

## Appendix 5 - Interview OVAM

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### **Tell me about yourself. What is your professional background?**

I'm an industrial designer, I'm one of the two industrial designers in this governmental organization which is quite exceptional, all the other profiles are more engineering background. I've worked with a design agency for some years and then I came to OVAM to take part in the ecodesign actions that OVAM was leading at that time.

### **What is your role within the company?**

My role within the company is the ecodesign policy, looking for new tools, doing research. A part of our research is about searching tools. A lot of our target groups are searching how to apply ecodesign so they want to know why they do ecodesign and how they can implement it. Most designers are very well skilled in nice design, colors and shapes but they lack information about environmental issues. We do a lot of communication, our website is our main platform for that.

### **What is the mission of your company?**

We are the Flemish waste agency, a governmental organization. We have two big departments, soil remediation, which is about cleaning soil that was polluted in history, and, our division about materials management. We want to think in a circular economy perspective, circular design and all new issues and policy concerning that.

**What do your daily operations look like?**

With my team, we work at enterprise division. It's a small team that is about supporting companies and designers about how to apply ecodesign. We communicate about our tools, how to apply ecodesign. We do research, we check with our target groups, company designers, what are their needs are, what are their barriers and thresholds to get to ecodesign.

**What do you understand by ecodesign?**

That's a hard question, there is a lot of discussion about it at the moment even within our organization. We still think it's about a good design approach which tries to reduce the environmental impact in all life cycle stages. The definition of ecodesign is under pressure. Traditionally, ecodesign was a combination of ecological and economic values but more and more also social elements are integrated so we think in the future this will be a more sustainable design approach and also for our organization we have to integrate a more social criteria. Ecodesign still is about rethinking the life cycle scenario of the product you're designing or producing and how you reduce the environmental impact of the product.

**What is in your opinion an ecodesigned product?**

I think a good ecodesigned product is a product that tries to solve the biggest problems in the environmental impacts of the product, preferably all the impacts of the product. So, try to look at the production, the transportation, how it is used, etc. It has to be a good product, it needs to last long and it has to be easily repairable. I think it should be a very complete product and not every ecodesigned product succeeds at that. It's also being aware about the strategy to try to reach the goals, as much as possible.

**What does the OVAM concretely do related to ecodesign?**

Mainly research, tools and communication. We also do the follow up of European legislation on ecodesign. We think ecodesign is important. To be ahead of competition in the market, companies have to take into account ecodesign.

**Are there companies that come to the OVAM for help for this tools and so on?**

Not so many because most of the time OVAM acts as a regulatory organism and most companies don't look at OVAM or other governmental organizations as a partner to support them. So, often they ask questions but I think most of the time they go to consultancy agencies. For the OVAM SIS Toolkit, we trained 32 consultants to be able to reach a lot of companies to help them to apply this tool because our team is too small for that. I think in the future we will evolve more to supporting companies as a partner, but at the same time there are good sustainable agencies on the market that do this work and we can't disturb the market in that way.

**Can you tell me more about the tools?**

The tools are explained on the website. I'll go briefly through them.

The first one is the Ecolizer tool. You can find it on [www.ecolizer.be](http://www.ecolizer.be) and it is one of the first tools we designed. A lot of designers had the problem that they don't have any tools to assess the environmental impact of the product they were designing so they needed a tool to measure these impacts. The Ecolizer tool gives a short introduction on life cycle thinking and designers and companies are able to make a short life cycle of the product, taking into account all the materials, processes, transportation etc. They get an overview of all the impacts of the product and we hope they will take the right measures to lower the high impacts.

Another tool we have designed is more about guidelines. We made guidelines for communication between the waste companies, the companies that recycle all our waste, plastic waste, packaging waste, etc. It seems they have a lot of problems also with the electronic waste. At the same time a lot of designers don't have any tools or guidelines to tackle those problems. For instance, in electronics, a lot of electronics recyclers have to take out the batteries but they don't know where the batteries are. So often they simply have to smash the product with hammers to find the battery, which is very stupid if we know that designers could just communicate about where the batteries are situated in most of these products. So we made some design guidelines for different product categories.

