Herentals proves the point. —

KATHARINA VERSTRAELEN AND JOKE VANREPELEN
VVSg international staff



With substantial input from both inside and outside the organisation, the SDG taskforce identified three priority SDGs in early 2025: No Poverty (SDG 1), Good Health and Well-Being (SDG 3), and Sustainable Cities and Communities (SDG 11). They now form the common thread running through the city's policy.



2030 is now!

(Re)affirm your commitment to sustainable development

In September 2015, the UN General Assembly formally adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Belgium also signed on. 65% of the 17 goals cannot be achieved without local governments. They have the experience, proximity, and local partners to work concretely on issues such as poverty reduction, environmental improvements, integration, and sustainable living and mobility.

For several years, VVSG has been supporting its members in translating the global SDGs locally and integrating the broad definition of sustainability into their policies and organisations. In 2016, we launched an SDG commitment declaration for local governments. 120 Flemish municipal councils signed the declaration 'Global Goals, Local Focus,' confirming that they take responsibility for realising sustainable development in their territories, using the SDGs as a guiding framework.



Liese Bergen, Alderman for International Affairs, City of Herentals: "We systematically assess our 14 political-strategic projects against the SDGs. This way, we make our policies more sustainable in the broadest sense, with extra attention to poverty, sustainability, and health. The circular exercise results in broad engagement from various departments and resilience in every type of project."

SDG Commitment Declaration 2.0

As the 2030 deadline approaches, the challenges are significant, but the determination of local governments is even greater. In fact, over the past years, Flemish cities and municipalities have emerged as globally recognised leaders in locally embedding the 2030 Agenda. Municipal multi-year plans based on the SDGs, local SDG reports, and systematic evaluation of projects against the SDGs... VVSG and its members have learned what works and what doesn't in turning the broad global agenda into an effective tool for sustainable local policy. It is therefore time for an SDG Commitment Declaration 2.0. One that goes beyond a general endorsement of the values of the 2030 Agenda and represents a commitment to concrete measures and action. The 2.0 declaration remains officially a non-binding pledge but aims to serve as a practical guide for accelerating progress during the final five years toward a sustainable 2030.

The concise text proposes a growth path. Signatories start with a strong foundation and gradually progress toward a comprehensive and integrated SDG policy. Each proposed step is a proven methodology which, according to local government experience, leads to coherent sustainable policies in the spirit of the 2030 Agenda.

Launch in Mechelen

On Tuesday, September 30, VVSG invites local governments from around the world to the 'Global Goals, Local Action' conference to review ten years of local SDG work and kick off the final sprint. During an official signing ceremony, the new commitment declaration will be endorsed in the presence of mayors from

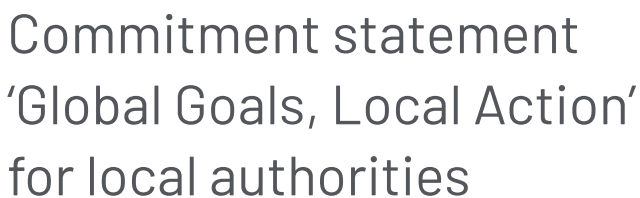


Yves De Bosscher, Program Manager for Sustainability, City of Harelbeke: "By visualising progress on our local SDG targets on a publicly accessible website, we hit two birds with one stone: citizens become familiar with the SDGs, while staff are required to regularly report on the progress of sustainability actions."

home and abroad, umbrella organisations of local governments, and representatives from other government levels and international organisations.

Everyone wins

VVSG hopes that all 285 Flemish cities and municipalities will formally express their commitment to the SDGs. Citizens deserve local policy decisions that structurally address health, inclusion, (international) solidarity, environment, prosperity, and participation. The SDGs have also become a common language spoken by businesses, associations, and other partners in every municipality. Committed cities and municipalities will be highlighted by VVSG—through, among other things, VVSG's practices database and press releases—and will have opportunities to learn from each other on a platform for signatories. —



With this commitment statement:

we commit to integrating the SDGs into our operations in a coherent, transparent and supported manner;

THE FOUNDATION

- We are raising awareness of the SDGs among our employees, political representatives and citizens.
- We use the SDGs as a touchstone in the preparation and implementation of the multi-year plan and/or in the development of at least a few priority projects. In doing so, we ensure policy coherence.
- We are committed to international cooperation and solidarity.

FURTHER ALONG

- We work across departments to develop a sustainable, integrated approach to local policy, for example in the form of a cross-cutting sustainability working group.
- We build bridges with local actors – such as schools, associations and businesses – to make progress on the SDGs together.
- We integrate social, economic and environmental sustainability criteria into our procurement, subsidies and partnerships.
- We monitor our progress and impact on the SDGs, for example using indicators.

IN-DEPTH INTEGRATION

- We report on our progress and impact on the SDGs, both internally and to residents.
- We define priority SDGs for our municipality, for example through an SDG impact analysis.
- We systematically map the positive and negative impact of our policies on people and the environment, with a particular focus on young people, women and vulnerable groups.
- We build bridges with international actors – such as European twinning partners, city-to-city partnerships and networks of local authorities – to make progress on the SDGs together.

1 Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

Since the very beginning of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), **Peter Wollaert**, Director of CIFAL Flanders—the Flemish office of UNITAR, the UN’s training agency in Geneva—has played an active role in advancing them. CIFAL provides training to local governments as well as businesses, trade unions, NGOs, and higher education institutions on how to put the UN’s core themes into practice: peace & security, human rights, and sustainable development, the SDGs.

MARC PEIRS
Editor Lokaal

“There’s plenty of money”

“We are convinced the world would be worse off without Agenda 2030. And the very fact that we can now assign a global figure to it already marks a difference compared with twenty years ago.”

STEFAN DE WICKERE







Big words, but in practice the SDGs are struggling: according to UN figures, only 16% of the global goals are currently on track. Should we call the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development—with its 17 SDGs—a complete failure? Wollaert resists what he calls the “critical journalist's trap.”

“That's not how we see it at all (laughs). We are convinced the world would be worse off without Agenda 2030. And the fact that we can even put a global number on progress—that alone is a huge difference compared to twenty years ago. Thanks to the UN resolution of September 2015, an extensive global data system was created. That means we can track the state of the world accurately, based on statistics and scientific evidence. If you had asked me twenty years ago how we were doing on specific targets, I wouldn't have been able to answer. Today, we measure—and we know.”

Still, he admits the numbers are sobering. “It's a very poor score, and we must be honest about that. The real decline started with the pandemic. Before then, many goals were on track. Remember, Agenda 2030 succeeded the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs, 2000–2015). On quite a few themes, real progress had been made—for instance, global poverty reduction was moving in the right direction. The decision was then made to continue the MDGs, but expand them to include environmental goals and add issues such as peace, security, and good governance. That push came in particular from South American countries such as Ecuador, who argued that the MDGs were no longer sufficient to address the world's new challenges.”

In Agenda 2030 we still have five years to go. Is it worth radically changing course now—or would that be counterproductive?

“The key question is and remains: in what should a government invest to best serve the public interest, locally, nationally, and globally? The SDGs are a political action plan that simultaneously provides a moral compass: not only what you do matters, but also how you do it. And there are annual progress reports on what is called ‘broad prosperity’ in the Netherlands, based on five pillars: social justice, ecological care, an economic policy that serves society rather than the other way around, peace and security, international cooperation and solidarity. The purpose remains that countries use the SDGs and integrate them into their own policies. In this way, the Agenda is meant to elevate projects around these pillars to a more ambitious level. But we must admit and recognise that in many countries this higher level of ambition is not rea-

“Cities and municipalities have all kinds of advisory councils. My recommendation is that it would be beneficial for all these councils to meet at least once a year. This creates space for cross-cutting collaboration.”

ched. I often say: the SDGs are dead, long live the SDGs. We need the SDGs more than ever to convince politicians that they must raise their ambitions for sustainability.”

In Flanders, many local governments do indeed show ambition regarding the SDGs. No less than 60 percent of local authorities integrate them into their new multi-year plans and therefore also allocate funds for them. Then I think: nothing can be reproached to the local authorities. They are not part of the failure of Agenda 2030.

“I fully agree with that. The SDGs will be local, or they will not be. All 17 SDGs are direct challenges and assignments for a local government. I am very pleased that the VVSG still takes on a very important role in raising awareness and providing support, while in the current political context more and more themes are being questioned, against better knowledge and scientific findings.”

Can you quickly name a few tools that would benefit local authorities and what they could learn from them?

