

City of Ghent (District09)



Interviewee: Jan De Busscher, Project Leader

Date of affiliation: 2021

Why did the City of Ghent affiliate to Electronics Watch?

City of Ghent's affiliation with Electronics Watch is the result of a collaboration between two complementary parts of our organisation.

City of Ghent has the Ghent Global Solidarity team that works on human rights and responsible public procurement policies across four priority product groups: textiles, food, natural stone and ICT. They support the city in translating its commitment to human rights and global justice into concrete procurement practices.

District09, the digital partner responsible for ICT and digital transformation for the City of Ghent, carries out the procurement of ICT hardware and digital services. As a major public buyer of technology, District09 wants to ensure that these purchases are not only efficient and innovative, but also socially responsible.

Electronics Watch brought these two ambitions together.

Through our affiliation, we are able to connect the City of Ghent's human rights objectives with District09's ICT procurement activities.

We talk to Jan De Busscher about the City of Ghent (Belgium) and District09, its digital partner responsible for ICT, and how they are supporting the city in translating its commitment to human rights and global justice into concrete procurement practices.

We affiliated because we believe public procurement can be a powerful tool for positive change.

By working together with other public buyers, we can use our collective purchasing power to promote respect for labour rights and human rights in the electronics sector, while integrating meaningful due diligence and responsible sourcing requirements into our contracts.

Ultimately, affiliation with Electronics Watch helps us ensure that public spending contributes not only to high-quality digital services, but also to fairer and more ethical supply chains.

How does affiliation support your organisation's responsible procurement work?

Affiliation with Electronics Watch provides us with practical tools and support to strengthen responsible ICT procurement.

A first and very important benefit is the contractual framework offered by Electronics Watch. We can integrate the Electronics Watch Contract Conditions into our procurement procedures and contracts. By agreeing to these terms, suppliers commit to greater transparency in their supply chains and the sharing of information regarding where products are manufactured.



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A second benefit is access to independent monitoring reports. These reports provide valuable insights into labour conditions and human rights issues in specific factories and supply chains.

Instead of discussing sustainability in general terms, we can involve suppliers in concrete findings and collaborate to understand risks, discuss potential improvements, and follow up on actions. This makes responsible procurement much more tangible and actionable.

Finally, the affiliation connects us with a network of public buyers across Europe and beyond facing similar challenges. Through Electronics Watch, we can learn from the experiences of other affiliated organizations. This peer exchange helps us build internal expertise and increases the impact of our efforts through joint action.

In short, Electronics Watch supports our work by providing the contractual tools, the independent monitoring information and the community of practice needed to turn responsible procurement ambitions into concrete actions and results.



Nele De Lie and Jehudi Hermie, District09, in front of Ghent City Hall

What makes Electronics Watch different from other responsible procurement initiatives available?

Its worker-driven approach to monitoring labour conditions in global electronics supply chains. Traditional social audits remain a widely used tool in the electronics industry. While audits can provide useful information, they are often limited to a specific moment in time, a particular site visit and a predefined assessment methodology. As a result, they may not always capture the day-to-day realities experienced by workers.

Electronics Watch complements these traditional approaches through its worker-driven monitoring methodology. Through local monitoring partners and ongoing engagement with workers, Electronics Watch can gather insights into working conditions over a longer period of time and from the perspective of the people directly affected.

For us as a public buyer, this provides a richer and more nuanced understanding of risks in the supply chain. Instead of receiving only a snapshot of a factory at a specific point in time, we gain access to information that reflects workers' experiences and helps identify structural issues that may otherwise remain invisible.



Can you tell us an example of the impact that your affiliation has had?

The impact of our affiliation is often found in small but meaningful steps that contribute to long-term change. There is a saying that if you want to change the course of a river, you start by moving a stone. On its own, moving a single stone may seem insignificant. But when many people do the same over time, the river eventually starts to flow differently. That is how we see the role of Electronics Watch.

As an affiliate, we receive regular monitoring reports that highlight labour rights issues and developments in specific production facilities. Electronics Watch helps us identify where action is expected from public buyers and which suppliers should be approached regarding a particular issue. This guidance allows us to focus our efforts where they can have the greatest impact.

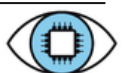
What we find particularly valuable is the continuity of the process. When we raise a concern with a supplier, the conversation does not end there. In subsequent monitoring reports, we often receive updates on the situation and can see whether actions taken by suppliers have contributed to tangible improvements. This creates a feedback loop that helps us understand how individual actions can contribute to broader change.

We have also seen impact beyond our own organisation. By sharing our experiences with Electronics Watch, we were able to encourage the City of Mechelen to become involved as well. This is important because the influence of public buyers grows when more organisations work together and send consistent signals to the market.

For us, the greatest impact is not a single success story. It is the knowledge that, together with many other public buyers, we are contributing to a gradual but meaningful shift towards greater transparency, accountability and respect for workers' rights in global supply chains.



