

PARKBOS

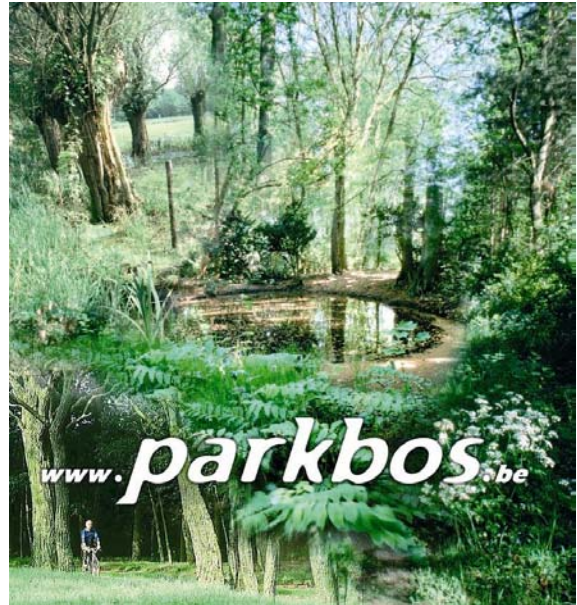
AN URBAN FOREST FOR GHENT



LIFE99ENV/B/000650 "Development of a policy implementation model for local governments with regard to sustainable environmental planning in urbanised areas on the basis of a case study: Ghent urban forest"

Project term: 01/10/1999 – 30/09/2002

bossanova
actie parkbos



Flanders is one of Europe's least forested areas: current figures show a mere 10,8% forest. These forests are spread unevenly over the five provinces. The index for Eastern Flanders is as low as 5.6%, a figure comprising over 80% privately owned forests, often not open to the public. Furthermore, Flanders is a densely populated area, and the Flemish urban population feels a growing need for a green and forested environment where they can relax. In 1997 the Flemish government aimed at creating 10.000 ha of additional forested area by the year 2007, an aspiration that up to now has proved to be difficult to realise...

Ghent, the capital of the province of Eastern Flanders, has some 225.000 inhabitants, but has no public forest. The city's inhabitants need to travel 15 km or more for their walk in the forest. That is why plans were made for a new urban forest for Ghent, an initiative for which the Environmental Planning and Nature Conservation Service of the Province of Eastern Flanders started a Life project in 1999 in cooperation with the Forest & Green Areas Division of the Flemish Community, and the Flemish Forestry Organisation ngo (FFO). The three project partners operate under the name '**Bossanova**'.



Forest & Green Areas Division

Ministry of the Flemish Community



The final **goal of the project** was the partial realisation of an **urban forest** for Ghent. An innovating **communication strategy** was considered vital in the pursuit of this goal. The project tested a new strategy of approaching the target groups and creating broad public support. The creation of a **support base** for the forest expansion project (on a political, administrative and social level) was an essential part of the project from the very beginning of the planning process onwards. Participation of and communication with the residents and future users of the urban forest was given ample attention, focussing on the expectations of all social actors and allowing the target groups involved to take the initiative and bear responsibilities. This approach is revolutionary, as similar projects have traditionally been developed by the proper authorities, informing the public only in the last stages of the process, and limiting participation to the public investigation, which offers the possibility of lodging an appeal. In this sense the project introduced a new culture: one of target group participation and planning transparency.

The new Parkbos, for which the first lands to be forested were acquired in 2002, holds important benefits for the environment in the Ghent region. It is a first impetus towards sustainable development and conservation of open space in the urban area, with attention for landscape aspects. In this scarcely forested region (5,6% forest in the province of Eastern Flanders) the forest expansion project offers important opportunities for plant and animal species. The project will result in an enhanced quality of life in the city, will increase the appeal of living in the city, and furthermore fulfills an educational and sensitising function for the general public. The **communication model** can also be applied in similar projects, so as to give forest expansion projects a new impetus **in other regions** as well. For this purpose the model will be written down in a document, which will be at the disposal of local governments in Flanders and abroad. The document will probably be available in the autumn of 2003, after concrete workshops with the local stakeholders have taken place, so that the findings of this important participatory step can be included in the document. The document (Dutch and English version) will be available on the website www.parkbos.be or on the number 0032/(0)9 264 90 50.

APPROACH

Two parallel tracks were pursued in the process: '**Planning process**' and '**Public support establishment**'. The part 'Planning process' involved the development of a design plan for the new Parkbos, linked to the first land acquisitions and actual afforestations. Analogously, a participatory communication model has been elaborated within the part 'Public support establishment'. Both tracks are complementary in the sense that the involvement of the target groups enhances the feasibility of the afforestation project substantially. Conversely the target groups can only be lastingly motivated if their actions result in actual realisations in the field, and if they see that their remarks are being considered in the final plans.

