

Interview with RECUPEL:

This face-to-face interview with Katrien Verfaillie, communications manager of Recupel, was conducted at the office of Recupel in Brussels, on 06/04/2012.

To start with, can you please tell me few things about the position you hold in Recupel?

I am actually the communications responsible, I have been here since the beginning of 2005, so I wasn't here when the system was set up, but I have had several different responsibilities, because they do not have always communication project, so I also deal with administrative things.

What is Recupel responsible for?

The system was set up at the beginning of 2001 by the industry and Recupel represents the largest part of the industry, the ones who have the take-back obligation, so they took the initiative to set up the collective system. At the beginning the system was set up for the collection and recycling of mainly households and it was limited to big white goods, old video etc and gradually we expanded the scope of our services to cover all the ten WEEE categories, so today we collect households and professional appliances and we cover the ten WEEE categories. There is no real participation of the governments in our organisation, but they do have a sit at the board of our directors and here you are at the offices of Recupel, we are the collective system, but actually we have behind our organisation (and that is also mentioned in our power point presentation), we have 7 different sector organisations, each representing their own part of the market, type of appliances, so with the 7 sector organisations we cover the 10 categories. There is only one player in the field and that is Recupel, so for those seven clients we offer services for collection.

So Recupel collects the e-waste and what does it happen afterwards?

We have our income from the visible fee, so the invoices are sent to the importers and manufactures to have a number in our system based on our list of declaration on what they put on the market. That's our revenue and we use that revenue to collect and recycle all the material that we collect via the container parks which are managed by the inter-municipalities (like Bruxelles-Propreté), we have almost 4000 retailers for collection points and we also work together with used-good centres in Brussels as well.

What are these used-good centres?

For example, in Brussels and Wallonia there is a branch organisation which is called Ressources, but the shops themselves are not called Ressources, it's like, for example, Oxfam, Le petit rien, they have their own individual names, they are part of the same network...

So they repair the appliances and they resell them...

Yes, and how it works is like, from all the volume that we collect they are allowed to go and have a look and see what is reusable and use the percentage of the collected volume for

reuse, but it depends on the market demand, so they say each year we expect that we need x number of units, or x number of kilos to be able to satisfy the demand of the market. They have a double role, reuse centres and actually collecting as well. They are also active in transport as well, for what we called the “finely meshed”, collections are not the bulk collections but they are finely meshed from different retailers, for example to bulk up the volume they are also active in transferring, so they have a double role, reuse but also collection.

And how is e-waste recycled? Is it shipped out of the country...?

No, we work together with 15 more or less recyclers, there is only one foreign recycler in Germany, but all the other recyclers are situated in Belgium. We have a tender procedure, which is actually going to finish the coming July and they will have to renew it for the next 2-3 years. So we have contracts and a tender procedure for collection and recycling, for collection for the parts finely meshed in smaller distances and then for bigger volumes the bulk transports. For recycling it depends on the type of material, because we make a distinction, we try to sort out the material from the moment people dispose their appliances, so at the container parks you (as a person) already have to dispose the material and already make a selection, is it cooling or freezing, is it big white etc.

For example televisions, how are they recycled?

Television screens are fractions and monitors, CRT, are separated fractions, so they are collected separately already, so they are depending on whether they come from container parks or retailer and they are sent to recyclers, of course those recyclers who have facilities to treat the TV monitors, but what happens first is the manual removal of hazardous components, but in the case of TV screens, the plastic and wooden part is removed and the glass (CRT) as well so it's a more easier recycling process. There is not much manual labour before it is actually sent to the recycling centre.

But who does the dismantling? Because I talked with BP (Bruxelles-Propreté) and they deal with the collection and sorting...

Yes, the sorting is done from the beginning, when you go to the container park, you have to sort your appliances according to the 10 categories, so there is already sorting at the base and BP works in this way because we don't accept mixed fractions.

And Recupel does the dismantling?

Yes, but we don't have our own trucks, or recycling facilities...

So you have tenders with other parts...

Yes, it's mainly on a contract basis...

So Recupel coordinates the whole system...

Yes we organise the system. So a container park of a retailer will submit a transport request on our website and depending on what type of waste it is we know where to ship it, to which recycler etc.

So you don't really know how they are recycled, you just deal with the logistics....

