

Interview with Bruxelles-Propreté:

The face-to-face interview with Laurent Grouwels was conducted at the offices of Bruxelles-Propreté on 22/03/2012.

Can you tell me few things about the position you hold here? Can you describe me your work on the daily basis?

I deal essentially with all things related to communication. I report to the internal and external communications' manager. I am responsible for working on the annual report, the campaign towards the citizens about recycling. There are 1100000 inhabitants in Brussels and since 2010 we have to communicate to citizens things about recycling. Since 2010 recycling has become obligatory. The PMC (plastic-metals-cartons) are collected in the blue bags and paper in the yellow bags and therefore it's not always easy for people to recycle properly. I am responsible for making some campaigns about recycling and on 1/04 we are going to generalise in the whole city of Brussels the collecting of the garden waste. I was talking to you earlier about Carl Defout who is responsible for the "filiales" which are the incinerators, the recycling centre, the composting centre. We are going to start the collection of garden waste in bags in all Brussels in the 19 communes of Brussels...

What is the colour of the bag?

We actually have 4 different recycling bags in Brussels, the white one for all the house waste that we cannot recycle, the yellow for paper, cardboard and all the stuff like that, the blue bag that is the most complicated, it goes a bit messy, but it's the producer of waste who makes our life complicated. In fact, we have the capacity to recycle cans, plastic bottles and Tetrapacks.

No plastic cups!

No plastic cups, correct! Because this plastic is not a good quality one, and we are trying to have the most optimum after the recycling process, for example we are going to take the example of the composting centre with the garden waste, maybe I am going first finish with going through all the bags. The green bag which is garden waste-the leftovers from mowing the lawn, the branches-it's really garden waste, dead leafs and stuff like that. Our composting centre, is one of the purest you can find, actually what we do is to collect all the garden waste and all the cut grass, there is a work of composting that is happening. In terms of compost, to obtain the purest compost possible, we have to recycle the same nature of waste. There are a lot of municipalities in Flanders and Wallonia that they are doing compost with house waste. We collect meat waste, banana or potato skins, it's very good as well but you obtain a totally different compost. So, we somehow show off that we are producing one of the best compost you can find in Belgium and we sell it back to GB and Baillers, who are going to make (terreau) soil that you are going to use to plant your plants, so we have a very good compost. In fact, we are trying to increase the quality of sorting for the green bag and the other bags as well, but the white back it's a totally different philosophy. But you still need to know that from the white bag we generate energy. There are a lot of people saying that the incinerator it's not very good, not very healthy because a lot of smoke comes out from the incinerator, but you have to know that this smoke it's the evaporation of water, that makes the turbines turn and produces electricity. The production of electricity coming from the incinerators is enough to give power to the metro of Brussels to function for a year. The director of the incinerator is very proud to say that finally the incinerator of Brussels is

much more eco-friendly rather than being a polluter. Like we will see a bit later in the explanation, Brussels incinerator is among the three best ones in Europe. I can assure that I live next to the incinerator and I am not sick. Actually in terms of norms, of producing bad smoke, we are, I think I don't have the number, but very under the maximum tolerated by the European Commission. The European norms are sometimes very tight, but at this particular issue we are very under the max. The incinerator is a very good tool and in addition, it produces electricity.

Can you describe me the exact management chain for e-waste for the Brussels region? If I have for example an old television what should I do?

For all the e-waste we work with Recupel. In fact Recupel is a tax, for all the equipment that you buy, mobiles, washing machine, TV you pay a tax that varies in regard to the equipment you buy and the price is included in the price you pay. Normally in Brussels and in Belgium we can go back in the retailer and bring back the old equipment we bought. Bruxelles-Propreté collects this equipment as well. We have 2 ways of collecting this type of waste: we collect e-waste at the retailers directly, TV, fridges and shops that sell electric and electronic equipment, or it's a spontaneous bring back of the citizens of Brussels. In Brussels, we have two collecting centres that we call container parks, where citizens can come and dispose their e-waste.

Free of charge, because there is a tax when you buy the appliance...

Yes! This is the system. So in fact, we collect e-waste and we go to Recupel and then they are going to work. Now you have to know that we have a project called Ressourcerie. What is Ressourcerie? It's a big place where we will store equipment that it's not in a too bad shape and we will repair it, a bit like Oxfam does, which collects EEE and they work on them and try to bring them back to life and sell in a lower price afterwards.

