
A 'locals' perspective towards social acceptance of the Closing-the-Circle project in Houthalen-Helchteren

Keynote lecture of Maurice Ballard

We thank the organizing committee to invite us and to give us the opportunity to see why and how we want to defend the concerns of the local population.

1- Why did citizens take the initiative to start up a 'Locals Work Group'?

In the run-up to the first ELFM symposium of 2010 in Molenheide we asked more than 100 local residents if they wanted to know more about the CtC project with a delegation of 18 members we participated in the first ELFM symposium and then 'The Locals' was formed.

Fourteen inquisitive and extremely watchful members still critically examine this project and follow reactions of local population. After more the 7 years, 48 Locals Meetings & more than 25 work meetings we still scrutinise every detail.

As 'The Locals' we invited experts from various knowledge institutes, technology holders, business and project leaders. They formed the basis of our regular 'Locals Meetings' with the aim of obtaining unbiased, reliable first-hand information. We also visited various factory and projects, all related to the acquisition of knowledge in connection with the ELFM project.

After + 7 years we closely follow and influence the CtC project of Group Machiels.

2- Knowledge overcomes fear

A history of dust, odour, nuisance and heavy traffic.

Surely, people have the right to be genuinely concerned about their quality of life and their health.

It would be too simple to blame local residents suffering from NIMBY syndrome.

This would only reinforce the fear and insecurity among the local population.

Therefore → building knowledge = building credibility = building trust

3- A critical approach whilst being receptive to change.

We believe in science and Clean Technology but blind trust is not our first choice

It is extremely important that the local population has full confidence that the project leaders will do everything to protect the living environment of the local residents.

A cautiously optimistic approach is to obtain as many safeguards as possible in this transition experiment, to ensure it is executed in a reliable way and without causing nuisance or adverse effects in the short or long term.

Transparency throughout the entire project will allow the appropriate follow-up and perfect controllability.

Be honest, this is a big challenge. Not only for those who are involved within the ELFM project but also for the Local Citizens.

Of course, there are different opinions within a society.

There will always be believers and non-believers.

But let us also be aware that technological changes often evolve much faster than their social acceptance.

Therefore, transition without social acceptance always causes serious obstacles. In the past years we have understood how polarized and unjustified claims were created because people usually believe what they want to believe rather than what is right.

That is why it is important to provide a flow of verified information. Information addressed to the right audience.

To get a well-founded agreement or no agreement, both require that everyone has a clear understanding of what it is essentially about.

Coming from a critical stance, we know that authorities and businesses alike want to convince society to go ahead with this project just showing the benefits.

Therefore, the principles of The Locals' approach are as follows:

It is not because we receive first-hand information and first-hand knowledge concerning the project, it does mean that one can immediately agree with the implementation of it.

If as local residents our agreement is sought, then it is necessary that we understand what will happen here and how, including the use of new technologies and processes

4- Participation without insight leads to utterance without perspective.'

In case we do understand but do not agree then we are able to clearly justify our opinion

Appropriate knowledge and insights will enable well founded objections to be described precisely.

Higher education institutions, scientists and business leaders are all more likely to listen to such clearly formulated objections

Also politicians will show an interest

The Locals consider it to be a very important task to work together with the scientific community to 'translate' complex information regarding 'modern and innovative landfill mining' to make it understandable for the general public.

5- The driving force that kept 'The Locals' going for more than seven years

Of course, there is the need to inform ourselves correctly as a group. But now we also want to inform the local population so that they themselves are able to form their own opinion based on the same first-hand information.

The need to build up trust will generates proposals are heard by the project managers, so that local residents can rely on 'precautionary measures' for expected calamities.

It is of course very important that information is communicated in a targeted manner.

We as 'The Locals' position ourselves as a neutral actor, who wants to engage in dialogue at all levels and we want to share our knowledge with those who want to be impartially informed..

ELFM offers an opportunity to write the final chapter in the long waste processing story in our municipality.

What we ultimately want is that we can bring this old form of waste processing to an end in our beautiful municipality of Houthalen-Helchteren.

And finally, my thank to 'The Locals' for their sustained effort over the past seven years and for attending the 4th Symposium today, so we can go back home with more information and more questions...