PROGRESS AND RESULTS

THE PART 'PLANNING PROCESS'

A **design plan** needed to be drawn up for the new urban forest. Originally, the project team was to develop a plan for an urban forest of 200 to 300 hectares on the Kastelensite (Castles site) near Ghent. Later on in the planning process, however, the urban forest project was broadened, and the Parkbos project was placed within a **regional executional plan** (REP) for the area 'Kastelensite-Scheldevelde-Rosdam' some 1200 hectares of size. This REP is an initiative of the Flemish community, and is coordinated by the Environmental Planning department. The REP aims to find a balance between the different spacial claims within the planning area, including not only forest expansion, but also sustainable agriculture, nature development and landscape restoration, recreation, housing, industrial activity, accessibility and infrastructure. A cooperation of a substantial number of partners was established, within which the Life project team worked on the 'subtask Parkbos', the green part of the project (forest expansion, sustainable agriculture and green open space within the planning area). An example of another subtask is the 'subtask mobility'.

Good contacts with the group responsible for the delineation process of the Ghent urbanised area enabled the forest expansion project to be firmly **embedded** in this regional planning proces. Similarly the urban forest was included in the city of Ghent's environmental plan, which was drawn up in the same period.

To get to know the planning area in depth, a comprehensive **inventory** was made. Agricultural, environmental and landscape values, ownership and land use and existing initiatives with regard to recreation, forest expansion and nature development within the planning area were mapped out, and the cultural, historical and social characteristics were listed. An agro-economic investigation resulted in clearer insights into the social conditions, comprising amongst other things a mapping in the field (land use, expanding greenery...) and the investigation of possible scenarios for land acquisition and accompanying measures for farmers. In this context an individual questioning of the farmers in the area was carried out (see also the part Communication).

In the mean time the Environmental Planning department had a **preparatory study** carried out for the REP. This study was concluded in September 2001 and includes an area vision and a structural sketch. The Life project team followed this preparatory study together with an extensive official and administrative supervision group, representing as such an already extensive support base for the results of this study. A summary of the preparatory study can be consulted on the website www.parkbos.be.

In the **Study Group Parkbos**, the Life project team collaborated on the area's design plan with respect to the 'green' aspects, as within the general REP the study group was responsible for forest expansion, sustainable agriculture, landscape, nature and soft recreation, departing from the structural sketch for the REP, which had already been agreed upon within all involved sectors on an official level.



Within the study group Parkbos representatives of the Forest & Green Areas Division and the FFO collaborated intensely with the Flemish Land Agency (FLA), for which purpose a collaboration protocol was signed. The development of the design plan required consultation with the different administrations and partners involved, as well as with the other subtasks within the REP, as it is important that the subtask Parkbos should run parallel with the other subtasks in order to obtain one coherent executional plan for the planning area.

To realise forest expansion in the field, specific instruments for e.g. land acquisition need to be applied. Examples are e.g. the a land exchange bank, management agreements, expropriation, company relocation, acquisition of lands (if necessary with first refusal right)... Through consultation with each land user and owner tailor-made solutions were sought, enabling a maximum response to the expectations and needs of the farmers involved. This is of vital importance, as the forest expansion largely needs to be realised on these agricultural lands. Within this scope the Forest & Green Areas Division and the FLA, made a survey, indicating which instruments are required under the different circumstances. This analysis was carried out parallel with the agro-cultural economic investigation of the entire area (see below).

The first Parkbos trees were planted in the autumn of 2002 on the first land that has been bought for afforestation. Children from several local primary schools rolled up their sleeves and planted the first small forests. Vera Dua, the Flemish Secretary of the Environment and Agriculture, had invited Chief Raoni of the Kayapo Indians for the occasion, as well as the Belgian prince Laurent and the local authorities' representatives. The planting action was extensively covered in the local and national press.



These planting actions are important as an initial impetus to sustainable development with the conservation of open space within the urbanised area around Ghent, as they form an important motivation for various target groups involved in the project. After all, this involvement needs to be nourished by concrete realisations in the field.

The broadening of the urban forest project to a regional project, for which forest expansion is only one of various aspects, increased the number of partners involved. As a consequence, the first planting actions were organised later than originally planned, not fully realising the intended 10% of the forest expansion within the Life project term. On the other hand, the broadening of the project did offer the substantial advantage of embedding the urban forest plans firmly in a sustainable regional REP and other running planning processes, increasing the feasibility of the forest expansion project, while at the same time establishing a firm support base for the Parkbos. The regional executive plan furthermore imposes conditions and directives, ensuring lasting protection of the landscape and forest, and guaranteeing the quality of the green area.

