

Flemish Agency for Facility Operations

We talk to three team members at the Flemish Agency for Facility Operations (Het Facilitair Bedrijf), Belgium. Find out more about their socially responsible public procurement goals, how affiliation to Electronics Watch is helping to meet those goals, as well as looking at some of their challenges and achievements along the way.

Affiliates since:

March 2020

Interviewees:

- Alexander Lemmens, Senior legal officer, Policy and procurement support team (*left*)
- Michaël Van Mol, Legal officer, Policy and procurement support team (*middle*)
- Mushtaba Mirzada, Product Manager, Procurement Centre (*right*)



What are your main goals within socially responsible public procurement?

Sustainability has become part of our DNA and runs through all our activities, from cleaning services, to real estate management, to the procurement of ICT solutions. To show we are serious about sustainability, we obtained an ISO14001-certificate and are working on our SDG ambassadorship. We wish to move towards total sustainability by choosing solutions with the least impact on the environment during the whole life cycle and which are responsibly sourced.

Why did your organisation affiliate to Electronics Watch?

Our organisation wants to be a sustainability pioneer. Together with our colleagues at Digital Flanders, we are the central ICT provider for the entities of the Government of Flanders. However the procurement of ICT is one of the most challenging terrains from a sustainability perspective. We already knew that it would be difficult to take steps toward more sustainable value chains without the help of an external partner and other contracting authorities. We affiliated to Electronics Watch to join forces with other like-minded organisations, and to grow with regard to socially responsible public procurement in the ICT value chain.

By affiliating to Electronics Watch we give substance to several policy goals on different levels, such as:

- The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically Goal 8. We were already fully implementing the process to become an SDG Champion when we affiliated. Now we are taking the next step by working towards SDG-Ambassadorship.
- The coalition agreement of the Flemish Government, which states that we should maximise our buying power to reward socially responsible procurement among others.
- The National Action Plan for Business and Human Rights, which also focuses on human rights in value chains.
- Our policy for public procurement, which stipulates the necessity to conform with the ILO conventions and incorporation of sustainable trade, social criteria and working against social dumping.

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

Already in 2008, the Government of Flanders established policy goals on sustainable public procurement. In the beginning, these goals were very broad and ambitious – the main goal was to reach a 100% sustainable public procurement in 2020. In later stages, the goals became more concrete and smart, as the different agencies of the Government of Flanders implemented sustainable criteria and contract clauses in their tender documents. Today, we work with more concrete and specific sustainability actions, e.g. working on human rights in our ICT value chains.

In 2019, after a few experiments in tenders for workwear and textiles in 2015, we tested a due diligence approach for the first time. The aim was to create more transparent value chains. We also affiliated with Trustone in 2019, an international GSR (Government Social Responsibility) covenant for natural stone. It provides a platform for entities of the Dutch government and Government of Flanders to internationally combat child labour, and to support sustainability and equal pay in the sector for natural stone. Then, in 2020, we affiliated to Electronics Watch.

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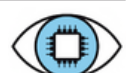
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How does your team collaborate with other functions and/or departments on different aspects of socially responsible procurement?

Within our organisation we have a triangular approach wherein a legal officer, a public buyer and a product specialist work together to ensure that each public contract is appropriate for the goods or services we want to procure. This way we ensure that a lot of expertise is available during the tender process and in the contract execution phase.

We work closely with the Department of Environment and the Flemish Waste Agency on green issues, and with the Department for Work and Social Economy on social issues. We engage with our federal colleagues and those in the other Belgian regions who are facing similar challenges with regards to social sustainability. And we engage in international collaboration networks, such as CFIT and Electronics Watch (for ICT) and Trustone (for natural stone). The complete list of other organizations we work with would be too long to include here.



In recent times we've been planning a training on socially responsible public procurement with the European Commission.

Socially responsible procurement is a theme that is relevant to most of our tenders and is becoming increasingly important within the Government of Flanders. Besides our affiliation to Electronics Watch, we recently published a guide on combatting social dumping and guidance to help contracting authorities to reserve contracts for social economy enterprises.

What are the biggest lessons you have learned so far? What are the biggest challenges that you face?

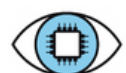
It is not easy to achieve transparency in value chains. It requires a lot of energy and is difficult to make the OEMs aware of its importance. Sustainable supply chain management is an additional contract management task, which doesn't readily combine with the other numerous and important tasks within standard business operations. The indirect relationship between our organisation and the OEMs presents an additional challenge, as we usually contract with resellers, who do not necessarily have the right contacts within the OEMs to secure the requested information. Perhaps the biggest challenge is to be patient and to persevere. Progress happens slowly, but it happens.

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What progress or achievements are you most proud of?

We made progress by including due diligence clauses in our contracts, which give us some leverage to talk with our contractors about transparency in the production facilities for the products they source. A little bonus is that we uncovered three new production facilities through the disclosure process that were not previously identified to Electronics Watch. It is also important within our own organisation that socially responsible public procurement has become an established topic that will probably continue to gain traction.

Moreover, we are proud to be the co-host for the Electronics Watch Annual Conference 2024 in Brussels (*taking place in the Herman Teirlinck building, below*) in November. We look forward to bringing together the different affiliates and monitoring partners and supporting the development of this network.



How does being an Electronics Watch affiliate support your work and achievement of your organisation's goals?

Electronics Watch supports our work by providing a lot of information, such as the Electronics Watch Contract Conditions, which we implemented. These documents and the online knowledge platform, in combination with Electronics Watch worker-driven monitoring, help us in our goal to source our goods and services responsibly.

We have the feeling that we are still not using the full potential of the instruments that Electronics watch provides, but that we are slowly getting there.

Can you think of a specific example of how you'd made use of your affiliation, something you've learned and applied in your work since affiliating?

We have made use of our affiliation to try to create a platform for discussion on socially responsible public procurement with OEMs with varying degrees of success. Although creating transparency in value chains is a laborious task, in the long run we believe it will be possible to drive change. The hardest challenge is to foster an open, proactive dialogue with OEMs and resellers on due diligence, rather than relying on a compliance-based approach via contract clauses.

What are the next steps on your socially responsible public procurement journey and how would you like Electronics Watch to support you?

Although we have been an affiliate for quite a while, we are still at the beginning of our journey. The importance of socially responsible public procurement is growing, and we want to grow as an organisation. As value chain management becomes increasingly important, we want to

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spend more time on developing our socially responsible contract management. As mentioned before, we are also trying to optimise our contracts to create more leverage in contract execution.

We are thankful for the support Electronics Watch already provides us for IT hardware and low emission vehicles. The expertise of Electronics Watch helps us to grow as an organisation. Further cooperation and networking sessions, of course, will be of great support.

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One of the buildings which the Agency for Facility Operations is refurbishing to become a circular, sustainable building

