



# Cohesion policy implementation, performance and communication

## LIMBURG PROVINCE THE NETHERLANDS

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## 1. Introduction

### Objectives and rationale

The objective of this case study is to investigate EU Cohesion policy performance and communication and the impact on citizens' attitudes to the EU in Limburg, the Netherlands. The case study also contextualises comparative COHESIFY research findings and provides more in-depth insights into the performance and communication of Cohesion policy. The selection criteria for the Dutch case studies included Cohesion policy eligibility and financial intensity, programme types, governance system, European identity (also related to the specific geographical features and experience of cross-border cooperation), and Cohesion policy implementation setting and performance.

### Funding and eligibility

Both Dutch case studies in COHESIFY, that of Limburg and of Flevoland, bring interesting and rare insights on Cohesion policy, its implementation and communication and the relation of those to EU identification, from the perspective of a country that is a net contributor to EU budget, is one of the most economically developed among the EU Member States and, hence, is not much exposed to the influence of Cohesion policy, which channels most of its funding towards the less developed territories of the EU. In other words, the Dutch cases shed light on the relationship nexus between EU identification and Cohesion policy in a context where the latter is not a major source of finance for public investment, as is the case in the Polish regions, for instance.

Limburg is a relatively affluent region, also in comparison to the other Dutch case study area, Flevoland. It thus was classified under 'Competitiveness and Employment Regions' objective in 2007-2013 period and 'More Developed Regions' (above 90% of EU27 GDP per capita average) for 2014-2020 period. This entails a relatively small size of the allocation of EU funds for Limburg (e.g. roughly a third of the 186 million euros allocated to South Netherlands for 2007-2013), as compared to less developed European regions. In 2015, according to Eurostat, the regional gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in Limburg corresponded to 109% of EU average (as compared to 164% in Noord-Holland, where Amsterdam is located, and 99% in Flevoland). The case study focuses on the ERDF Operational Programmes in 2007-13 and 2014-20, although it touches upon territorial cooperation programmes as well due to the importance of those for Limburg.

### Governance

The Dutch cases also offer an example of regions operating in a unitary yet decentralised state, with the provinces having elected assemblies, appointing a provincial executive body. The provinces also have relatively broad competences, with responsibilities (albeit often shared with the central government and municipalities) for land use planning, transport, economy, agriculture, environmental protection, recreation, welfare and culture as well as financial oversight of the municipalities. Despite having important competences, the central government in the Netherlands remains a very strong actor and the provincial authorities compete and are often overshadowed by the biggest municipalities having their own agendas and greater political clout.

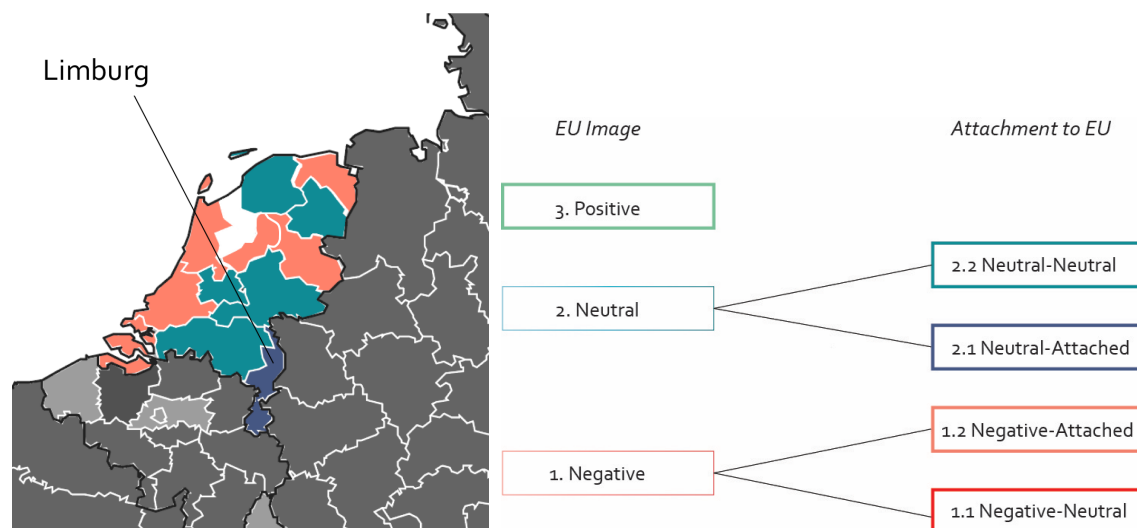
### EU identification

The strategy for choosing Dutch case study regions was aiming at choosing two highly contrasted cases. While Flevoland is a new province with less deeply embedded regional identity and, being relatively underdeveloped, an experience with a significant inflow of EU funds as part of Objective 1 until 2006, Limburg was established as a province in 1839, but its history stretches far back into the Middle Ages. Thus, 40.9% of the Limburgers surveyed in the COHESIFY citizens survey declared being very attached to their region.

Importantly, however, it is also located at the southernmost tip of the Netherlands, bordering Germany and Belgium. This particular location, as well as its historical connections to the neighbouring territories, is behind the province's long tradition of collaboration across borders. In fact, the Dutch Limburg together with the Belgian Limburg, Liège and the German-speaking Community in Belgium, as well as Aachen in Germany established Maas-Rhine Euregion in 1976, the oldest of such cross-border regions in Europe. The importance of the cross-border dimension was one of the key reasons for choosing Limburg as a case study, as it was assumed that it could affect EU identification and shed some light on the role of territorial cooperation in shaping it.

Indeed, in the regional typology of EU identification elaborated as part of COHESIFY (Dąbrowski, Stead and Mashhoodi, 2017) and based on Eurobarometer data, Limburg stood out from among the Dutch regions as having the most positive EU identification. It was classified as Neutral-Attached, whereby most citizens surveyed had a neutral image of the EU (corresponding to the evaluative dimension of EU identification, that is views on how well the EU performs) and positive in terms of attachment to the EU (corresponding to the affective dimension of EU identification, that is feelings of attachment to the EU). This EU identification profile was partly corroborated by the COHESIFY citizens survey indicating that 43.4% of the Limburgers surveyed claimed that the Netherlands had benefited from EU membership and 41.9% were in favour of European integration. The vast majority of the Limburg respondents, however, 83.2% declared being at least a little attached to the EU (21.1% very attached and 38.4% somewhat attached).

Figure 1.1 Typology on European identification in EU regions in the Netherlands



Source: Dąbrowski et al., 2017.

### Implementation settings

The COHESIFY analysis of the regional relevance of EU policies, examining the objective vulnerability, receptivity and desirability of EU policies, from the point of view of the structural development situation, needs and challenges of regions, along with the analysis of relations between the features of territories, their receptiveness to EU policies and the perceptions of the EU and EU Cohesion policy, resulted in the development of territorial typologies, which also served the basis for the case study selection. Analysis of regional policy implementation settings classified Limburg as a region with an opportunistic policy setting (i.e. where Cohesion policy intervention is not necessary but the resident population requests it) in a Eurosceptic context (i.e. the good quality of institutions is not matched with a widespread support to EU institutions), at least when it comes to support for tangible private assets, that is investment in small and medium enterprises (SMEs), innovation and tourism (Capello

and Perucca, 2017). When it comes to tangible public assets, that is mainly infrastructures (transport, healthcare, energy), Limburg was classified as having an appropriate policy setting (i.e. clear objective need for intervention, irrespective of the perceived needs of the resident population) in a Eurosceptic context. Concerning intangible public assets (investment in social inclusion policies, vocational training, supporting women on the labour market, etc.) Limburg, like all Dutch provinces, was classified as having an opportunistic policy setting in a Eurosceptic context (Capello and Perucca, 2017). Finally, concerning Cohesion policy implementation and performance, COHESIFY research conducted by Smętkowski et al. (2018) concluded that Limburg could be classified as low growth dynamics area with a low scale of funding, and low reported achievements of EU funding invested in the region.

## **Methodology**

In addition to secondary and primary resources for the desk-based analysis, the case study is based on a rich set of original data collected through stakeholder survey, stakeholder interviews, focus groups and citizen survey, as detailed below.

### *Stakeholder interviews*

Interviews were conducted with 10 stakeholders representing the Managing Authority (including the Communication officer), economic and social partners, civil society organisations, local and regional governments, and implementing partners at regional level. Most of the interviews were carried out between June and September 2017 (see Annex 1 for more details).

