

The interwovenness between the Sustainable development goals and the Ghent city strategy

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Abstract

Questo contributo si riferisce alla città di Ghent e a come implementa gli obiettivi dello sviluppo sostenibile (SDGs) nella sua strategia. La missione strategica per il periodo legislativo 2020-2025 è: «Ghent è una città orgogliosa dove alla gente piace vivere, lavorare e passare il proprio tempo libero. È una città che respira e lascia respirare. Ognuno è differente dagli altri e si riconosce negli abitanti di Ghent. Ai bambini sono lasciati spazi per crescere. I cittadini hanno la possibilità di dispiegare il proprio talento. A Ghent noi sperimentiamo e agiamo. Siamo aperti al mondo. Costruiamo la città insieme. E prepariamo la transizione per una Ghent migliore per le generazioni future». La missione indica chiaramente che il Consiglio municipale definisce i cittadini come il suo core business, per co-creare la città e costruire un futuro sostenibile insieme. Gli SDGs giocano un ruolo chiave nel realizzare questa missione. Tuttavia, coinvolgere i cittadini nel costruire una città più sostenibile è possibile grazie alla lunga tradizione di partecipazione civica di Ghent. Per entrare nel merito è opportuno avere un rapido ritratto di Ghent e di come può impegnarsi per gli SDGs.

This article is about the city of Ghent and how we implement the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in our city strategy. Ghent's strategic mission for the legislative period 2020 – 2025 is that “Ghent is a proud city where people like to live, work and relax. It's a city that breathes and lets breathe. Everyone is as much different and as much Ghentian. Children are given space to grow up here. People get chances to deploy their talents. In Ghent we experiment and we take action. We are open to the world. We make the city together. And we make the transition to an even better Ghent for our future generations.”

This mission clearly indicates that the City Council defined the Ghent residents as its core business, co-creating the city, and building a sustainable future together. The SDGs play a key role in realising this mission. However, involving citizens in making the City more sustainable is only possible due to Ghent's long-standing tradition of citizen participation and initiatives that contribute to a more sustainable Ghent.

Before we delve deeper into our current approach and initiatives, let's give you a short impression of Ghent and how we became committed to the SDGs.

Parole chiave / Keywords

Co-Creazione, Futuro sostenibile, Campagna per gli SDGs, Politica per il cibo sostenibile, Commercio giusto ed etico, Strategia generale delle città / *Co-creating, Sustainable future, Campaigning for the SDGs, Sustainable food policy, Fair & ethical trade, General city strategy.*

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Ghent, what are we talking about?

Ghent, located on the Scheldt and Leie waterways, is the capital of the province of East Flanders, in the Flemish Region and Community of Belgium. More than 261,000 inhabitants live on an area of 156.18 km² (December 2019). In addition, about 78,400 students reside on the territory (December 2019), making Ghent the second largest city in Flanders and the largest student city in Belgium.

The first mentions of Ghent date back to the Gallic period. For centuries, Ghent was well-known for linen, cloth and cotton trade, until the Vikings destroyed the city in the ninth century AD. About a century later, the city restructured into what is now the basis of the City. From the 11th till the mid-16th century, Ghent was the third largest city on the European mainland, only Genoa and Paris were larger. During this period of more than five hundred years, Ghent was an influential and prosperous city, witnessed by a whole series of buildings such as the Belfry that symbolized Ghent's urban power. Today you can still admire the rich architectural and art history in the Ghent inner-city.



A period of economic decline followed from the end of the sixteenth century. Only when industrialisation made its appearance and both a university and a port were established in Ghent, the economy recovered. The 1913 world exhibition, organised in Ghent, became a new highlight for the City.

During both world wars, Ghent suffered little from bombardments, so that the many historic buildings are well preserved in their splendour. After the Second World War, Ghent steadily evolved from a grey factory city to a lively urban centre. From the 1990s, the results of urban revaluation initiatives became clearly visible. For example, cars were already largely banned from the inner-city with the 1997 mobility plan, and numerous sustainable urban renewal projects were developed.

