

FLEVOLAND

GENERAL POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Flevoland is one of the two Dutch case study regions of COHESIFY. The Dutch case is unusual among the COHESIFY study areas at least for three reasons. First, the country is a net contributor to the EU budget and thus is not a major direct beneficiary of cohesion policy. Flevoland is exceptional in the Dutch context because, being the Netherlands' poorest province, until 2000-2006 period it was classified as Objective 1 region and thus has seen substantial inflow of Structural Funds in the past. This has changed since the enlargement of the EU and for 2007-2013 and 2014-2020 Flevoland is classified under the objectives competitiveness and more developed regions, respectively, which entailed a massive decrease in funding allocated and hence a decline of relevance of Cohesion Policy for the region. Second, the Netherlands is also a case where territorial cooperation programmes, both cross-border and transnational ones, are particularly salient due to close linkages with the neighbouring states. This is particularly the case for Limburg Province, the second Dutch case study region, and less so for Flevoland which is cut off from the national borders. Third, the implementation of Cohesion policy and in particular of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) regional programmes relies on a peculiar institutional set up. There are four regional operational programmes (ROPs) grouping several NUTS2 regions each. This entails a degree of complexity when it comes to disentangling the aspects of policy (funding streams, impacts, communication practices, etc.) for particular provinces comprised as part of the programme area, but also for understanding the underpinning governance dynamics. Throughout this report, therefore, references are made to the wider ROP, where data was not available for Flevoland only, but to the programme area as a whole.

Flevoland was established in 1986, when different polders resulting from reclaimed land from the Zuiderzee (an inland sea within the Netherlands) were merged into one province. This land reclamation spans from the 1930s to the 1960s and resulted in a large island in the newly created IJsselmeer (lake), connected to the mainland by bridges. This new Dutch province is



divided in 6 municipalities which present different socio-economic profiles and face therefore different challenges.

Fig. 1 Satellite shot of the Flevoland Province, established on relatively recently reclaimed land.



Source: NASA World Wind

Fig. 2 The geographical area of OP West Netherlands and the participating provinces.



Source: G4P4



Flevoland is specific among the COHESIFY case studies as this is a region that was a former substantial beneficiary of EU funds, benefiting from funding under Objective 1 until the end of 2000-2006 period, however, since then it has been losing most of its EU funding. Flevoland may be relatively wealthy as compared to EU average and is part of a state that is a net contributor to EU budget and for which EU Cohesion policy has arguably less relevance than for less developed countries, like the South or Eastern Member States. Having said that, in the Dutch context Flevoland remains a lagging region, and, importantly, it has been a loser when it comes to the share of the Cohesion policy 'pie': not only did it lose its Objective 1 status, but also the share of its allocation as part of the multi-regional Operational Programme (OP) West has been declining between 2007-2013 and 2014-2020 periods, with the programme's objectives being to a large extent disconnected from Flevoland's investment needs. Despite that, the previous experience in (successfully) managing Cohesion policy funding before 2006 has been recognised and the Province plays a key role in the management of OP West, using its knowledge in the programme secretariat that it hosts.

Furthermore, the case of Flevoland is inseparable from the wider area of West Netherlands because of the OP West structure, covering four NUTS 2 regions. Thus, the implementation of EU funds in Flevoland has to be understood against the background of the wider multi-region programme, in which Flevoland plays an important management role, but receives only a small share of funding, most of it being shared by the big cities of Rotterdam and The Hague (Province of South Holland), Amsterdam (Province of North Holland) and Utrecht (Province of Utrecht). OP West management is rather unusual as compared to the practice used across other EU territories. It is governed through a partnership of four main cities and four provinces within the programme area, each managing sub-parts of the OP. While largely informal and based on 'gentlemen's agreements' on the division of the ERDF allocation to ensure a 'fair' distribution of EU funding, this G4P4 arrangement reflects the ever-shifting and fragmented Dutch governance patchwork, particularly in the West region or the Randstad.

The OP West investment focused on the 'Lisbon objectives' (innovation, competitiveness, etc.) and on supporting investment in the four main cities (which in turn reflects the Dutch interest in Cohesion policy as a tool for supporting urban development, see the Urban Agenda for the EU promoted by the Dutch EU presidency). The disbursement of funds as part of OP West has been efficient thanks to strong institutional capacity, good cooperation between the well-networked partners involved and assistance offered to beneficiaries through local support points. The projects supported are formally in line with the objectives of the OP, however, as flagged up in the evaluations and partly in the interviews with stakeholders, the effectiveness of spending suffers from the territorial fragmentation of interventions, weak strategic coupling between them and little concern for the assessment of their actual effectiveness and value for money (even though OP West was the only programme where the qualitative and quantitative assessment criteria were applied to project appraisal, in practice the funds were distributed on a 'first come, first served' basis). Moreover, the typical Cohesion policy hurdle of bureaucratic burden also seemed to have affected OP West, with complex procedures for acquiring and implementing grants being blamed by the interviewees for discouraging potential applicants.



On the communication front, three points stand out in the case of Flevoland. First, the communication strategy is centralised and nation-wide, rather than specific to regional OPs. Second, the communication effort on Cohesion policy focused on projects as vehicles for communication (emphasis on the actual result of the projects supported, able to touch the citizens in their daily lives, rather than on the policy behind it) and was based on the use of a decentralised management structure to facilitate communication activities locally. Third, two additional factors complicate the communication tasks: the interviews and focus groups indicated a very low interest in and awareness of the general public of Cohesion policy and the EU more generally, while the fragmentation of the 'pots' contributing to the OP West budget makes it harder to create a narrative on the programme as being a 'European' one.

