

**Urban mobility debates in Flanders:
the need for participatory technology assessment at the local level.**

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With 4.2km of roads per square kilometre, Flanders has the densest network of roads in Europe. Ghent, a Flemish medieval city with a population of 230,000, lies at the crossroads of two highways and has seen increasing problems with traffic congestion. The history of the way that the city handled its growing traffic problems can be seen as an example of the need to involve the public in decision-making.

In the 1960s and 1970s, cities in Belgium such as Brussels and Antwerp responded to growing traffic congestion by constructing metro systems. A fierce debate over the practicalities of constructing a metro in a compact, medieval city took place in Ghent at the same time, the result of which was a decision not to build a metro.

The traffic problems in Ghent continued to grow until 1988 when, for a few short months, traffic was banned from the city centre. This 'Lussenplan' was introduced shortly before city elections with minimal consultation or communication with the public. Local shopkeepers were strongly opposed to the plan and traffic was soon allowed to return to the city centre.

Following this u-turn in policy, traffic became a taboo subject in political debate until the next election in 1994. The new city government set out an ambitious Mobility Plan, which included proposals to keep the historic city centre car free and to build underground car parks to keep cars off the streets. These plans were marketed to the population through a website, brochures etc while official discussions took place within the city administration. In 1996, the City Council approved the Mobility Plan.

However, the public had not been given the opportunity to participate in developing the initial policy or in the decision-making process. Two networks opposing the plans had developed – one of local shopkeepers who regarded access for the private cars as essential to keeping the city centre economically active, and the other of environmental and residents organisations who wanted to see a reduction in car traffic and an investment in public transport. A new mechanism for initiating referenda, introduced in 1995, enabled these opponents to force a referendum opposing the Mobility Plan by gathering the signatures of 10% of the electorate. The referendum – the first to take place at city level in Flanders – stimulated intense public debate. The required 40% of the electorate took part and 94% voted against the Mobility Plan.

As an alternative, the political parties sat down together to develop a new plan for a public transport system (Horizon 2010), which went to referendum in 1999. There was again intense public debate. Some groups encouraged a boycott of the referendum and the turnout was only 22%, which made the referendum invalid.

Ghent therefore remains without a policy for reducing traffic congestion. Transport is, however, a central issue in public debate. But without the participation of the public in developing policies it seems that a solution will be difficult to find. The introduction of referenda in Flanders in 1995 enabled citizens to exercise direct democracy, but not to participate in decision-making. There is a lack of knowledge in Flanders about techniques such as consensus conferences and scenario debates that can be used to engage the public. viWTA has been established with a clear expectation that it will be involved with participatory technology assessment at a regional level, but perhaps there is need for similar work to be carried out at the city level.