“First, drawing on my experience at CIFAL, I would say that ideally every local policymaker should receive basic training in sustainable development. After all, it is relevant for everyone. Second: citizen participation is vital. Cities and municipalities have all kinds of advisory councils. My recommendation is that it would be good if all these councils meet each other at least once a year. This creates space for cross-cutting collaboration. The youth council can learn from the senior council, the cultural council might explore whether a joint project could be developed with the sports council. Knowing each other and collaborating interdisciplinarily is much more fruitful than each working in isolation. Moreover, the themes the councils deal with are immediately also SDG material and strongly present in Agenda 2030. It is important to get those engaged citizens—and engaged they are, since their very presence on an advisory council shows their commitment—to talk to each other.”

“My third recommendation: ideally, the theme ‘sustainable development’ should be a responsibility of the mayor, acting as a connector. He or she must ensure that themes such as youth policy, investment, environmental challenges, and others come together, and that their interplay remains coherent. This also means that the sustainability officer should be elevated to a strategic level. Sustainability is not a separate specialty; on the contrary, sustainability is transversal, it is about connection, coherence, and long-term thinking, based on the already mentioned five pillars reinforcing each other.”

In that direct way of working, reacting quickly, is that the unique added value of the local policy level?

“Of course! It is at the local level that everything becomes concrete. You can formulate major objectives at federal and international level, but without the involvement of local authorities and local citizens you will never be able to achieve them. Incidentally, Agenda 2030 has the baseline ‘leaving no one behind’. That call is aimed at tackling poverty, but it also refers to participation. Fortunately, we still have a strong and much-loved tradition of community associations—from the traders’ federation to the local theatre club, from the village football team to the environmental group. Our youth movements are thriving, despite all the commercial alternatives, and they form a particularly important breeding ground for sustainability and social connection. Sustainability is increasingly realised at the local level. Think of the many city festivals, where different SDGs come together. There is attention to inclusion, with special facilities for people with disabilities. There is attention to ecology, with the growing use of easily recyclable ‘smart cups’. And there is attention to safety, with specially trained stewards.”

Should local politicians and civil servants contribute to discussions on the successor to Agenda 2030, and what should be prioritised?

“Good question. The United Nations already has a text available—the so-called Pact for the Future, which was adopted at the UN General Assembly last September. This text has two parts. On the one hand, Agenda 2030 was reaffirmed in the Pact by the 193 member states: it remains the UN’s leading action plan. But because critical voices had been raised, several new themes were also added: the impact of artificial intelligence; taking youth participation far more seriously and giving young people a full role in decision-making bodies; and, finally, the explicit recognition of human rights as the foundation of sustainable development—something on which Europe has been particularly insistent.”

Does this renewed Agenda 2030 offer anything for local governments, or must they fend for themselves? What advice would you give them?

“The current text is purely political and dense, aimed at federal and supra-federal governments. For a local authority, such a text needs to be ‘localised’ as quickly as possible into a tool that is usable at the local level, turning global issues into actionable local policies.

This applies not only to local policymakers but equally to the private sector. At almost every UN conference, the importance of business is highlighted—not just for co-financing, but also for producing goods and services necessary to achieve Agenda 2030. Think, for example, of specific products tailored for seniors, who are now reaching eighty, ninety, and increasingly over 100 years of age.

In addition, I am a strong supporter of a mayors’ conference at the UN. At present, mayors have no structural voice within the UN. The UN, as we know it today, is an ecosystem of diplomats, heads of state, and government leaders. I advocate for a kind of ‘Second Chamber’ where mayors worldwide are elected to review UN texts and,

from a local perspective, approve or comment on them. UN documents frequently state, explicitly, that the local government level is a crucial link—but within the UN system, that link is essentially invisible. This needs to be addressed in UN reform. We know that the SDGs are driven and implemented worldwide by mayors in large cities. Mayors recognise the relevance of these issues, and that is not in question.

But a forum where these mayors can engage in open, frank dialogue is lacking. This entire agenda is also about innovation and associated pilot projects. Local authorities should take up these challenges. Cohousing, intergenerational living, and all these new forms of community life deserve to be tested. Local authorities should be the frontrunners in these initiatives, including projects related to interculturality—a significant challenge for our community in Flanders.”

The geopolitical situation is tense, confusing, and dangerous. Everywhere funds are being cut to increase defence spending. What keeps you motivated enough to maintain enthusiasm for your work in these difficult times?

“But there is no shortage of money (laughs)! Open any newspaper on any day, and you’ll find news about millionaires and multi-millionaires. There are organisations, countries, businesspeople, and foundations that are extremely wealthy. In Belgium, for example, the King Baudouin Foundation has a savings fund of over one billion euros. There is plenty of money in our society, but it is mostly parked in private hands and not available for the common good. I attend meetings weekly where discussions revolve around hundreds of thousands, or even millions, of euros or dollars. So money is not the issue—that’s point one. Point two: the motivation, which I certainly draw from the countless wonderful initiatives I encounter when giving lectures, where people live out their ideals. There are many committed people, plenty of enthusiasm, and countless beautiful, concrete actions happening at all levels— in neighbourhoods, schools, care homes, businesses, and community organisations.”

“That shows that the SDGs remain inspiring even today. Few United Nations texts are as widely known as Agenda 2030, and even fewer generate such a large number of lectures and workshops. More than that, in my view, Agenda 2030 is the UN text that, after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is the most widely used in so many different ways—from toddler toys to academic treatises. The text has been translated into all imaginable languages and is even available in Braille, which is highly unusual.”

“Agenda 2030 naturally inspires remarkable initiatives, such as the annual VVSG campaign ‘Local Heroes’ in September during Sustainability Week. On the other hand, there are poets who address the theme gently and thoughtfully in their work. And that’s a good thing. When people ask me whether Agenda 2030 and the SDGs will achieve the desired sustainability, I say: certainly, but never completely. Perhaps stillness, simplicity, beauty, or a touch of poetry will carry us further in our journey towards sustainability than many technical analyses and well-intentioned political actions.” —

The United Nations sees the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as the best way to make the world a better place for everyone. Cities and municipalities can also commit to achieving self-selected SDGs, taking meaningful steps toward a more ideal world. Mayors **Jan Vanderstraeten** of Lebbeke, **Katrien Schryvers** of Zoersel, and **Luk Draye** of Herent share their experiences with integrating the SDGs into local policy.

Local policy, global vision

MARC PEIRS
Editor Lokaal

‘The previous board had already given the SDGs a prominent place and we now want to link our policy even more strongly to them in terms of content.’

STEFAN DE WICKERE







Luk Draye:

“The SDGs and Agenda 2030 have been approved by the UN and by representatives of national governments. These efforts shouldn’t be left solely to the higher echelons of government.”

They barely know each other, the three mayors taking part in this discussion, but one quality they certainly share is optimistic voluntarism: a drive to make the SDGs “a given” in their municipal policy, as Mayor Luk Draye of Herent puts it.

“Like all municipalities, we are currently drafting our multi-year plan up to 2030,” Draye explains. “The previous administration had already given the SDGs a prominent place, and we now want to align our policy even more strongly with them.”

How?

Luk Draye: “By asking ourselves, for every action or measure, whether SDGs are applicable and if so, which ones, and by checking whether we are meeting the SDG targets. For example, when striving to reduce poverty, how do you do that without stigmatizing people who are already disadvantaged?”

Does it require constant vigilance to ensure your policy doesn’t conflict with the SDGs?

Jan Vanderstraeten: “In Lebbeke, the major advantage is that, at the administrative level, the connection or reflex happens much more quickly: the question is immediately, ‘Which SDGs are at stake here?’ So, which other departments need to be involved in this measure? I’ve noticed that the Public Works department collaborates closely with the Environment Department and the Urban Planning Department. All these teams give feedback because they spontaneously ask which SDGs might play a role, and how the different SDGs involved here and there can help achieve other objectives. In short, there is much more collaboration than just working side by side.”

Has that reflex for collaboration grown spontaneously, or was it directed from above?

Jan Vanderstraeten: “It grew spontaneously, mainly thanks to the dedication of a number of staff members who pushed the implementation of the SDGs to the forefront. (pauses to think) What I wouldn’t do again is first draft our multi-year plan and then, partway through, try to align the plans with the SDGs where they fit. That inevitably creates inconsistencies and cases of duplicated effort. Now we enjoy the advantage of creating a new multi-year plan with the SDGs already integrated. The opportunities to develop policy around the SDGs are clear from the outset, with greater uniformity and more efficient work. It’s really a kind of organisational culture,

a mindset shared throughout the entire organisation—a way of seeing things and making sure everyone is on board.”

How do you start doing that?

