

# Co-design of Indicators on Urban Sustainable Development

## Case Ghent - Belgium

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### 1 INTRODUCTION

Carry out a test and ask the following question to any authority, civil servant or resident of a city or district: 'Are Ghent, Knokke, Zutendaal or ... (complete as you wish) growing in a desirable way?' Answers for a specific area are often given to the general question, i.e. as regards employment, housing, safety, environmental quality, etc. No one can, however, specify if his or her city or district is developing satisfactorily in general. Everyone can give a partial answer, but is unable to put all the pieces of the puzzle together. To promote communication on the city's future, the **Centre for Sustainable Development** (CSD – Ghent University) has developed a Barometer for Sustainable Development<sup>1</sup>. This instrument has now been tested for the first time in Ghent (Belgium)<sup>2</sup>.

The barometer forms part of preparations for the **Ghent Local Agenda 21**, a local implementation of the global **Agenda 21**. This agenda for the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the only integrated global approach so far to all aspects of environmental and urban development. It is a concrete and extended programme of action with definition of priorities and quantification of financial needs. The **participation** of all involved partners is also emphasised (including the designation of long-term social objectives). A political consensus on this programme was reached at the UN conference in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. The proposed action breaks down into four areas:

- (1) *The social and economic aspect*: international co-operation, combating poverty, changes in consumption patterns, demographic development, health, etc.
- (2) *Maintaining and managing development resources*: protecting the atmosphere and oceans, forests and other ecosystems, combating desert formation and drought, long-term land development, effective waste management, etc.
- (3) *Strengthening the role of social groups*: i.e. the position of women, the role of children and young people, recognising the rights of native peoples, the role of NGO's, local government initiatives, the role of trade unions, etc.

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<sup>1</sup> Within the context of the Belgian federal policy on sustainable development, the Federal State Environment Secretariat supports the Ghent municipal authorities, who, in compliance with section 28 of Agenda 21, are working to prepare a Local Agenda 21. The City of Ghent called on the CSD for this purpose in 1997 and 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Text based on: Doom, R., Block, T., De Jonge, W. and Van Assche, J., (1999), The Ghent Barometer for Sustainable Development. Final report October 1999, compiled for the Ghent city authorities, Ghent: CSD-RUG.

(4) *Implementation resources*: financial resources, technology transfer, education, scientific research, institutional provisions, decision-making information (e.g. indicators), etc.

The development of a Barometer for Sustainable Development is thus one of the first steps that the city of Ghent is taking towards implementing this sustainable development policy. The **1999 Edition Barometer** comprises a basic list of 60 indicators from 25 policy areas as well as a selection list with 15 indicators from 10 policy areas. In addition to the concrete end-product, we can present a number of other results at communicative, method, policy and participative levels.

The Centre for Sustainable Development normally starts with the development - in a participative way with all the stakeholders - of a **vision** for the future of the city. This vision must then be operationalised in Sustainable Development Indicators. However, in this project we didn't have the opportunity to build a vision. We also want to emphasize the importance of **implementation** of the barometer and the indicators during all phases of the process. Nevertheless, this article gives a good view of our working method to build an **instrument** for decision makers.

## 2 IMPLEMENTING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

### 2.1 Consensus and confusion

When sustainable development is discussed, many people adopt a sceptical attitude, and this is understandable. Indeed, few terms have developed against such a vague background and few concepts are as susceptible to producing so many derived interpretations (Stengers, 1996). There is, however, a broad consensus among specialists concerning the term 'sustainable development'. The informal definition in the **Brundtland-report** (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987) is generally accepted: "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." The report also emphasises accommodating the essential needs of the poor.

Sustainable development therefore comprises much more than mere concern about the environment. It entails social organisation of **intra- and intergenerational equity**. The environment is not just central in this instance; importance is also assigned to economic and cultural aspects, such as preventing poverty and social exclusion, concern about the quality of life (not just raising income), attention to ethical aspects of human well-being, systematic organisation of participation by all concerned stakeholders, etc.