And after Recupel collects the e-waste what happens then?

That, I don't know. I am not the right person to tell you what they do with e-waste.

So the responsibility of Bruxelles-Propreté is to collect and provide with collection points where people can go there and dispose their waste...

Exactly!

And if I have a very old television the system covers also this...

There is no problem to collect it. As I told you before, if I want to buy a new TV, I go to the shop with my old TV, give it back, and I have paid in my new TV the tax Recupel. So normally that is how it happens, but there are still shops, in particular, small TV shops, that they cannot stock these old TVs. Normally if I don't buy a new TV, I can go to the shop and dispose it without buying a new one, normally it works like that as well. The tax is paid so the shops are responsible to get rid of these TVs. Obviously they don't have the infrastructure but we have the trucks and a bigger place to store everything, we have particular containers to collect all these. To tell you the truth, we have at Bruxelles-Propreté

a particular way of transporting all the e-waste to Recupel, we sort the type of the waste before we transport, and we transport it to Recupel, so all the small equipment, toasters, printers, small radios, normal computers, speakers, then we have the washing machines the driers, and we have as well the TVs, the TV with CRT, flat screens, computer screens. Those things are already sorted at Bruxelles-Propreté (container parks) before transporting them at Recupel, because it's more easier for Recupel and some components of this type of waste cannot mixed up with some other type of components. For example with the flats screens it's liquid crystals inside, and on the other hand in the CRT screens you have gas which cannot be mixed up together. We have to sort the different waste.

So in the end, Recupel receives only separated parts.

Correct.

And then you don't know how they treat them...

In my opinion they sort it out again, because sometimes, there are some materials like washing machines that could work again. So I think that after we transport the waste to them, they still sort it in terms of quality. So if a computer still works, we have to repair it a little bit and it will work perfectly and we put it back to the recycling chain. In contrast, there are computers that are totally broken, so they are going to be dismantled. The only thing that I know is that, if the appliance is too broken they dismantle it and sort the plastic with the plastic and the components inside the computer (mother card, graphic card etc) together. So there is again a sorting process that happens at Recupel. Then I don't know what they do with it, maybe they melt some parts to recover the materials, to sell it back to the market, and the price is fixed in relation to the weight of the metal. I am not quite sure how it works but I am sure that they sort it once more when they receive it.

So the system is financed by the Recupel tax...

For all the e-waste. You need to know as well that citizens of Brussels pay an annual regional tax. We, Bruxelles-Propreté, are a regional organisation, we work in the 19 communes of Brussels, there are 19 communes in Brussels, with the city of Brussels included and then we have several communes(he names few). So the citizens of Brussels pay a tax that is not only for the garbage, it's a regional tax which encompasses other services, the maintenance of the streets, fire fighters, police, and of course Bruxelles-Propreté. If I am not wrong, Bruxelles-Propreté gets back about 2 euros out of 89 euros that the citizens pay in total. Obviously, a lot of people are excluded from paying the tax but it's not that with these 2 euros we will be able to finance the work of the whole company, as it is a big company and collects the waste from all the streets of Brussels, we collect the waste but we clean as well the streets and roads. So Bruxelles-Propreté is a regional organisation which works with the 19 communes of Brussels. On the top of that, there are communal taxes, because its commune has its own system. So to get back to the idea of the container parks, I told you that there are 2 container parks and some communes as well, have their own container parks and there you have to be a resident of this specific commune to get into the container park and dispose your waste. In contrast, to access the containers parks of Bruxelles-Propreté you have to be a resident of any of the 19 communes in order to have the right to

dispose your waste, you just need to provide your residence in Brussels and you can go and dispose your waste.

But if you want to go to a specific commune container park you have to be a resident of this specific commune...

Yes.

But in the Dechetterie (sorting centre) in the south (part of the city) you can go anyway...

Correct.

Do you have an example of a commune that has a container park...

Yes, of course, (he names few). There is a future project to build two more "dechetteries" in order to have 4 in total. We have the north, the south one and we would like to have two more in the east and west.

So just to make it clear, the Brussels region finance until the point where e-waste is collected and then Recupel tax finances the recycling...