Katrien Schryvers: “Recently, we’ve been using a circular exercise where each department considers how it can contribute to different aspects of various policy areas, and whether it always keeps an eye on the effects of its actions. For example, take the Finance Department, which handles administrative tasks and deals with late payers—people who don’t pay taxes or fines on time. Do we consider that these people may be struggling, and how can we address such issues? Even internally, in HR, how do we handle employees facing wage garnishment? Do we take that into account, for instance by ensuring timely payment of salaries? That can make a huge difference to people trying to make ends meet. If the Finance Department doesn’t have that reflex, you won’t know which staff members are struggling. But if you keep reinforcing it, that attitude becomes almost second nature throughout the organisation. Everyone develops a certain sensitivity to poverty nearby, and once that ball starts rolling, you can’t and won’t stop it.”

Why do your municipalities participate in the SDGs and Agenda 2030, the successor to the Millennium Development Goals that bundles the SDGs in a single framework?



Luk Draye: “First and foremost, it’s a purely political and moral matter. The SDGs and Agenda 2030 were approved by the UN and national governments’ representatives. So it seems logical that a local authority would engage with them. You shouldn’t leave these efforts solely to higher levels of government. There are also benefits for local authorities because, as we’ve said in this conversation, the ideas behind the SDGs and Agenda 2030 permeate your organisation and help promote internal collaboration.”

Jan Vanderstraeten: “You gradually realise that the agenda is also important for the local community.”
Katrien Schryvers: “I think it’s especially important that everyone understands they can contribute, no matter how small the contribution. It’s all these small actions, even at the local level, that together can produce greater results. We shouldn’t just look to higher levels of government—we can also contribute ourselves to a more sustainable world, and we don’t always stop to think about that.”

Each of your municipalities has around 22,000 inhabitants. I don’t mean to offend anyone, but can every municipal official really digest all that international information? Are they equipped to understand the complexities of the SDGs and Agenda 2030?

Jan Vanderstraeten: “Absolutely. The information is all very accessible. Besides, I believe international efforts and ideas should start from the ground up, not imposed from above. The fact that the SDGs and Agenda 2030 are international instruments—identical in any country or city where they are applied—makes it easy to find best practices and draw on examples from around the world. That said, smaller municipalities do indeed need to make careful choices about which areas to focus on. Take the SDG ‘quality education’—how do you apply that in a relatively small municipality like ours?”

On other domains, we can be a leading force. Take the SDG ‘clean water.’ What flows in the Scheldt River is beyond Lebbeke’s control, but what we release into the

Scheldt or Dender ourselves, that’s up to us. We can monitor and manage the water quality locally.

Another thing I’ve noticed for a while is that it’s not just governments working with the SDGs—businesses do too. We’ve found connections with local companies. A good example is our gingerbread manufacturer, Vondelmolen. They are completely energy neutral. We, as a municipality, are pi-

oneers in sustainable policy just like Vondelmolen. And until recently, we didn’t even know about each other (laughs). Since we connected, we’ve collaborated well and exchanged ideas.”

Katrien Schryvers: “You need to find partners, that’s true. Working on the culture within your own organisation is obviously extremely important, but you also have to look more broadly, so you get the effect of expanding circles when you throw a stone into a pond. That’s how you achieve more and more results.”

If I may give one example? In Zoersel, we organised collaboration between all primary schools, regardless of their network. Fifth and sixth graders from all schools work together. We call them the ‘Climate Crew.’ Over the course of the year, these students carry out various actions together, have joint information sessions, workshops, and activities outside school, such as visits to a recycling centre or a wind turbine. All these sustainability and energy initiatives are linked to SDGs on poverty, the environment, biodiversity, and so on. You can hear and see that these young people even discuss these issues at home with their parents. Often it’s the children who educate the parents (laughs).”

Citizen involvement seems crucial. Without it, everything falls flat. How do you motivate people?

Katrien Schryvers: “It’s important that people can see the feasibility of actions up close. We’re lucky in Zoersel that Dieter Coppens, a committed TV presenter, is one of our residents. Coppens is always at the forefront of initiatives for the environment, nature, and climate. Various actions have grown from this, such as ‘Bye Bye Lawn.’ Let a patch of your grass grow wild for the benefit of bees and biodiversity in general. After a year, this modest initiative has expanded in many municipalities into vast wildflower lawns, full of flowers and insects.”

Agenda 2030 bundles the 17 SDGs into one handy overview. Municipalities can make their own choices. How do you select your own focus areas?

Jan Vanderstraeten: “Some of the 17 goals can be identified and addressed quite quickly at the local level. Others operate above our heads. International law, justice, fair trade—those kinds of issues, the geopolitical processes that govern the world—are areas where a local authority has limited influence. But on other themes, you can make a real impact; clean water, for example. Yet you see that different SDGs are interconnected and influence each other. Poverty and access to clean water, for instance, are two closely linked issues. And that’s exactly what the UN and Agenda 2030 want to encourage.”

Katrien Schryvers: “Some goals are obviously closer to local government than others, that’s clear. But don’t be too quick to think that a municipality can’t influence geopolitical issues. Fair trade, you said? A local council has the opportunity and choice to position itself as a Fairtrade municipality—always opting for fair and sustainable products. That may be a small step, but it shows your commitment.”

Jan Vanderstraeten:
“Working with the SDGs is really about creating a kind of organisational culture—a mindset shared throughout the entire organisation, a way of looking at things to ensure everyone is on board.”



Katrien Schryvers:

“The key is to get attention for the SDGs started. Before you know it, that process becomes unstoppable, and your entire organisation will be permeated by it.”

Jan Vanderstraeten: “It’s precisely the combination of different aspects that makes Agenda 2030 such a valuable source of inspiration. In Lebbeke, the largest employer is chocolate manufacturer Callebaut. They’ve long been committed to sustainability, particularly regarding fair-trade cocoa. In the global South, Callebaut has made significant progress in this area. Now the final piece of the sustainability puzzle is whether the more than a thousand employees in Lebbeke can cycle to work. As a municipality, you naturally support that. You ensure that employees have safe and proper cycle paths within Lebbeke. This kind of collaboration allows you to address multiple SDGs at once: mobility, sustainability, and safety.”

Katrien Schryvers: “On the international stage, Zoersel has had a town-twinning partnership with Bohicon in Benin since 2011. That relationship is very active. There are not only municipality-to-municipality projects but also—very importantly—projects initiated by citizens and organisations. A group of local residents has taken initiatives in Bohicon for people with disabilities. Others decided to support a boarding school for deaf children there. A facility for people with mental disabilities in Zoersel trains staff for that purpose, and our psychiatric hospital plays an active role. And yes, you could say these initiatives are drops in the ocean, but those drops make a real difference for the people there. Only through collaboration can you achieve meaningful impact.”

Luk Draye: “We in Herent also frame our town-twinning with Cobán in Guatemala explicitly around the SDGs. In 2027, the twinning will celebrate its 25th anniversary. During that time, we’ve launched several high-profile joint projects. For example, we held a week-long conference in Cobán on the role and place of cities and municipalities. Another example: we invited a delegation from Cobán to Herent to evaluate our Public Centre for Social Welfare (OCMW). The delegation noted that our OCMW primarily focuses on individual citizens, whereas the Guatemalans suggested a more structural approach, targeting the sociological group of people in poverty. From that evaluation, a group programme was created for OCMW clients to support each other by sharing their experiences.”

Right now, every municipality is drafting its 2025–2030 multi-year plan. Are the SDGs being integrated?

Katrien Schryvers: “In Zoersel, we organised a very extensive information and participation round. The fin-

dings are translated into concrete policy based on the SDGs. But first, many people have the chance to give their opinions and input. We always ask ourselves whether and how each action fits into Agenda 2030. We also consider how we will implement the policy. Everyone supports a new library? Fine. But we immediately think a step further and decide that it must be sustainable.”

Jan Vanderstraeten: “We link every action to the concrete targets of Agenda 2030 and the 17 SDGs. Suppose the municipality needs new infrastructure. You then carefully consider whether you can achieve two or three goals at once: does the new infrastructure also address the clean water issue, or part of the mobility problem? Maybe you notice a connection between two municipal departments that could work together on this. And shouldn’t you involve the relevant alderman? That’s how opportunities arise that you might not have noticed before.”

Luk Draye: “I see that in Herent, the Procurement Department has developed the reflex to consider sustainability as a key criterion. We must take into account not only our budget but also the sustainability of services, products, and materials. It might cost a little more if it’s sustainable, but that provides real guidance in our work.”

I see three passionate mayors immersed in the SDGs and Agenda 2030. What would be your golden tip for colleagues who are not yet familiar with this?

Luk Draye: “What’s important is that in your multi-year plan, you must dare to allocate sufficient financial space for actions that align with the SDGs, for example, for your town-twinning. Twinning isn’t something you finish in two years, so to speak. On the contrary, only by investing time and money does the twinning become stronger and more lasting.”

Katrien Schryvers: “The key is to get attention for the SDGs started. Before you know it, that process becomes unstoppable, and your entire organisation will be permeated by it.”