Despite the fact that considering sustainable development as the sole preserve of environmentalists must make room for a broader definition, many remain attached to a purely ecological view. They frequently limit themselves to proclaiming the **multi-dimensionality** of sustainable development, which exempts them from investigating or paying attention to the underlying dynamics of several areas. This conceptual error arises from the fact that 'sustainable development' is a normative concept as well as a descriptive one.

The popularity of the term 'sustainable development' in political circles and government statements should therefore not be surprising in any way. The term crops up both correctly and incorrectly, often nicely packaged and up-beat, but very frequently as an alibi to support

and popularise a position. Although it is significant that the terms ‘sustainable development’, ‘sustainability’, etc. are no longer seen in certain situations, they should be used **economically** and correctly. Overuse of such expressions often has a dysfunctional effect.

The following more practical and local interpretation of sustainable development, created by the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (1994), is useful when we wish to apply the term to **western urban areas**: “Sustainable development is development that offers elementary ecological, social and economic facilities to all inhabitants of a society without threatening the existence of the natural, constructed and social systems these facilities depend on.”

## 2.2 Common language: needs and need satisfiers

Knowledge of the literature on sustainable development has led the CSD to develop a common language on sustainable development, which can be understood by all interested non-specialists. From several definitions of sustainable development, it emerges that the concept essentially relates to **needs** on the one hand and how they will be **satisfied** on the other. Use can also be made here of related terms such as needs, wishes, expectations, requirements, objectives, demand, etc. as well as facilities, products, services, provision, resources, supply, etc.<sup>3</sup> In addition, emphasis is laid on ‘**equity**’. As already stated, this not only means paying attention to and meeting the needs of poor people in the southern hemisphere or one’s own home country or city; equity also entails showing solidarity with future generations.

Making use of this language more or less removes the **friction** associated with seeking a compromise between environmental protection and social complaint. By meeting the needs of both the current and future generations of the poor, a balance is achieved so that ‘economic problems take account of environmental factors and social and economic pressures are considered when acting on an environmental level’ (Stengers, 1996). The use of these **accessible central concepts** promotes communication with and between various municipal services, as well as with a range of social partners, so that participation in and support for a sustainable development policy increase. Barriers are lowered and participative thinking simplified.

If a decision is to be made on whether or not Ghent is a sustainable city (i.e. whether Ghent meets the needs of current and future generations), then attention will turn quickly to the following **fundamental needs**: subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, participation, idleness, freedom, identity, etc. It is clear that we have not confined ourselves to the environment with this broad approach, but have involved many other **policy areas** in the project: the economy, education, housing, health, safety, mobility, sport, culture, north-south co-operation, town planning, public works, social cohesion, etc.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Max Neef makes a clear difference between needs and need satisfiers. Needs are universal in time and space, finite (in contrast to wishes: unsatisfiable) and complement each other. In contrast, need satisfiers are not universal, but rather socially and culturally determined.

<sup>4</sup> Table 1 contains a list of all policy areas.

## 2.3 Sustainable development indicators (SDI's)

In general, it may be said that an **indicator** is a synthetic and representative reflection of a greater, more complex sum of phenomena, preferably made measurable on a quantitative scale (OECD, 1998). Indicators are mostly used to emphasise that figures do not only reflect facts, but are rather a synthesis of complex and vague information. It is therefore necessary to interpret the figures, to comprehend a **target** (Gordon D. and Spicker P., 1999). A SDI is relevant for the objectives of policy based on sustainable development. The indicators developed in the project are a simplified reflection of trends and phenomena in the urban landscape, which have an impact on the strategic objectives of co-ordinated municipal policy and are situated in various policy domains and subjects.