### *Focus groups*

In the case study of Limburg, 12 participants (4 female and 8 male) took part in 3 focus groups in the cities of Maastricht and Delft. The groups included between 4-6 participants, of which two were homogenous per age cohort (21-30 and 64-74 respectively). The third one was more heterogeneous (24-75). All three were somewhat misbalanced with respect to gender, but this did not hinder the level of engagement by the female participant in the discussion. The focus group in Delft was organised outside the regions and included students (BSc, MSc, PhD, postdoc) originally from Limburg. The participants were recruited by different methods. The first one was through the COHESIFY citizen survey, which asked a random sample of respondents' living in Limburg to provide a contact telephone number if they were willing to participate in a focus group discussion on the topic of EU funding and attitudes to the EU. The second method was by posters throughout the TU Delft campus recruiting students originally from Limburg. The third method was on the basis of an advertisement in a regional newspaper. A payment was made to each participant as an incentive to participate (see Annex 2 for more details).

### *Stakeholder survey*

A stakeholders' online survey was carried out in the spring – summer of 2017. The survey was answered by 19 stakeholders, involved in ERDF and Interreg Funds during the 2007-13 and 2014-20 programming periods, including (i) Monitoring Committee members: stakeholders involved in the management and monitoring of operational Programmes, including Managing Authorities, implementing bodies, associations of local authorities or businesses, economic and social partners, education institutions, civil society organisations and NGOs; (ii) local state authorities: stakeholders involved in the delivery of EU projects as project promoters at the local level, (iii) and other economic development stakeholders (See Annex 3 for more details).

### *Citizen survey*

A citizen survey was held in Limburg with similar questions throughout all case studies. For Limburg there were 558 participants.

### Structure of the case study

The case study is structured as follows. The contextual scene is set in the next section by reviewing the socio-economic and political background including public opinion on the EU, territorial identity issues and political context. It then proceeds to the analysis of the implementation and performance of Cohesion policy, based on desk research, stakeholders' surveys and interviews. The analysis of the communication aspects follows in terms of the effectiveness of communication strategies and wider media framing of Cohesion policy, based on desk research, surveys, interviews and media framing analysis. Public perceptions of Cohesion policy and the impact of Cohesion policy on identification with the EU are reviewed in the final sections, drawing on policymaker surveys and interviews, the citizen survey and focus group results. The key findings are summarised in the conclusion including the policy implications and recommendations stemming from the case study.

## 2. Context and background

### 2.1 Introduction

Limburg is one of the 12 Dutch provinces (all at NUTS2 level). The province is 2.209 km<sup>2</sup> large, situated at the very South-East of the Netherlands with a long border with Germany and Belgium<sup>1</sup>. Because of this characteristic Limburg is part of a number of cross border European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) programmes. Limburg covers 33 local authorities with in total 1.1 million inhabitants.

Figure 2.1. 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 regional economy towards a service economy, national government largely invested in regional economy. Since 1989 Limburg was

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<sup>1</sup> The border with Germany and Belgium is even longer than the one with the rest of the Netherlands.



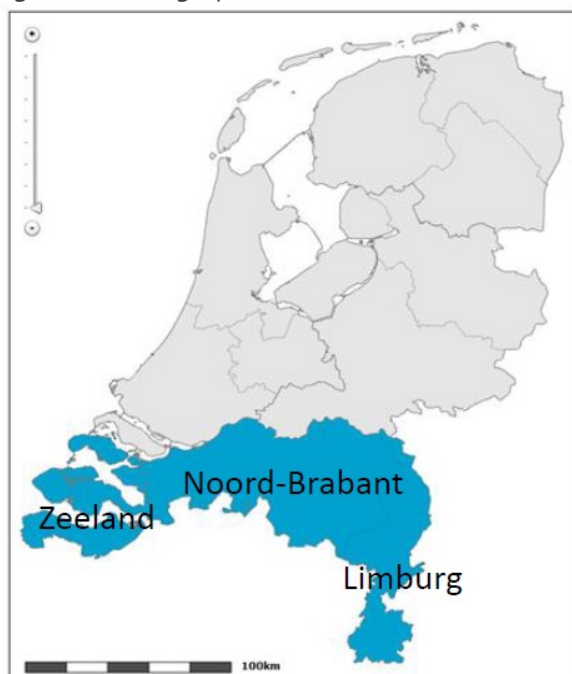
involved in several ERDF and ESF programmes. ERDF funding programmes have always been closely related to national sectoral programmes, such as the current national policy on economic top sectors. Top sectors are areas in which Dutch businesses and research centres excel. Businesses, universities, research centres and government jointly work on knowledge and innovation to make its position even stronger. Another national policy area closely related to ERDF is the Regulation on Stimulation of innovation of SMEs (Small and Medium-sized Enterprises) Region and Top sectors (*Mkb-innovatiestimulerende Regio en Topsectoren* or MIT in Dutch). National government and regions jointly make money available with the aim to stimulate SME innovation across regional boundaries.

Currently Limburg is involved in the following ERDF programmes:

- *Operationeel Programma Zuid-Nederland* (Operational Programme South Netherlands or OP Zuid) which addresses three Dutch provinces of which Limburg is one;
- *Interreg IVA/VA Euregio Maas-Rijn* (addressing part of Limburg, Belgium and Germany);
- *Interreg IVA/VA Vlaanderen-Nederland* (addressing a.o. Limburg in the Netherlands);
- *Interreg Duitsland-Nederland* (addressing a.o. Limburg in the Netherlands). Euregio Waal-Rijn is part of this programme;
- *Interreg IVB/VB North West Europe* (NWE, addressing a.o. Limburg in the Netherlands);
- *Plattelandontwikkeling 3* (POP3, European subsidy programme for the development, preservation and innovation of the Dutch countryside).

In this case report we will focus mainly on the Operational Programme South Netherlands or OP Zuid. Additionally we will refer to Euregio Maas-Rijn as an example of a cross border 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<sup>2</sup>.

Figure 2.2. Geographical area of OP Zuid



Source: own elaboration

<sup>2</sup> In OP Zuid it was deliberately decided to not allocate ERDF funds geographically, but according to priority. On the basis of Annual Implementation Reports and Evaluations it is thus not possible to deduct the allocations for Limburg only.



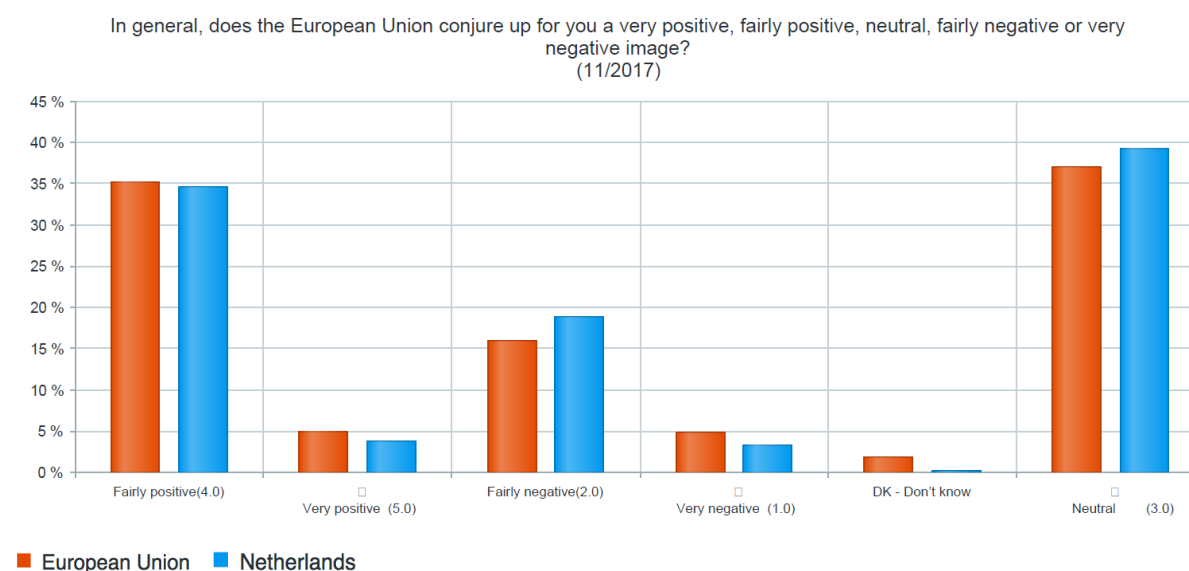
Within European Cohesion policy 2007-2013, the EU set out three objectives: (1) convergence, (2) regional competition and employment, (3) territorial cooperation. Within Objective 2, activities can be funded by two funds: the European Fund for Regional Development (ERDF) and the European Social Fund (ESF). OP Zuid fits in priority 2 (regional competition and employment) and only concerns ERDF funding. Objective 3 (territorial cooperation) relates to transnational, cross-border and European cooperation in networks and is covered in Interreg programmes (OP Zuid 2007-2013).