The Ghent Global Solidarity Team. From left to right: Jonathan Janssens, Veerle De Meerleer, Bieke Deleye, Carmen Van Puyenbroeck, Greet Verellen



How is your collaboration with Electronics Watch evolving beyond the ICT sector?

Our collaboration with Electronics Watch expands as we further develop our approach on how responsible public procurement can contribute to fairer and more transparent global supply chains across different sectors.

A recent example is the City of Ghent's decision, in June 2026, to extend its collaboration with Electronics Watch to the low emission vehicles (LEV) sector. This follows the launch of Electronics Watch's new structural monitoring offer for LEV supply chains.

The City of Ghent has set itself the objective of operating a completely diesel-free vehicle fleet by 2030. From 2026 onwards, low emission vehicles will become the standard choice for the procurement of passenger cars and light commercial vehicles.

As a public authority, we believe that the transition towards climate-neutral mobility should go hand in hand with respect for human rights. A sustainable vehicle is not only a vehicle with lower emissions; it should also be linked to responsible sourcing practices and improved working conditions for the people involved in its production.

The experience we gained through Electronics Watch in the ICT sector has shown us the value of independent monitoring, supply chain transparency and collaborative engagement with suppliers.

We therefore see the extension to LEV supply chains as a logical next step in building on our experience with responsible procurement. Electronics Watch, the Procurement and Logistics department and the Ghent Global Solidarity team will work closely together to build expertise and to ensure that the transition to cleaner transport also contributes to greater respect for human rights and decent working conditions worldwide.

“ Instead of discussing sustainability in general terms, we can involve suppliers in concrete findings and collaborate to understand risks, discuss potential improvements, and follow up on actions. This makes responsible procurement much more tangible and actionable. ”

This expansion reflects our broader ambition to use public procurement as a force for positive change, not only to meet our environmental objectives and deliver value for the city, but also to promote social justice, responsible business practices and decent working conditions throughout global supply chains.

When and how did your organisation begin its responsible procurement journey?

Our journey towards responsible procurement did not start with Electronics Watch. It arose from a broader commitment to sustainability and the principles of the circular economy within the City of Ghent and District09.

District09 has been working for over twenty years to extend the lifespan of ICT equipment through repair, reuse, refurbishment, and recycling. We consciously invest in high-quality devices, use them for as long as possible, and maximize the possibilities for a second and third life. Over time, these circular practices have become an integral part of our approach to ICT, rather than a separate project.



“ *The influence of public buyers grows when more organisations work together and send consistent signals to the market.* ”

The social dimension of responsible procurement has gained momentum in recent years. The City of Ghent has a long-standing policy focused on human rights and fair trade, with previous initiatives targeting product groups such as textiles and food. In 2019, ICT hardware was identified as a priority area where the city wanted to make further progress. This ambition was explicitly included in the city's policy framework regarding international solidarity.

A significant milestone was the signing of the Fair ICT Flanders treaty in 2020, when we joined that network as a pilot organization. This gave us access to expertise, knowledge exchange with peers, and practical guidance in translating our ambitions into procurement practice.

From there, our development gained momentum. In 2021, the City of Ghent and District09 joined Electronics Watch and began developing a new generation of ICT procurement procedures that encompass both the circular economy and corporate social responsibility. At the same time, we strengthened the collaboration between the city departments and District09 dealing with sustainability, international solidarity, and responsible procurement.

“ *As a public authority, we believe that the transition towards climate-neutral mobility should go hand in hand with respect for human rights.* ”

Winning the Fair ICT Award 2021 was a significant recognition of this approach. The jury highlighted our ability to combine the circular economy with respect for human and labour rights, and to integrate responsible ICT procurement into a broader policy framework rather than viewing it as a standalone initiative.

Looking back, our journey toward responsible procurement has been a gradual evolution. We started with a focus on extending the lifespan of ICT equipment and reducing the environmental impact. Over time, we have expanded this perspective to include human rights, working conditions, and supply chain responsibility. Today, we consider these elements to be integral parts of sustainable ICT procurement.



Tony Goethyn, system administrator, District09, repairs ICT equipment



Jan De Busscher, Project Leader at District09

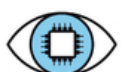
Jan, what is your title or function on the team? How do you collaborate with other functions and/or departments on different aspects of responsible procurement?

I'm responsible for sustainability policy within District09. A key part of my role is ensuring that sustainability considerations are embedded in our ICT procurement and contract management processes.

Within District09, I work closely with our procurement colleagues to integrate sustainability and human rights considerations into procurement procedures and contracts. I also collaborate with the colleagues who manage supplier relationships and oversee contract execution, as they play a crucial role in following up on commitments made by suppliers and engaging in dialogue when issues arise.