Fig. 1: Standard form for a sustainable development indicator

<b>Description</b>	<b>Data</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Name</li> <li>- Definition</li> <li>- Measurement unit</li> <li>- Meaning</li> <li>- Evaluation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Outline of situation</li> <li>- Data</li> <li>- Data source</li> <li>- Shortage of data</li> <li>- Data quality (availability, accessibility, reliability, comparative quality, currency and cost price)</li> <li>- Validity</li> <li>- Weight</li> </ul>
<b>Situation</b>	<b>Administration</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Local policy objectives</li> <li>- Higher authorities (Provincial, Flemish, Belgian, European and international)</li> <li>- Policy areas</li> <li>- Participation</li> <li>- NGO's</li> <li>- References</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Processing phase</li> <li>- Author</li> <li>- Contact person</li> </ul>

Indicators therefore at least comprise (quantitative) data and evaluation of development. They are like **indicators on an instrument panel**: without data, they do not move and so cannot be interpreted. As such, data must be collected very systematically and in a targeted manner; data quality and relevance for the policy domains concerned must also be designated. Against this background and to achieve accurate databasemanagement, the project needed to develop a suitable instrument. The document concerned helped to prevent identification, definition and interpretation problems. The **standard form** (cf. fig. 1) developed simplified reference to the indicator's shortcomings, validity, comparative value, etc.

## 3 CO-DESIGN OF SDIs

### 3.1 Divided knowledge

Very few, if anyone at all, have adequate knowledge of all aspects of a sustainable city. We too, the Centre for Sustainable Development (CSD), do not have this knowledge and opted to

draw on the expertise built up over several years by various municipal services. Due to the major complexity of the material and the high degree of specialisation involved, **participative development** of indicators (the ‘**co-design**’ **method**) was central to our approach.

During this project several discussions were organised with favoured partners. With the help of a common language, thoughts on sustainable development were exchanged and all concerned reached (relatively quick) agreement on which areas are relevant for the future of the City of Ghent as a liveable and vital city. The persons concerned could easily translate concepts such as needs, need satisfaction, equity, priority for the socially deprived, maintenance of environmental capital for future generations, etc. into concrete references to their own domains. This input formed the basis for the CSD to elaborate indicators.

The know-how of **civil servants**, **experts** and **key persons** was thus always translated into various drafts for indicators in each domain, which were presented once again. During the course of the project, the people concerned received an opportunity to use their expertise in the development process. As such, they became known as experts, which produced the additional advantage of creating a **carrying capacity** that would facilitate work with the barometer and SDIs. For clarity’s sake, the indicators were not developed by ‘super experts’ from the university. The SDC acted as a ‘**facilitator**’, with the result that all specialist knowledge available was mobilised for the production of the indicators. This was indeed necessary because of the multi-disciplinary input involved.

### 3.2 Unanimity at all levels

In view of the fact that the barometer is relevant for all policy areas, it was important that implementation was supported by a **civil service working group**, which brought together all interested departments. The Ghent civil service working group included representatives from the economic, social policy, north-south co-operation and environment departments and steering committees. This working group was chaired by the mayor and alderman responsible for the urban environment.

In the various project phases, the indicators developed were also presented to the competent cross-party **municipal authority committee**. All the retained indicators received approval from all majority and opposition political parties. To sum up, maintaining a broad consensus was an important basis for developing the SDIs.

Councillors, civil servants, members of advisory groups, representatives of the social partners, and interested citizens were later invited to a **presentation and consultation round** relating to the barometer<sup>5</sup>. Their suggestions and comments (which still have to be processed) will be taken into account for the 2000 Edition Barometer.

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<sup>5</sup> The Ghent authorities assigned this task to ‘Vzw Stadsland’ in Antwerp.

### 3.3 Consultation of existing quantitative data

Not only was know-how from various city departments used; their numeric data was consulted extensively. This had both advantages and limitations. **Government statistics** are mostly generated by civil service organisations. These are organised along bureaucratic lines and oriented to administering social processes. The guidelines for assigning these processes to an administrative framework operate according to a **formal rationale**. Administrative organisations thus categorise real situations on the basis of criteria based on policy considerations (Van Doorn, 1986). In a nutshell, civil service data often has a concrete goal which is closely associated with economic, political and social order and control.