Ghent has always been a rebellious city. No period or power could determine the image of this City. Ghent is at the same time a university city, a port city, a historic and cultural city. A city of all times with its own quirky character.

Ghent, ambassador of the SDGs

In 2016, a couple of months after the official launch of the UN SDG framework, the Belgian federal minister responsible for sustainability asked Ghent to become one of the first six ambassadors of the SDGs. As the only selected city we enthusiastically accepted the challenge to make the SDG cluster People (SDG 1 to SDG 5) known by all Belgian citizens.

Together with our local administration, the Ghent City Board and several stakeholders, we designed a communication campaign based on concrete and competitive challenges that affect people's daily life. Because communication campaigns addressing the 'the general public' often mainly reach 'the already convinced', specific target groups (at every turn in Ghent and another Belgian city) were identified and triggered through five different challenges: "Eat massively social" (SDG1.4), "days without meat" (SDG2.4), "Everyone on the bike" (SDG3.9), "class marathon" (SDG4a), and "Everybody feminist" (SDG5.5).



In total 5,893 citizens of 6 cities participated physically, and in addition many other people supported the challenges via social media (communicated through short movies, web-posts and recognisable campaign images). This way also the information campaign in itself was sustainable¹.

The SDG Voices campaign involved 23 different Ghent city services and departments, and an equivalent hereof in the challenged cities. Furthermore, stakeholders (e.g. Ghent knowledge institutions, various NGOs, The Shift, Gent en Garde, Football Club KAA Gent) participated actively in the challenges and overall campaign. Last, but very important, all challenges received substantial media attention (foremost social media, but also coverage in newspapers, radio and several newsletters).

The campaign triggered lots of question and suggestion from very different actors, sometimes laying the foundation for new collaborations (e.g. Flemish Association of Cities and Municipalities (VVSG), University and Academy Ghent, CSR Europe, etc.) and initiatives (e.g. healthy cooking workshops, debates on sustainability at school, theatre performance on gender equality, summer cycling course for immigrant children, etc.). The campaign also resonated throughout networks, such as Eurocities, ESDN, ICLEI. Thus, also the second aim of the campaign was realised, at the same time

¹ More information on: <https://stad.gent/en/international-policy/sustainable-development-goals/city-ghent-sdg-voice>

having a multiplier effect on (more) citizens' and organisations' familiarity with and involvement in the SDGs. For example, the cooperation between businesses and schools will be continued, NGO Globelink started a project to implement the SDGs in Ghent with youngsters, the city administration integrated the SDGs in the preparation of the long-term city planning, Ghent University and Ghent Academy embraced the SDGs in their new policy strategy,

Implementing the SDGs in the City of Ghent

The city of Ghent was asked by the federal ministry to become an ambassador for the SDGs, given the many examples of sustainable actions that the City had already deployed, even before the SDGs came into being. In other words, the City did not start paying attention to sustainability since the SDG framework was internationally agreed, the roots of our city's commitment to sustainability date back much longer. For example, Ghent was one of the first cities to engage in the Covenant of Mayors, and is a pioneer with regard to sustainable and fair fashion (winning the 2019 EU Fair and Ethical Trade award), the creation of living streets, the application of a local food policy, etc. In the paragraph below, we briefly present Ghent's sustainable food policy, called "Ghent en Garde" for which the City received the 2019 UN Global Climate Action Award.

Over the past six years, Ghent has launched a number of small- and large-scale projects to help make the food system in the city more sustainable, with the close involvement of individuals and civic groups. This food policy, "Ghent en Garde", has brought significant change to the local food system. Through participative governance models, including a food policy council, Ghent's food policy has moved from launching small-scale initiatives to bringing structural change to the food system. It is decreasing food waste, making food procurement more sustainable, scaling up short food supply chains and improving access to food.

