

LIMBURG

GENERAL POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Limburg is one of the 12 Dutch provinces (all at NUTS2 level). The province is situated at the very South-East of the Netherlands with a long border with Germany and Belgium. Because of this characteristic, Limburg is part of a number of cross-border cooperation programmes funded under the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). Limburg covers 33 local authorities with a total of 1.1 million inhabitants.

Figure 1. Location of the province of Limburg in The Netherlands



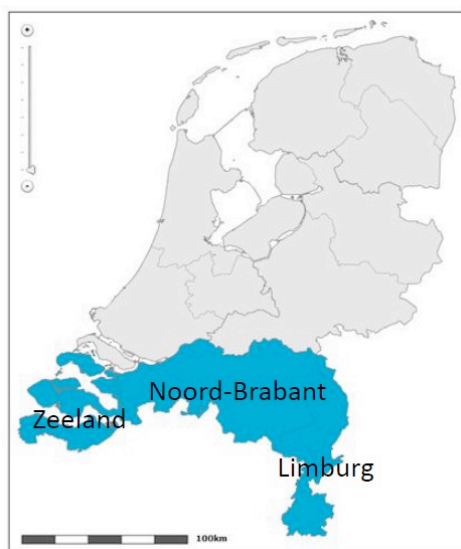
Source: own elaboration



In the mid-1970s the last coal mines were closed in Limburg. To deal with regional unemployment as a consequence of this closure and in order to restructure the regional economy towards a service economy, the national government largely invested in the regional economy. Since 1989 Limburg has been involved in several ERDF and European Social Fund (ESF) programmes. ERDF funding programmes have always been closely related to national sectoral programmes, such as the current national policy on economic top sectors.

The case study report for COHESIFY is mainly focused on the Operational Programme South Netherlands or OP Zuid, which is the main Cohesion policy programme for Limburg, but there are also references to Euregio Maas-Rijn as an example of a cross-border cooperation programme. The case study of Limburg is somewhat different in focus than many of the other COHESIFY case studies, as the main ERDF programme (OP Zuid) addresses 3 provinces (Zeeland, Noord-Brabant and Limburg: Figure 1.2) of which Limburg is only one. Because of this fact the allocation of funds as indicated in the tables in this section relates to all 3 provinces and not only to Limburg.

Fig. 2. Geographical area of OP Zuid



Source: own elaboration

The province of Limburg stands out in the COHESIFY case studies as a more developed region, within a country that is among the net contributors to the EU budget, that receives relatively small amounts of EU funding. Its specificity is also the importance of the cross-border dimension, stemming from the province's location and manifested in participation in several territorial cooperation programmes. In many ways the findings in the management of EU Cohesion policy are, however, similar to those observed in the other Dutch case study – Flevoland. In fact, like other Dutch regions, Limburg benefits from ERDF funding as part of a



multi-regional programme – OP South Netherlands – therefore, one has to consider the case of Limburg through the prism of this programme covering the territories of three provinces.

The priorities of the programme have been arranged in a similar way to those of other Dutch multi-regional OPs as well, with an emphasis on innovation, and to a lesser extent, the urban dimension. The management structure for OP Zuid also echoes the Dutch 'polder model', with a division of roles between the participating provinces and informal provision to ensure a balanced distribution of funds (in practice, preventing that the majority of funding is absorbed by the economically leading region of Eindhoven). In the first programming period 2007-2013, ERDF allocation was informally divided between the provinces (and the regions within the provinces) involved, however, it was not the case in 2014-2020. Unlike in the case of OP West Netherlands, for instance, the programme management is not fragmented into territorial sub-parts with their own management sub-structures. The formal Management Authority is the province of Noord-Brabant, but programme management is sub-contracted to a semi-private body – Stimulus. In 2014-2020, the balance of powers has been further reinforced with the Chair of the Monitoring Committee being allocated to the Province of Limburg and the role of representation of the three participating provinces being entrusted to the Province of Zeeland.

While not encountering major implementation hurdles, it was noted that small and medium-sized enterprises are under-represented as beneficiaries of OP Zuid, which reflects a certain misalignment with the objective of supporting innovation. Moreover, while partnership arrangements work generally well, the evaluations flagged up an issue with a bias in the project appraisal in the 2007-2013 period with the potential beneficiaries (representatives of the provinces, municipalities) being members of the Monitoring and Steering Committees. However, once this problem had been recognised a shift towards more neutral assessors in 2014-2020 was ensured with the introduction of Expert Committees. This approach also limited the practice of 'pre-slicing of the pie' between the key stakeholders and allowed for a more competitive process with a focus on the actual added value of the bids for funding.

Concerning communication, the focus in Limburg is on highlighting the possibilities for acquiring grants by presenting concrete achievements of the projects supported, while packaging 'Europe in another message.' Therefore, the key addressees of communication activities are the potential beneficiaries and the partners involved in the management of the programme, which reflects the approach in other Dutch regions. Also similarly to other Dutch OPs, in OP Zuid the communication strategy emphasises the use of the existing networks of partners to facilitate communication. What is similar as well to the wider Dutch situation is the fact that communication remains challenging given (1) that ERDF funding in the programme corresponds to only 35% of the total budget, while the rest being funded from different 'pots', which makes it difficult to promote it as a 'European' programme; and (2) that there is limited awareness of Cohesion policy among the general public, as was evidenced by the insights from the stakeholder interviews and focus groups. In 2014-2020, a single national strategy for communication was adopted, with a focus on communicating on the EU and Cohesion policy on the national level, and engaging beneficiaries to communicate more on the projects themselves in regions. Last but not least, what stands out in the case of Limburg is the peculiarity of its EU identification, which in turn has a bearing on the conditions for effective



communication on Cohesion policy. What emerged from the interviews and focus groups in this region, being a stronghold of the anti-EU PVV party, was that the inhabitants tend to share positive views on 'Europe', understood as the close neighbourhood of Limburg – the adjacent Belgian and German regions – as opposed to more reserved and reluctant views on the 'EU', seen as more distant and more critically assessed.