Jan Vanderstraeten: “Now is the golden moment to start. Embed the SDGs in the drafting of your multi-year plan.”

Luk Draye: “And go listen to the VVSG—they have knowledgeable people ready with excellent advice.” (*general laughter*) —

Decolonisation in focus: how the city of Diest transforms a colonial tribute into a place of dialogue and healing



Facing the past in all its complexity requires courage. In Diest, that courage has led to a remarkable art project that not only reframes a painful piece of history but also brings residents together in dialogue and reflection.

For years, the entrance hall of Diest's town hall displayed a colonial tribute: a plaque glorifying the Belgian presence in Congo. As public awareness of colonial history grew, this symbol became increasingly difficult to ignore. The city reached a crossroads. Should the plaque be removed and stored away, or given a contemporary counter-narrative? Diest chose the latter and launched the participatory art project Atelier Dekolonisé.

Under the guidance of artist Angélique Baeyens, a diverse group of residents collaborated for over a year on an artistic response. Participants reflected and shared personal stories — often painful, sometimes hopeful. The municipal services for Diversity and Heritage supported the project with respect for everyone's perspectives. Connections were made with schools, local associations, and the Pegasus Museum. Thanks to open dialogue among all partners, new bonds and a sense of global awareness emerged.

The outcome: a meaningful mosaic artwork that literally and symbolically reframes the colonial plaque. The piece is now permanently displayed in the town hall's entrance hall. Visitors can use a QR code to explore its deeper meaning and symbolism.

Some of the stories shared during the process also found a second life in a podcast series. The podcast addresses themes such as daily life in the colonial era, the legacy of coloni-

sation, and the tension between remembrance and awareness.

For local authorities seeking to engage with decolonisation or controversial heritage, Diest offers valuable lessons:

- Ensure professional guidance in sensitive discussions. A safe space for dialogue is essential.
- Combine participation with artistic expression. Art provides a way to address difficult themes.
- Involve different municipal departments and external partners from the very beginning.
- Allow time for the process: the dialogue itself is at least as important as the final result. —

JOKE VANREPELEN

VVSG international staff member

Inspired?

Get in touch at diversiteit@diest.be

Despite global cutbacks in development cooperation, researcher and professor **Sara Kinsbergen** (Radboud University) remains hopeful. "I still see an incredible amount of solidarity. That is a precious good we must cherish."

Just when global challenges are becoming more urgent and complex – think of the consequences of climate change – we are experiencing the largest ever cuts in development cooperation worldwide. Belgium, France, Germany, England, Finland, Sweden, the Netherlands, the US: these are all countries that are currently taking four steps backwards instead of the necessary two steps forwards. Current estimates predict global cuts of 30 to 70 billion euros by 2025. In light of the growing challenges, I find this extremely worrying.

This realisation is gradually sinking in among citizens and governments. Along with many others, I think it is irresponsible "to hide behind the dykes", as we say in the Netherlands, at a time when we, as global citizens, are more connected than ever.

'Everyone has a role to play in achieving the sustainable development goals: citizens, knowledge institutions, companies and governments. But governments do have a very special function, because they can make choices that other players – civil society, citizens – cannot make so quickly or so well. Think, for example, of investments in good governance in developing countries, helping to create and organise a fair tax system. The fourth pillar of sustainable development – voluntary citizen initiatives and initiatives by private foundations and funds – will not focus on this quickly. Or consider the work of the

to move back in with their parents. 'How can you expect me to show international solidarity when I can't even help my own child find a place to live?' is a comment that often comes up in our research. It is problems like these close to home – sometimes real, sometimes perceived – that mean that we may know what is happening in the world, but we cannot always be open to it.

Research shows that solidarity – both far away and close to home – still exists. People who are struggling financially are surprisingly often the most supportive: they do voluntary work, help their neighbours, share their meals. It is a political choice whether or not to encourage these forms of solidarity. In the Netherlands, over the last fifteen years, there have been cuts to budgets for civic engagement, international solidarity and development cooperation. These budgets are now also under pressure in Belgium and

Flanders, where savings of 25% and 10% respectively will be made during this term of office, which in turn will trickle down to the provinces and municipalities. But while some cities or provinces are scaling back significantly, there are also authorities that are choosing to go all out right now. The province of West Flanders, for example, reserves 1%

of its budget for global policy. When I heard that, I was amazed. That's fantastic! I strongly believe in the principle of solidarity. Working together to create a better world, based on the realisation that we are all connected.

'Belgium still has a very fine mesh network for citizen involvement and international solidarity. That is unique and you really have to cherish it. From the federal government to the regions to the provinces and municipalities, from the administration to civil society and umbrella organisations such as 11.11.11 to private initiatives: at all levels, there are groups working on global cooperation and civic engagement. There is a very decentralised structure. In the Netherlands, there used to be something similar, but since 2010, 2011, it has been completely dismantled. We have seen civic engagement and international solidarity disappear from the fabric of society here due to austerity policies.

You cannot pursue policies that stop at municipal or national borders, living under the illusion that what happens beyond them has no impact on your citizens.

American government department USAID in the fight against the HIV virus. The incredible progress that has been made there over the past twenty years is now in danger of being wiped out in one fell swoop. And it will be very difficult to repair that damage.

'Every day, we are informed and experience first-hand how interconnected our world is, think of the energy crisis or the coronavirus pandemic. At the same time, I think that we are currently in a phase in which many people are experiencing difficulties in their own lives. In the Netherlands, for example, there is a huge shortage in the housing market, which is causing many young people

Giving solidarity a human face



Sara Kinsbergen

was born in Deurne and has lived and worked in the Netherlands since 2003, where she is now a full professor at Radboud University in Nijmegen. Since 2006, she has been conducting research into citizens' initiatives in the world of development cooperation. This so-called private fourth pillar (the other three being governments, multilateral organisations and organised civil society) comprises initiatives by motivated individuals and private foundations or funds. Citizen involvement is the common thread in her research, which covers a diversity of actors and themes (forms of cooperation, impact, power shifts, decolonisation).



But the model is also under pressure in Flanders. The GROS, the municipal councils for development cooperation, are ageing and finding it difficult to recruit new members. And for organisations such as 11.11.11., it is also apparently less obvious to find volunteers. Combine that with shrinking government budgets and disappearing employees, and you can see that the structure is beginning to falter. What I would recommend to everyone who cares about solidarity is to be very alert right now. Which structures do we definitely want to protect?

How can we perhaps better organise ourselves to remain relevant and up to date? All levels should sit down together to make that analysis. In the Netherlands, we are only now cautiously entering a phase where importance is attached to global citizenship, but little knowledge and few structures remain. It will take years to rebuild that.

'It is more important than ever that local authorities also play their part in international, global policy. Citizens are entitled to national and local policymakers who are imbued with the idea of shared destiny. You cannot pursue policies that stop at municipal or national borders, living under the illusion that what happens beyond them has no impact on your citizens. Local authorities must ask themselves how they relate to this changing world. The first aspect is impact: contributing to a better world. Based on the realisation that your municipality can only thrive if the world is doing well. And vice versa: if things are going well in your municipality, this can also contribute to a better world. In addition, international solidarity is now often dehumanised: development cooperation is seen as a very complex system, which in recent years has also been approached solely in economic or transactional terms. Municipalities, the level closest to the citizen, are ideally placed to give those citizens and local communities on the other side of the world a face again. By maintaining contacts, investing in projects and then telling the human story.

'I think it's important to give those who are still showing solidarity, in whatever way, the attention they deserve, to put them in the spotlight. So that we continue to see that, to hold on to it. Because if you add up all those small gestures and initiatives of solidarity— local and

Local authorities are ideally placed communities on the other side of the world a face again. By maintaining contacts, investing in projects and then telling the human story behind them.'

international –, you do indeed arrive at a large sum. Communication is extremely important. It is the task of the media, but certainly also of local authorities, to but also from local authorities to bring the distant world closer and to show that solidarity exists. To show the impact of these initiatives, their positive effects on people's lives.

'You are not born a global citizen, someone who thinks, acts and feels from that perspective. You have to be nurtured in that, you need drivers for that: your parents, education... As financiers of structures, governments play an important role in building support for citizenship and global awareness. I would therefore advise all local authorities to have the courage to go against the tide and show that, as a local community, they do want to connect with other local communities. That they are taking a step forward out of solidarity. 'We are four trillion dollars short per year to achieve the SDGs. But that SDG agenda was and is extremely important because it has enabled us to make it clear to many people, young and old, how the world actually works and that problems are not just those of developing countries but of everyone, and that efforts are therefore needed from everyone. Even if we don't achieve the goals, as far as I'm concerned, that's already a win: the SDG agenda has enabled us to talk to more people about this. The SDGs have been very important as a process of raising awareness.' —

GUY BOURGEOIS
Editor Lokaal

VERBETER
DE WERELD
VANUIT JE
LUIE ZETEL

AAN HET DR
VANEEN BE



Two municipalities, one shared world

What if we rethought the traditional city partnership? International cooperation could become simpler, more goal-oriented, and focused on equality and mutual learning. VVSG is testing this approach through SDG partnerships between local governments in Flanders and Benin. In late March, the municipality of Laarne and the city of Sint-Truiden conducted a working visit to Benin. Ellen Leroy, General Director of Laarne, shares her impressions.