Then we have our OVAM SIS Toolkit. this is more a strategic tool, we noticed that a lot of companies and designers have a lot of difficulties about sustainability and finding how to set priorities. Ecolizer was very good in measuring the environmental impact but it said nothing about which track to take or which strategy to use. With the OVAM SIS Toolkit, we try to make a very broad spectrum for sustainability and design and so it is a very good communication tool between designers and companies and also very good tool for companies just to set up the actions that they are currently doing and to see where they are lacking behind in sustainability actions and what they could do. We had a pilot program for that with five companies and then we trained 32 consultancy agents, that are providing workshops with this tool for companies.

We also focus on education with the EHO tool or ecodesign for higher education tool, which is a tool that supports teachers and schools how to integrate ecodesign within higher education. We noticed that not only product designers are involved in product development, but also engineers, mechanical engineers, product engineers, some other profiles in marketing, etc. Now we try to make the education program sensitized, give them information about ecodesign. So it's very important for them to be aware that ecodesign and climate change, sustainability, is something to take into account when making decisions related to products.

**About life cycle assessment, how to make sure that what has been done at one stage of the life cycle does not negatively impact another stage of the life cycle?**

How did you come to this conclusion?

**I think it's a question that hasn't really been tackled thoroughly in the literature.**

We don't do a lot of LCA studies anymore because it is very time consuming and it costs a lot of money. The Ecolizer online tool is based on simplified life cycle assessment thinking. The Ecolizer takes into account 19 environmental impact categories, like impact on health, if you get cancer from it, carbon footprint, acidification, extinction of resources, etc. These 19 categories are put them together in one indicator, in one figure, and if one of those 19 impact categories is very high then the overall indicator will rise, while if you take one of them, CO2 with carbon footprint calculation, I think you can have the problem that you have transfers of

impacts or negative impacts on other stages. It's very important in an LCA as well to take into account the whole life cycle because for instance you can have a very good chair, for instance in wood, but if it is not stackable, it will take a lot of space when you transport it and so the transportation impact will be very high. I think it is very important for designers to think in life cycles and to be aware of how the product reacts in all this life cycle and then they have to take into account all these impact categories as well because they are very creative and they might think that if they use wood for instance, their product will be very good but it's important to think about the whole life cycle. For instance, if you have a wooden chair that lasts 3 years and you have an aluminium chair that lasts 20 years, it is very hard for designers to understand that the aluminum chair has a higher impact in production but in life cycle it will roughly be the same as 8 wooden chairs maybe. It's important to take into account the broad scope of ecodesign.

**How far do you consider we should go to take the different impacts into account?**

It's important with life cycle assessment to set barriers. If you say "this is my system, it is this wide" and with an LCA you only take this part of the system, you can be certain that the conclusions will be doubtful. It's very important to look at this life cycle assessment and which are the barriers, the system barriers to take into account. Some of the times, it's better for the company to make a small system. It's very important to assess how to evaluate the life cycle assessment and whether all the environmental impacts have been taken into account. Sometimes it's typical that within the company, they don't have any problem but that the trajectory before the company or after the company has very high environmental impacts.

**Do you maybe have concrete examples?**

Not on life cycle assessment. The Ecolizer is based on a streamline, simplified life cycle assessment, so it's not as solid, not as scientifically approved, but at the meantime it's a lot easier to use. If I propose LCA to designers, they will refuse to use it because they don't understand it. The Ecolizer is simplified and has simplified instructions. Someone can log in and then just start using it.

**Which laws are involved?**

I'm not a specialist on which laws are involved. Maybe I can check with colleagues or you can find it on websites.

**From what I read in the literature, Extended Producer Responsibility gives a good incentive for take back and recycling but not for ecodesign, what is your opinion about that?**

In general, it should be a good incentive for ecodesign if you have product responsibility. I think in the 90s, there were some pilot project where producers launched a product and would be involved in the taking back. If the producer knows he will be responsible for its product to take back, then he will adapt the design so they can easily recycle it or refurbish it in a way that is better managed. But the problem I think for the moment is that a lot of recycling systems don't allow or it's very complicated for companies to take back their own product because sorting isn't easy. For packaging, we have a very good recycling program, but it's very difficult even now, it's almost impossible for to say Coca-Cola or Danone or other big packaging companies just to take back the packaging of their brand. But this would be the best system because then they would take back their own products and they could have a design and recycling together while now they just have to pay a fee to have it recycled. And I don't know but the EPR is only used for some goods, I'm not sure what categories are included. It should be good because as a company you stay responsible for your product and you know that if you have to take back the mobile phone you created, you will take out the precious materials and then you will make it as easy as possible while now it's not necessary for them to make another design, they just make design as any other company, they make it as profitable as possible. I think we have to come to another level on the Extended Producer Responsibility to make it an incentive for companies.

