

4TH INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON ENHANCED LANDFILL MINING - A 'Locals' perspective towards social acceptance of the Closing-the-Circle project in Houthalen-Helchteren

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Introduction: Why did citizens take the initiative to start up a 'Locals Work Group'?

The first Enhanced Landfill Mining (ELFM) symposium was held in Houthalen-Helchteren in Molenheide (Belgium) in 2010. This was the result of an initiative launched by a multi-actor research consortium and the company Group Machiels that operates the Remo landfill. Maurice Ballard initiated the idea to invite not only members of the scientific community but also representatives of the local people (The Locals) to jointly express the residents' concerns to the symposium attendees.

Following this conference, The Locals, a pure citizens' initiative, realized there was a need to continue with their 'work group'.

The Locals is a work group made up of local people mainly from Houthalen-Helchteren and Heusden-Zolder, who have adopted the objectives of the not-for-profit association CleanTechPunt. Currently, the group consists of fourteen inquisitive and extremely watchful members who critically examine the plans for the entire project. They scrutinize every detail and will continue to do so over a follow-up period.

It is evident that the approach taken by The Locals is a dialogue model. The follow-up of such a project over six to seven years is indeed completely voluntary, yet every member of the group is fully committed.

Acquiring knowledge and building trust

The Locals, as a group, have clearly chosen not to use a conflict model and instead engage at every level. This enables them to closely follow and influence the development of the Closing the Circle-project of Group Machiels. They trust the scientific and technological community but are aware that blind trust may be

dangerous. They are led by Mr M. Ballard, chairman of CleanTechPunt, who has expertise in the principles of the circular economy. Group meetings always include further training in related subjects. The Locals have established contacts with scientists, universities, business leaders, tech companies and public bodies. To date, more than 45 information gathering meetings and in excess of 25 internal work meetings have taken place. By acquiring knowledge from unbiased and trustworthy sources, the Locals consider themselves well placed to listen to concerns of other citizens, to understand their anxieties and fears, to analyse their concerns and establish the essence of their objections in order to jointly look for a solution.

A critical approach whilst being receptive to change

With regard to the impact of the CtC-project, The Locals adopt a rather conservative, buffering and controlling role. The Locals' aim of this 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 for the appropriate follow-up and perfect controllability.

ELFM offers an opportunity to write the final chapter in the long waste processing story in the municipality and to draw a line under it. This project replaces waste disposal methods such as incineration and landfill, with waste processing technologies that enable the waste to become part of the circular economy. Of paramount importance here is the protection of the environment, health and safety.

When engaging in the public debate, the Locals take a rather exploratory and stimulating approach. In addition to the identification of necessary safeguards for which the appropriate mechanisms and communication channels have to be put in place, there is further exploration of the potential for additional benefits and gains for the local people. What concrete positive outcomes could the CtC project deliver for the residents and the local community? Are positive effects only possible in the long term or also in the short term? Which elements could make the CtC project intrinsically attractive, and is this feasible, or can one only find drawbacks which may need to be compensated?

What is the driving force that has kept 'The Locals' going for more than seven years?

Clearly, the project has great importance for society on environmental, economic and technological levels. And of course after seven years one might wonder: when will this project be realised and what improvement in know-how is still needed? The preparation of the project is often a theoretical approach designed to provide sufficient detail to enable someone to have a good understanding of the activities and outcomes involved. Only after execution it's possible to measure in practice how

closely those preliminary studies resemble the reality. This is also one of the reasons why The Locals attach great significance to the environmental impact of test excavations, transport and storage of waste to be processed. Of equal importance is an understanding of residents' attitudes towards this form of waste processing which is totally new to them, and also of the possible nuisance this may cause...