Yes, it's like this. I can see that you are more interested in e-waste so I need to find the right person to redirect you. Recupel is a partner, it's not part of Brussels-Proprete (BP).

Do you have a contract with Recupel?

There is probably a contract, it goes further way from my knowledge, a bit like Fost plus. In fact, Fost-plus it's them who finance for BP the selective collection. We all pay a tax for Fost-plus. In fact it's an organisation which works with us, which finances clearly the collection of the bags. For example, Coca-cola is going to pay a tax because they generate waste. So Fost-plus collects this money and distributes it to the different regional entities, so they are going to give money to BP, to the city of Namur or Liege, because they as well do recycling. In general they distribute money to public entities dealing with waste in Belgium.

But this is for any type of waste...

Yes, at least for the blue and yellow, because they are recycled. The citizens of Brussels pay for their house waste (white bag) and Fost-plus finances the yellow and blue bag. It's really simplified, but that's the spirit. And everyone pays the Recupel tax, when buying an electric or electronic appliance.

So the WEEE management system was set up in 2001, how was the WEEE managed before?

What people were doing before was to put everything in the same bag and everything was burnt. We don't need to go that far backward, about 20 years ago we had technical bearing centres which are actually landfills, as you can find in Asian countries or African ones where you dig a big hole and you throw all the waste, but you will throw plastic, paper, computers; but now, there is sorting of the waste. Before that is how he did with waste. Now we have chain of elimination (waste sorting), one for the blue bags, for the white (bag) and e-waste...

So the sorting and recycling system was set up in 2001?

More or less, I think that it's about in 2001 that we became aware (of the recycling) and that some organisations have thought...I think it didn't come out of nowhere...I think that the European Commission has put a very strong pressure to create chains of elimination and recycling. But now, I think that we should make waste to create value (he used the word "valoriser" in French, which basically means to create value out of waste), even if it's household waste or e-waste. If you put your waste to create the value, you will create a financial value and you will earn more. So we are in a much more eco-friendly era and it is obvious that we have to find solutions to eliminate the waste and not bury a computer in the landfill because it's not biodegradable. So we will have pollution of the soil and we eat the vegetables which grow up in the soil-the soil is polluted and this is not good for the human health. I think it's an awareness of Europe, of Belgium, I mean the all European countries, we actually try to find chain of elimination to recycle as much waste as possible.

So before it was only BP who was responsible for collecting and landfilling of every waste, before the system was set up as it is right now(there were not any other companies involved in the system...)

Brussels it's actually specific, because BP is-we will call it like that-para-governmental company and what is that, it's a direction by itself, we have our own general chief executive, our own administrative structure but we depend on (link to) political cabinets and obviously we have funds coming from Brussels capital region. So, in a way, it's normal that our organisation is bound to political cabinets. In a way it's the budget given by political cabinets that allows us to accomplish our mission towards the citizens. Now there are plenty of private organisations, since we opened up the public procurement, probably since 2009, so now there are companies like SITA and (...) which are private companies that collect waste and sometimes they treat or recycle waste as well. But with Brussels we have the monopoly, we are lucky enough to be a regional organisation, so we work for Brussels, we do not have trucks which go and collect the waste of the city of Namur, or the city of Liege, because our territory is the city of Brussels. That's the way the system works.

But previously you were responsible for collecting and bearing the waste, or you were responsible for only collecting...

BP exists since 1990, and since then we really exist as a regional organisation. Before the system was the same, but we didn't encompass everything. Each commune had each one system for collecting and eliminating waste.

But do you think that the WEEE management system is efficient as it is right now? Do you think that it works fine?

