The Region of Flanders, Belgium: **IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SDGS THROUGH MULTI-STAKEHOLDER PARTNERSHIPS**

**Key highlights**
- The Flemish government is experimenting with an innovative governance model that aims to break policy silos and adopt a multi-stakeholder approach to the 2030 Agenda.
- Many municipalities are working to mainstream the SDGs into their policy planning processes and are communicating vividly with their local citizens.
- The active role of private sector and civil society actors provide fruitful grounds to implement a territorial approach to the SDGs in Flanders.

Actors across the region of Flanders demonstrate strong commitment towards localising the 2030 Agenda in a holistic way. The shared perception among public and private actors, including civil society, appears to be that the transformative nature of the 2030 Agenda calls for new solutions beyond business-as-usual. Flemish actors are thus favouring transversal, multi-stakeholder and bottom-up approaches. Nonetheless, there is still room to capture the potential of the 2030 Agenda to break policy silos and change the status quo.

Sustainable development strategies are in place since 2006 in Flanders, with updates every five years. A Decree from 2008 further determines sustainable development as an inclusive, participative and coordinated process. The second Flemish Strategy for Sustainable Development (2011) placed strong emphasis on innovation and introduced a transition approach to achieving a long-term vision for Flanders. This focus remains in the current government’s vision: Vision 2050.

Vision 2050 outlines seven priority transitions towards which the region strives (Figure 1). To achieve this, a governance model based on transition management principles (i.e. system innovation, taking a long-term perspective, involving stakeholders through partnerships, engaging in co-creation and learning from experiments) has been in place for the last 3 years.

Flanders has also started translating the 2030 Agenda into the local context through “Focus 2030: Flanders’ Goals for 2030”, which is the key document guiding the implementation of the SDGs. Both Vision 2050 and Focus 2030 are umbrella strategies bringing together other plans, concepts and policies. In particular, Vision 2050 stipulates that sustainability is a guiding principle for all policies.

Figure 1. Priority Transitions in Flanders’ long-term vision, Vision 2050

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Source: Department of Public Governance and the Chancellery (2016).
Flemish cities and municipalities play a key role in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, including when developing their local strategies and plans. Flemish municipalities are tapping into current political momentum to address the SDGs in local policy development processes. Following the local elections in October 2018, many new local administrations are integrating the SDGs in the new 6-year policy plans (covering 2020-2025). Municipalities participating in a SDG-pilot project implemented by the Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities (VVSG) are being supported in this endeavour, including by using the “SDGs Circle Exercise” as a popular tool to incorporate the SDGs in local policies and projects (Figure 2).

In the Belgian context, coordination between federal and regional levels, including harmonisation of indicators at all levels, is challenging. One key reason for this is that each government have their own strategies and set of goals linked to their own competences. This means that strategies are not necessarily coordinated or aligned, even if regular updates are provided between different governments. The first Belgian VNR preparation, coordinated through the Inter-ministerial Conference for Sustainable Development, involved federal and regional governments, whereas the municipal level could have been more involved.

The tradition of stakeholder engagement is highly visible in Flanders, where multi-stakeholder platforms like the Strategic Advisory Councils and the civil society campaign Perspective 2030 contribute to advising and holding regional and local governments accountable for their commitment to the 2030 Agenda.

The Chamber of Commerce’s (VOKA) Charter on Sustainable Entrepreneurship offers companies the opportunity to work on sustainable entrepreneurship using an action plan based on the SDGs. Public institutions also influence and engage with private sector stakeholders by using their purchasing power related to public procurement. Both the Flemish government and municipalities apply Sustainable Public Procurement (SPP) to ensure public spending supports responsible business conduct that promote social and environmental goals.

![Figure 2. Game board 17 SDGs: Circle Exercise](Source: VVSG (2018)).

Lastly, Flanders has also mainstreamed the SDGs into their Decentralised Development Cooperation (DDC) agenda. The region is supporting the implementation of the Agenda 2030 in partner countries and promotes the exchange of best practices. This peer-to-peer learning mechanism is an innovative feature of the region. Other elements of adaptation of the Flemish development cooperation policy to the new [development] paradigm of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development are a more systematic integration to leave no one behind and a multisector approach including the introduction of social innovation elements.

**FORWARD LOOKING POLICY RESPONSES**

Use the SDGs as a framework to enhance strategic alignment between federal, regional, provincial and municipal sustainable development strategies and enhance interaction with stakeholders taking advantage of the common language and shared goals of the framework. A possible way forward could be to ensure more interaction between advisory councils at different levels of government.

Continue to support cities and municipalities to implement the 2030 Agenda holistically, respecting their role and competences, including expanding the SDG-pilot project work by VVSG, as well as awareness-raising efforts to reach all 300 municipalities.

Improve the coordination in the development of SDGs indicator frameworks and reporting tools, including involving municipalities in the VNR and in defining indicators. This could further help to clarify future reporting requirements by municipalities and promote the use of common indicators and targets (where feasible) to measure progress towards the SDGs.

Create an open data platform where civil society can be involved in monitoring progress towards the SDGs. Through this open data platform, reporting on progress by all levels of governments can be made transparent, allowing citizens to provide their inputs and feedback.

Use the SDGs as a budgeting tool to ensure implementation of the Flemish government’s Focus 2030 strategy. The SDGs can provide a useful framework for convening stakeholders from different policy domains around financial decisions and could help to show accountability for the agenda.

Ensure uptake of good practices related to sustainable public procurement, using it as a tool to leverage private sector contribution to the SDGs.

Practical examples should be promoted across the region, including through the government’s multi-stakeholder transition spaces.