International cooperation is no longer solely the domain of national governments. Local authorities worldwide face the same challenges: climate, citizen participation, economy, waste management...

At VVSG, we see that Flemish municipalities are looking for a more accessible and thematically focused approach, one that better matches their available time and resources. That is why, with the support of the Belgian Development Cooperation (DGD), we are launching the SDG Partnerships: short-term collabora-

week of exchange, wonder, respect, and reflection. 'Ouinhi – Laarne: two municipalities, one shared world,' we wrote on the gift we presented to the mayor of Ouinhi. That message proved to be more than symbolic."

The reality was sometimes confronting: schools without running water, health centres with barely any staff. Yet despite the limited resources, doctors, school principals, and local officials demonstrate impressive resilience every day.

"The respect and openness with which we were received left a deep

municipal council. And finally, efficient land use: Municipal plots are strategically allocated for food production."

In addition to structural meetings and working visits, the municipalities will remain in digital contact over the coming months. The Flemish and Beninese authorities will jointly decide how to use the remaining operational budget of €4,250 per municipality and how they can continue to inspire and support each other with specific learning objectives.

Ellen Leroy:
"The insights from Ouinhi and Covè are not merely theoretical. With an action plan in hand, we will focus on further exchange in the coming months."



VINO FOTOGRAFIE

tions around a single theme, with a limited budget.

Two Flemish municipalities have been paired with a municipality in Benin. Laarne and Ouinhi, for example, will work together for two years on local economy and participation, exchanging practical experience along the way.

A warm welcome in a challenging context

Recently, the VVSG organised a working visit to Benin, attended by a political-administrative delegation from Laarne and Sint-Truiden. Ellen Leroy, General Director of Laarne, reflects briefly: "On 22 March 2025, we set off with a delegation to Benin. What followed was an intense

impression. During the working visit, we learned from local advisory councils, agricultural cooperatives, and municipal services how participation, economic development, and agriculture are organised in Ouinhi. These insights from Ouinhi and Covè are not merely theoretical. Armed with an action plan, we will focus on further exchange in the coming months."

Ellen Leroy highlights some inspiring practices they took home: First, strong local consultation: Weekly Monday meetings between key administrative figures enhance coordination and the flow of information. Secondly, embedded participation: each village has a voice through representation in the mu-

One shared world

The SDG partnership between Laarne and Ouinhi shows that global solidarity also begins locally. Today's challenges extend far beyond municipal and national borders. But by working together and learning from each other, municipalities can address them more effectively. Ellen Leroy confirms this: "Before we left, we didn't know what to expect. Now we look back on an experience that made us think. International cooperation? That simply starts in your town hall." —

MICHEL OUVRY

VVSG international staff member

Building inclusive progress together

Since 2018, the Beninese municipality of Pèrèrè has partnered with the Flemish municipality of Anzegem. This town-twinning is about more than projects—it is built on a shared vision and mutual trust. With limited resources, Mayor Dr. Abdoulaye Alassane Nouhoun is making significant strides toward the 2030 Agenda. His message is clear and relatable: “The Sustainable Development Goals are not distant ideals; they are practical tools for local policymaking.” He explains how the SDGs are applied locally in Pèrèrè and why women play a key role in this process.

“The SDGs are our compass,” says Mayor Alassane. “Pèrèrè comprises 61 villages across six districts, each with its own priorities. The SDGs allow us to identify these local needs, weigh them, and incorporate them into our Municipal Development Plan.” This plan, known as the Plan de Développement Communal (PDC), was developed with support from Swiss development cooperation. However, its implementation is driven by the villages themselves. “These are their priorities, their resources, their future.”

the village of Bonrou to build its own health centre.

In Pèrèrè, inclusion and social justice are guiding principles. The municipality holds open accountability sessions with citizens at least twice a year. “Transparency builds trust, and that’s essential if you want to create something together.”

Vulnerable groups are also involved in policy planning: people with disabilities, the elderly, youth, and women living in poverty. “We listen, weigh options, and make choices. That way, no one is left behind.”

trust. Since then, we’ve learned a lot from each other, through visits and concrete projects.”

The exchange extends beyond municipal structures. “Our schools collaborate. Our women’s associations maintain contact. And we aim to continue fostering intercultural exchange and shared learning.”

Dreams for the future

What are Mayor Alassane’s hopes for the future? “I want Pèrèrè to become a model municipality, just like Anzegem.



Abdoulaye Alassane Nouhoun:
“Women gain recognition, independence, and influence in their communities. And when women thrive, families and villages thrive too.”



From literacy to women’s cooperatives

An important action point is literacy. Thanks to PAGEDA, 47% of adults are now literate. The municipality links this to economic empowerment: women process cassava and soy into gari and soy cheese, and with support from Anzegem they also set up a shea butter production unit. “It brings more than income,” says Abdoulaye Alassane. “Women gain recognition, independence, and influence in their community. And when women thrive, families and villages thrive.”

Leaving No One Behind

Pèrèrè is pioneering participatory budgeting in northern Benin. Residents indicate in their villages what they consider priorities, and this input is incorporated into the municipal budget. This allowed

Better together

Pèrèrè demonstrates the benefits of international cooperation. Since 2018, there has been a twin city partnership with Anzegem, which has already produced concrete results, such as support for women’s cooperatives processing cassava and waste collection in the Bawara neighbourhood.

“We were able to purchase rubbish bins, and waste is now collected regularly,” says the mayor. “This has not only improved health and hygiene but also enhanced the neighbourhood’s appearance and boosted the local economy.”

According to Alassane, the collaboration rests on three pillars: trust, knowledge exchange, and mutual respect. “When Anzegem provided resources without knowing us well, they showed

A place where women are economically independent, children can attend school, and young people have a future to look forward to.” His priorities for the coming years are clear: strengthen the community radio, increase local revenue, and above all, deepen the cooperation with Anzegem. “We want to learn how to improve our services and provide stronger governance. And we hope that Anzegem continues to learn from us as well.” —

KATHARINA VERSTRAELEN

VVSG international staff member

Want to learn more about the Anzegem–Pèrèrè partnership? Contact the International Team at internationala@vvsg.be

A soft spot for local-global policy

When portfolios are assigned at the start of a legislative term, local-global policy is rarely a coveted responsibility. Yet the three politicians we interviewed eagerly took it on. Dirk De fauw, Mayor of Bruges; Kathleen De Poorter, Alderwoman in Evergem; and Marc Geerts, Alderman in Pelt, share a strong sense of international justice and solidarity—but above all, an unwavering belief in the power of local action.

“I grew up in Spain, travelled extensively, and sent my children on exchange programs. It’s important to know the world and look at it with solidarity—we all share this planet,” says Kathleen De Poorter. As a federal parliament member, she focuses on public health, but as Alderman for International Cooperation in Evergem, her commitment extends far beyond Belgium’s borders.

Dirk De fauw inherited his international solidarity early. “My father was a provincial official responsible for global policy and travelled ex-

tensively. He always returned with countless stories of hardship, but also of the meaningful work missionaries were doing. In 1985, I visited leprosy clinics and prisons in Cameroon. That experience deeply affected me and convinced me I should do what I can to address people’s suffering.”

Marc Geerts’ international experience is more limited, but his determination is equally strong: “Seeing inequality motivates me to act. I cannot accept that poverty and hunger still exist in the 21st century. Every

level of government must take responsibility, including municipalities, no matter their size.”

The world as a village

Global challenges resonate locally: environmental pollution, climate change, migration, pandemics, wars. The conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine concern all three politicians.

Marc Geerts explains: “A municipality mirrors the world. Every crisis forces reflection and action. Local governments must not only respond but also actively contribute to peace





ALBERT LOOS

Marc Geerts:
“It is our moral duty to strengthen citizens’ solidarity and sense of justice and support local organisations in their efforts for a better world.”



GF

Kathleen De Poorter: **“It is often a difficult balancing act, but whenever possible, we make sustainable choices.”**



GF

Dirk De fauw:
“Our city has always played a key role in international relations. I see it as my duty to continue that tradition, as global challenges grow ever greater.”

and stability by taking initiatives with citizens and demonstrating solidarity.”