In contrast, a **theoretical rationale** attempts to manage real situations via ever more precise abstract concepts. Members of an academic organisation legitimise their activity by transforming information into knowledge. Posing scientific questions is also in keeping with the fact that scientists like to look beyond general acceptable facts. For example, much relevant data on the sustainable city can also be gathered via an academic survey. Although the cost is high and response problems often arise, researchers can set to work with conscious objectives and themselves define both the type and content of questions. The impossibility of working at source in terms of both respondents and concepts is a general characteristic of civil service statistics and ensures a certain unwillingness by academics to use this data for scientific investigation. We are therefore convinced that another method (e.g. an academic survey) would have produced other indicators for sustainable development. The comment that the current selection list is also a **political list** falls within this context.

We also had to remain constantly aware of the dangers inherent in numerical data. The use of **quantitative data** offers many opportunities for testing hypotheses and developing theories, but this habit also too quickly gives an investigation objective scientific status. This is closely associated with the idea that measurable systems can also be controlled and managed. It is then also logical that policy which calls for more **manageability** would adopt these elements as a sort of panacea for all management problems (Simonis and Lehning, 1987).

## 4 1999 EDITION BAROMETER

### 4.1 A basic list: 60 indicators

Table 1 gives an overview of the retained indicators for a database that must remain usable in the **long term**. The first column shows the policy area to which the indicator applies, and the second the name of the indicator concerned. This refers to a standard form developed during the course of the project. A quite summary view of matters relating to the effects of the sustainable development indicators is shown in the third column. A total of 60 indicators for 21 policy areas were retained.

This basic list contains two indicators that apply at **meta policy level**. The general and selective migration rates were taken as indicators in the basic list, because they can provide the City of Ghent with important indications of how attractive the city is to live in, its quality of life and the quality of accommodation in the city. This basic list is remarkable due to the fact that no indicators have been elaborated for **health policy**. The local health issue is changing rapidly and related policy is only at the start-up phase. Necessary sustainable development indicators could only be defined within the context of more developed local

health policy. The policy domain is nonetheless mentioned because health is viewed as very important and relevant in the context of sustainable development. **Educational policy** was also referred to for similar reasons. However, due to difficulties in obtaining data flows from the educational field, no indicators were developed.

A further comment needs to be made on division of the **environmental area**. This municipal policy area was divided on the basis of topics from the Ghent Environment Policy plan 1998 - 2002. The six environmental areas (i.e. energy, drinking water, quantity of groundwater, raw materials, refuse and waste water) and the six environmental qualities (i.e. groundwater quality, earth, surface water, air, noise and dangerous materials) were also retained in the basic list and assigned sustainable development indicators. The environmental policy domain was also clearly differentiated from the nature development policy domain.

Table 1: Overview of the basic list – 1999 edition

Areas	Indicators	Current situation
Meta	General migration rate	Selected for the 1999 edition
	Selective migration rate	Completed
Economy	Number of jobs for employees and the self-employed	Selected for the 1999 edition
	Overall unemployment rate	Selected for the 1999 edition
	Number of poorly educated people in the job-seeking population	To be reviewed
	Number of long-term unemployed in the job-seeking population	Selected for the 1999 edition
	Differences in income	Completed
	No indicators available yet	No useful information as yet
Education	No indicators available yet	No useful information as yet
Housing	Number of applicants for public housing	Selected for the 1999 edition
	Waiting time for public housing	Selected for the 1999 edition
	Quality of lodgings	Data being gathered
	Number of empty houses	No useful data
Health	No indicators available as yet	No useful data yet
Security	Integrated criminal statistics	Completed
	Number of burglary victims	Selected for the 1999 edition
	Theft victim rate	Completed
	Rate for victims of violence	Completed
	Rate for vehicle-related crimes	Completed
	General sense of insecurity	Selected for the 1999 edition
Mobility	Traffic behaviour - Modal split	Data is being gathered
	People injured in traffic accidents	Selected for the 1999 edition
	Subjective traffic insecurity	Completed
Sport	Number of visits to sports facilities in Ghent	No useful data as yet
Culture	Value of mobile cultural capital	No useful data as yet
	Value of fixed cultural capital	No useful data as yet
	Cultural participation per inhabitant	No useful data as yet
	Cultural renewal in Ghent	No useful data as yet
	Attitude towards 'Ghent as a Cultural City'	No useful data as yet
North-south co-operation	Resources for north-south co-operation	Selected for the 1999 edition
	Global training initiatives	Completed
Energy	Use of economical electric devices	No useful data as yet
	Use of economical heating devices	No useful data as yet
	Level of connection to the gas network	Data not received as yet
	Connections to the municipal heating system	Completed

