

GREENSPIRATION: GENK'S NATURAL CAPITAL AS A DRIVER FOR SUSTAINABLE VALUE CREATION

Report from Transition Platform Meeting, June 9th 2015, Genk

Background

Genk is the greenest city of Flanders, a young and vibrant city colored by the diversity that went hand-in-hand with its rich mining history. Confronted with the challenges of economic downturn, the city is at the forefront of exploring new economic models based upon new notions such as a circular economy, an entrepreneurial city, smart development and cleantech innovation. The Transition Platform meeting in Genk took place on Tuesday June 9th at C-Mine in Genk. It was an open dialogue session between researchers of the ARTS consortium, the mayor and deputy mayor of Genk, and members of the local city administration, as well as transition initiatives. The meeting explored the following questions:

- How can the city harness nature's value benefiting all forms of social, natural and economic capital?
- How can Genk's natural capital accelerate smart and inclusive innovations?
- How can Genk's natural capital create a prospering, resilient city?

This short report summarizes the main discussion points and insights from the meeting, to make them available to a larger audience.

1st PRESENTATION: Mayor Wim Dries

The mayor welcomed the attendees and gave an introduction into Genk. The mayor emphasized that the City Administration is very interested in finding strategies to use the landscape and the environment as an opportunity for the sustainable development of the region of Limburg in a way that can be an inspiring example in Europe. Here are some of the key points from the talk:

150 year ago the Flanders region represented a touristic center of the country and it was known for the beautiful landscapes. Genk was a small village with a nice landscape. However, major changes in the landscape took place over time due to industrialization, agriculture, and urbanization.



Today, there are many projects in the city representing an opportunity for a transition in the city, such as *C-Mine* (connecting innovative technology especially renewable energy with art, creativity and education), *Project Biomista* (focusing on biodiversity and cultural/social diversity) and a *New Business Park* (a crossover between education, science (research), technology, companies (entrepreneurs can be hosted), entertainment).



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One of the big challenges for Genk is how to productively cope with its diverse population in the future, while at the same time doing something for the environment. For example, many people have already recognized Genk as a good case of how to promote social inclusion and cultural diversity. At the same time, the city has a rich natural landscape: 40 % is green areas, 20 % of Genk today is industrial parks, and 10 % recreational areas. One vision for the future is that the city can be a laboratory for diversity and new socio-economic developments. The natural landscape can be the starting point of these new developments.

2nd PRESENTATION: Deputy Mayor Joke Quintens



After the mayor, Deputy Mayor Joke Quintens delivered a short talk. Here are some of the take-aways:

The Deputy Mayor also emphasised the importance of the diversity within Genk for the city. More than 50 % people living in Genk have different roots, making Genk a multi-cultural city.

Some of the challenges are the high unemployment rate (3800 unemployed) and delay in schools (33% of young people graduate with delays from schools). On the other side, opportunities for Genk are a strong history and tradition of participation (e.g. G360), as well as the local environmental sustainability initiatives (e.g. Natuurpunt, Heempark, multiple urban farming initiatives, etc.).

The Deputy Mayor finds that some of the questions that need to be asked about the relationship with natural capital are the following:

- How to conserve the existing green?
- How can we convince people of the importance of the green?
- How can natural capital be a driver of economic development?
- How can we use nature provide jobs? How can we use the green for economic growth?

3rd PRESENTATION: Leen Gorissen

As a third presenter, Leen Gorissen – researcher at VITO - introduced the ARTS (Accelerating and Rescaling Transitions to Sustainability) research project and the mechanisms that we have identified to accelerate sustainability transitions. Leen posed four questions that the participants then brainstormed about:

- How can we use the natural capital of Genk?
- How can we link culture and nature?
- How can we pollinate the nature-based solutions and practices into all different regions?
- How can we swift to a WE-economy (e.g. circular economy, shared economy, collaborative economy, etc.)?

DIALOGUE SESSION

Following these three presentations, the audience engaged in a dialogue session. Based on the questions posed by Leen, many ideas and opinions



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were voiced by the participants during the dialogue session on how to address these issues. This collection illustrates some of the main points from the discussion on how to improve the natural landscape and socio-economic developments in Genk:

Create a multidimensional urban vision

- Next to existing economic visions (creativity, knowledge, etc.) create a vision on Genk as the City of Nature, or City of Urban Farming. Also integrate importance of nature and biodiversity into other visions and plans of the City of Genk.
- Create a vision on how to organize citizen ownership for the natural capital and to design the process, such as nature camps where the citizens will find new solutions.

Bring nature-based solutions to multiple places in the city and show their multiple benefits

- Support street art about biodiversity in center, e.g. by inviting a famous graffiti artist to organize workshops with local youth and select the most beautiful examples for an exposition in city center (e.g. invest in local Banksys).
- Combine greening with art by using public space as open air exhibition of green art.
- Ask people from allotment gardens to create demo gardens in the city center in order to show more residents on how to run their own gardens.
- Improve communication about initiatives around natural capital to make it easier for people to find them out and join.
- Invest in awareness rising and community projects related to natural capital.

Show that green means business

- Involve private companies to promote biodiversity in their offices, factories and company sites.
- Promote eco-tourism and outdoor education as areas that create new business and learning opportunities.
- Innovate the forms of growing food e.g. urban agriculture, rooftop gardens, and vertically grown food on house walls.
- Use the recreational value of green spaces to attract knowledge intensive industries.
- Show economic and leisure benefits of natural capital so as to enable the creation of new initiatives about reconnecting people with nature.
- Organise a monthly nature-based flash mop at natural hotspots with silent party and self-made food.

Provide institutional support to greening initiatives from communities, businesses and public institutes

- Make more space for green in the city, e.g. by supporting bike instead of car mobility, replacing car spots and lanes with mobile green, promoting green roofs, and making green areas more accessible.
- Organise outdoor activities and environmental education for children in order to reconnect them with nature.
- Promote usage of ecofriendly materials in companies, businesses and industrial parks.
- Create dedicated policies and programmes to protect existing green spaces from further development and urbanisation.
- Set up a department of nature-based knowledge in Thor to inspire eco products and processes and couple to challenges (e.g. swarm theory for smart grids). In this way, use nature as a library of sustainable solutions.



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