

An interview with Mrs Anne-Michèle JANSSEN, Director of the Eco-construction Cluster

What exactly is eco-construction?

Eco-construction is an approach that aims to build or renovate healthy, comfortable and energy-efficient places to live and work, from the design stage right through to the end of a building's life. Eco-construction combines building design with the use of eco-materials to reduce carbon footprint and the consumption of natural resources. The materials used in eco-construction are biosourced, geosourced (little processed), recycled or reused.



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So eco-construction isn't just a wooden house insulated with straw bales?

First and foremost, it is a building designed according to its environment: its position, the amount of sunlight it receives, the local climate, the nature of the soil, etc. Secondly, this design takes into account adaptation to climate change, in particular by integrating elements that will provide shade in the summer and others that will provide natural heat in the winter. Eco-design also aims to limit the amount of impermeable soil, so as to reduce the risk of flooding. In general, we will take care to reduce soil alteration, for example by building on stilts rather than concrete foundations, where possible. In addition, eco-construction professionals use materials that, by their very nature and/or the way they are processed, consume less energy and pollute less than commonly used

products. Natural materials include wood, hemp, straw, grass, wool, paper, cork, cotton, stone and raw earth, all of which are used in the construction or renovation of homes, schools, offices, theatres and more. Wallonia has around fifty producers of eco-materials and construction systems.

Most of these companies are SMEs or even very small businesses. Are they capable of meeting demand?

Many of the companies in the sector are self-employed, working alone or with a small team, but there are also industrial structures employing up to 120 people, such as insulation or wooden structures manufacturers and builders. These manufacturing companies do not produce at their optimum. In fact, they are only working at 20% to 40% of their potential, due to a lack of demand. Some Walloon production companies are more successful abroad than in Belgium ([Gramitherm](#), [Woolconcept](#), [Stabilame](#), etc.). These local producers could quickly provide over 85% of the insulation materials needed to meet the 2050 targets. More than 300 companies can implement them and are just waiting for us to call on their expertise.

What are the obstacles to the development of existing solutions?

The main obstacles are psychological: habits, preconceived ideas about durability, fire safety and price. The sector also has to contend with the powerful lobby of conventional construction. Some obstacles are more prescriptive, such as the requirement for tests and certifications that are unaffordable for some companies.

What are you doing to remove these barriers?

The main challenge is to change mindsets and convince clients, architects, contractors and public authorities to favour eco-materials. This involves raising awareness and providing support, from the Eco-construction Cluster. For example, before the recent European, legislative and regional elections, we met representatives of all the political parties to demonstrate the potential of the sector and the importance of supporting it in the context of reducing greenhouse gases, protecting resources and preserving the environment. Our voice was heard, and support for the eco-construction sector is explicitly mentioned in the Walloon government's Declaration of Regional Policy.

Do your activities extend beyond Belgium?

Yes, because we work on European Interreg projects, in particular [Build Value](#), for which we are the lead partner. This project involves the border region between Wallonia,

Flanders and France. It aims to strengthen the region's ability to adapt to climate change. This will involve promoting eco-materials, whose carbon footprint is favourable to reducing the greenhouse gases emitted by the construction sector. The use of eco-materials will be encouraged by drawing up an inventory of existing products and characterising their potential in situ and in the laboratory. These solutions will be promoted through training and support for players in the sector, to accelerate the decarbonisation expected by 2050.



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