## 2.2 EU attitudes and identity

Since the early 2000s, the profile of the Netherlands in the EU has changed: from a mainstream, no-nonsense partner to one with growing suspicion of the EU. Since the EU enlargement in 2004 the Netherlands has less of a say than some of the newest members, yet it is one of the largest per-capita contributors to the EU budget. A first sign of estrangement was the rejection in a 2005 referendum of the EU's proposed constitutional treaty. The perception that the Dutch were left paying the bill while other countries flouted the rules became fertile ground for Eurosceptic politicians. It boosted the anti-immigrant, anti-EU popularity of Geert Wilders and made the Dutch government increasingly critical of the European Commission and ever-closer EU cooperation. By 2013, Dutch national government was actively seeking a smaller, more effective Commission and finding support in Germany and other member states.

Gradually, public opposition to the EU hardened. The rejection of the EU Association Agreement with Ukraine in a referendum in April 2016 underlined the image of the Netherlands as a country critical of the EU. Today, support for EU membership hovers at around 40% (Korteweg, 2017).

Figure 2.3. Image of citizens in the Netherlands (blue) on the EU compared to the EU average (red)

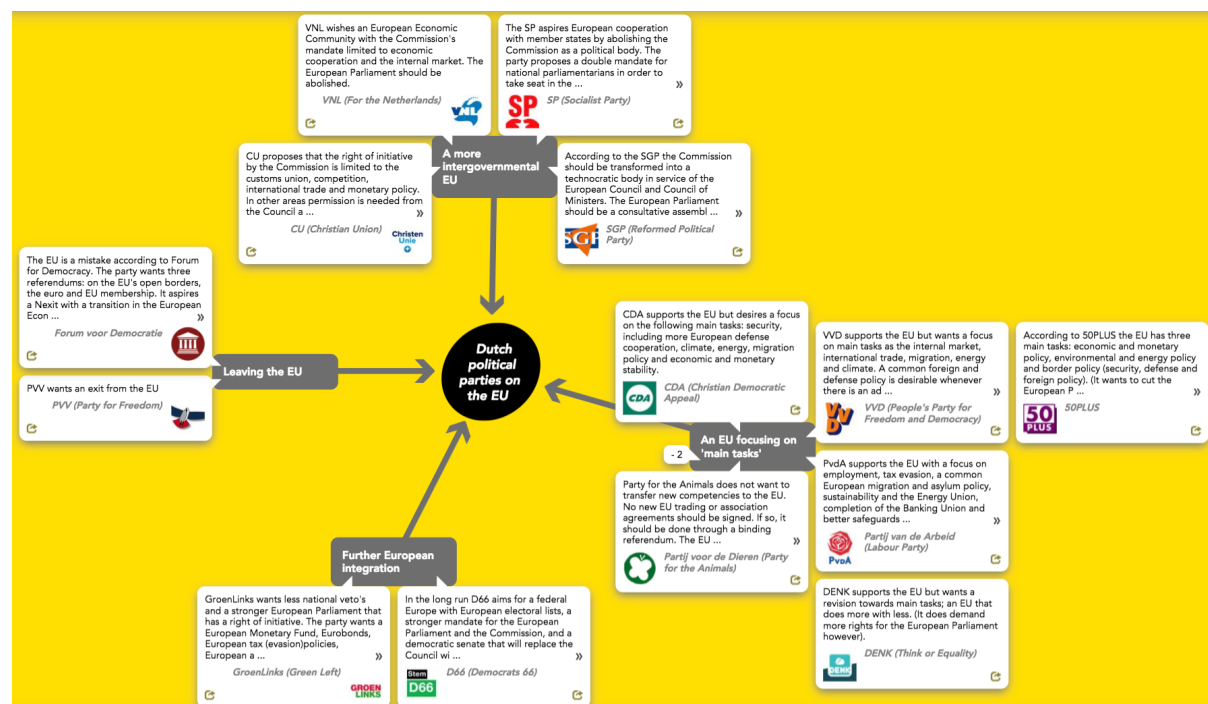


Source: Eurobarometer

## 2.3 Political context

The results of the Dutch national elections on March 15 2017 were looked upon in the EU as a possible precursor of the upcoming elections in France and Germany later that year. Although the EU hardly played a role in the debates during the Dutch election campaign, much of the international debate focused on whether an 'anti-EU' government will be elected with at least two political parties that desire to leave the EU: PVV and *Forum voor Democratie*. The (extreme) right wing party of Geert Wilders, the Party for Freedom (PVV), calls for a 'Nexit' and is currently still leading in most polls. At the same time, this lead amounts to an average of 20% of the votes only, with many political parties refusing to form a coalition with the PVV. A new political party, Forum for Democracy (right wing, conservative), that favours more direct democracy desires to (ultimately) leave the EU, too. The Christian Union (socially conservative, economically left wing), the Reformed Political Party (theocratic, conservative right wing) and the Socialist Party aspire a more intergovernmental EU with the power of the European Commission being diminished. A new right wing party, called "For the Netherlands", wants to return to the European Economic Community. Mainstream political parties such as the Labour Party (*Partij van de Arbeid* - PvdA), Christian Democrats (CDA) and the centre right liberals (VVD) still support the EU but express that it should focus on certain so called 'main tasks'. The Party for the Animals (ecological interest party) does not want to transfer new competences to the EU. The new political parties DENK (left wing immigrant party) and 50PLUS (an interests party for the elderly) are ambiguous about the EU but share the opinion of an EU of 'main tasks'. Two parties are explicitly in favour of further European integration. The Dutch Green Left (*GroenLinks*) desires a stronger European Parliament. D66, a centrist liberal party, aspires in the long run a federal Europe (Luining, 2017).

Figure 2.3. Dutch political parties on the EU



Source: <http://mattermap.nl/embed/2ti73/75>

These insights are broadly consistent with the party manifesto analysis conducted as part of COHESIFY (Debus & Gross, 2017), according to which the Dutch party system is relatively strongly divided both on European integration and on Cohesion policy. The analysis of the manifestos across several electoral cycles (2006, 2010, 2014) showed that while the CDA, D66, *GroenLinks* and PvdA favour both the EU and its Cohesion policy, parties like CU, SGP, SP, PvdD and PVV remain opposed

to the depending of European integration and also are against Cohesion policy (Debus & Gross, 2017, p. 40).

Table 2.1 National party positions on European integration and EU Cohesion policy in the Netherlands

Party	Year (CHES data)	Policy positions	
		(a) European integration	(b) Cohesion policy
CDA	2006	5.33	4.80
	2010	5.29	5.25
	2014	5.55	6.00
PvdA	2006	5.58	5.20
	2010	5.29	5.13
	2014	5.46	5.40
VVD	2006	4.50	2.60
	2010	3.93	3.86
	2014	5.18	4.50
D66	2006	6.50	5.20
	2010	6.64	5.38
	2014	6.82	5.60
GL	2006	5.45	4.80
	2010	6.21	5.25
	2014	6.55	5.80
SP	2006	2.00	2.60
	2010	2.42	3.14
	2014	2.10	3.00
CU	2006	3.45	3.20
	2010	3.79	4.50
	2014	3.44	2.50
PVV	2006	1.55	1.60
	2010	1.36	2.00
	2014	1.09	1.20
SGP	2006	—	—
	2010	3.00	4.33
	2014	2.56	2.50
PvdD	2006	—	—
	2010	3.63	4.20
	2014	3.71	1.50
50PLUS	2006	—	—
	2010	—	—
	2014	4.80	3.50

*Note: Party policy positions are based on a CHES seven-point scale, ranging from 'strongly opposed' (1) to 'strongly in favour' (7);*

Source: Debus & Gross, 2017, p. 40

In Limburg elections the party positions on the EU and on Cohesion policy are similar to those in Flevoland and broadly reflect the national-level trend (Debus & Gross, 2017). This is not true, however for PvdA which is more opposed to European integration and Cohesion policy in its Limburg manifestos than it is in the manifestos for Flevoland (see table 2.2). There is also a difference to Flevoland in terms of emphasis on European issues in Limburg manifestos as compared to Flevoland. Thus, in Limburg sub-national parties tend to devote some more space to those issues (3.7 per cent in Limburg, 3.33 per cent in Flevoland), as indicated on Figure 2.4. Interestingly, EU funding is an issue covered in Limburg's parties manifestos, particularly those of LOKAAL LIMBURG and CDA (see Fig. 2.5).