I think that fundamentally, the infrastructure we have as well as the work we accomplish we are doing a lot of things for the environment. We have a very environmental position. That is my personal opinion. I think it works well; the thing is that we have so many demands and as well we have a lot of problems with the behaviour of the citizens. People know that a mobile

phone can be disposed in a container park or in a shop, but it's easier to put it in the white bag and it's burnt and not recycled. It's the citizens who have to make the effort. I think that sorting it's not so complicated; it's just an effort that the citizens must make. Time it's essential to put this idea into people's heads. But the infrastructure, I think that is efficient and there are numbers supporting this. But going back to e-waste, I think that what Oxfam does, repairing and putting back to the market e-waste it's a very good idea. In particular, in an economic crisis time, we can as well give people with lower income the opportunity to have access to products like second hand mobiles, laptops etc, rather than throwing it away, because there are a lot of consequences; it's not recycled, we have to reuse raw material. It's not very good to burn this type of waste. We don't get rid of our e-waste as we get rid of our banana skin, there is a specific treatment that needs to happen. I think we are on the right way in terms of functioning, collecting and sorting waste and in particular e-waste. I think that in Europe we are doing quite ok. I saw a document few months ago how waste was managed in Asia and I can tell you it's a totally different thing. The guys cleaning electronic system with acid bath, it's absolutely not the same reality in Europe. We have real organisations specialised in treating waste, but probably everything doesn't work yet perfectly. But I don't want to go too far, because we are not aware of all these things, so I don't know if it's done perfectly but I know that at least waste is collected and transported to collection points. Instead of transporting waste all over the place, now we developed a classification of waste and we recycle them with either a bad or good way, but at least we are trying to recycle them and we have a chain of elimination and that I think it's even more important when you are the European capital.

Do you know how the WEEE management system was set up? Was it an initiative taken by the producers? Recupel?

I don't think it was their initiative, I am a bit assuming but I don't think that it was an initiative taken by Recupel and as I told you before, we are not going be naïve, recycling e-waste most likely creates money. Was it really an initiative, did really one day a guy just said I am going to recycle e-waste because it's very good in terms of recycling and managing waste. Personally I don't know anyone who will build up a company, even with an eco-friendly position if it's not to make money. There is no one doing things for free. And there is as well the thing that people forget that recycling, treating and eliminating waste cost a lot of money. Recycling and sorting do cost a lot of money. If we analyse all the recycling chain from the first moment where the waste is thrown away to the last moment when it's recovered and put back to the market, it costs money. It costs money on human resources, transport, infrastructure. Obviously recycling e-waste as well and I hope it costs less than reproducing new equipments and materials. Recycling creates employment but if it creates employment at one point it creates money. So the boss of Recupel doesn't work for anything.

So you are saying that they didn't do it because they wanted to do something good for the environment but because they wanted to gain something...

I really thing that the project of Recupel is really good, collecting e-waste to recycle them it's a very good project. Now I don't know anyone who creates an organisation without the target of generating benefits.

It is quite strange that they took the initiative by themselves, since the EU directive wasn't published yet back then, so they didn't really have a legal obligation...so you think that they didn't really have a high sense of responsibility, they just did it to earn money...

I think that they really have an environmental position, but I have never worked for Recupel, so it's difficult for me to know the ethics behind the company. I think that the idea is not stupid to take an eco-friendly position, but probably things underneath may not be just only eco-friendly motives...if I can give you an example, it's a bit like the controversy with the organic products, it's a bit the same spirit there, the idea is good, the position of organic products I think it's an excellent strategy, but if you start looking underneath you will find a lot of things that do not make sense with the eco-friendly position, so then again organic products are very good, but the guy who is producing organic products is going to sell the products twice the price, just because he has an organic label. The starting point of the idea is very good. But if you start looking underneath you start finding deadlocks, which is I believe the whole purpose of your thesis.

Comparing Recupel to BP, do you think that they saw a sort of lack of resources from BP part which wouldn't allow BP to deal with e-waste properly and that is why they proposed the initiative?

Most likely, but Recupel works for all Belgium. As I told you before, I work for the communications part I prepare communication for 1 mil. people, we don't do for example TV advertisements, Recupel, does, for example, TV advertisements, that means that they have a national action. I think the will is to create an organisation to collect (salvage) e-waste, now maybe in regards to the regionalisation of the activity, they said that now we cannot do it just on a regional territory, it is a private company, working on a national territory (it might not be financial sustainable to work in a regional territory only). I think that kind of stuff were said, I think that Recupel has political support, it is probably politicised. You cannot win a national public procurement, if you are unknown company. Underneath, there should have political support, partners, or regions which work with Recupel. I know we are partners but I don't know to which extend we are partners, is it a financial partnership, is there a shareholding, I wouldn't say (he doesn't know). It is obvious that an organisation that collects waste works with a company like Recupel, because after we collect the waste, what do we do it? We have to have system to eliminate waste. Now to be clear, there are also independent departments belonging to BP, going back to "defiliale" (Carl Defout responsible). BP is a shareholder, it was paid infrastructure but we are not managing them. In fact, linking back to the para-governmental aspect of our organisation, we don't have enough economic resources to makes us able to act on our own. We need to be rational and be able to build up partnerships with other organisations in order to cope with managing everything.