**What can be done by the government to reinforce incentives for green design?**

Well we have legislation as typical and natural reflex but I think this only applies for companies that still lack behind and they are not willing to get to the minimal level of waste or hazardous materials they have to exclude. The most companies that are from their strategy is oriented to innovation for new products, they are very aware of sustainability already but

you have to prove to them that sustainability has everything to do about making good products. If they make good products, sustainability and ecodesign will be a part of it besides choosing the right materials, choosing a user interface or making a very good looking product, I think ecodesign has to be a logic strategy for designers to use. Companies that will apply ecodesign will have a natural advantage compared to their competitors on the market and it is also interesting for companies to include more integrated costs. Lots of products are just too cheap on the market.

We can also think about how to influence the consumers about what they buy. A colleague of mine is working on textile and fashion and it's very terrible what's happening in fashion and how easily consumers are seduced to buy clothes, new clothes every once in a while, while the most of the clothes are very made in bad conditions, etc. It's interesting for consumers to give them information on how to make the right choices.

We also gave good examples through the magazine Grow.. It's about 50 companies that have been really exceptional with applying sustainability and we noticed that a lot of companies get inspired by other companies that have taken special measures. It's easy for us to declare to companies that they must do ecodesign but it is a much better story if other companies tell them how to buy ecodesign and how they are doing so.

We, as a government, are an important buyer of various products and ecodesign and sustainability is a criterion in tenders. For instance, if we need a lot of chairs, we are prepared to pay more if they are made in a very sustainable ways.

**Why would a company want to engage into ecodesign? What are according to you the incentives?**

Well, I think innovation is one of the easiest. I think a lot of companies that are sensitive to innovation, react positively to ecodesign because they are always looking for new roads for innovation.

Cost reduction is a typical thing that we try to convince companies that if they do sustainable products, they will have cost reduction because of material efficiency, thinking about another way of producing.

We see a lot of change when the management of a company is convinced about ecodesign. So, I think the most popular and the best examples are with companies where the management is convinced that sustainability is a very good strategic long term thing to do. The management is convinced and most of the time they apply ecodesign.

Legislation is also a small part. It's not so good. The very good ecodesigned products are not on the market because of legislation. Legislation is there for companies that are very bad related to environmental impacts but I think in general, again, why to engage into ecodesign is if you want to make good products, try to convince designers and design companies, if you want to make good products, if you try to communicate and to make the best product, then it's not possible to ignore ecodesign or ignore sustainability. Most of the time if companies are into making good products, then they know that sustainability has a part in it.

**In almost every piece of literature, they also talk about these cost reductions but, I don't know if it's just a preconceived idea, green products are often more expensive, why would a consumer then choose an ecodesigned product compared to another cheaper one?**

Yes it's true and I think that's a bit the problem in the industry. Typical green products are much more expensive. I told you the integrated cost is not calculated with products so they remain cheap while if you want to make sustainable products, you need to check the whole life cycle and make sure everything is ok, the cost thus goes up. The cost is higher compared to traditional products but at the same time they are made in smaller quantities because most of the time the traditional products are made in much higher quantities. If you have small amounts of products and make them very special, then this price will go up. If you have very large quantities of products, then you can lower the price. So in time these products will become cheaper. As soon as consumers start buying them, the price goes down. It's the same as GPS systems, years ago it was unaffordable while now GPS systems, you can buy them for 50 euros and even almost every car has an integrated GPS system.

But at the same time, good products that do not especially communicate about sustainability can have a higher price and the consumer doesn't perceive them as ecodesigned products, they just perceive them as the best products on the market and you will buy them because of the

best quality and the best functions. I think it's true that if you communicate about the fact that you have a very green product and that explains why it is very expensive, I don't think a lot of consumers will buy but if you show you have the best product in your range, and that a side effect of that is sustainability, that it is a driver, then I think that the consumers will pay a higher price if they know they will get the best product on the market. It's true that before sometimes consumers had to pay like typically ecological products that were technically not so good as the classic product. If you get a less good function for a higher price, then consumers will not accept to pay more for a less good product. If you want to have a good ecodesigned product it must have the same functions and quality, it has to fill the function at the same time or even higher but you cannot give the consumer a worse product for a higher price.. This is very important and I think companies sometimes make the error to think these green consumers will buy anything for a higher price, I won't buy a bio cotton t-shirt that breaks after a week or after one time washing. So consumers have reacted to that and if they say, we have the best t-shirt, it is very strong, it is very colorful and it is made of bio cotton, then I think that's the communication consumers will react to.