Among the successes is the Foodsavers initiative, which has so far taken more than 1,000 tonnes of food that would otherwise have been thrown away by restaurants and supermarkets and shared it among social restaurants and organisations working with those living in poverty. 70% of all food redistributed by Foodsavers is fresh fruit and vegetables.

A new B-2-B- logistics platform "Vanier" connects local farmers with for restaurants, caterers and retail in the city through a multi-stakeholder cooperative model and sustainable logistics. Ghent also pilots new ways of leveraging city-owned agricultural land for city-oriented sustainable food production.

For 10 years, Thursday has been Veggie Day in the city, encouraging citizens to give up eating meat and fish for at least one day each week for reasons of sustainability. Every Thursday, 4,500 pupils are served vegetarian food at school. A survey by the city showed that four out of five citizens are aware of the campaign, with one in three taking part. The initiative has spread to cities including New York².

² More information about "Gent en Garde" can be found on: <https://unfccc.int/climate-action/momentum-for-change/planetary-health/ghent-en-garde> and <https://stad.gent/en/city-structure/food-strategy-ghent-gent-en-garde>



Integrating the SDGs in Ghent's general city strategy

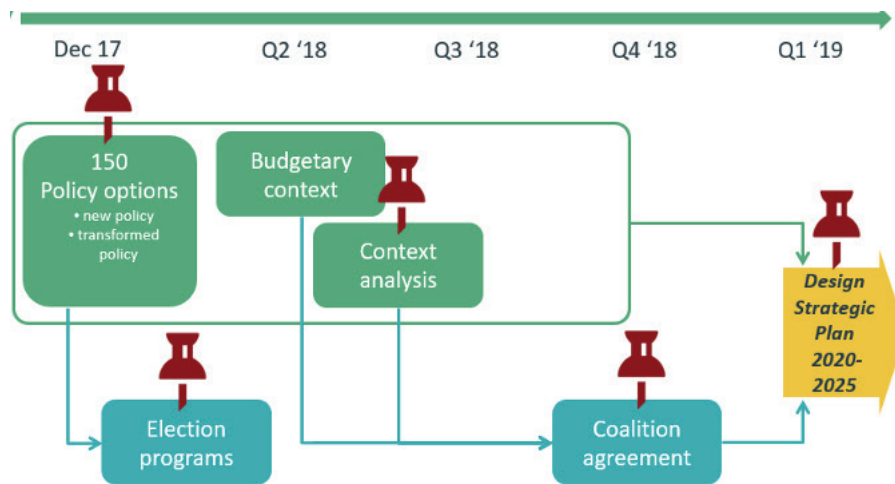
Since 2016, the City of Ghent together with the Ghent Public Centre for Social Welfare, and numerous public and private partners started actively contributing to the realisation of the 17 SDGs within the City. Actions to become a more sustainable city were elaborated and implemented in various fields. We focused, amongst others, on increasing (international) solidarity, equal opportunities through public procurements, sustainability of the tourist centre via Ghent's Sustainable Light plan, and we developed several strategies such as Ghent's Climate and Mobility plans, Ghent's Food strategy, Ghent approach for the inclusion of asylum seekers and immigrants. Deriving from these plans, many projects and actions specifically related to the SDGs were implemented in the City³.

All these separate plans and initiatives were integrated in the City's general strategy. Hereby two main principles were taken into account: first, the SDGs are not only about communication, their main purpose is to support sustainable policymaking; Second, as a local government we want to lead by example together with our residents. The process of integrating the SDGs within our City's general strategy took shape through collaboration with other Flemish localities, via the umbrella organisation Flemish Association of Cities and Municipalities (VVSG). The VVSG called local authorities to sign an SDG-charter pledging to use the SDGs as a tool within the city organisation and to actively communicate the SDGs to citizens. The City of Ghent was eager to engage with this pledge!

In the period between 2017 and 2019 Ghent was one of the 20, by VVSG selected, 'pilot cities' to implement the SDGs within the local city strategy. As Ghent, we exchanged experiences on how to translate the SDGs in our local policy framework and how to monitor and evaluate results booked on implementing the SDGs.

