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United Nations Institute for Training and Research

Action Learning Platform

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With more than 50 participants, CIFAL Flanders once again organised an inspiring Action Learning Platform. As the morning programme of this biannual event consisted of an open lecture, this year's second edition was slightly different than usual. The day opened with a half-day training on how to get started with the UN Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This session was open upon registration and included a lecture on 'How to become SDG-proof?', a best practice example by one of CIFAL Flanders' partners and a panel discussion. The afternoon programme was for partners only and focused on transition and circular economy.

Tom Meeuws, Deputy Mayor Social Affairs, Poverty Alleviation, Community Development, Equal Opportunities, Social Economy, Environment and Welfare of the City of Antwerp, welcomed the diverse audience with a short but powerful speech. "Now more than ever, we need to work together to take the next step and come to solutions." He stressed the importance of connecting all 17 SDGs, however difficult that may seem, and argued the necessity of taking risks in order to establish true transition.

After these thought-provoking words, **Peter Wollaert**, Fellow UNITAR & Managing Director of CIFAL Flanders, introduced the attendees to the real challenges in the field of sustainability. The main question of this open lecture on Agenda 2030 and the 17 SDGs was 'How to become SDG-proof?'. What does the future behold for our society, the organisations we work for and us as individuals? Once again it became clear that Agenda 2030 bursts with innovative concepts and offers great opportunities in this regard.

Prof. Dr. **Joost Dessen** discussed the challenges and opportunities that come with implementing the SDGs at his own organisation, the Flanders Research Institute for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (ILVO). Lessons learned pointed out that implementation is a sometimes difficult, but in general uplifting process offering surprising new insights for the organisation as a whole and towards different stakeholders. In a very practical manner he explained how ILVO converges a bottom-up and top-down approach during its implementation process of the SDGs in its organisation and the added value of CIFAL Flanders in that trajectory so far.

Afterwards, a panel consisting of experts from a wide variety of sectors reflected on localising the SDGs.

Marian Blondeel, Head of the Benelux-EU Team of UNRIC, made it clear that the UN considers the SDGs primarily as a strategic communication campaign. Thereby she indicated that it's important to avoid only 'preaching to the converted' and to actively raise awareness among all audiences.

Entrepreneur and founder of YouthTalks **Hassan Al-Hilou** warned for a political climate of growing repression. Individuals, both as civilians and as consumers, are experiencing difficulties with making conscious decisions due to a lack of correct information and practical advice. He considers supporting individuals on a micro-level as an important task, for (multinational) corporations and (international) governments alike.

Prof. Dr. **Luc Van Liedekerke**, expert on business ethics, added that this bottom-up approach of supporting on a micro-level can only succeed when the SDGs are also implemented in a strategic way in policy texts and mission statements. Therefore, he pleaded for a wide scope and vouched for the idea of a multi-level perspective.

Christel Vandenhouten, Head of Sustainable Development at Brussels Airport Company, identified both internal and external communication on the SDGs and their irrefutable importance as one of the main challenges for her own company. While it's clear that the management of her own organisation fully supports the implementation, it will be challenging to reverse Brussels Airport Company's controversial reputation in order to defy the general public opinion.

Ingrid Lieten, Director of Verso, agreed on the challenges that come with internal and external communication on the SDGs, but also praised the power of the SDGs as a framework, point of reference and common goal for our society, organisations and individuals.

In general, the communication about SDGs in a time of seemingly growing adversities and critical public opinion were identified as the main challenges, while the innovation and comprehensiveness of the Agenda as a whole were lauded as the biggest opportunities.

The afternoon programme, which was only open for CIFAL Flanders' training partners, focused on the concept of transition. As the complex step of transition raises some questions for CIFAL's partners, this phase of the implementation was looked upon from different angles.

First by Prof. Dr. **Thomas Block** of the Centre for Sustainable Development at Ghent University, who started with a reflection on what sustainable development actually means. He showed how 'a transition in thinking' is needed to support this development and eventually establish true sustainability. However, a multi-level perspective is a sine qua non in this long-term and complex process. Several 'niche' innovations from the past, such as the invention of the internet, and more recently the concept of a sharing economy, were cited. He concluded his presentation by analysing the strengths and weaknesses of transition management and the general misconceptions that often come along with this discipline.

Katrijn Siebens of OVAM presented 'Vlaanderen Circulair'. This partnership of governments, businesses, civil society and academia operates as a kind of incubator for state-of-the-art initiatives of promising business concepts based on circular economy. The project is considered a best practice as it empowers innovative entrepreneurs trying to find solutions for the growing shortage of raw materials, which will be - especially for Europe - alarming in the decades to come if we do not ignite the much needed transition shift.

Peter Wollaert concluded with the announcement of CIFAL Flanders' upcoming activities and projects, after which a fruitful exchange of learned lessons and opportunities for the future took place during a networking session.

As the next Action Learning Platform takes place on the International Day of Education (24th of January 2020), the important matter of education will be addressed on this occasion. This will happen once again in a festive atmosphere as CIFAL Flanders will also host its New Year's reception during this event.

Further information, please contact

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