Dirk De fauw adds: “Peace requires local policy attention now more than ever. The world has become a village, and within our village resides the world. With increasing diversity and interconnection, we must build a positive shared narrative to counter polarisation.”

Kathleen De Poorter sees similar challenges: “Evergem is a peri-urban municipality near Ghent, with both rural and urban influences. Our community is becoming more diverse. That’s why we developed, together with our global council, an inclusive program including activities like cooking together with people from migrant backgrounds, fostering social cohesion.”

Cold or warm cities

The goal of local-global policy is international justice, but Dirk De fauw highlights the local benefits, improving the quality of life in Bruges: “As local governments, we influence our environment’s future. The choices we make locally have global impact and vice versa. This interconnectedness creates opportunities, and local-global policy helps keep the administration open-minded and alert to the values it stands for.”

Marc Geerts sees it as a moral responsibility with tangible benefits, such as strengthening the social fabric: “International solidarity goes hand in hand with local solidarity. We must enhance citizens’ sense of justice and solidarity and support local organisations in their

efforts for a better world. This strengthens civil society and social cohesion.”

Dirk De fauw concurs: We support the many initiatives of our Bruges global citizens, encourage our schools to engage with the SDGs, and promote traders who operate responsibly. This way, we take meaningful steps toward an ideal world. I am certain that our citizens and visitors embrace all these initiatives and are happy to contribute themselves. After all, a warm, solidaristic city is far better to live in than a cold, unjust one, isn’t it?”

Sustainable procurement and ethical investing

What we do locally also resonates far beyond our national borders. The key word is coherence. Aligning your policies with the SDGs is an excellent way to enhance that coherence. The same applies to sustainable procurement and ethical investing—policy choices with significant global impact. For instance, if a municipality with a twin city in an African conflict zone invests in a major bank that funds the arms industry, the net contribution to international justice remains limited. To be coherent, the municipality must switch to ethical banking. In doing so, it indirectly strengthens its investment in the twin city partnership.

This is exactly what Bruges has done. Mayor Dirk De fauw: “We recently received the ‘SDG Pioneer City’ certificate from UNITAR, the UN training institute. A great recognition of our efforts. The SDGs also form the basis of our partner-

ship with the city of Ebolowa in Cameroon. Since 2019, we have gradually made our city finances more sustainable with a focus on ethical banking. We also communicate about this and obtained the ‘Transparency ID’ from Forum Ethibel. Our sustainable procurement and food policies further enhance the coherence of our global strategy.”

Kathleen De Poorter and Marc Geerts, also responsible for Finance, extend this global perspective. Kathleen De Poorter: “Sustainable finance and sustainable procurement are important levers for international justice. We include sustainability clauses in our tenders, and for banking products and long-term investments, we focus on sustainability. It is often a delicate balancing act, but whenever there are opportunities to make sustainable decisions, we take them. It is also crucial that we clearly explain where the money goes and what results we achieve.”

Marc Geerts adds: “Pelt has two key subsidy schemes: project support for local associations and support for immersive study trips. These are small initiatives, but I am convinced that these funds are well spent.”

Twinning as an engine for change

Bruges maintains a partnership with Ebolowa in Cameroon, Evergem with Guaranda in Ecuador. While these partnerships differ, both demonstrate the power of international cooperation. Kathleen De Poorter emphasises: “A local government can collaborate directly



ALBERT LUDS

What is local-global policy?

Local-Global Policy (LGP) has three action areas. It is entirely possible for municipal initiatives to fall under more than one area of action:

Global policy choices are coherent policy decisions made by a local government that contribute to international justice.

Global citizenship involves the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours that reflect a shared responsibility to implement changes both locally and globally that promote international justice.

Global cooperation is a form of international collaboration aimed at contributing, as partners, to greater international justice.

All of this can be found with just a few clicks on the VVSG website:

- Five pages arguments and proposals for integrating Global Policy into your party manifesto, coalition agreement and multi-year plan
- The Selection Menu for Municipal Global Cooperation provides an overview of eight ways for a local government to engage in global cooperation, with definitions, key features, and practical examples.
- Learn more about the reorientation of municipal development cooperation toward Local Global Policy (LGP), what LGP entails, and how to implement it in practice in the publication From North-South to Global: Towards a Local Global Policy.

and in a very hands-on way. That is immensely powerful and valuable for both communities. The partnership also has a strong cultural dimension that enriches and connects both sides: an Ecuadorian artist created several works together with Evergem students, there are exchanges between artists and music associations, and joint exhibitions. As a local authority you are ideally placed to raise awareness among residents about global challenges—that is the first step toward societal change.”

Bruges runs a “chocolate partnership” promoting sustainable cocoa production. Dirk De fauw: “We have set up a multi-stakeholder partnership. Ebolowa focuses on making the local cocoa sector more sustainable—from cultivation

to production and processing—through training and support for cocoa cooperatives. We work closely with women’s cooperatives to improve their skills in producing chocolate, oils and cosmetics, thereby strengthening the local economy and raising living standards. In Bruges, we engage chocolatiers, schools and the wider public. Our showpiece is our city chocolate ‘Sjokla’: 100% fair trade, 100% locally made by our Bruges guild of chocolatiers. Sjokla makes the link between local and global action tangible for our citizens.”

Marc Geerts notes that while Pelt lacks a formal partnership, the municipality supports projects in Congo and dreams of establishing a town-twinning connec-

tion to elevate its global policy: “We have a very active and committed advisory council. A town twinning—for example with a Congolese partner—would take our global policy to the next level.”

Crowning local work

Dirk De fauw sees local global policy as far from an afterthought: “I think I am one of the few mayors who absolutely wanted this responsibility. Our city has always played an important role in international relations. I see it as my duty to continue that tradition, because global challenges have only grown. I know some people question whether local governments should engage in global policy, but I don’t have to think twice about that. ‘Feest in ’t Park,’ our global festival, attracts over 10,000 visitors every year. That proves that solidarity lives in our city.”

Marc Geerts shares the same view: “As an alderman, I have experienced how powerful local actions can be for global change. It is a privilege to contribute to international projects and initiatives. For me, this is not an extra task, but an integral part of my political mission.”

For Kathleen De Poorter, international cooperation is also essential: “You enter politics to contribute to a better society, both here and beyond. I will never claim that, as alderman for international cooperation, I can change the world, but I would be thrilled if my efforts help people lead better lives. If given the chance, I would gladly serve another term.”

One thing is clear: today’s global challenges require strong local global policy. The three local politicians we spoke to emphasise the importance of global citizenship, international cooperation, and sustainable policy choices. Their passion and commitment offer hope for the future. —

JULES DE WINTER

VVSG international staff member

www.vvsg.be/internationaal/mondiaal

Sustainability as a guiding principle for the multi-year plan

In 2025, Flemish municipalities are preparing their multi-year plans for 2026–2031. Using the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a framework for these plans offers several advantages. They provide a clear structure, encourage cross-departmental collaboration across the organisation, and make it easier to engage with partners who speak the same SDG language. Berlare, Halle, and Laarne are three of many municipalities that see the value in the SDG approach.

Local governments are indispensable for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Around 65 percent of the targets cannot be reached without the active contribution of cities and municipalities. The local level brings innovation and proximity, for example in involving people living in poverty in policy-making, planting vertical greenery, making public buildings more sustainable, implementing participatory budgets, or addressing energy poverty. Flemish municipalities are embracing all seventeen goals: 180 municipalities have already participated in the Sustainable Municipality Week, 120 have signed the VVSG SDG commitment declaration, 40 percent monitor local SDG progress, and 60 percent include them in their multi-year plans. At present, Flemish municipalities are conducting their environmental analyses, which will feed into the preparation of their 2026–2031 multi-year plans. The SDGs are therefore once again coming to the forefront. Laarne and Halle took their first steps six years ago, while Berlare is working with the goals for the first time.

Broader perspective

“We used a kind of light version of working with the SDGs at the start of the previous municipal term,” says Ellen Leroy, General Director in Laarne. “We built our multi-year plan around the organisation’s mission, vision, and values, and only afterwards linked the SDGs to the various

objectives and actions in the plan. You could say we simply labelled them. Now we want to take the next step. We structured our environmental analysis around the five Ps – People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace, and Partnership – because this is somewhat simpler than the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals. In the next phase, we will organise discussion tables with citizens about the environmental analysis and the

se same five Ps, with an expert providing the necessary explanation and context each time. We plan to integrate all of this into the multi-year plan next year. In February, we will start with a policy day for the elected officials. This also requires them to think differently. They are usually very action-oriented and practical, whereas the SDGs are more of a reflective framework, slightly removed from day-to-day practice.”