In 2019, after the new local policy agreement was approved by the in October 2018 elected City Council, we could proceed with the integration of the SDGs in the general city strategy. Thus, both before and after the local elections we used the SDGs as a tool to foster a city strategy that takes sustainability in all its forms and policy domains into account. In the timeline under the marked phases show when the SDGs were used as an input in the process of constructing the current city strategy.

³ More information: <https://stad.gent/en/international-policy/sustainable-development-goals/city-ghent-and-sdgs>



1. In 2017, the year prior to the local elections we started with input for the multi-annual policy agreement, called 'Ghent about Tomorrow'. It was an inspiration paper with 150 policy options linked to SDGs. Ghent about Tomorrow was a participative process in preparation of the new legislature. We wanted to inspire the new local government by determining the future challenges of the city. This short term as well as long term. We formulated policy options and opportunities, in different policy areas. We matched all policy options with the SDGs and they all received an SDG-tag on our website.
2. During 2018 we coordinated a context analysis. The context analysis is a synthesis of on the one hand research and on the other hand strategic data, interpretation and analysis for Ghent in 2018. The focus is Ghent as a city, not the local government and administration. The principle is to explain the context (environment) as a strategic basis for all actors in Ghent. It's not about either existing or planned policies. The SDGs were again used as an input to check if we did research on all the strategic data and therefore had a complete interpretation of the status of Ghent.
3. In the election programs of several local policy parties you could find the SDGs as an important tool to make the city more sustainable.
4. After the local elections, September 2018, the new coalition (of Greens, Liberals, Socialists and Christian-democrats) made a coalition agreement. Again, the SDGs were mentioned as an important tool toward a more sustainable city.
5. A new city government means a new policy plan. In 2019 we were working on a strategic plan for the next 6 years. The mission, the themes and the new strategic goals were written with the SDGs as an important input in all phases. After that, we had to translate those into operational goals and had to decide on the necessary means to implement those goals, such as staff, budgets, buildings, IT and stakeholders.

Future perspectives on the deployment of the SDGs in Ghent

Now that we integrated the SDGs in our city strategy, the work is not done! During the legislative period 2020-2025 we will focus on the implementation of the SDGs through concrete actions and initiatives. Moreover, annually we will make a Local

Voluntarily Review of the city's progress, as suggested by the United Nations. As a starting point, we matched our current (strategic) goals with the SDGs, to provide an overview of what is already happening in Ghent. This way we find gaps and opportunities to strengthen policy and to align with the SDGs.

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One of the main conclusions and lessons of this whole matching process is that not every SDG-sub-objective is as relevant for the City of Ghent: sometimes the content of the SDG-sub-objective is not relevant for the City (e.g. SDG target 14.5 “conserve at least 10 per cent of coastal and marine areas”, as Ghent is not located at a sea) and/or doesn't is not applicable to an urban area or in Western-Europe (e.g. SDG target 1.1 “eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere, currently measured as people living on less than \$1.25 a day”, as the daily income of \$1.25 lags very much behind the financial anti-poverty norms in Europe). In some cases, local governments have no decision-making authority (e.g. in relation to SDG target 8.8 “Protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers” the federal and regional governments can take legal actions, while the local government can only implement the current legal provisions correctly and generously).

From our matching SDGs with the current city strategy exercise we can also conclude that the city of Ghent scores well on sustainability. In several cases, our city strategy goes beyond the goals set by the SDGs, for example with regard to climate adaptation, alternative renewable energies, urban agriculture, etc. Nevertheless, there also are some bottlenecks and there is always margin to strengthen our local policy, for example, we feel the need as a city to focus more on supporting partnerships with developing countries or ‘the Global South’.

In sum, working on the implementation of every SDG and sub target at the city level, demonstrates as well the progress made as well as the remaining gaps and opportunities to become more sustainable on the own territory and worldwide. Only together we will be able to make the globe a sustainable place for everyone on the sole planet on which we live today and tomorrow!!