Outside District09, we work closely with the Ghent Global Solidarity team, which leads the city's activities regarding human rights and responsible procurement policy. Their expertise helps us translate broader policy objectives into practical actions within ICT procurement. Additionally, we maintain good contacts with the City's purchasing department, which supports the integration of sustainability criteria into all public tendering activities. Furthermore, colleagues from the Environment and Climate department contribute expertise on environmental and energy-related topics.

“ *Collaboration is essential. No single public buyer has sufficient influence to impact global supply chains alone.* ”



What are the biggest lessons you and your colleagues have learned so far? What are the biggest challenges that you face or have faced?

One of the most important lessons we have learned is that responsible procurement is a process, not a final destination. Meaningful changes in global supply chains require time, perseverance, and collaboration. When we started responsible procurement of ICT products, we quickly realized that there are rarely simple solutions to complex supply chain challenges. Labour rights issues often have deep-rooted causes that cannot be resolved with a single contract, audit, or supplier consultation. Progress is often gradual. Another important lesson is that collaboration is essential. No single public buyer has sufficient influence to impact global supply chains alone. By collaborating with networks such as Electronics Watch, public buyers can learn from one another, align expectations regarding suppliers, and increase their collective impact.

We have also learned how important it is to listen to the workers themselves. Traditional audits can yield valuable information, but often offer only a snapshot. Electronics Watch's worker-driven monitoring approach offers a different perspective by integrating worker experiences over an extended period. This helps us gain a more complete insight into the reality within supply chains. We are very grateful to these monitoring partners for this.

One challenge is that progress is not always immediately visible. Improvements in working conditions are often the result of many small actions by various actors over a long period. This requires patience.

What progress or achievement(s) are you most proud of? What is something that you want to share with other public buyers (a lesson, idea, tip)?

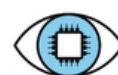
That we can now identify the factories where, for example, the laptops we purchase are assembled or where the chassis of our printers was produced. For many organisations, supply chains remain largely invisible, apart from the direct supplier.

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Thanks to our collaboration with Electronics Watch, we have gained a much better insight into where products are manufactured and how supply chains are structured.

Looking back, one of the key lessons we want to share with other public buyers is: start small and build experience step by step.

Responsible procurement can sometimes seem complex, especially when it comes to global supply chains and human rights. Our advice is to start with the product category where Electronics Watch can have the most relevance and impact for your organisation. Integrate Electronics Watch's contract terms into the procurement procedure, initiate the disclosure process to gain more transparency in the supply chain, and, if necessary, engage with suppliers regarding specific issues that have come to light during monitoring activities. Once these processes are familiar, you can gradually expand the approach to other product categories. That is how we approached our own journey. Instead of trying to do everything at once, we focused on practical and manageable steps, building internal knowledge and trust along the way.



If you were starting your responsible procurement journey today, what would you prioritise?

If we were to start responsible procurement again today, we would begin by developing a clear procurement strategy with sustainability as one of the pillars.

Our experience has shown that responsible procurement is most effective when guided by a well-defined framework and a shared vision. We have based the sustainability pillar of our procurement strategy on the Circular and Fair ICT Pact (CFIT) framework, which combines environmental and circular economy objectives with ambitions regarding labour conditions, human rights, and supply chain responsibility.

One of the key lessons we have learned with this approach is the value of transparency and open dialogue with suppliers. Responsible procurement cannot rely solely on contractual requirements. It requires genuine commitment from both buyers and suppliers to discuss how products and services are delivered, where risks may exist in the supply chain, and how improvements can be achieved.

Therefore, if we were to start again, we would explicitly prioritize transparency from day one. We would clearly communicate our expectations to suppliers, document them in procurement documents and contracts, and create opportunities for continuous dialogue throughout the entire contract lifecycle.

Electronics Watch has taught us that meaningful engagement begins with better information. Supply chain transparency, combined with employee-driven monitoring and constructive dialogue with suppliers, forms the basis for continuous improvement and more responsible procurement practices.

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What are your responsible procurement goals related to ICT for the coming 2-5 years? What's the next big milestone on your journey?

Over the next two to five years, we want to focus on two ambitions in responsible ICT procurement. First, we aim to strengthen our approach to software and digital services procurement. Responsible procurement has traditionally focused on physical products and their supply chains, but we believe that software development also deserves greater attention. We want to engage suppliers in conversations about topics such as nearshoring, offshoring and the working conditions of the people involved in developing, maintaining and supporting digital solutions.

Second, we want to embrace the growing market for more sustainable ICT products. In recent years, we have seen an increasing number of suppliers offering refurbished and remanufactured devices. These solutions help extend product lifecycles, reduce the need for virgin raw materials and support the transition towards a more circular economy. We want to explore how such products can become a standard option in public procurement while continuing to meet the performance and reliability requirements of our users.

The next milestone in our journey is therefore not a single project, but the continued broadening of responsible procurement into new areas. We want to build on the lessons learned from hardware procurement and apply them across the wider ICT ecosystem, while continuing to encourage circular business models and greater transparency throughout supply chains.