### **Is there a real demand for ecodesigned products (consumer point of view)?**

Following on what we discussed, I think there is only a small group of consumers that is looking for green products but I think the much bigger group is just looking for goods that are good-looking, well designed products. These can include ecodesign but I don't think we don't have a big ecodesign market pull.

There are consumers that think of environment but don't act accordingly. Climate change, global warming is very important but their choices in life aren't what they should be. I think in that part, government and companies has a role to play too, they just have to make good products that have the lowest environmental impact possible.

### **What are the barriers of ecodesign?**

One thing we mentioned already is the cost. Consumers think ecodesigned products are more expensive so they will not buy them. Consumers or companies will think they should not produce them because it is more expensive to produce and consumers won't buy them so it's a vicious circle. At the same time we have the globalization, we have the problem with the

integrated environmental cost we just don't apply. So if you have products made in China or any other eastern country where they don't take into account the pollution on the environment as they do in Europe sometimes, it's easier for them to make harmful products than here, it's very cheap to get them on the market here, and it's a difficult competition for companies that try to make other products. At the same time in China, there are also interesting things happening about new products so I think costs was also a barrier.

The oil price is very low at the moment so everything about changing to not using fossil fuels, plastics, etc. is very hard because all the biological alternatives are more expensive than the fossil fuels at the moment. It would be easier if fossil fuels exploded in price, then alternatives would have their chance.

It seems that communication about ecodesign as well still is difficult. We can think that if you do ecodesign, you get a product that is of lower quality than the traditional products. It's very important that for us that you do not get the same product but you get a very high-end product of a total different level, very well designed, very user friendly and with a low footprint.

### **Do companies actually earn from it? How?**

The companies that are into innovation, they earn from innovation and they take ecodesign into account. They know that if they make better products, they just make superior products compared to competitors and they think in time. They know that legislation will change in a few years and a lot of companies already adapt to this changing legislation, they don't wait until the moment a legislation has started. So they are ahead of competitors because of thinking that way. That's an important strategy for companies that earn of it.

But, it's very hard for companies to earn from it in quick ways. You have to think in long term strategy and think about how to make the company ready for the future because if you don't, if you are not aware about climate change, you're not aware about sustainability now, probably in the future you will not be there as a company anymore; other companies are being more and more aware of this. But it's very hard for them to earn from it at the moment.

**Can you give examples of cases encountered?**

[Examples shown in the magazine GROW]

**Is there something to add?**

Maybe something that is still lacking is about the hidden environmental costs. That's something that has been a problem for a long time. We have to think about how to get the indicators for this but it's not so easy. For instance we are very interested as an organization in the design stage because in the design stage all the indicators, the characteristics of products are defined by designers and the company. As a user or as a consumer or as a waste manager or recycling company you cannot change anything to the product since it's already produced, the consumer just buys it and in the distribution they also see the product and they cannot change nothing about this. So it's very important to take the right measures in the design stage, that's why we still believe that ecodesign has a very important role to play but at the same time it's very hard because if you take measures in ecodesign, it's very hard to see what is the profit in the life cycle. For instance, if we have lowered the plastic waste by 3% it is not so easy to prove what part was the result of ecodesign measures taken.. With tools, you can prevent the waste from existing. We still think about how to tackle this problem but there are a lot of invisible problems.

Measures are still quite end-of-pipe approaches and a lot of the policy is about how to tackle problems when they are already there while it's much more efficient and cheaper and innovative to tackle them in the design stage. There still remains a big challenge for the future.

At the same time we give advice to companies just to communicate to consumers how they think about sustainability and what they do to try to be good. For some problems they don't have any solutions yet, but it's ok to communicate about that and to say that they try to do their best while a lot of other companies have just said "we are very green" but they are actually not as green as they communicate.