Table 2.2 Regional party positions on European integration and EU Cohesion policy in Limburg

Party	Election year	Policy positions	
		(a) European integration	(b) Cohesion policy
CDA	2007	6.13	6.07
	2011	5.48	5.23
	2015	5.01	5.27
CU	2007	4.67	4.15
	2011	4.82	4.40
	2015	—	—
GL	2007	5.51	5.00
	2011	3.81	3.88
	2015	5.19	4.72
Limburgs Belang	2007	3.45	3.79
	2011	—	—
	2015	—	—
PvdD	2007	3.70	2.30
	2011	3.15	1.14
	2015	2.49	-0.05
PvdA	2007	5.58	5.41
	2011	4.37	4.44
	2015	3.21	3.70
SP	2007	3.29	3.75
	2011	2.94	3.05
	2015	4.02	4.06
D66	2007	5.27	5.09
	2011	6.72	5.89
	2015	6.61	5.51
PNL	2007	2.49	2.45
	2011	4.56	4.72
	2015	—	—
50PLUS	2007	—	—
	2011	5.01	4.82
	2015	—	—
PVV	2007	—	—
	2011	0.47	1.62
	2015	-0.68	0.76
LOOKAL-LIMBURG	2007	—	—
	2011	—	—
	2015	5.67	5.38
Volkspartij Limburg	2007	—	—
	2011	—	—
	2015	4.70	4.50
VVD	2007	5.55	5.15
	2011	4.73	4.78
	2015	4.36	4.40

*Note: Party policy positions are based on 'Wordscores' estimations of regional parties' election manifestos. Low scores indicate opposed positions towards European integration and EU Cohesion policy, respectively, while high scores indicate positions in favour of European integration and EU Cohesion policy.*

Source: Debus & Gross, 2017, p. 43

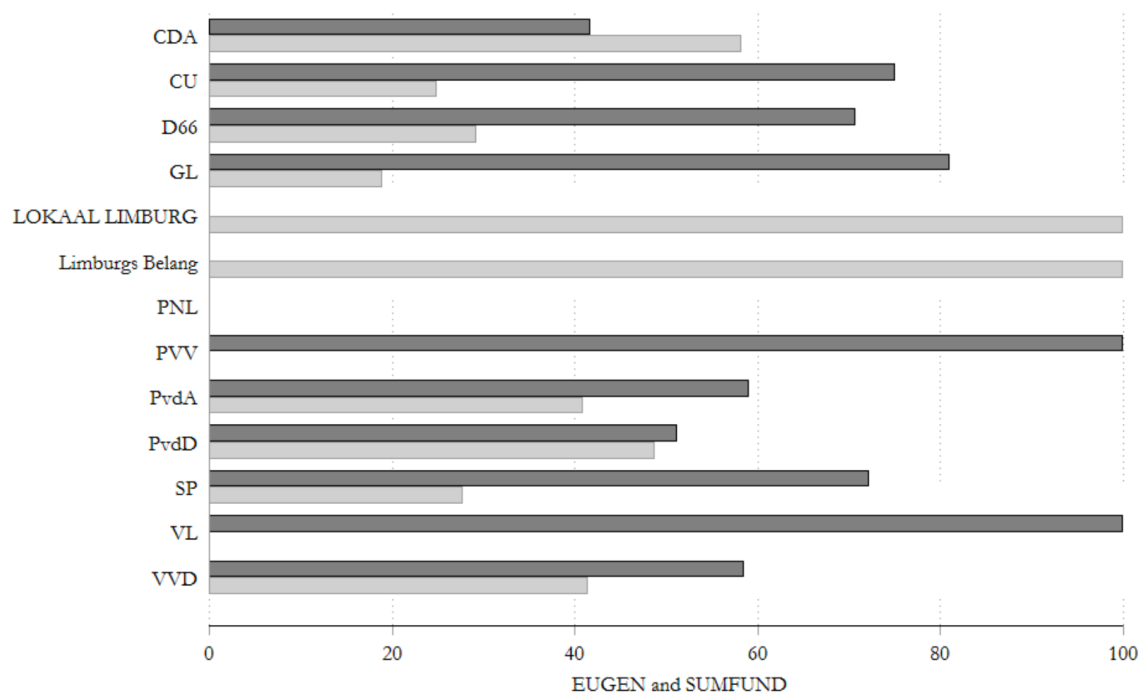
Fig. 2.4 Share of a party's Limburg manifesto devoted to European issues and CP by election year



Note: Bars show the percentage of the regional manifestos (grouped by party and election year) that focuses on European issues (EUPER). A blank space indicates that a party's election manifesto could not be coded.

Source: Debus & Gross, 2017, p. 44

Fig. 2.5 Percentage of words that parties devote in Limburg manifestos to EU/Europe and to EU and to Cohesion policy funding



*Note: Bars in dark grey show the average percentage of the regional manifestos (grouped by party) that focuses on Europe in general (EUGEN). Bars in light grey show the average sum of all categories related to EU funding (SUMFUND) in parties' regional manifestos.*

Source: Debus & Gross, 2017, p. 44

## 2.4 Regional and local governance

Limburg is one of the twelve Dutch provinces and comprises 33 municipalities. The Dutch institutional system consists of three formal government levels: the national level of government, provinces and municipalities. Additionally there is a functional tier (regional water authorities) and a myriad of formal and network-based collaborative arrangements. All three government tiers have deliberative assemblies, which are elected by direct universal suffrage. They have an autonomous power of regulation and administration of their own internal affairs as well as a taxing power. This system also includes numerous formal and informal network-based collaborative arrangements to jointly provide public services across administrative boundaries. The Dutch decentralised system still has a paradoxical nature, with several features revealing the strong presence of the central government at the local level, limiting the autonomy of the subnational government, in particular their competences and finances. However, the Dutch multi-level governance system draws its strength from the predominant political culture emphasising collaboration and consensus from well-developed vertical and horizontal linkages. This rich network represents an asset for the implementation of the subnational government reform and intricate policies cutting across levels of government, even if it requires efforts to align and co-ordinate the complex interactions (OECD, 2014).

## 3. Cohesion policy implementation and performance

### 3.1 EU Cohesion policy strategic and implementation framework

#### 3.1.1 Operational Programme Zuid-Nederland 2007-2013

The three major content-related priorities in the Operational Programme 2007-2013 for the southern part of the Netherlands are:

1. Knowledge economy, entrepreneurship & innovation;
2. Attractive regions;
3. Urban dimension.

In addition a 4<sup>th</sup> priority is Technical assistance.

Priority 1 focusses on strengthening the innovativeness of the South Netherlands economy in a broad sense and further strengthening and expanding the position of Southern Netherlands as a top technology region. It addresses research and development (R&D), creativity and entrepreneurship represent the basis for innovation and the creation of new products and services with economic value.

Activities which were covered under this priority are:

- Stimulation of market-oriented cooperation between government, business and knowledge institutions with the aim of intensifying the innovation process.

- Organizing clusters of companies and companies knowledge settings around product combinations, market and technology.
- Enhancing R&D capacity (and especially stimulating public investment in R&D), increasing the innovative power of SMEs, and the involvement of SMEs in research and development.
- Supporting starters (up to five years after creation) and (fast) growing companies.
- Business-oriented activities for the connection of labour supply on labour demand.

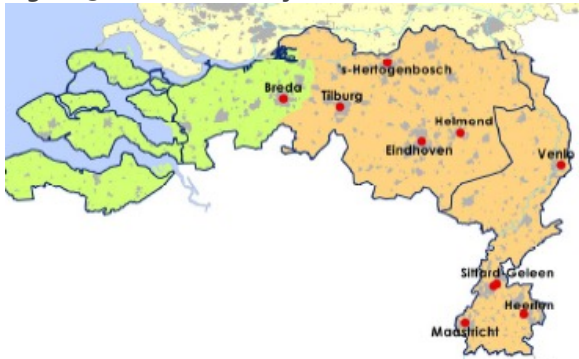
Priority 2: Attractive regions. The main objective is strengthening the business climate in South Netherlands in line with the regional innovation agendas. Aspects of the business climate which this priority addresses are accessibility of persons and goods, quality of housing, quality of living environment and external security. The aim is to spatially focus the resources for this priority and to allocate 90% of the resources into the economic core areas, urban networks and tourism projects in the province of Zeeland.

Activities which were covered under this priority deal with:

- Improving the quality of existing industrial sites by applying what is already present differently, better and/or innovatively.
- Developing top milieus and incubators for the creative class outside cities addressed by Dutch national policy on major cities.
- Investing in green, culture and nature if that increases the attractiveness of the region and gives an impulse to tourism development or an attractive business climate.
- Activities to improve environmental quality, especially air quality.
- Developing and implementing innovative transport concepts for passengers and goods.
- Implementing innovative ICT concepts for the purpose of accessibility, attractive residential and workplaces, and tourism.
- Developing and implementing instruments that enable the physical expansion of tourism activity.
- Region promotion and branding, aiming at tourism and business location.

Priority 3: Urban dimension. This priority is related to Dutch national policy on major cities (Grote Stedenbeleid or GSB in Dutch). The main objective is to contribute to a safe and attractive living and working environment for all residents of the cities addressed in GSB policy on the nine major cities in South Netherlands (Figure 1.3). Four of these are situated in Limburg: Maastricht, Sittard, Geleen en Venlo. OP Zuid will – jointly with ESF – pay attention to creation of employment for the urban population.

