

## 4. WHAT DOES THIS MEGATRENDS STUDY TEACH US?

This study is a first introduction to megatrends and their impacts, today and in the future, on the environment in Flanders. What general lessons can we draw? Complexity and uncertainty are the reasons why the consequences of megatrends cannot be determined unambiguously. What is clear is that the impact of six identified megatrends is inevitable and manifests itself mainly through four societal systems that are relevant to the environment. Especially also because of the incisive impact of the megatrends on the existing organisation of these systems, it is necessary to make these systems fundamentally more sustainable, more resilient and therefore more future-proof. Despite the complexity and the high degree of elusiveness of megatrends, policy can play an important role in adequately and successfully dealing with them.

## 4.1 MEGATRENDS INEVITABLY AFFECT FLANDERS AND ALSO DETERMINE THE QUALITY OF ITS ENVIRONMENT

Screening of the international literature resulted in the identification of six megatrends that are relevant to the environment in Flanders. These six megatrends jointly impact, both directly and indirectly, society in general and the environment in particular:

- changing demographic balances;
- accelerated technological developments;
- growing scarcity of raw materials and other resources;
- growing multipolarity in society;
- climate change;
- increasing vulnerability of systems.

The impacts of these six megatrends are already apparent and likely to become even clearer and stronger in the next decades. Because megatrends are so diverse, closely interrelated, act over a long period of time and are therefore to a large extent inevitable, they **structurally** impact society and our environment. The impact on the environment is estimated by the experts to be **predominantly negative**. However, the great complexity and the uncertainties surrounding the megatrends imply that the environmental impacts of these six megatrends can in most cases not be determined unambiguously or accurately.

## 4.2 THE IMPACT OF THE SIX MEGATRENDS ON THE ENVIRONMENT IN FLANDERS IS TRANSMITTED MAINLY VIA FOUR MAJOR SOCIETAL SYSTEMS

Megatrends influence the environment in Flanders via the following four societal systems:

- spatial planning;
- mobility system;
- energy system;
- production and consumption system.

The megatrends put great pressure on the organisation of these four societal systems. More specifically, they impact the dominant characteristics, the mechanisms and the developments of these systems, already today but also in the future.

### 4.3 MEGATRENDS INCREASE THE NEED FOR MAKING THE FOUR SOCIETAL SYSTEMS MORE SUSTAINABLE, MORE RESILIENT AND THEREFORE MORE FUTURE-PROOF

The six megatrends put great pressure on the current, deeply embedded organisation of the four societal systems. The **challenges and uncertainties** that the six megatrends entail for Flanders make it necessary - together with the internal tensions and contradictions specific to each of the four societal systems - to structurally reform the current deeply embedded organisation of these systems.

This is true of each system separately, but from a megatrend perspective, also in relation to each other. The six megatrends and their interdependencies in fact create interactions between the four systems that are most important for the environment in Flanders. Such **system transitions** are important to address **persistent environmental problems** but also, and not least, to safeguard our welfare and well-being. A transition implies the progressive transformation from the existing organisation of a societal system to a new organisation that is sustainable, resilient and therefore future-proof. Together with developments that can be considered counter-trends, the significant, dominant societal and ecological developments help determine to a great extent the pressure on the societal systems that may lead to their transition.

### 4.4 POLICY HAS AN IMPORTANT ROLE TO PLAY IN THE ADEQUATE AND SUCCESSFUL HANDLING OF MEGATRENDS

By definition, policy in Flanders has little if any impact on global megatrends. There is, however, an important role to be played by public authorities in supporting society to enable it to deal with the impact of megatrends. Flemish public authorities can in fact intervene in the organisation of the four societal systems through which megatrends primarily influence the environment. The resulting risks but also the future possibilities in the four societal systems most relevant to the environment, should be used as **strategic opportunities** wherever possible. Flanders alone is unable to meet some of the challenges it is facing. The transition of different systems also transcends the national context.

If the environmental impact is to be pushed back substantially, it is essential for policy to develop an integrated vision and set up a coherent framework for the different societal systems. All policy levels involved should cooperate with each other: federal, Flemish, provincial and municipal. This also calls for proper coordination between today's compartmentalised policy domains and different policy levels. Public authorities should stimulate the population and companies to make more environmentally conscious choices.