No we do, because the industry, our main stakeholders has an agreement with the government, the three regional authorities, and in that agreement it is written first of all how the tender procedure has to look like, what are the criteria to evaluate the tenders. Once we have a contract with the recycler they need to report very detailed from each kg which enters the recycling facility up until what comes out of the recycling process, but it goes on until you have a reusable material and can be put into the production process again. So it's like a Christmas tree, it starts with the material that comes into the recycling and then each process that is used and we follow the European waste catalogue and the tools that are used to register we are developed via the WEEE Forum, so every member of the WEEE forum uses the same tool which allows us to compare between countries as well. But it's a big effort that we ask from our recyclers to actually register what comes into the recycling process, what process is used and what is the end result, if it is shipped to a second recycler or abroad or wherever, it has to be registered until the end, but it's very-very detailed. Of course to the outside world this is something that we not going to communicate because we are not going to share individual information of one recycler, because we don't want to share this information with competitors, but on a global basis, first of all we have of course to report to the regional authorities, it's what we call a waste report that we submit each year, so for example from the previous year the waste report it was just submitted and answers questions like how much was put on the market, and how much was taken out of the market, what are the recycling results, so it's very detailed. We also have what we called depollution targets, because a recycler is going to recycle all the valuable materials without any question, that his own motivation because the more he recycles the more profitable is going to be for him. The only thing that is more questionable is the depollution, the removal of the hazardous components and I think we are the only country in Europe that has actually set depollution targets, so what we did was to take out the volumes that we collect and we sampled them and we wrote down for example for a fraction of big white appliances, what kind of components can occur from that fraction, for example batteries, ink cartridges etc, and how much does this represent in volume, e.g. if you collect 100 tonnes of big white how much has in components and what you will have to remove and those targets are put in the contract as well with the recyclers so they need to think these recycling results but also the depollution targets. And we do have unexpected and expected audits for our recyclers as well to be able to guarantee that what we say it's true that there is 100% recycling of the collection.

Are these reports available online?

The waste report is not public, but if you want to have a look at it you can address your question, it's a bit strange maybe but you can get into touch with the responsible in IBGE.

So if I want to have a look at it I will have to talk with IBGE...

Yes, because it's not something that we cannot publish.

So I am going back to why the system was set up...why do you think that the industry took the initiative to set up this WEEE management system?

Well, we were one of the first countries in Europe, apart from some Scandinavian countries, but the industry and I am thinking about the big federations Agoria and FEE, they already had discussions, as early on as 1996, on whether or not they need to set up a recycling system and that finally came into existence in 2001. But on their motivation to work together for example, I cannot give you any information, because I don't know why they decided to set it up in 2001, why it took so long, because they were already having negotiations in 1996. I think it also has to do with the fact that in 1996 we had a government which was "green", so that's probably why they had some pressure, even though there was no real legislation forcing on a European level, I think it's mainly under the influence of our national and local government which was at that time 1996 and onwards more green with one of our green party which was actually in power that time.

So you are saying that it was more or less a political pressure towards the industry to take responsibility...?

A political pressure yes, but there was no actual legislation enforced, so it was still...

More like discussions between the industry and the government...

Yes, there was some pressure, but it was also the fact that the industry wanted to take up this responsibility, it's like they both made the same decision at the same time so that is why they started the negotiations, why it took so long, I am not sure...

In your opinion what kind of benefits do you think the industry saw from setting up this system? Did they maybe see an economic benefit...?

No, because in the beginning of 2001 and in the first few years, the main goal was to have a solution, to comply with upcoming legislation, but not really the whole green image of the industry was something that followed...

So the environmental aspect was something that didn't exist that much back then...

It was mainly the goal to comply with the legislation, wanted to go beyond the legislation and do something more required by the law is more actually more recent. Also because the industry realises the environmental importance of the collective system, but the impact that has to the society at large it's a more recent evolution. At the beginning of the take-back system the target set by the EU Directive is to collect 4kg/inhabitant/year, we surpassed this goal quite quickly, so there was no actual or coordinated effort to collect more. The industry more had the idea of we collect everything that is offered to the system, because he have already reached the 4kg target. It's now 2-3 years that the mindset has changed also because we anticipated the fact that the target will become more ambitious now with the 65% return back that we have to achieve, so now the mindset is different and we will actively go-by means of market surveys, competitor analysis-and detect opportunities to

collect more, based on market data and the actual reality that we face every day-impacts of material prices for example-so there is a more focused and coordinated approach, not merely let's comply with the legislation but how we can reach the 65% target not as fast as we can but in a cost efficient way and be one of the first countries again in Europe to reach this target.