Figure 3.1. The nine major cities in OP Zuid addressed in Priority 3



Source: OP Zuid 2007-2013

Examples of activities which are covered under this priority deal with:

- Stimulating the combination of living and working in neighbourhoods, for example by developing ICT concepts, new forms of housing and incubators.



- Creating urban top milieus by developing knowledge infrastructure, (culture) historical identity of the city and expansion of the package of cultural facilities.
- Improving the quality of workplaces through redevelopment of business buildings, contributions to the establishment of park management and investing in public space.
- Increasing participation of citizens by means of new residential care and ICT concepts which can increase the interaction between citizens and between citizens and government, and developing a sense of a district/city/region feeling through education and information projects.
- Investing in the transformation of inner city areas with economic added value.
- Improving the attractiveness and/or safety of public space through physical measures (in space and/or green) and a joint development of methods for addressing urban problems.

Priority 4 is about Technical Assistance. The main objective of this priority is the successful and adequate implementation of the operational programme in line with the substantive programme objectives and the European frameworks. This priority will fund the organization's structure of the programme. Also activities on communication, monitoring and evaluation are part of Technical Assistance.

Table 3.1. Operational Programme South Netherlands (OP Zuid) 2007-2013

<b>OP Zuid 2007-2013</b>			
Priority axes	Total eligible costs	EFRD allocation (%)	EFRD allocation (EUR)
Priority 1: Innovation, entrepreneurship and knowledge economy	385,361,579	24.6 %	94,355,082
Priority 2: Attractive regions	175,540,019	24.9 %	43,675,237
Priority 3: Attractive cities	121,014,815	32.8 %	39,687,408
Priority 4: Technical assistance	14,873,000	50.0 %	7,436,000
<b>Total OP Zuid</b>	<b>696,744,413</b>	<b>26.7 %</b>	<b>185,900,000</b>

Source: OP Zuid 2007-2013

The interviews with stakeholders bring forward the following main socio-economic needs and problems that the OP Zuid programme addressed over the last two programme periods (2007-2013 and 2014-2020). Focus in Limburg shifted from infrastructure, construction of business locations and development in tourism and nature and landscape in the mid-1980s to innovation and low carbon economy at present. In both periods innovation was a key motive. In the 1<sup>st</sup> programme period it was about the positioning of regions and promotion of innovation, where innovation was formulated in a broad sense. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> programme period innovation has been narrowed down and focussed on a sustainable society.

For Limburg the increase of employment and stimulation of the labour market have always been important. Innovation is also applied to these objectives by addressing cooperation between triple helix participants and consortia in an innovative way as well as stimulating innovative ways of thinking within educational institutions, companies, but also in the government itself.

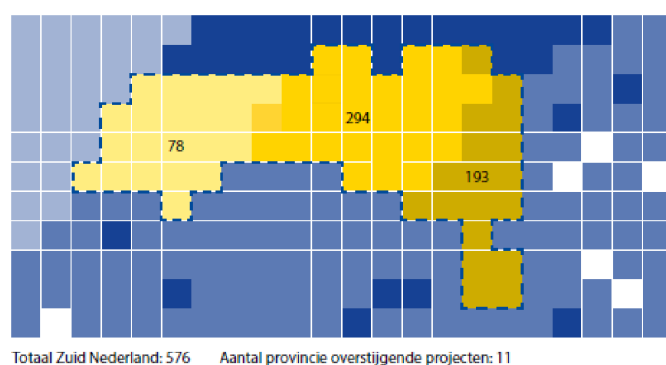
For the 2007-2013 programme period of OP Zuid an indicative distribution was made with respect to the budget: 1/3 for the province of Limburg, 1/6 for the province of Zeeland and about half for the province of Noord-Brabant. The budget for Noord-Brabant was then again indicatively distributed

across three provincial regions in order to avoid that too much funds would go to the economically powerful region of Eindhoven. For the 2014-2020 this indicative distribution was eliminated, although the cooperation covenant still includes an informal agreement in order to guarantee that all regions within OP Zuid benefit from the available funds. If there would be proof for an unbalance in distribution of resources, a corrective call could be issued to cover all regions in South Netherlands in a more balanced way.

In each Annual Implementation Report (AIR) the results are presented according to the four priorities. The allocated budget is presented according to priority theme dimensions (86 in total), finance dimension (4 in total), territorial dimension (10 in total<sup>3</sup>) economic activities (23 in total), location dimension (NUTS<sub>3</sub> and NUTS<sub>4</sub> levels). The location dimension includes the provincial level of Limburg and the three COROP regions within that province (Limburg consists of 3 NUTS<sub>3</sub> regions) (AIRs OP Zuid 2007-2015).

When looking at the number of projects with OP Zuid 2007-2013 funding, we see in Figure 1.4 that the province of Noord-Brabant had most projects (294), followed by Limburg (193). Zeeland had only 78 projects. In total there were 11 cross provincial projects.

Figure 3.2. Number of projects in each of the three provinces in OP Zuid 2007-2013



Source: Stimulus Programmamanagement (2017)

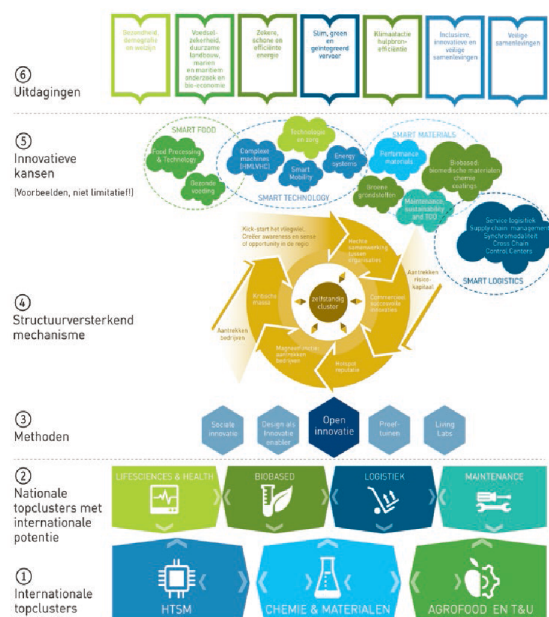
### 3.2.2 Operational Programme Zuid-Nederland 2014-2020

One of the starting points for the programme period 2014-2020 was that the European Structural and Investment Funds would focus more at the national level in order to achieve synergy. As in the preceding programme period OP Zuid Nederland 2014-2020 is a European innovation programme for the provinces of Limburg, Noord-Brabant and Zeeland. It offers funding for projects aimed at innovation promotion within SMEs and the transition to a low carbon economy and on the conditions for these focus areas.

OP Zuid 2014-2020 is closely related to the Dutch national top sector policy and the basis is the Regional Innovation Strategy for Smart Specialization (RIS<sub>3</sub>) developed jointly by the three South Netherlands Provinces (see Figure 1.5). In RIS<sub>3</sub> the objectives of Europe have been translated into regional social challenges and is one focus on a number of strong clusters with competitiveness.

<sup>3</sup> Urban, Mountains, Islands, Sparsely and very sparsely populated areas, Rural areas (other than mountains, islands or sparsely and very sparsely populated areas), Former EU external borders (after 30.04.2004), Outermost region, Cross-border cooperation area, Transnational cooperation area, Inter-regional cooperation area

Figure 3.5. Regional Innovation Strategy for Smart Specialisation (RIS3)



Source: OP Zuid (2014-2020)

OP Zuid 2014-2020 particularly focusses on improving regional competitiveness and employment by promoting innovation and transition to a low-carbon economy. Special attention is paid to innovative SMEs in a number of top sectors and their relationships with knowledge institutions and large companies. The programme offers subsidy opportunities the following sub-objectives:

- Promotion of cooperation between companies, and between companies, knowledge and research institutions and government tiers.
- Strengthening and widening the South Netherlands innovation system by stimulating cross-overs between international top clusters, and between international and national top clusters.
- Stimulating open innovation and methods and related processes through, for example, living labs, co-creation, social innovation and utilisation of design.
- Better connection between education and labour market demand of technically educated people, by stimulating education programmes and facilities in which both the private sector and knowledge institutions are involved and which respond to qualitative demands on technical talent of the private sector in the top clusters.
- Innovation in techniques, products, processes and renewable energy production services and energy efficiency.

- Smart rolling out of new techniques in the built environment (OP Zuid 2014-2020).

To address innovation a public-private partnership has been set up in the province of Limburg. Brightlands is the brand name of a joint triple helix initiative of the Dutch province of Limburg, Maastricht University, Maastricht University Medical Center+, Zuyd University of Applied Sciences, Fontys International Campus Venlo, in close partnership with leading companies in specific market areas. It is an open innovation community which connects four campuses in Limburg and embraces the following areas of expertise:

- Chemelot Campus on smart materials and sustainable manufacturing (location Sittard-Geleen);
- Maastricht Health Campus on regenerative medicine, precision medicine and innovative diagnostics (location Maastricht);
- Data science and smart services (Brightlands Smart Services Campus, location Heerlen),
- Food and nutrition (Brightlands Campus Greenport Venlo, location Venlo).