The land acquisition runs parallel to the development of plans for the design of the new green area. As we speak, the next deals are being made and negotiations for new acquisitions are underway. Departing from the design vision, planting plans for the acquired lands are being drawn up so as to realise the first afforestations in the field in a well-considered way.

THE PART 'COMMUNICATION'

Parallel to the planning process discussed above various initiatives were carried out within the part 'communication and participation', as the project applied an innovative communication strategy, enabling for the first time for the target groups to be involved in the planning of the forest expansion, and this from the very beginning of the project onwards.

Which are the project's target groups? Important target groups include environmental, youth and sports associations, neighbourhood committees, schools, senior citizens' associations, agriculturists and horticulturists, municipal authorities, but also unorganised youth, neighbouring families, ... Some four groups can be distinguished. Firstly, the target groups with an explicit demand for forest. Secondly there are some 'quiet' social groups with an implicit demand. A third group consists of those 'neutral' towards the new forest project, and finally there are the 'adversaries'. This last group of adversaries – and specifically the farmers and horticulturists of the planning area – has proved to be highly organised, and as a consequence has a much louder voice than the other groups. For all these target groups contacts were approached, and a list and profile were drawn up.

On the basis of the profiles, specific communication strategies for the different target groups were developed, specifying the themes, key messages and information carriers.

These strategies were put into practise, being permanently evaluated and adjusted during the course of the project.

Apart from this, a **broad network** was being developed, which proved crucial for the establishment of broad public support on a political, official and social level. This dynamic process created a sustainable interaction structure devoted to realising forest expansion in the Ghent region even after the conclusion of the Life project. The development of a support network required first and foremost the regular provision with **information** of the various network chains. For instance, the results of the localisation study were presented to the municipal authorities concerned, as well as to the agricultural and environmental advisory bodies and several agricultural organisations. The most important agriculturiers in the area concerned were **individually visited**. Several **info meetings** were organised for the various target groups, offering those interested and involved the opportunity to ask questions and pass on reactions and suggestions. Furthermore a **Parkbos newsletter** was issued every six months and an extensive interactive **website** was constructed to keep those interested posted on the project's progress. Even after the conclusion of the Life project the partners intend to continue to issue the newsletter, at least as long as the planning process is in progress.

To maintain and strengthen the established **contacts**, regular meetings and activities were organised, for example a meeting between the Secretary of the Environment and Agriculture Vera Dua and Frank Beke, mayor of the city of Ghent. The possible cooperation for the realisation of these green areas was discussed in March 2001 on a meeting of the Ghent city services involved, and the Life project group. This way concrete efforts were made to tune the tasks on various governmental levels. Through the extensive project steering committee the authorities concerned were offered the opportunity to participate in the project. This steering committee consisted of the project team (Prov. Eastern Flanders Environmental Planning and Nature Conservation service, the Forest & Green Areas Division and the FFO) but also the municipalities and administrations concerned (dep. Nature, dep. Land, dep. Spatial Planning, dep. Monuments and Landscapes, FLA). The committee has been progressively extended. Furthermore there was permanent contact with the Ghent Community Involvement Action, which goal is to promote deliberation between resident groups, officials and politicians.

Some examples of network developing **activities**:

- In collaboration with the Festival of Flanders a unique castle concert was organised. This event was viewed as an alternative way of assembling every one concerned with the realisation of a fully fledged urban forest for Ghent and letting them enjoy the unique location of the castle domain of Borluut Castle.
- Youth movements, farmers organizations, environmental and socio-cultural groups were contacted.
- Several field trips in the area were guided, some with international groups.
- Various departments of the city of Ghent were collaborated with. We participated in, amongst other events, the Day of the Park (May 2002) and the exhibition on the Ghent Spatial Structure Plan (summer 2002).

One main objective of this Life project consisted of the creation of a forum for discussion. The **Parkbos forum** offers those interested and concerned the opportunity of actual input in the development of the plans, the design and the management of the future forest, which allows the project to be carried not only by officials but also by the target groups, whose responsibility and participation is enhanced, making it sort of 'their forest'. The Parkbos forum includes an **interactive website** (with a discussion forum), **deliberation moments** with specific target groups (e.g. environmental groups, agriculturiers and horticulturere, youth, senior citizens, ...), **information meetings** for the local residents. In this initial stage of the Parkbos forum the so-called '**sounding**

board group' was started up, consisting of some 18 'personal witnesses', with whom the project team constructively debates on the plans at discussion. These people were selected on the basis of their personal involvement, seeking a balance between different age groups and viewpoints from the various municipalities concerned. This approach allowed the project team to gain a better insight into the complaints and concerns of the various target groups within the planning area. The conclusions were taken into consideration in the making of the design plan.