Drinking water	Level of connection to the water supply	No useful data as yet
	Tap-water consumption per connected inhabitant	No useful data as yet
	Proportion of ground water in drinking water	Selected for the 1999 edition
Groundwater (quantity.)	No indicators available yet	No useful data as yet
Raw materials	No indicators available yet	No useful data as yet
Refuse	Overall quantity of refuse per inhabitant	Selected for the 1999 edition
	Level of selectiveness of household rubbish	Completed
	Quantity of non-recyclable refuse per inhabitant	Completed
	Illegal dumps	Data being gathered
Waste water	Cleanliness level of household waste water	Data being gathered
Groundwater (quality)	Quality of well water	No useful data as yet
Soil	Historical overview of polluted lands	Data being gathered
Surface water	Physical chemical quality of the Ghent waterways	Completed
	Biological quality of the Ghent waterways	Selected for the 1999 edition
Air	Nitrogen dioxide content in the city air	Completed
	Ozone content in the city air	Completed
	Number of air pollution complaints	Selected for the 1999 edition
Noise	Number of noise complaints	Selected for the 1999 edition
Dangerous materials	Number of dangerous materials offences	No useful data as yet
Nature	Surface available for valuable and extremely valuable areas	Data being gathered
	Surface available for nature sanctuaries	Data being gathered
	Surface available for rare flora	Data being gathered
	Surface available for areas with fauna	Data being gathered
Town planning	House density	No useful data as yet
	Empty commercial premises	Data being gathered
	Green spaces	No useful data as yet
Municipal construction	Resident-friendly houses	No useful data as yet
	Quality of the living environment	No useful data as yet
	Quality of local facilities	No useful data as yet
Community building	Quality of the social environment	No useful data as yet

## 4.2 Selection

The drawing-up of a basic list constitutes necessary preparation for creating a useful policy instrument that can be used to measure progress towards achieving the long-term objectives of generating a liveable and vital Ghent. It also forms the necessary basis for selecting the most relevant indicators for sustainable development of Ghent. Other cities often place emphasis on other indicators.

To ensure that selection was made in a systematic and smooth manner, it was decided to apply a method where **three selection criteria** were used cumulatively:

- (1) **Presence of data:** an initial condition involved the presence of data for a minimum number of recent points in time with an interim period of at least one year. Only 15 indicators had three items of data and 28 indicators had data for two points in time. Due to the limited availability of the data, the civil service working group decided to retain all indicators with two figures for further selection. It was necessary to act carefully with regard to interpreting and evaluating the indicators.
- (2) **Balance between the indicators:** the second criterion was only to play a role if a sufficient number of indicators with information on two points in time were available. As such, an attempt had to be made to achieve a balance between ecological (environmental), economic and social indicators. This balanced approach is necessary within a sustainable



development frame of reference. The gathering exercise showed us that **few social indicators** had survived the test of meeting the first criterion. In contrast, environmental indicators were over-represented. It was decided to retain only one indicator from the refuse, surface water and air policy areas. Economic indicators were selected on the basis of a balance between all three.

**(3) Participation**: the civil service working group stipulated which indicators from the refuse, surface water and air policy domains should be retained.

