

SDGs in the Green Office

An introduction to The Green Office of Maastricht University

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Camilo Straatsma, education coordinator standing in the Green Office of Maastricht

Currently, we are meeting a great amount of challenges regarding sustainability. Natural resources depletion and impacts of climate change to the environment are two significant factors from which the world is most likely to suffer in the near future. The *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs) aim to promote worldwide action among governments, organizations and civil societies to end poverty and to create a life of opportunity with dignity for all, within the boundaries of the health of our planet (UN, 2015). To move towards this goal, it is essential for local communities and individuals to act on a local scale.

For these reasons, and more specifically for the aim of creating more sustainability within the University, the Green Office of Maastricht was created. The organisation focuses itself on pushing through initiatives and being a knowledge hub to promote long term sustainability. In this article, we will discuss the role of the Green Office of Maastricht (UMGO) in relation to Science, Technology, and Innovation (STI) policy at Maastricht University (UM) and the city itself, as well as the UMGO's relation to the SDGs. To enrich our discussion, we have interviewed Camilo Straatsma who is currently the education coordinator at the Green Office of Maastricht¹. The report will firstly discuss STI policy, the SDGs and their impact on STI policy. We will then discuss the role of the UMGO and their impact on STI policy within UM and the city of Maastricht.

STI Policy and the UMGO

According to the scholars Lundvall and Borrás, the overall aim of science policy is to produce scientific knowledge (2004). The actors that mainly play a role in this policy area are often Ministries of education, health and finance. This, whereas civil organizations, such as student-led groups play a role as interveners and criticsers regarding the policy decisions of the local or national government. A frequent reoccurring issue with science policy is the allocation of sufficient budgetary resources and its distribution among all activities. In a lot of cases, as Camilo Straatsma argues, NGOs must compete to obtain funding from their government or local organizations. Nonetheless, science policy relates in most cases to internal regulation of the parts of the innovative system in universities and research institutes, and how they link up with the environment, government, and industry. This linkage is even more essential in the innovation and technology policies.

In contrast to science policy, technology policy focuses itself as on the advancements and commercialization of the sectorial technical knowledge (Lundvall & Borrás 2004). The technical policies were created in an era of technology optimism as it represented a fluctuation from philosophical considerations to a rather instrumental focus on economic objectives for each country. Therefore, these elements attempt to link itself more to an industry while the innovation system remains its focus on university and research institutions. A few tools that are used in the promotion of projects and technologies are tax reductions, subsidies and public procurement.

¹ Camilo Straatsma kindly consented to the publication of his answers and opinions in this report. The signed consent form can be requested from the authors.

Going a step further from both technology and science policy, innovation policy focuses itself on the overall innovative performance of the economy (Lundvall & Borrás 2004). There are two types of innovation policies. The *laissez-faire* type emphasizes the non-interventionism, and instead focuses on the innovation framework conditions. Within this view there is a focus on public initiatives, where a positive point of view towards science, technology and innovation are encouraged. The second type of innovation policy, however, which is the *systematic approach*, aims at the competence in unequal distribution among firms and initiatives, meaning that a good practice or idea is not promptly distributed among other initiatives. Naturally, there are instrumental differences within these two views. The *laissez-faire* proponents look more to markets and entrepreneurs for internal change. Proponents of the holistic approach, however, hold that top-down approaches and policy or even constitutional changes allow for more targeted results (Lundvall & Borrás 2004). In the case of the UMGO, science and innovation-based policies are needed to foster and encourage the innovative initiative that can link up with both the government, the university and the local community. Regarding innovation policy, the Green Office falls, therefore, under the more systemic approach.

The UMGO and SDGs

As mentioned before, the Sustainable Development Goals framework focuses on global partnership to decrease negative impact on the climate, poverty while creating more life opportunities for all while fostering the health of the planet (UN, 2015). The Green Office aims to incorporate these goals by raising awareness among the student and staff community of the University of Maastricht, empowering initiatives from the UM community, and providing services in collaboration with other organizations or corporations. Looking at the UMGO, we therefore believe that it very much represents: sustainable cities and communities, responsible production and consumption, climate action and lastly, partnerships for the goals with other institutions and stakeholders of the UM community.



Through projects and events, UMGO raises awareness among students of the university and various high schools in Maastricht. To execute these initiatives as efficient and effective as possible, UMGO works together with its stakeholders at the UM. Incidentally the Green Office also works on small projects, such as a pub quiz or a workshop in collaboration with the political parties such as GroenLinks. Through collaborations with other institutions and initiatives, more effective means of the implementation for sustainable development is encouraged on a wider level.