Apart from the Parkbos forum a broad **sensibilisation** on the project was also of major importance. This sensibilisation campaign made the urban forest project widely known: by offering all target groups general information on the project, a favorable atmosphere was created, necessary for the realisation of the social demand for forest expansion. The sensibilisation campaign proved vital as a support for the entire network development process. Actors within the network are only lastingly motivated if they regularly find that their efforts are widely supported and are given due attention e.g. in the press. Sensibilisation and media campaigns furthermore exercised a major '**pressure effect**' on politicians and officials to offer the project their support.

The sensibilisation campaign can be subdivided into general sensibilisation of the general public and concrete sensibilisation in and around the planning area.

For the general public Bossanova was conspicuously present at the **Gentse Feesten** (the summer festival in Ghent) in 2000, 2001 and 2002, providing a playful eye-catcher and distributing promotional materials. Questions and reactions were individually responded to by project collaborators. Media attention was massive, and the Parkbos became widely known amongst the general public.

Nic Balthazar, well known in Flanders and inhabitant of Ghent, was happy to commit to being the **godfather of the Parkbos**. He has been present at several events and writes a column in the Parkbos newsletter.

The website www.Parkbos.be promotes the project, offers up to date information and the possibility to air reactions and suggestions on the discussion forum.

The Flemish Forest Organization has also been present at various **fairs and happenings** in the Ghent region in order to promote the Parkbos, giving those interested a personal answer to their questions, and distributing the project's **newsletter and leaflet**. The FFO has also collaborated in **manifestations** such as the Day of the Park, where an info stand was set up and a slide show was organised. Some 100 people took part in a cycling tour running partly through the Parkbos area.

The **exhibition** on the Ghent Environmental Plan, organised by the city of Ghent, also helped spread information on the Parkbos project, as the FFO offered a module on the project as one of the future green areas around the city. The Parkbos module was developed into a travelling exhibition.



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into the spotlight in a positive way.

It proved to be important for the various target groups to regularly bring new information on the project.

One example of **sensibilisation in and around the planning area** was a unique **castle concert** in the immediate vicinity of the future Parkbos forest. This event took place on Saturday 9 September 2000 and was organised in collaboration with the Festival of Flanders. It brought together all those involved in the development of a fully-fledged urban forest for Ghent: people from the forestry branch and government officials and, at a second concert, the local residents. Apart from music there was also room for speeches and children's animation.

A **biannual Parkbos newsletter** kept those concerned and interested posted on the project's progress. The first Bossanova newsletter was posted in every letterbox in the entire planning area (the entire municipalities of De Pinte and greater Ghent). Subsequent newsletters were posted in all municipalities of the planning area, and were distributed through libraries, town halls, service centers, ... People living outside the planning area who were interested, were given the chance to subscribe to this newsletter for free, which some 1500 people did.



To involve the local infant and primary schools in the Parkbos project an **educational package** was put together, built around a little puzzle representing the various aspects of the concept 'forest' in a playful way.

EVALUATION AND DISTRIBUTION OF THE RESULTS

The evaluation of this Life project comprises amongst other things an efficiency assessment of the new communication model, the distribution of the Life project results and the editing of the communication model in an applicable form for local authorities.

During the project the activities and adopted strategies were being **permanently internally evaluated**. The initiatives were judged with regard to their efficiency concerning forest expansion and were adjusted when necessary. Internal evaluation was carried out regularly at the steering committee meetings.

An **external evaluation** was carried out permanently by a communications office which gave expert advice and assisted in the development of a communication strategy and a plan of action. The developed communication model will be published in applicable form and will as such be easy to apply for local authorities and the forestry commission, enabling similar forest expansion projects to be realised in this new participatory manner.

The results of this Life project have been **internationally distributed**. Members of the project team participated in various international symposia, e.g. the **European Forum on Urban Forestry** (2th, 3rd, 4th and 5th forum). The Ghent urban forest project was also treated as a case-study in e.g. the project **NeighbourWoods** ... advancing the quality of life and the environment of European cities through the socially-inclusive planning, design and management of urban woodlands...' and in the **PBO project** 'the broadening of public support in planning, implementing and managing forest expansion in Flanders'. Furthermore there were several (international) field trips in the planning area, e.g. for the symposium '**Use of open space in Flanders**'. Finally there were also informal opportunities of exchange and international contact, e.g. a visit

to several projects and urban forests in Scotland, during which mainly participation experiences were discussed, in view of the organization of Parkbos workshops.

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