The campuses offer entrepreneurs, scientists and students, state of the art facilities to support development, innovation and growth. All Brightlands campuses are supported by the province of Limburg, Maastricht University, the Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs, private companies, as well as several European, national and local public funds. They are managed jointly by leadership teams of their member partners who administer their respective campus bodies.

Table 3.2. Operational Programme South Netherlands (OP Zuid) 2014-2020

<b>OP Zuid 2014-2020</b>			
Priority allocation	Source of co-financing	EU funding (EUR/%)	Total allocation (EUR)
Priority 1: Reinforcement innovation	Public co-fin.: € 45,814,600 Private co-fin.: € 94,032,500	€ 74,993,857 (34.9%)	€ 214,840,957
Priority 2: Low-carbon economy	Public co-fin.: € 31,786,000 Private co-fin.: € 31,786,000	€ 34,088,117 (34.9%)	€ 97,660,117
Technical assistance	Public co-fin.: € 4,545,082	€ 4,545,082 (50 %)	€ 9,090,164
<b>Total</b>	<b>Public co-fin.: € 82,145,682 Private co-fin.: € 125,818,500</b>	<b>€ 113,627,056 (35.3%)</b>	<b>€ 321,591,238</b>

Source: OP Zuid 2014-2020

Table 3.3. Operational Programme South Netherlands (OP Zuid) 2014-2020 (Committed on 31-12-2016)

<b>OP Zuid 2014-2020</b>			
Priority allocation	Source of financing	EFRD allocation (%)	EFRD allocation (EUR)
Priority 1B1: Reinforcement innovation system	Public co-fin.: € 29,078,857 Private co-fin.: € 33,163,020	23.5 %	19,121,935
Priority 1B2: Valorisation SME	Public co-fin.: € 419,659 Private co-fin.: € 15,239,074	30.4 %	6,851,766
Priority 1B3: Human Capital Agenda	Public co-fin.: € 2,197,018 Private co-fin.: € 3.108.315	34.2 %	2,755,921
Priority 4F: Low-carbon economy	Public co-fin.: € 4,151,146	34.2 %	9,574,120

	Private co-fin.: € 14,297,444		
<b>Total</b>	<b>Public co-fin.: € 37,397,278</b> <b>Private co-fin.: € 64,257,257</b>	<b>27.4 %</b>	<b>38,303,744</b>

Source: AIR OP Zuid 2016 (committed up to and including 31-12-2016)

For monitoring purpose the provinces of Limburg, Noord-Brabant and Zeeland have set up an overall monitoring system for European Programmes. This concerns not only the regionally managed Structural Funds, but also Horizon2020, Erasmus, LIFE, CEF, etc. They work towards a single South Netherlands report, which provides insight into the state of affairs in this OP region. In addition, a cross-section can be made according to different themes and sectors. The key points from the provincial and South Netherlands reports are submitted to the Monitoring Committee at a subsequent meeting. The underlying database is updated by Stimulus Programme Management annually.

### *3.1.3 Interreg programmes 2007-2013 and 2014-2020: Euregio Maas-Rijn as an example*

The Interreg programmes are of particular importance for Limburg due to its location on the meeting point of three national borders and its history of cooperation across those borders. The focus of these programmes is on cross-border projects and on cross-border economic development, education and culture. In the Operational Programme Interreg IVA 2007-2013 for Euregio Maas-Rijn the priorities were:

1. Strengthening the economic structure, promoting knowledge and innovation and more and better jobs
2. Nature and environment, energy, natural resources and mobility
3. Quality of life
4. Technical support

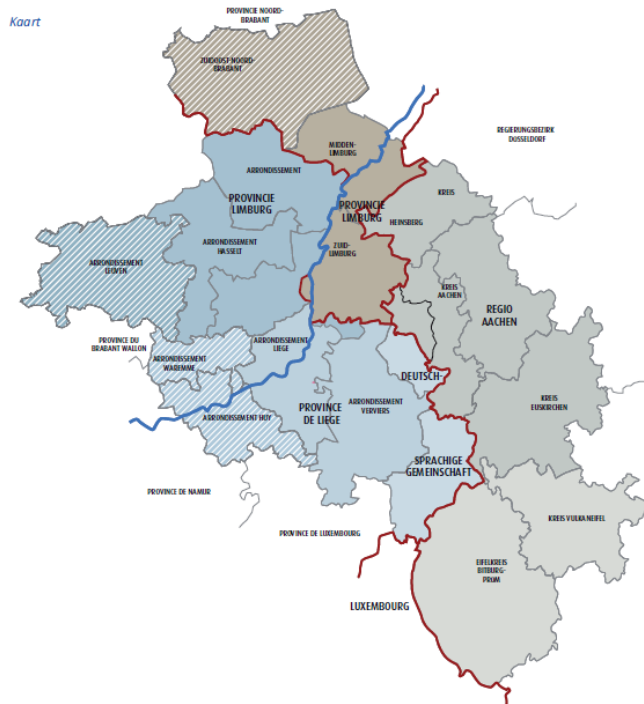
In 2014-2020 (VA) these priorities had been reformulated and focussed to:

1. Innovation 2020: strengthening of research, technological development and innovation
2. Economy 2020: improving the competitiveness of SMEs
3. Promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and any form of discrimination
4. Improving institutional capacity of government and stakeholders and efficient public administration
5. Technical support

Also in this programme there was attention for innovation and a shift from nature and environment to social issues.

The Interreg Euregio Maas-Rijn programme partly aimed at bridging cultural differences in business management and innovation between three countries and even more regions. This takes time and needs stimulation and thus the allocation of funds lags behind.

Figure 3.3. Cooperation and geographical area of Euregio Maas-Rijn



Source: OP Euregio Maas Rijn 2007-2013

An example of a project result which was mentioned from one of the other Interreg programmes is the current way in which water managers now cooperate in a structured manner in South Netherlands and Flanders in the field of water quality and water quantity. It is a result of Interreg programmes that water managers now have a broader view which is not only related to their own territory.

### 3.1.4 Implementation framework and partnership structures

The province of Noord-Brabant is the management authority of the Operational Programme South Netherlands. The Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality is the certification authority and responsible for verifying the accuracy and completeness of payment requests and spending statements submitted by the Management Authority to the European Commission. The Ministry of Finance is the audit authority and ensuring that the management and control system of the operational programme is functioning properly. Additionally this authority will verify by sampling whether the declared expenses are correct. Since 2007 programme management is outsourced to Stimulus, a government related organisation working on programme management of European, national and regional subsidy programmes in southern Netherlands and Flanders. Stimulus advises and facilitates project initiators in preparing their applications and implementing approved projects, monitors the financial and substantive progress of the programme and ensures communication and publicity of the programme. The OP Zuid Stimulus team has a size of 8-10 FTE (financial and programme management and 1.0 FTE included for communication). Stimulus puts a lot of effort – jointly with partners as the provinces, regional development companies, triple helix organisations and SMEs – in supporting potential beneficiaries in formulating a good project proposal and business case.

Also in place is a Monitoring Committee which monitors the effectiveness and quality of the implementation of OP Zuid. It decides on the overall strategy and policy of the programme and is responsible for global supervision of the implementation of the programme. In addition there are

three Steering Committees: for Southwest Netherlands, Southeast Netherlands and the South Netherlands cities. These Steering Committees have an advisory role on assessment of proposals and allocation of funds for the Monitoring Committee and have thus a content related role. Members of the Monitoring Committee broadly represent both the public and private sector, such as the various government levels, small and large businesses, representations of trade unions, knowledge institutions, nature and conservation organisations etc. Steering Committees meet on average four times a year.