So why do you think that BP accept this initiative from the producer's part? Do you think that BP was not able to treat with e-waste by itself without any private companies getting involved?

(He just answered before they need to create partnerships in order to deal with everything, because the money is not enough...)

Our mission is to collect, ends there, it's not more complicated than that. There is no company in Brussels, even in Belgium that collects waste and recycle it as well, we try to do it, as I told you earlier own, we have the project to set up Ressourcerie to repair EEE and there obviously we will slightly compete with Recupel, we will try to collect some waste and repair them and put them back to the market. We will continue to work with Recupel because, the material we will be able to recycle and repair, will be resold as second hand, but the equipment that we won't be able to repair it will go to Recupel. I believe we will deal this way. We do not have the possibility to treat waste.

So it will only be e-waste that you can reuse, fix it a bit and reuse it... and when is it going to start?

Good question...

So it's still under the planning process...

We are more than far, we already have the building, but the project is launched (internally not officially) and it's a partnership with Brussels capital region, it's an initiative as well of Brussels capital region, so this means that is funded from the Brussels capital region. It will have as well functioning cost paid by the Brussels region. But we will feed the Ressourcerie. People that are going to work it will be exactly like the incinerator, a separate directorate. We just have the mission of collecting and transporting the waste to the Ressourcerie for the capital region. It's going to be a public-public partnership.

(He cannot answer questions related to how decisions are taken because these are political driven and he doesn't know how it works, because as he says these things are kept secret)

The project of Ressourcerie, we could say that this a "sign" that the Brussels region can maybe treat e-waste without the involvement of the private sector....

We are going to transport all these stuff to Ressourcerie, computer will be able to have a second life, but if the computer is broken the Ressourcerie cannot do much, so it will be force to give it to Recupel. So, in a way we will continue working with Recupel, we will just bring them less waste.

And this initiative was taken from BP?

Initially it's an initiative from BP, we try to find solution, try to work autonomously and in a way to rise funding. With the Ressourcerie project we try to gain some value from waste. We don't have the capacity to treat waste. Because the structure it's too complicated so it's not sustainable.

You said that you want to work autonomously...why?

I think it's simply a way of managing an enterprise, despite the fact that we are a public company. But public authorities have this habit to not make things move forward. In a modern way of managing public administration we need to have our own resources to be able to manage the functioning of BP on our own as well as the collection system. We should not stop only to the collecting mission we have, even if in our status we collect the waste of Brussels streets, we should go beyond this status and because we have really an eco-friendly position we should collect e-waste for the 1 mil inhabitants of Brussels and therefore try to put this e-waste to work and try to do something with it. Why then not trying to do something and diversify the capacity of the company. I think that this is a modern way to manage the company; it's innovative; it's just adjusting to the current context and to the demands of the Brussels citizens.

So I can see three categories, increase profit, reduce the environmental impact and to do something good for the citizens of Brussels, is that true?

Yes, but this is the definition of public service, we are here for people, we have the same role as the police. If you are attacked in the street and nobody comes to help, the police didn't do its job. We ask people to put their bins out to the street and we are public organisation, so we have in a way to please the citizens as well, because as I said earlier on, the citizens pay to get rid of their waste.

So it's an effort to improve the public service that you offer...

Yes, that's it. Yes, that's what I was explaining earlier on, with the idea of modern management; it's just to think within the framework of the needs; before in Brussels we were 800 thousands, now we are 1100 thousands. The population of Brussels is increasing, more and more people are coming to live here. The territory of Brussels is starting to be spread more and more therefore it's necessary to satisfy the demand. For me, the essence of the public service is to satisfy the demands of the citizens.

So with the development of the Ressourcerie project it seems like BP wants to have a more active role in the management of e-waste. Do you think that this role could be even more active in the future? How do you see BP in the future?