First 'The Locals' need to be informed, then they inform the local people

The Locals' starting point was for all members of the group to be well informed. As mentioned previously, information gathering by The Locals is from unbiased and trustworthy sources, and obtained first hand. The focus was on fundamental questions such as: 'Should there be a landfill clean-up knowing that the oldest ones were constructed without a protective lining? And is it not our responsibility - here and now – to protect the environment for our children and future generations?' Further questions were then asked such as: can local residents agree to such a project in their neighbourhood? And how would residents respond if they were also informed with first-hand information? This is an important and necessary step towards a shared project that is socially relevant in terms of both the restoration of nature and available open space, together with the recovery of raw materials and energy.

Jointly overcoming obstacles

'Participation without insight leads to an utterance without perspective.'

To get either 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.

The principles of The Locals' approach are as follows:

- Knowledge about the project does not mean that one can immediately agree with the implementation of it.
- If as local residents our agreement is sought, then the first step is that we understand what will happen here and how, including the use of new technologies and processes.
- In case we do understand but do not agree then we are able to clearly justify our decision
- The foundation for dialogue is laid by the acquisition of appropriate knowledge and insights, which then 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
- This method of jointly sharing information and knowledge, and a willingness to listen to each-others arguments are essential steps in the development of a community supported project.

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. When conveying this information they take into account the current social issues and the reasons for resistance.

Knowledge overcomes fear

When attempting to address resistance thresholds for this project, repeating the economical, technological and environmental benefits again and again is unlikely to form a successful strategy. On the other hand, filling in any gaps in people's knowledge with objective and impartial information is helpful. It is important to deliver a clear and focussed communication at a suitable pace such that assumptions and uncertainties are eliminated. It is not The Locals' aim to win over the general public for this project since Locals are not missionaries. The intention is to offer the public sufficient objective scientific knowledge so that they are empowered to make fully informed decisions.

In contrast, equally motivated people who lack factual information and rely on false assumptions in order to develop objections or concerns, often become frustrated as their opinions are rejected as unfounded. Such objections cannot be relied upon to make adjustments to the project or to stop it altogether. Worse is that the current resistance continues to persist, public support further erodes, and whilst these objectors are genuinely concerned, it creates the impression of 'not being heard'.

However, people have the right to be concerned. A history of dust and odour nuisance and heavy traffic on local roads, have made the inhabitants around the Remo landfill site very suspicious. Ten years ago those pollution problems had stopped; would this now start all over again? Worried about a radiological risk? What is the impact of dust emitted during excavation of this landfill site? Will we have to live with offensive smells again? How will it affect our health? These are all very justified questions and every questioner has the right to a clear and honest answer.

These are exactly the reasons why The Locals wanted to continue with their task after the first ELFM conference in Helchteren.

To inform without causing polarisation

An important question is: how can we inform local people when polarisation of views already started a long time ago. Polarisation is, in principle, not necessarily an issue

if it helps focusing on the problems and/or the lack of clarity. This changes however, when 'not informing' and 'taking things out of context' become a clear strategy to continue to say what one wants to hear or believe.

The Locals thoroughly assess and consider each argument, they weigh up all the pros and cons of the CtC project. This stands in stark contrast to those opposed to the project who selectively deliberate certain issues and often present themselves as experts. Arguments based on popular wisdom are often incorrect and unsubstantiated. Also the media for whom newsworthiness takes precedence over accuracy may be a source of inaccurate information. This increases the likelihood of the demise of the CtC project even before it has started. It is therefore important to provide the local community with a sustained and easily accessible stream of reliable, well-founded information in order to reduce the risk of any form of polarisation.

A survey of local residents undertaken by The Locals in early 2016 entitled 'What do local people know about the plans for the Remo landfill site?' revealed a need for understandable, non-biased, independent and accurate information regarding the CtC project. The Locals were perceived as a reliable source. This is consistent with The Locals' philosophy as illustrated by the open character of the organisation: everyone is welcome to take part in the group.

Another important observation was the lack of interest of the general public to information sessions which were organised jointly by the company Group Machiels and the municipality Houthalen-Helchteren.

This was the main reason why The Locals wanted to start a communication project with direct involvement of the local community by responding to their principal concerns, namely the consequences for their health and the environment.