The Green Office

The UMGO is the most relevant sustainability student-actor within the University. Their model of student-led involvement within the University to promote sustainability (not only in the ecological sense) was the beacon for many similar movements. It has now spread to 27 higher education institutions across six countries. When it began, a small but committed group of students wanted to see Maastricht University doing more in the realm of sustainability. They successfully lobbied to have a student-run sustainability unit embedded within the institution and many of the early projects they bootstrapped were met with tangible success. The UMGO, therefore, is a prime example of how student participation can achieve positive change within the university. Practically, the UMGO runs sustainability projects in collaboration with students and staff and facilitates communication between various stakeholders from the university and community who have complementary goals/interests in sustainability. Their work consists out of five portfolios: operations, research, education, community, and governance (Maastricht University Green Office, n.d.).

An interview with the education officer of the Green Office of Maastricht

As mentioned before, to get more insight into the workings of the UMGO and of the Green Offices in general we met with Camilo Straatsma (see photo) who is currently working as education coordinator of the office in Maastricht. We discussed the working of the UMGO as well as its strategies to influence and shape sustainability policy.

Awareness, Understanding & Recognition

What does the Green Office in Maastricht do in terms of influencing, creating, or evaluating science, technology, or innovation policy on a local level?

“We wrote the previous sustainability policy of the University. It is currently being updated by UM and we are part of this updating process. We also play a role in the university’s overall sustainability and we’re working with the sustainability task force.” To influence policy, the Green Office aims to pitch their own project with the UM and aims to act as a critical voice. “If something is not going well regarding sustainability or initiatives that goes against our principles, then we provide criticism. We do this through meetings. And when the sustainability task force comes into force, we’ll also have more regular meetings with them.”

Does the work of the Green Office relate to the Sustainable Development Goals? If so, which SDG(s) does the Green Office prioritize and which of the SDG(s) does the Green Office in Maastricht promote?

Camilo contends that the UMGO does not have a specific SDG project, or one on which it particularly focusses. “We don’t categorise our work in specific goals. Neither do we have one stakeholder that we’re focusing on in general. Instead we focus on education, research, society engagement and operations. Through carrying out our work neutrally we aim to influence these as many areas of research education and societal engagement.” The Green Office also creates reports that it shares with the University with regards to their sustainability feats. “We see these reports or monitors as a priority. We also aim to include the wider community in this in the future.”

What is your role in the Green Office in Maastricht and how does is the work of the UMGO transformed into societal output?

“We work together with external organizations, but there aren’t any official projects. Still, we do try to organise events and happenings for events on high schools, and there we also try to recruit volunteers.” In his role as education coordinator, Camilo focusses on education, however the tasks are similar for all the board members. Their overarching goal is to promote sustainability within the university, yet the different portfolios held by each board member of the UMGO differentiate their respective tasks. “Recently we set up the SDG project; here we aim to track the UM’s progress in contributing towards the SDGs.”

What are the current problems that should be approached on a local level in Maastricht and what role can the Green Office play in this?

“One big problem is fragmentation; organisations don’t communicate. Collaboration is negated for the sake of competition. Organisations working towards the same goals are protective of their information and competition can obstruct collaboration.” Luckily, politically speaking, on a local level awareness of sustainability is improving.

What policies should or can be implemented for these current problems, especially on a local level such as in Maastricht?

“I’m not sure, and my ideas are not innovative. Still more institutional support would improve the situation a lot. Funding, resources, availability, creation of more dialogue between different partners and similar initiatives, spaces for pedestrians and car-free zones.” These, according to Camilo, could improve the situation on a local level. Therefore, policies should be lobbied for that can enable such changes to occur.

What are the best ways in raising awareness for sustainability and Do you think the that the municipality and local organisations raise enough awareness regarding sustainability or is improvement needed?

“Sustainability is not just about the environment! So not just awareness but also understanding! An Increase of participation or civil society mobilization is necessary to further the sustainability agenda. Sustainability initiatives should be more prevalent and more transparent; if I wasn’t working at the Green Office I would have to search more in order to see what the municipality does. It is not always apparent to students what actions the municipality is taken. Their communication towards students could be improved.”

Finally, what are your future expectations regarding sustainability? Do you think that there will be global awareness or that it might take a while for people to acknowledge that there is a problem?

Here, Camilo contended that it is difficult, even in his position at the Green Office. "I hope that people will understand more about sustainability and that awareness is raised on a global level, however you do get doubtful. The process of creating more green offices involved a lot of lobbying. To make long-lasting change happen, however, activism and participation is required." To enable this, the authors argue that the sustainability agenda should include three aspects: awareness, understanding, and finally, recognition.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we discussed the role of the Green Office of Maastricht (UMGO) in relation to Science, Technology, and Innovation (STI) policy at Maastricht University (UM) and the city itself, as well as the UMGO's relation to the SDGs. Taking a closer look at the UMGO allowed us to observe their efforts and results with regarding to promoting more sustainability within the University. The UMGO is succeeding in connecting their initiatives to the wider local community, however, competition amongst similar organisations and the lack of public awareness, understanding, and recognition is sometimes hindering collaboration. As Camilo Straatsma said, more attention is a necessity to promote the idea of sustainability to a wider audience. The SDG framework provides an opportunity for the UMGO to use it to their benefit and permeate more levels of society.

References

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