How important is the environmental aspect for Recupel?

It is important and becomes more and more important, but mainly from the realisation that is more cost efficient to use materials that come from the recycling process than going and producing a material right from the beginning. So we do think-but it's not the case yet- that our members will claim their resources that come from the recycling process. For example I am Philips lighting company, I can put X number of lamps in the market, x number of recyclers, I want to have the materials I want to use it for my own purposes, that might be an evolution we are going towards. So it's an environmental aspect but mainly...

It has economic benefits as well...

Yes, but it's almost equal now...it's economical but it's ecological at the same time...so it's a win-win situation.

And the industry will take advantage of it...

Yes, for now it's not yet the case, it's not that we say to Phillips that's your material, but you might end up in a system where each importer or manufacture will claim their rights to the reusable materials which might make sense.

I saw on your website that in your mission you mention that "Recupel ensures that WEEE is collected and processed in a sustainable and cost-effective way". In which terms does Recupel define sustainability?

In order to make the mission statement more concrete, we, together with the board of directors, listed 10 strategic actions that we want to focus on, but they are not only into the sustainability aspect of course. But when we talk about sustainability and cost efficient way of organising our system it's for example, in our transportation system, when we have to pick up something from somewhere, we developed an optimisation tool which guarantees that we have a cost efficient way of transporting, but this is just one example. When we talk about sustainability, it's part of our organisation, it's what we do, sustainability as a whole. The fact that we don't recycle 100%, that we try to work together with the reuse centres. But then we talk about reuse criteria for example, there are some appliances that cannot be reused, for example a very old fridge cannot be put back in the market, we have to recycle it...

For example, if you look into literature, sustainability is usually defined in terms of social, economic and environmental aspects, so which one do you think that has the biggest value for Recupel?

That's when we talk about people, planet and profit?

Yes...

So we are a non-profit organisation so we only need to have enough revenue to cover our costs so we want to evolve the pay as you throw system. Now we have too many reserves. The physical fee that we ask to the consumers is too low because we want to diminish those reserves, but profit is not the goal of Recupel, we are not a profit organisation so ideally we would have our income and expenditures to match, but this is not sure because we have the price of the materials which can impact our budget enormously, but profit is not our main goal. Of course you could for example say that all the materials that we end up with at the end of the recycling process....recycling it's not necessarily a cost, it can be a revenue as well and what you could do for example go and collect self phones (these are our competitors for example) and not other products and we(the competitors) don't collect cool and freezing because that's always a cost and that we only collect high end products which contain a lot of copper, gold... but in our system the mindset is that we want to cover all 10 categories-costing fractions and fractions that actually gives us money, so profit, no that's not the main focus, we try to cover all categories. Planet, of course we are bound by those targets that are in the environmental policy agreement, so we need to obtain certain targets, but it's linked also to the better a recycler can recycle the more he can...the purer the materials the better the price he can get, so it's a win-win always. When we talk about the aspect of people, it's something that we do pay attention to because, for example the manual depollution in the recycling centres is done by people-what we call social economy-people who cannot find a job in the regular job market, so it is a concern. But we also for example want to keep our recycling activities within Belgium, this is also an aspect. But which one of the three Ps benefits the most from having a collective system, I would say that it's planet, even if there is an economical driver behind it, it's still planet, that's why the system was set up. The fact that we still continue to grow and we have a growth of almost 9% from last year, 110000 tonnes (of recycled WEEE) is a lot, we have the biggest impact on the planet.

Do you think that the industry took the initiative to set up this initiative because they saw a sort of lack of resources from the part of BP?

It's hard for me to say because I wasn't there at the beginning. But we didn't lobby in order to create this, we have the contract unanimously. Why work with Recupel, yes or no? Why set up the collective system, it's the industry's choice and it's far from me to comment. If you do need a more detailed point of view of the industry, the people who started the negotiations in 1996 are still actively involved in our system so if you want I can give you their contact details. So if you really need the industry point of view I would prefer that you ask them because it's hard for me to comment.

But I can still ask you my questions and you can give me your point of view... so do you think that BP would be able to manage the whole system by itself, both collection and recycling?

But they cannot do something else apart from the activities they do now...but if our system didn't exist they would still do the same.

By the same you mean like before the system was set up...