On the basis of the above-mentioned selection method, **15 indicators** were retained for 10 policy areas (cf. Table 2). The trend score only evaluates development over time and varies from ‘+++’ (very good development) to ‘---’ (very poor development). A ‘~’ indicates an indeterminate (i.e. difficult to evaluate) trend or stable situation.

Table 2: Overview of the selection list – 1999 edition

Areas	Indicators	Trend score
Meta	General migration rate	--
Economy	Number of jobs for employees and the self-employed	+
	Overall unemployment rate	~
	Number of long term unemployed at the NWWZ	~
Housing	Number of applicants for public housing	+
	Average waiting time for public housing	+
Safety	Domestic Burglary rate	~
	General feeling of insecurity	~
Mobility	Number of people injured in traffic accidents	~
N-S co-operation	Resources for north-south co-operation	++
Drinking water	Proportion of ground water in drinking water	~
Refuse	Overall quantity of refuse per inhabitant	~
Surface water	Biological quality of the Ghent waterways	~
Air	Number of air pollution complaints	~
Noise	Number of noise complaints	-

### 4.3 System of low-key dynamism

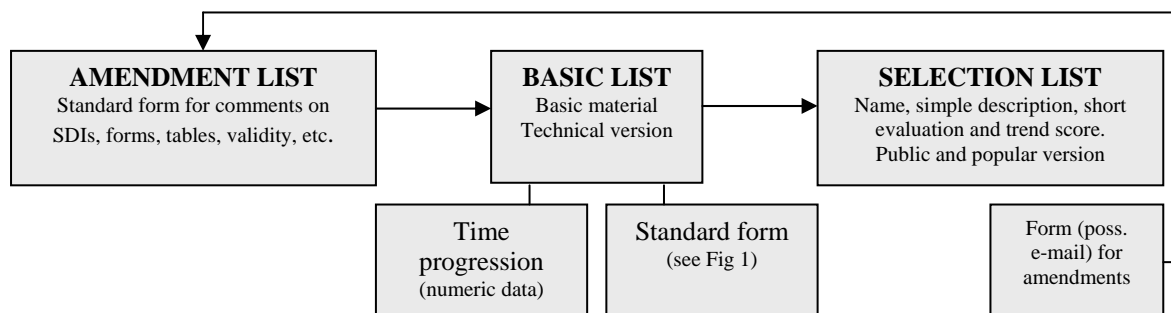
It was decided to develop a procedure to optimise use of the basic list and selected indicators. Figure 2 shows a system for **dynamic management** of the indicators. A reader can clearly see which dynamic is contained in the barometer for sustainable development. There is a basic list – in Ghent’s case comprising 60 indicators – from which the civil service working group can select a certain number to achieve a more popular version, which is valid for a given year. This selection is presented to a broader public. This public of inhabitants, people who work in the city, people who use the municipal services, civil servants and councillors can then express their opinions.

The suggestions, comments and proposals made are processed as **amendments** to existing or (drafts for) new indicators. These are included in an amendment list. The supporting civil servant working group decides at particular times which of the proposed amendments can be made to the basic list. The selection list can also be altered. For example, it must be possible to adjust the selection following a round of presentations, consultations and joint meetings or

for a new council following the elections in October 2000. In a nutshell, existing indicators can disappear and new or adjusted indicators can be added.

This procedure must take place annually at regular intervals and, as such, the indicator lists are viewed as dynamic. Account must always be taken of comparability, the various editions of the selection list must be linked to each other and the balance between ecological, economic and social indicators not disturbed. In Ghent, this link is fostered so that **'low-key dynamism'** can be achieved.

Fig. 2: Dynamic indicator management system



The CSD is also currently arguing for **automation** of the comprehensive structure comprising the basic list, selection list and amendment list. In addition, the reactions of the target group can be accessed electronically at the municipal authorities' address. With regard to automating dynamic management of the indicator lists, a **website** would be a useful instrument for the Ghent Barometer. It is obvious that automating management of the annually changing indicator lists can strongly enhance the usefulness of the whole system.