The following example clarifies this: The Locals plan a specific measuring project, using the 'Citizen Science' approach. Local people will be involved in a measuring campaign with plants, the leaves of which will, after several weeks, be examined and assessed by scientists. The resulting data will then be compared with measurements obtained by the project operator. Once unbiased conclusions have been drawn, they will be intelligibly conveyed by The Locals to the local community. By communicating openly and transparently with local people, we are convinced we are able to arouse their interest so that they can share their concerns which facilitates a more focussed search for an appropriate solution.

The Locals' Communication & Research Project

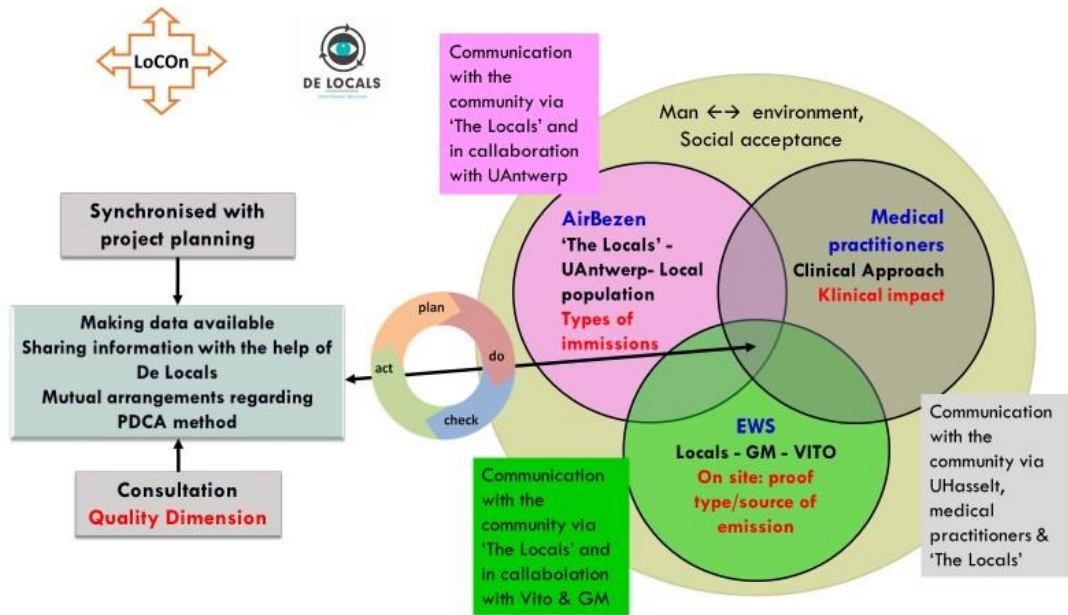


Figure 1: The Locon project creates added value due to the interaction between several research projects which makes it possible to link cause and effect. Communication of the results generates public acceptance.

An issue without closure stays with you all your life

It would be too simple an explanation to cite the NIMBY (not in my backyard) syndrome as an argument to downplay the anxieties of local people and to stigmatise them.

A fundamental requirement is the building of mutual trust: the company has to use everything in its power to detect a nuisance at an early stage and to act effectively before any nuisance is noticed by the neighbours; and local people with concerns and issues must be able to communicate directly and effectively with the company via an open dialogue so that both parties benefit from the exchange of information.

Surely, people have the right to be genuinely concerned about their quality of life and their health. However, in the past, a breakdown in the necessary two-way communication left these issues unresolved.

We are convinced that those who were not listened to in the past and may still feel resentful, must be given the chance to speak. Give them the right to a broad forum, otherwise lasting frustration will prevent them from being open to new ideas. When they feel heard and understood they will be able to join a renewed and open dialogue. Maybe they do not yet realise how effective new technologies have become. Would it not make sense to recover raw materials and energy from waste? To persuade them is a first step towards persuading the world of tomorrow's circular story.