Normally, it should evolve, like I was explaining to you earlier, we are going to have this project the Ressourcerie. I have been working for BP 10 years, so I had the opportunity to see the evolution. At the beginning, we were just collecting the white bags, and then we set up the recycling chain and the sorting of waste, we have now 4 bags, in the container parks there are more and more different containers to sort the different types of waste. And like I was explaining earlier on, we are not going to put the flat screens with the CRT screens, we really separate the waste by type of waste in order to easily treat them and recycle them afterwards. It's much easier to recycle just laptops than if it's mixed with glass or grass from the garden. We really try to do more and more categories for waste in the sorting process.

Do you think that the citizens are satisfied with the current system of e-waste?

To be honest, the citizens don't care, what they want is that the trash bags they put out in the streets are picked up. And sometimes it's a bit pity, I think as a general rule, citizens are quite happy with the services provided by BP, obviously there are people who are not satisfied, you always have people complaining, but we are often facing the lack of "civism" of people (to be a responsible citizen). People very quickly do whatever they want, it's BP we pay for BP, we are clients of BP therefore we don't care we do whatever we want, they just have to cope with that. To give you a simple example, there are some specific hours to put the bags out to the street and people don't care about that. Now we increasingly take penalty measures (suppressive) for the people who don't sort their waste, despite the fact that it's an offense to the law. There is a law article that has been published. Not everybody sorts. So people are happy, but they want a service that they put their bin in the street and they put it back. For example, to link back to e-waste, people are not going to go at the container park because they have a mobile phone to throw away, they will throw it away in the white bag, and it will be burnt, because they can't be bother to go at the container park for one mobile phone. Meanwhile, they don't think that they could wait until their laptop, coffee machine etc is broken to go to the container park with their mobile phone, it's complicated. And that's the mentality of people I don't think that it's only in Brussels, I think that it's the human nature.

Is it easy for the citizens to have access to information like rates for collected waste etc?

If I say no, I am "shooting myself" (he means that that's his job and if he says no, it means he doesn't do it properly). To put it clearly, they have enough information.

(Last question, sent via email on 28/03/2012)

In your opinion, what do you think should be the role that regional authorities in general (not only Bruxelles-Propreté, but around Europe in general) should have in the management of e-waste? Should they have an active role and be the main coordinators or should they let the producers take the entire responsibility? Which one do you think works better?

Je pense que les autorités régionales devraient avoir rôle de « coordination » c'est-à-dire que pour le moment nous fonctionnons à l'envers ou ce sont les organismes publics qui doivent s'adapter aux sociétés qui produisent les déchets électroniques et autres. Les hautes institutions comme la commission européenne impose une taxe : recupel selon de type de produit électronique qui est payée par le producteur qui la répercute sur le consommateur.

Le producteur paye la taxe donc se moque de la manière donc les déchets électronique sont collectés et surtout recyclé et/ou éliminé. Donc il devrait y avoir des concertations entre les différentes institutions avec de voir comment cela se passe pratiquement sur le terrain en terme de collecte ainsi qu'en terme de recyclage. Le mot d'ordre pour ma part est l'uniformisation, il faut que tout le monde travail dans le même sens, je parle des institutions bien sure, afin d'imposer une manière de fonctionner aux producteurs de manière à avoir un vrai positionnement environnemental et non aux producteurs d'imposé aux citoyens sa manière de consommer.

Translation:

I think that regional authorities should have the role of "coordination" that is to say that currently we are operating in reverse or they are public bodies that must adapt to the companies that produce electronic waste and other (type of waste). The higher institutions as the European Commission imposes a tax: Recupel according to the type of electronic product that is paid by the producer who passes it on to the consumer. The producer pays the tax, therefore, makes fun of the way so the electronic waste is collected and recycled in particular and / or eliminated. So there should be consultations with the various institutions to see how it goes almost on the ground in terms of collection and recycling. The watchword for me is the standardisation, everyone should work in the same direction, I speak about institutions of course, in order to impose a way of working with producers in order to have a real environmental positioning and do not let the producers to impose to the citizens their consuming manner. I don't know if i am in right way but it's my vision, to do something for the environment we must work together, not so easy when there is a lot of money to make with the e-waste.