## 5 INDICATORS AND DECISION MAKING

### 5.1 An instrument panel

The Ghent authorities have developed a **vision of the future**. Its profile is related to Ghent's future as an intellectual and cultural city which must remain accessible for everyone. This future profile must be set in terms of **long-term objectives**. The co-design of SDI proved an outstanding instrument for this purpose. Discussions on the relevance of current municipal trends for the future profile made the underlying long-term objectives clear. Both elements – the facts and norms – are very important for municipal **strategic planning**.

The time is over when citizens could be placated with good intentions, vision and long-term objectives in themselves. At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, authorities must treat local residents as adults. For this reason, each credible authority cannot just publicise its vision of the future; it must also use a **measuring instrument** such as the barometer, which the people concerned can use to measure development of the actual situation in a Local Agenda 21.

A barometer is therefore also eminently suitable as a **communication instrument**, as it translates complex realities and developments into simple indicators. With a targeted publication campaign, both the interested players (external communication) and the different

administrative services (internal communication) can be informed, and their comments and suggestions publicised at the same time. From the civil service working group meetings, contacts with the competent council committee and from the round of consultations and presentations with all interested parties, it emerged clearly how these indicators work, for example, to enable people concerned in the socio-economic world to contribute and receive ideas on ecological matters.

When, after a number of annual measurements, it emerges that some aspects of municipal policy do not depart from the target direction, only then will it be possible to say that the authorities have learnt something about policy effects. The barometer is therefore a **learning instrument**. The indicators give feedback to the city authorities and civil servants on progress and thus enable them to learn something and possibly steer (some elements of) existing policy. Not only local authorities have to be able to draw lessons from urban developments; the social partners can also be systematically informed.

## 5.2 The city as a learning organisation

Just like individuals, organisations like a city can also learn. **Learning organisations** are organisations where people continually expand their capacities, where new thought patterns are developed, where collective targets are striven for, where people continually learn how to learn together (Argyris, 1996), systematically investigate the (technological and social) changes occurring in their environment and take account of these changes in their activities (Becker, 1994). It is the players actually affected (politicians, civil servants, inhabitants, etc.) who, as city representatives, demonstrate the behaviour that leads to learning.

Learning will certainly take place in two types of circumstance: firstly, when the city reaches its objectives and, secondly, when a gap in agreement between targets and results is corrected (Argyris, 1996). Sustainable development indicators can fulfil their role as learning instruments in this instance.

## 6 PROVISIONAL CONCLUSION

In addition to the concrete barometer, the project can also present some results at the communicative, method, policy and participative levels. First and foremost, the attention paid to and interest in sustainable development indicators have grown strongly and penetrated various sectors of the municipal authority. Finally, it is the municipal services themselves who decide as experts which indicators demonstrate permanence or quality of life in Ghent City. This co-design method is subject to the use of a common language to communicate on sustainable development. The barometer is therefore of greater value than a so-called ‘municipal monitor’ where experts from an external bureau decide which indicators are to be used. With the help of the systematic participation of key people from the municipal authority in developing the Ghent indicators, the authorities go further than an external investigation of the city’s quality of life, which is carried out with much less support work. Systematic incorporation of the city’s own services and possibly other social partners ensures internal and, frequently, external support for policy focused on municipal quality of life and permanence.

Is Ghent now on course for sustainable development? Nine indicators show an indefinite trend, whereas four show a rather positive trend. In contrast, two indicators show negative development, including the most important indicator, i.e. ‘the general migration rate’. Can we decide on this basis that no clear trend has yet emerged in Ghent? It is easy to see that the number of indicators with an undefined trend score must decrease. Additional quantitative data must be made available for this purpose. A follow-up edition of the barometer is required. At least, this is dominant feeling experienced by all of those involved in Ghent.

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Anyone who has comments or would like more information on the (Ghent) Barometer for Sustainable development or on Local Agenda 21 can contact:

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