Yes...we only use their services but there is no real difference...it's like any private operator, we use recycling facilities that already existed before the collective system, we use transport

that existed before we existed, it's merely coordinating and communication and that there is an obligation of collecting and recycling and a responsibility in regard to what is put on the market and how the system is financed and that's why the collective system was set up, but I agree that that collection/recycling if you only look at that aspect, do you need a collective system?-not necessarily. There are not players active at that market but the general overall view and the legal obligation does not only focus on out of market but also puts on market. We use the services that already exist. But that's a good point, because what we are trying to do now in order to get the 65%, the network that we have now, container parks, retailers and used good centres existed before, but Recupel, it's just that we made our own network and we managed to increase, year after year our collection volume, but if we want to collect more and more small appliances we also have to question, will we be able to do that with the existing network? No, we need to have some kind of innovation. Is it worthwhile to go and collect at the doorstep for example, to have big containers in the neighbourhoods because they are always accessible, is it a good idea to have more retailers in our network, should we go and collect in companies, in office buildings. So we are conscious of the fact that what we collect now we do it with a network that already existed, and that we have reached our maximum capacities. Maybe there are other solutions that are even easier for a consumer or for a company to dispose their e-waste and why not offer those services. But it's early days, there are a few child projects that we set up, but I agree that there is nothing new when we started in 2001, we just used a network and infrastructure that already existed but by coordinating it we do have a maximum return. The fact that there is a collective system that can operate on a national level is good for prices, it's bigger volume and that's always more beneficial and more cost-effective than looking on a smaller scale. But that's my opinion, I have nothing against BP!

So, the role of BP is to provide with collection points for e-waste.

There are only two official container parks in Brussels. So that's again as well, if something that we want to get into consideration who wants to dispose of what and where. Brussels it's completely a different area than Flanders and Wallonia, we need to take that into consideration.

What is the exact role of BP in this system? For example, can Recupel proceed with a plan or with a project without the approval of BP?

Yes, because they are active in the field, we have to have the authorisation and approval, not of BP but of IBGE, that's for projects in the fields but also about communication projects need to be approved by not only the region of Brussels but by the three regional authorities, but locally it's IBGE. Because BP is a player in the field just like any other inter-municipal organisation in Flanders or Wallonia and they cover more waste streams than just e-waste, we have a contract with them but they are not our controlling authority.

So you have to report to IBGE.

Yes, also the waste report is one of those applications so that's part of how the system works, the system is audited, checked, controlled by the regional authorities.

How does the WEEE management system work, how are decisions taken, how is coordinated?

We have meetings with the regional authorities, they have a sit in our board of directors, not only our boards, but also the seven sectors, we have strategic meetings as well with them, we have meetings with IBGE board of directors, we have a meeting on defining the scope, what goals under the ten categories, we have general interregional meetings with the three regions on all kinds of topics, administration, puts on market, recycling, collection, so that's on the general meeting, we have meetings with the reuse sector separately, and then we have twice a year a meeting with all the players active in transport so that's including the branch federation of the inter-municipal organisations, BP is also invited for Brussels and then we have meetings on communication for example with all the inter-municipal organisations as well. So they are invited on a regular basis. But the main focus for us, for reporting is of course the IBGE, but in Brussels the situation is so specific we only have BP so that's more often one to one communication, because the situation is different we usually tend to have separate meetings with them on their issues and contracts because in Flanders and Wallonia, is slightly different, there are more players and inter-municipal organisations, so we tend to have a special way of working with them.

Does IBGE tell you exactly what to do or you propose to them projects or is it interactive?

First of all, what we have to do, we have the environmental policy agreement and there it is mentioned that you need to have a reuse plan, communication plan, plan of execution every year, a management plan for 5 years, so that's what we evaluate every year, but those are the bigger lines that are set up. But when we need to do a communication campaign for example, or we need to introduce a new type or recipients, then we have to talk to IBGE.

So it's you who take the initiative every time to propose things and they check if it's ok...

Yes, if they agree, how are we are going to proceed. But to be honest, the region of Flanders is more active and they challenge us more, whereas in Brussels and Wallonia with all the respect, they tend to just follow our case and that's the case that we develop together. And up until now, every project that we realised it was on a national level, so the idea of doing something specific for Brussels is new and might be necessary. But we present our projects to the three regions and ask permission from all of them. And it's only when becomes concrete that we need to have discussions with BP as well but it's not something that we oblige them to do, even if we have a contract. But first IBGE has to agree.

I have some questions about recycling but maybe it would be better to provide me with some contact details of some recycling companies(I am mostly interested in TV recyclers)...

