

## 6. Torekes: A City-Initiated System to Encourage Volunteering

Our sixth example is running in the city of Ghent in Belgium, having been started in 2010. Although a relatively wealthy town of 250,000 inhabitants, the neighbourhood called Rabot is statistically the poorest in Flanders. Half of its 8,000 inhabitants are immigrants living in low-income apartment towers called 'Torekes' (Flemish for 'Little Towers'). Its population density is among the highest in the country. More than twenty languages are spoken there, the most prevalent of which is Turkish.

The City of Ghent wanted to encourage ecological and health-promoting activities, beautify the neighbourhood and improve the overall quality of life in Rabot. They started with a survey asking local residents what was most desirable to them. The answer was access to a small plot of land to grow vegetables and flowers. The city made land available, including an unused factory lot, on which over a hundred 4m<sup>2</sup> gardens were created. These little gardens have been made available for a yearly rent of 150 Torekes, payable only in Torekes.

Torekes are earned by engaging in a variety of activities in the community. The activities are organised by the local community centre, run by the city government in the neighbourhood and by several local NGOs. The activities started with the building of these small gardens themselves. They also included more modest efforts such as putting flowers on windowsills and helping to clean up a football field after a match. The list is open to local suggestions.

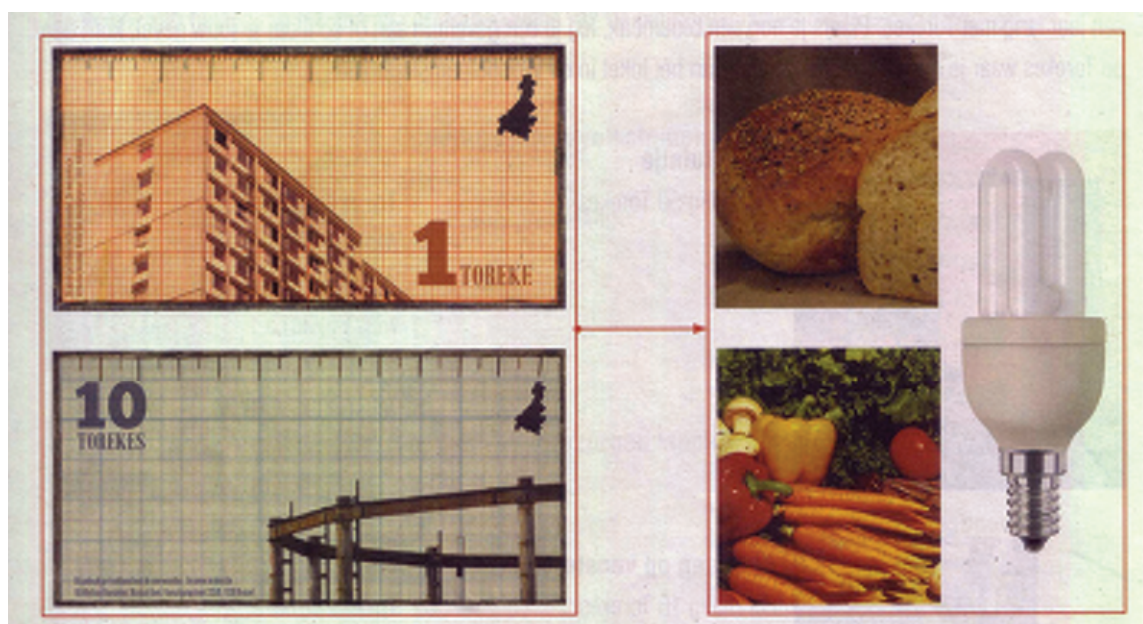


**Figure 8.1:** Photograph in the Spring of 2011 of the individual garden plots rented in Torekes.

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In addition to being used to pay rent for the gardens, Torekes can also be used to buy from local shops specific goods which the city encourages, including low-energy light bulbs and seasonal vegetables. Torekes can also be used to buy tickets for public transport and for the cinema (where otherwise empty seats would have remained unused). Businesses can exchange the Torekes for euros at the community centre office. These simple arrangements with participating stores benefit the residents, the local economy and the environment.

Since its launch in November 2010, the system has been so successful that it even faced an excess of volunteers during the spring of 2011. At the request of the participants, Torekes were introduced as a paper currency (see Figure 8.2). During the first year, a total of 50,259 Torekes were earned for 526 different activities.<sup>1</sup> 494 users have officially registered, but the number of actual participants is larger than this because exchanges also can take place directly between the residents.



**Figure 8.2:** Torekes bills in denominations of 1 and 10 Torekes (left), with samples of products for which they can be exchanged at local shops (right).

### First-year results:

#### Earning Torekes

The most popular activities were preparation of the little gardens themselves, which resulted in 21,424 Torekes being earned by 161 participants. Other activities included the creation of a little facade garden in front of some of their own residence towers

<sup>1</sup> All data about the Torekes are taken from a private report about the first year of operation of the Torekes, by Wouter Van Thillo, dated November 2011. See also [www.torekes.be](http://www.torekes.be).



(4,850 Torekes earned by 97 participants), the planting of flowers in common spaces (3,565 Torekes earned by 29 participants) and the installation of windowsill flower boxes facing the street (720 Torekes earned by 72 participants).

### **Spending Torekes**

Of the 50,259 Torekes issued, 21,855 were spent on purchasing fresh vegetables and low-energy lamps at local shops. The rent of the Torekes gardens accounted for 8,400 Torekes and 2,640 were spent on movies and bus tickets. The balance is still in circulation, or saved for next year's garden rental.

### **Exchanging Torekes**

The city reimburses businesses exchanging Torekes with Euros drawn from existing budgets allocated to the neighbourhood. The pilot experiment has had a broad social impact. Even at this early stage, the results obtained for the budget allocated in euros have been estimated at three times more than what was thought possible without the Torekes system. Because some of the operational costs are fixed, this could rise to a factor of 10 as the number of participants in the project increases.

## **7. 'Biwa Kippu': Funding a Regional Environmental Project**

Lake Biwa in the Shiga Prefecture of Japan is one of the world's oldest lakes and is graced with a very diverse and unusual ecosystem. However, the lake has become prone to a number of environmental problems: poor maintenance of water source forests; water contamination from industry, agriculture and households; algae blooms; as well as invasion of exotic fish species that have overwhelmed the native fish population. The Shiga prefectural government has used both environmental regulations and subsidies as policy instruments to address these issues. However, the question was raised: can additional policy instruments be used to obtain greater environmental results without increasing the budgetary burden on public authorities. The Biwa Kippu has been designed to be just such an instrument.

### **Objectives**

The primary objective of the Biwa Kippu system (literally 'Biwa Tickets') is to improve the Biwa Lake environment. Biwa Kippu, therefore, aims to promote environmental activities by residents and non-profit organisations in Shiga Prefecture without creating additional costs for the prefectural government, which is already too highly indebted. While job creation and community building are not the primary objectives, such benefits would be welcomed as positive side-effects.