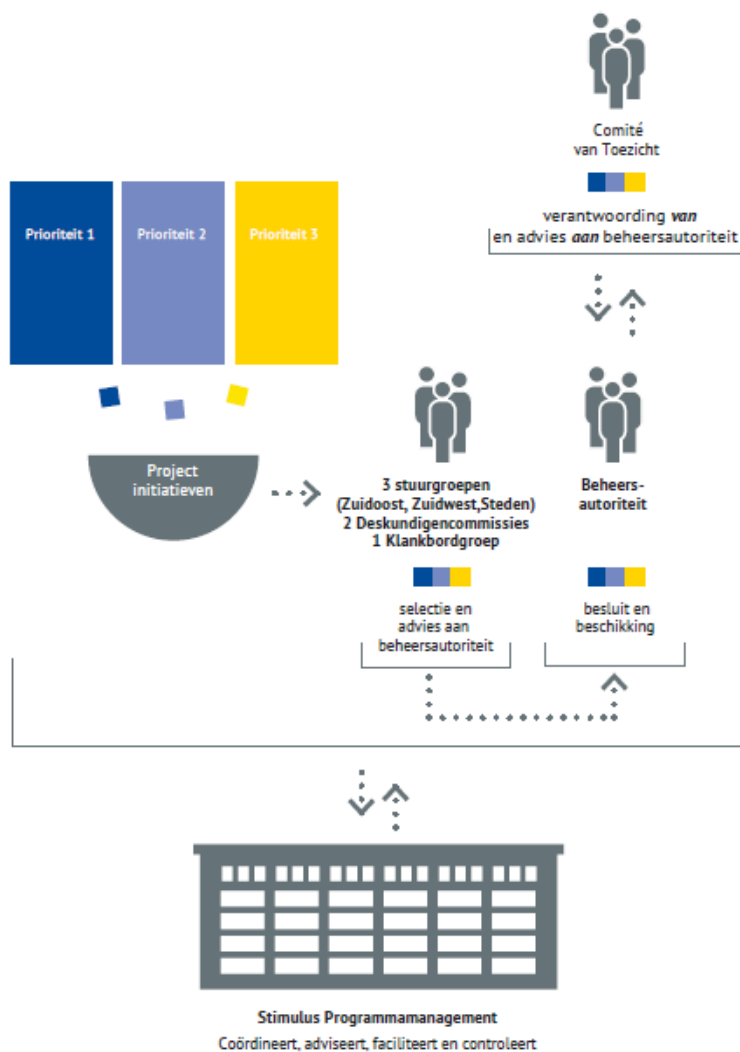
Stakeholders from the private sector consider the management structure as requested by the EU as rather bureaucratic. Knowledge and research institutions are already more used to these bureaucratic structures as they rely partly on subsidy programmes. Steps have already been taken to make management more effective. The Monitoring Committee is chaired by the commissioner of the province of Noord-Brabant which is the managing authority. The Steering Committees were responsible for the assessment of project proposals and political and regional interests were part of discussions. One of the interviewees characterised the procedure as 'having a butcher inspecting the quality of his own meat'.

Figure 3.4. Governance structure OP Zuid 2007-2013<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Translation: Comité van Toezicht = Monitoring Committee. Verantwoording van en advies aan beheersautoriteit = Accountability and advice to managing authority. Beheersautoriteit = Managing Authority. Deskundigencommissies = Expert Committees. Stuurgroepen = Steering Committees. Selectie en advies aan beheersautoriteit = selection and advice to Managing Authority. Klankbordgroep = Soundboard Group. Besluit en beschikking = decision. Coördineert, adviseert, faciliteert en controleert = coordinates, advises, facilitates and checks.





Source: OP Zuid 2007-2013

Some programmes (OP Zuid as good example) have taken steps to turn decision-making less politically biased. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> programme period (2014-2020) decision making on project applications was revised to allow more focus on the quality of the proposals and less on political interests. A new governance structure was implemented to allow for this more neutral and transparent assessment and more focus on the quality of the proposals. In 2008 a Soundboard Group and two Expert Committees (Southwest and South East) were put in place to review applications in the field of the SME subsidy schemes on their innovativeness. These consist of experts from the field of innovation. At first proposals were submitted both to an Expert Committee and a Steering Committee. Since 2010 applications are no longer submitted to the steering committee, to allow a shorter application procedure. The Expert Committees are anonymous other than the chair. The Expert Committee now evaluates proposals after which the Monitoring Committee formally allocates funds. Other than the Expert Committees also the upfront indicative distribution of funds across regions within South Netherlands was largely abandoned to allow more focus on the qualitatively best project proposals. Another change in this period is the change of chair of the Monitoring Committee. Whereas in the 1<sup>st</sup> period the provincial governor of Noord-Brabant was the appointed chair, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> period this has shifted to the provincial governor of Limburg. The province of Zeeland represents the three provinces in the Monitoring Committee. This balances better the responsibilities across participating provinces: Noord-Brabant being the managing authority and Limburg being the chair of the Monitoring Committee.

This new governance structure with Expert Committees is a source of inspiration to other Operational Programmes and one of the stakeholder interviewees indicates that OP West considers a similar approach. It has also been discussed and tested with EC representatives who responded enthusiastically. But not everyone is that enthusiastic about the Expert Committees: interviewees from the province of Limburg bring in that the objective and independent assessment strikes too far as no administrative consideration is involved in the final decision making.

There are no specific overall partnership networks put in place. The Monitoring Committee is considered as the platform to integrate key stakeholders in the programme area for overseeing and discussing policy implementation. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> programme period it is considered as a challenge to shift towards tailoring the calls more toward the target groups and developing the information of the subsequent calls accordingly. As triple helix partnerships are highly valued and partnerships across geographical borders (both within the Netherlands as across international borders) this needs a tailor-made approach.

One of the stakeholder interviewees indicates that the deployment of an Expert Committee in assessing project applications is fine but that in this way the approved projects also reflect the composition of the Expert Committee. Knowledge institutions, government tiers and multinationals are well-presented in the approved projects. However SMEs are hardly represented in the committee as well as in the approved projects, let alone as project lead. If innovation is the major goal of OP Zuid, then SMEs should be the main engine to implement innovation.

#### *Example of Interreg programme Euregio Maas-Rijn*

Programme management for the Euregio Maas-Rijn has proved challenging during the past period. 11 local and regional government tiers in three countries (Netherlands, Belgium and Germany) participate in the Euregio Maas-Rijn and the dedicated Foundation Euregio Maas-Rijn has been the managing authority until 2015. It was based in Eupen (Belgium). Management authority shifted to the province of Limburg. Until then the province of Limburg did not have experience as management authority of a European programme. It seemed logical to shift this responsibility to this province as Germany was managing authority for Interreg Germany-Netherlands, Flanders for Flanders-Netherlands and the province of Noord-Brabant for OP Zuid. As there are major cultural differences in work style and view on programme management it was a challenge to find a joint approach in this programme. Focus has slightly shifted to a more transparent management style and a more transparent way of assessing project proposals. One of the stakeholders interviewed indicated that in the Euregio Maas-Rijn the influence of politicians on decision making is still highly valued by some of the participants as this might increase the success rate for their municipality or region. Another observation is that the Euregio has been discussing its structure for years and did not yet get to selection and implementation of projects.

## **3.2 Assessment of performance**

### *3.2.1 Programme performance*

At national level it was decided to focus on priority 1 (Knowledge economy, entrepreneurship & innovation) from the perspectives of content and budget. For OP Zuid 2007-2013, a midterm evaluation is available, but not an ex-post evaluation. For the programme period 2014-2020 a midterm evaluation report is not yet available. The midterm evaluation was written for all four Dutch Operational Programmes allowing a comparative perspective. All projects which have been allocated

OP Zuid funds are published on the website of Stimulus programme management.<sup>5</sup> Annual results are also published in the Annual implementation reports. One of the programme management interviewees reports that all objectives for the 2007-2013 have been met.

In October 2010 – mid-way the programme period and reported in the midterm evaluation – already 73% of the EFRO resources in OP Zuid had already been allocated. In September 2009 (at the apogee of the economic crisis) submission of proposals to the programme had to be temporarily closed until May 2010 as there was a danger of exhaustion of the programme budget (AIR OP Zuid, 2009). When looking at the allocation to priorities, it stands out that 85% of the priority 1 budget had been allocated compared to 65% of priority 2, 48 % of priority 3 and 100% of priority 4. This midterm evaluation (Berenschot, 2011) concluded that when considering the overall ERDF programme the resources available to the Netherlands were well utilized to strengthen existing national and regional policies. All OP regions were able to initiate promising projects, although the expectations were initially moderate, because of the economic downturn and the more limited budget compared with the previous programme period. But the expectation was that the incentive by these projects would significantly contribute to economic recovery. Berenschot (2011) also concluded that the programmes were well on track, both financially and in terms of content. There was confidence in timely and full spending of available budgets. It was also expected that the stated goals would be achieved. The process of development, assessment, decision-making and monitoring generally took place smoothly, even though improvements on points were considered possible. This is partly due to the phase of the programmes.

In each Annual implementation report a number of indicators was used to report on the progress. For each indicator two figures are given: what had been committed until the end of that year and what the target was. These same indicators have been used in the final report on OP Zuid 2007-2013 in which the performance of the 3 main priorities was measured on the basis of a number of indicators (Figure 1.8):

#### Indicators priority 1:

- Number of (new) partnerships between businesses and knowledge/research institutes
- Number of gross created jobs
- Number of SME companies having received support
- Number of starting companies and small companies < 5 years having received support
- Number of R&D projects
- Private R&D investments
- Public R&D investments

On all indicators we see that much more was realised than aimed at at the start of the programme period.