Of course one of the big challenges for television recyclers is the fact that we don't produce TV and computer CRT screens anymore, so the industry need to define new ways of using the materials that come out of the recycling process because we cannot use them to create new CRT monitors and that's the biggest challenge for them .

Do you think that the management system for e-waste as it is right now in Brussels helps to reduce the environmental impact that e-waste has?

Yes, but we need to go further, because if you look at the regional level, we only barely manage to reach the target of 4kg. We need to start taking into consideration that we are in Brussels, how many inhabitants are here and there are only 2 container parks, people with language issues, different cultural behaviours, a lot of illegal exports as well, so we need to be able to have a different type of system in Brussels and try to have an action plan specifically for Brussels will be necessary because barely 4kg is not enough.

Is it easy for the citizens to have access to information regarding statistics about e-waste, how it is collected etc?

Yes and no, the information listed in the website is quite technical, what we are developing now is visualising the recycling and collection process in simple images and we want to give figures but more interesting like what a journalist would use when he's writing an article, because 110000 tonnes for a lot of people is too abstract. So it's finding the right way to communicate this kind of figures and to make them interesting. There are different ways of expressing recycling targets like putting the focus more on the impact, what if everyone in Belgium instead of putting e-waste in the normal waste bin disposing it in the container parks, what would this mean? In simple words. So there is a lot of data available but is it easy to understand information available?-no!

Are the citizens satisfied with this system? What do you think?

We don't have a clear....we do have an almost yearly market survey about consumers, retailers and our own members. Our members survey is satisfaction survey, for retailers is a combination because not every retailer works together with Recupel, so it has general questions such as are you aware of the fact that there is a visible fee etc and for the consumers survey of course one of the questions is do you know Recupel fee, what do you think of the visible fee, do you know where to go with your waste etc, so that's something that we measure every year, but it remains quite stable but that's logical and that is because it's already at a very high percentage of people knowing what to do but this doesn't mean that they do what they have to do, but there are no radical disagreements with the consumers now.

Do you think that it is efficient for the WEEE management to give the entire responsibility to the producers as set by the WEEE directive?

But who could be the other alternative?

The municipalities for example. In some countries the municipalities have a really active role in WEEE management.

But they have more or less the same role. Don't underestimate the influence and the impact of inter-municipalities on the collective system as well, they have importance, the container parks represent the 55% of our collective volume and they are important, they have a lot of political support as well from the IBGE, so is it a good thing that the take-back obligation is put on the manufactures? It's not a question if would it be better to give it directly to the inter-municipalities-I am not convinced that it would be better.

Why?

Because they have their own...we are a non-profit organisation, we operate on a national level, we can have one national solution, instead of... and for the bigger volumes it works, I mean we have proven the fact that it works, driving everything into smaller regions with different systems would not be a cost effective solution, the fact that we have big volumes that we can present to recyclers is beneficial on price. But that's my personal opinion and there no study ever done that could prove my point that is better to have no collective system or to have the full obligation or responsibility given to the municipalities. I don't have any data that I can show you that one or the other would be better.

What do you think should be the role that municipalities should have in WEEE management, should it be as it is right now, should they have a more active role and be involved also into the recycling process, should they let the producers deal with it?

But, it's hard to say, should they be active in the recycling process? There is the tender procedure, you have recycling contracts, there are certain requirements, not just any company can become a recycler of our system. Who would be benefited, I really don't know. For the moment we have more than enough recyclers who can deal with e-waste.

For example previously you mentioned that you need an innovative solution for dealing with CRT monitors and the project that I am looking at in Valencia, the municipality has initiated a project who deals with CRT monitors and it's the coordinator of the project but it has brought several companies together, the municipality collects the CRT monitors, and provides the private companies in order to process them and produce construction material. Do you think that IBGE could have a role like this?

But it's a different approach that could not work within our current way of working because collection and recycling are two separate procedures. The role of the inter-municipalities has been determined in the environmental policy agreement and it does not necessarily leave room for recycling so it's not compatible with our current way of working. There will have to be a change in legislation. I don't think that BP can start claiming everything that we are collecting in Brussels we are going to recycle it ourselves, from a legal point of view I don't think that this is possible.

So you think that it's a legal issue and not that they don't have the resources to do it...

I don't know if they have the resources. As far as I understand is fairly a legal issue that the role of the collective system has been determined, the role of the inter-municipalities as well and we need to work together and it doesn't leave room for recycling from the part of the municipalities, but that is how I understand it.