Hilde Van der Jeugt:
‘We want to organise our multi-year planning in a different way, using a new methodology. The SDGs are very suitable as a framework for this.’



Ellen Leroy:
‘We based our environmental analysis on the five Ps. In the next phase, we will organise round-table discussions with citizens about the environmental analysis and those same five Ps, with an expert present at each discussion.’



Marijke Ceunen:
‘I hold a seat on the general meeting of the social enterprise AMAB, which has been using the five Ps and the SDGs as its policy framework for some time now. It's nice that we speak the same language.’

The city of Halle went through a similar process six years ago, as one of the SDG pilot municipalities in a VVSG project. There, too, they started from the multi-year planning and linked the SDGs afterwards. “Both staff and elected officials saw the benefits of attaching the seventeen goals to the actions in the multi-year plan. They can immediately see what an action is about and which areas it impacts. An action aimed at energy savings may also have a social component, and that becomes clear and visually understandable at once. This broadens the perspective on sustainable development and ensures that all possible SDGs are considered from the start of a project,” explains Marijke Ceunen, who served for the past six years as alderman for, among other things, sustainability. How Halle will approach the new multi-year plan is not yet entirely clear; it is up to the new municipal team to decide how they will integrate the SDGs. In any case, the environmental analysis already includes them.

Circle exercise

The municipality of Berlare will be using the SDGs for the first time in preparing its 2026–2031 multi-year plan. “We are getting up to speed,” says General Director Hilde Van der Jeugt. “We want to organise the multi-year planning differently, with a new methodology. The SDGs are very suitable as a framework for that. With support from VVSG, we have set up a process. There has already

been an information day for the organisation’s managers, the Sustainable Development Goals were introduced at the general staff meeting, and we now have an SDG coordinator and a steering group with representatives from various departments. The SDGs are also on the agenda for the orientation day for new council members. The next step is the SDG circle exercise, which will be done per department. First, we analyse which

actions a department is already taking and which SDGs they contribute to, and then we consider additional actions. All this work will then feed into the preparation of the multi-year plan next year.”

Dashboard

The seventeen goals (or the five Ps) help municipalities structure their multi-year plans differently and integrate sustainability in a broad sense across all objectives and actions in the plan. Municipalities can also monitor progress for each SDG and attach new policy proposals accordingly.

Tessa De Marie, sustainability officer in Halle, explains: “The city really wants to focus on data-driven governance. Our environmental analysis has led to a dashboard with numerous indicators for Halle. The SDGs are part of that. The dashboard shows, for example, poverty indicators such as income levels or the number of social welfare recipients. These are linked to SDG 1, ending poverty worldwide. We can track the evolution of each individual indicator very precisely, but we can also combine the different poverty-related indicators to visualize progress on SDG 1. This is particularly useful information for the city council and the executive board.”

Laarne and Berlare also link the data from their environmental analyses to the Sustainable Development Goals to monitor trends and progress. It is clear that the SDGs are inherently transversal across the entire organisation. Many



LATLAERTS



Tessa De Marie:
‘The city really wants to focus on data-driven governance. Our environmental analysis has resulted in a dashboard with lots of indicators for Halle. The SDGs are also part of this.’

actions in the multi-year plan touch on multiple goals and involve several departments. They help break through tunnel vision on certain actions or projects.

Common language

Finally, the Sustainable Development Goals also provide a common language—within the municipal organisation, in relations with other authorities, and in communication with external partners. Hilde Van der Jeugt: “In Berlare, the Environmental Council and the Global Council have been working from the SDG framework for some time. That has certainly been an incentive to adopt the SDGs more broadly within the municipality.”

Alderman Marijke Ceunen points out that more and more companies and organisations are also starting to work

with them. “I sit on the general assembly of the sheltered employment company AMAB, which has long used the five Ps and the SDGs as a policy framework. It’s great that we speak the same language.”

The framework also proves its value in international cooperation: the SDGs are literally a universal reference. Since 2023, Laarne has partnered with Ouinhi, a village in Benin, on themes such as exclusion, discrimination, and violence against girls and women. Ellen Leroy: “Working with the SDGs is second nature for the municipality of Ouinhi. That language is very useful for shaping and deepening our still nascent collaboration. It makes clear that we share many themes and challenges.” —

BART VAN MOERKERKE
Editor

SDG-BINGO

In 2015, the United Nations launched 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These are intended to make our world a more sustainable place by 2030, with respect for people and the environment. Everyone can do their bit: your local council, school, company... but also you as a citizen! Which of the actions in the table on the right are you already doing? Where can you step up your efforts? Can you cross off a row and get BINGO?

Your local council is committed to the SDGs and is participating in Sustainable Municipality Week. It is putting sustainable heroes in the spotlight and hoisting the SDG flag. Would you like to get to know these heroes?

Visit www.duurzamegemeente.be and get inspired!

3 Take the stairs instead of the lift or escalator. 	12 Avoid food waste. Freeze leftovers and ask for your leftovers at restaurants. 	15 Create a natural (wild) garden. 	4 Broaden your (grand)child's world view and introduce them to different cultures. 	9 Is your organisation in need of renewal? Opt for sustainable materials and more greenery.
11 Choose to cycle or take public transport. 	1 Encourage your school or that of your (grand)children to offer 1-euro meals. 	8 Buy local, seasonal and fair trade. 	6 Be economical with water when brushing teeth, bathing and cleaning. 	16 Participate in local citizen participation initiatives.
10 Become a volunteer buddy for a new resident in your municipality. 	17 Tell others about the Sustainable Development Goals. 		2 Donate food that you no longer use. 	13 Eat more vegetables and reduce your meat consumption.
6 Drink tap water 	15 Do not throw litter (plastic, cigarette butts, etc.) in the countryside. 	5 Choose to have more women in politics and leadership positions. 	17 Support charities worldwide. 	7 Use renewable energy for heating, lighting and electricity.
16 Invest your money in sustainable and ethical savings and investment funds. 	13 Offset the CO ₂ emissions from your car or air travel. 	12 Give used items a second life. Sell or buy second-hand items, or turn them into something new. 	3 Behave safely on the road. 	14 Use biodegradable cleaning products.



Laurence Hauttekeete “The SDGs are my compass”

Calling the Department of Strategy, Quality and Participation of the City of Deizé “dynamic” would be an understatement. The vibrant personality of Laurence Hauttekeete is infectious within the four-member team. “The combination of policy work and citizen participation fuels my passion for local government,” she begins enthusiastically. For Laurence, the Sustainable Development Goals are more than a framework—they are a guide. “To me, the SDGs offer a compass for conversations about the social challenges facing our city.”

Although Laurence Hauttekeete has been working for the city of Deizé for almost thirteen years, her workdays remain surprisingly varied. “In recent months, the focus has been on an in-depth environmental analysis and the preparation of the multi-year plan. The Sustainable Development Goals serve as a lever in this process.” Her colleagues also make grateful use of the SDG tools. “My colleague in the department and our data analyst have been consulting the SDG monitor intensively—a set of indicators that maps the city’s SDG profile.”

In past legislative periods, the department itself conducted surveys aimed at the citizens of Deizé. “Creating and processing a questionnaire is very labour-intensive. The wealth of data we can now extract from the SDG monitor and municipal and city monitors makes a separate survey unnecessary. This has freed up space to experiment with innovative forms of citizen participation.”



STEFAN DE WICKERE

LAURENCE HAUTTEKEETE

has been working for the city administration of Deinze for nearly thirteen years in the Strategy, Quality, and Participation Department. After an academic career with a European perspective, she returned to her hometown. Her passion has remained the same: mapping the impact of changes on people. The core tasks of her position have also remained the same—policy work, citizen participation, methodology subsidies, and monitoring—but the landscape has changed drastically. Each workday offers new challenges and perspectives. Far from routine, Laurence Hauttekeete thrives.

environmental analysis, the panel reached out to all citizens of the city using the participation platform. The panel presented questions digitally, enriching the qualitative input of the panel members with the opinions of the broader population.”

For the mayor and aldermen, the collaboration with the citizen panel is just the beginning. Laurence Hauttekeete proudly explains: “Now that the environmental analysis is complete, the Deinse Denkers will continue as ambassadors of the city. In the coming year, the panel will focus on themes such as city identity and cleanliness. Citizens will be kept informed about the panel’s progress via goedgezgd.deinze.be.”

The Deinse Denkers are embedded in the updated participation regulations, approved by the city council. Some supporting tools, including the participation manual and guide, are also referenced. “These tools are aimed at city staff whom we wish to support in their ambitions to engage with citizens. Deinze has a long tradition of advisory boards, based on an impressive volunteer commitment. With respect for the pace of these dedicated members, we are starting a transition process with a few advisory boards. We want to evolve toward a more open operation.”

Laurence Hauttekeete started as a policy officer with the task of shaping an environmental analysis and taking the first steps in the new policy and management cycle. Two legislative periods later, her responsibilities have grown significantly along with the city. “I enjoy mapping what is happening in my city. Having the freedom to experiment with citizen participation gives me a lot of energy.” Based on all the information she collects, she can formulate policy advice. “In my opinion, the city of Deinze is ideally sized to observe the impact of policy decisions. This provides the opportunity to adjust quickly if needed.” Her interest in understanding the impact of

changes on people has been consistent, even in her earlier academic career.

After the merger with Nevele, the department was strengthened with two additional staff members. Now, she experiences the power of a self-organizing team: “It’s wonderful to learn in depth as a department and to build on each other’s expertise and interests. The city council also gives us space to build knowledge internally.” The city of Deinze has experimentation in its DNA. Through these experiments, the city builds knowledge and experience. “In recent years, for example, we have made tremendous progress in monitoring policy choices. In the previous legislative period, we assigned SDG labels to action plans. Currently, the SDGs serve as a guide for policy planning and a framework for our citizen participation.”

Promoting the SDGs internally requires more staff than currently available. “Ideally, one employee would work part-time to support colleagues and the council in integrating the SDGs into daily practice. At the moment, there is no room for that.”

Laurence Hauttekeete is happy to share tips with new policy officers. “As a policy officer, you must immediately take your place and not hide within the organisation,” she states firmly. “You have a supportive role, so show your council, management team, and colleagues how you can assist them. And always maintain an open mind. Keep renewing yourself and deepen your expertise in areas such as innovative participation methods or change processes. Don’t get stuck, but keep challenging yourself.” Bringing innovation into the city administration and among citizens is a long-term effort. “Dare to experiment, and don’t give up immediately when facing resistance. Give citizens, councillors, and staff time to let new ideas take root.” —

JOKE VANREPELEN

VVSG international staff member

Laurence Hauttekeete is grateful for the trust and freedom to experiment provided by the city council. “We have been able to enrich the available data from the monitors with the voices of our citizens—digitally through our citizen participation platform and via a randomly selected citizen panel.”

Deinze engages its citizens through the digital participation platform goedgezgd.deinze.be. But Laurence Hauttekeete’s pride is the citizen panel Deinse Denkers. “Through a lottery, we selected 26 citizens, paying particular attention to representativeness and diversity. These ambassadors of Deinze engaged in conversations with each other and with the city council to deepen the environmental analysis.”

The SDGs run like a red thread through all discussions, following the 3 Ps: People, Planet, and Prosperity. Notably, the Deinse Denkers bridge the gap to the wider population. “During the



Selection menu for municipal global cooperation

Making a local impact on a global level: which approach best fits your vision and context?

The 8 working methods of municipal global cooperation

International cooperation is an essential part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and local authorities play a key role in this. VVSG's selection menu for municipal global cooperation describes eight inspiring working methods, illustrated with numerous examples of good practice. Discover the approach that best suits your own context and make a unique contribution to a sustainable and just world!



Town twinning

Enter into a long-term partnership with a municipality in the Global South to strengthen administrative capacity. Municipalities exchange knowledge on topics such as waste management, the local economy and participation.



Twinning

A cultural exchange that connects people across national borders, often within the EU, and promotes better understanding and cooperation through culture, sport and youth activities.



International youth work

Inspire young people to become global citizens. Through international exchanges and projects, they broaden their world view and social engagement. International youth work is often the driving force behind successful and widely supported global policy.



Indirect cooperation

Support local organisations such as citizens' initiatives, NGO's and schools working to international solidarity. Connect and strengthen them through the global advisory board.



Cooperation with the private sector

Involve companies in sustainable development. From fair trade to the circular economy, the private sector offers solutions to global challenges.



Global networks

Join global networks and work together on shared goals for climate, mobility, nutrition and health.



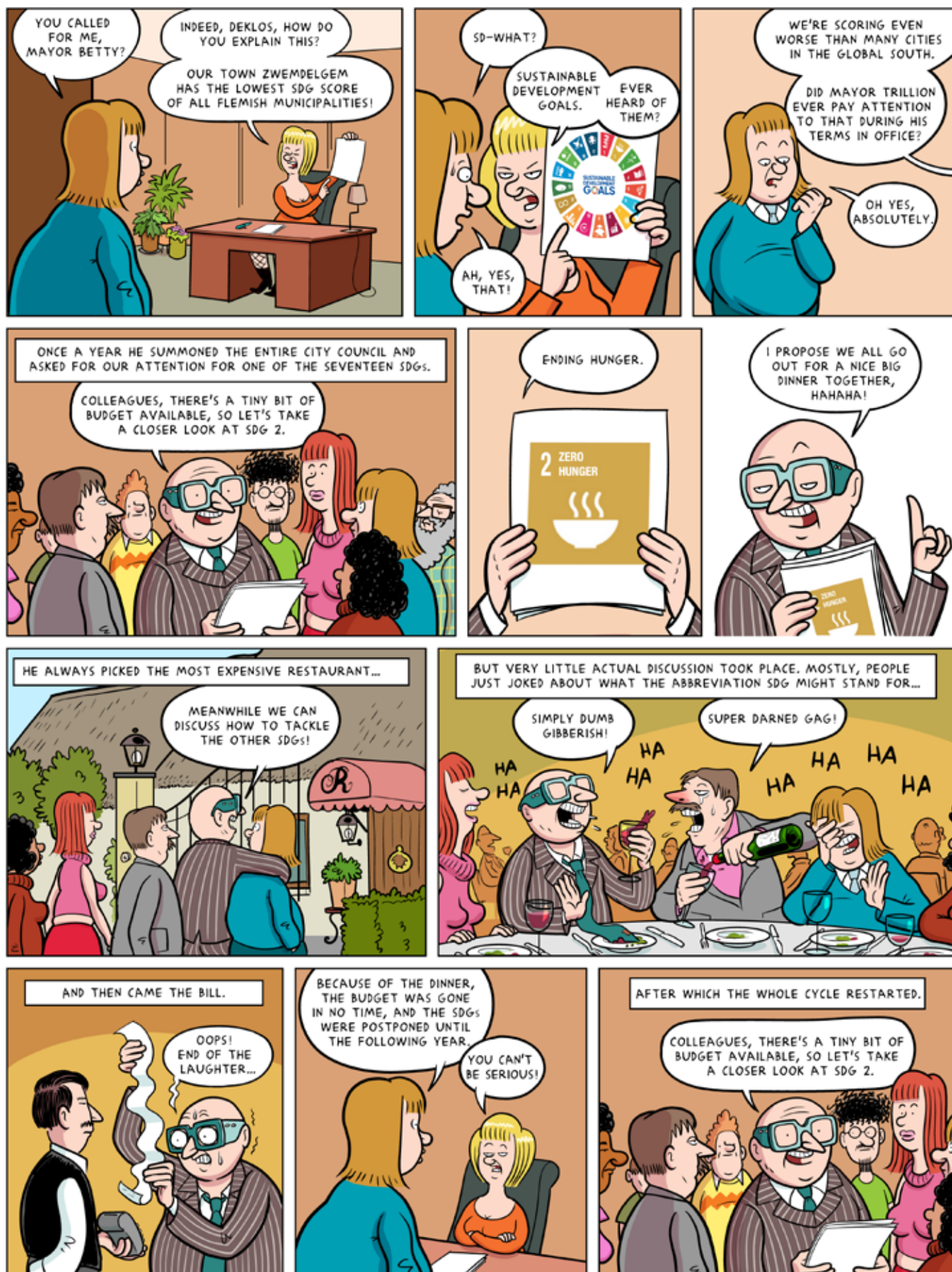
Humanitarian aid/emergency aid

Show solidarity by providing direct support in the event of natural disasters or crisis situations on the Global South. From reconstruction projects to emergency provisions.



Short-term expertise exchange

Short exchanges and training courses strengthen local capacity and deliver concrete solutions in areas such as healthcare and infrastructure.





GLOBAL GOALS
LOCAL FOCUS

DE LOKALE VERTALING
VAN DE 17 DUURZAME
ONTWIKKELINGSDOELSTELLINGEN

1 DEEL JANUARI	2 DEEL JUNI	3 DEEL SEPTEMBER IN NIEUW
4 Kwaliteit duurzaam	5 Gef duurzaam	6 Duurzaam duurzaam
7 Duurzaam duurzaam	8 Duurzaam duurzaam	9 Duurzaam duurzaam
10 Duurzaam duurzaam	11 Duurzaam duurzaam	12 Duurzaam duurzaam
13 Duurzaam duurzaam	14 Duurzaam duurzaam	15 Duurzaam duurzaam



Belgium
partner in development



Flanders
State of the Art