#### Indicators priority 2:

- Number of gross created jobs
- Number of hectares of modernised business estates
- Number of projects focussed on environment (incl. external safety and air quality)
- Number of projects focussed on improvement of accessibility
- Number of projects focussed on nature, countryside and cultural heritage
- Number of tourism-recreation projects

The first two indicators show a considerable better result than anticipated at the start, aim and result of the 3<sup>rd</sup> en 4<sup>th</sup> indicators are relatively in balance whereas the results on the 5<sup>th</sup> en 6<sup>th</sup> priorities scored lower than anticipated.

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<sup>5</sup> [www.stimulus.nl/](http://www.stimulus.nl/)

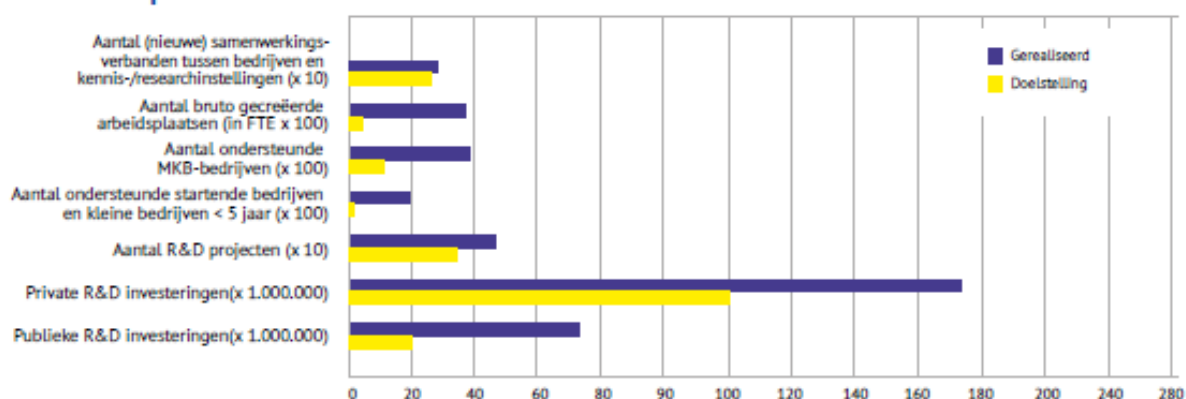
Indicators priority 3:

- Number of gross created jobs
- Number renovated or new urban facilities
- Number of modernised business locations
- Number of projects focussed on entrepreneurship, urban/neighbourhood economy
- Number of projects focussed on participation, liveability and social activation

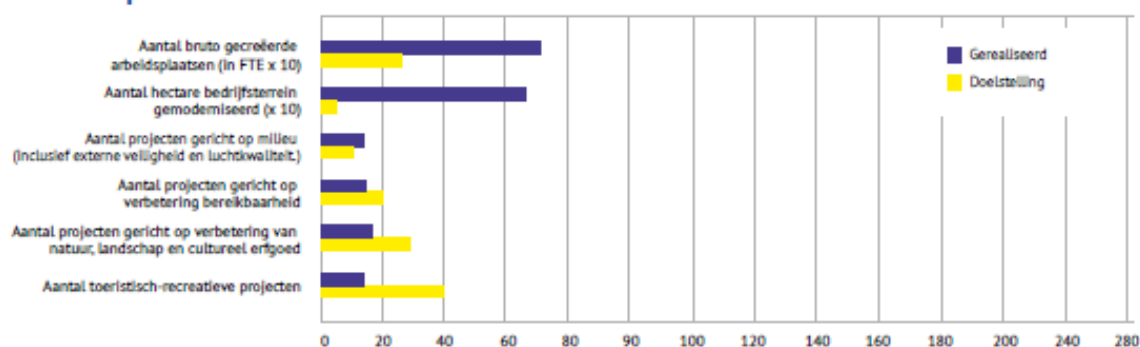
The results on the 1<sup>st</sup> and especially the 3<sup>rd</sup> indicators show a considerable better result than anticipated at the start. The results on the other three priorities are lower than anticipated.

Figure 3.5: Results on indicators of OP Zuid 2007-2013

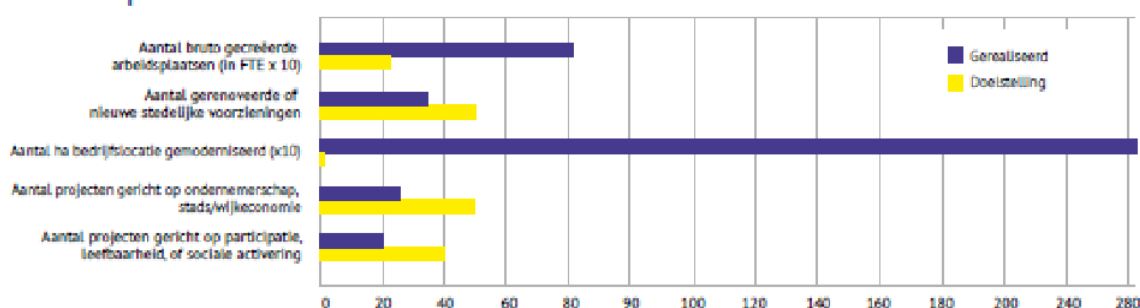
### Indicatoren prioriteit 1



### Indicatoren prioriteit 2



### Indicatoren prioriteit 3



Source: Stimulus Programmamanager (2017)

The Netherlands Court of Audit (in Dutch *Algemene Rekenkamer*) published a report on the effectiveness of spending in a selection of 30 projects (of which 8 in OP Zuid) with EU co-funding. This report was much more critical. Although many projects perform as indicated in their proposal, the efficiency and effectiveness of spending is often not easy to determine. For example, the set target values have been set so low in practice that they are very easily achieved and thus not a good indicator for effective spending of ERDF funding. In 2009 the Ministry of Economic Affairs developed a

'calculation tool' to assess the reliability of the target values estimated by beneficiaries to the to enter into discussions with the final beneficiaries about the estimation of target values. OP Zuid used this tool in the preparation of proposals. Another issue is the way the value-for-money criterion, or effectiveness, is applied in the appraisal of project proposals. The conclusion for the OP Zuid projects was that this was hardly tested in the application process. The value-for-money test was not even part of decision-making on ERDF applications. Another general comment was that there was too little competition between project proposals, although in OP Zuid experiments were carried out with a tender in order to bring the element of comparability into the procedure.

The interviews with stakeholders indicate that no implementation problems have occurred throughout both periods. The funds available for OP Zuid 2007-2013 were already largely allocated in 2010. Perceived bottlenecks are the bureaucracy or administrative burden due to European and national regulations and requirements and differences in interpretation between government tiers. Also national governments might interpret regulations differently. It is thus not specifically EU regulations causing bureaucracy, but also the national translation of these regulations. This is confirmed in the stakeholder survey in which 68% agrees with the statement that excessive, cumbersome reporting had a (very) significant impact during the implementation of Cohesion policy projects and 47% with the statement that complicated rules for submitting applications for Cohesion policy funding had a (very) significant impact during the implementation of Cohesion policy projects. The balance between bureaucracy and feasibility is considered as a major challenge. In one of the stakeholder interviews it is brought forward that the EU introduced some administrative simplification in the last programmes with lump sums for personnel costs and preparation costs. But there is also good news: an interviewee of the programme management organisation stated that partly due to initiatives as OP Zuid and government support South Netherlands has relatively well fared through the economic crisis.

In the programme period 2014-2020 the provincial Executive of Limburg economically focussed the provincial coalition agreement 2015-2019 on the four Brightlands campuses (Chemelot Campus, Maastricht Health Campus, Campus Greenport Venlo and Smart Services Campus). The majority of the project proposals for OP Zuid for Limburg are related to these campuses. An important challenge in this programme period was to improve the quality of business plans by advising applications upfront as there was room for improvement on the basis of the quality of the business plans of first call of 2014-2020. The provincial coalition agreement also presented the commitment of generating 100 million euro of ERDF funding to Limburg for the period 2015-2019. But already halfway this period this was achieved and the commitment was raised to 250 million euro (source: interviews).

When asking stakeholders about challenges and problems, some indicated the rigidity of a 7-year programme which lacks flexibility to respond to new developments. Some also indicated that although universities were included as potential beneficiaries, they missed higher professional education (HBO) and secondary vocational education (MBO) as potential beneficiaries. These are not eligible in the OP Zuid calls, but are considered needed when addressing innovation and labour market issues.

The stakeholder survey also addressed a number of questions related to the assessment of funds. All respondents report that Cohesion policy funds have been used well in their region, this varies from 16% for very well, 58% well and 11% acceptable (the remaining 15% does not know). The majority (74%) is more or less positive about the extent to which Cohesion policy objectives have reinforced the development objectives of their region. When asking them about the extent to which Cohesion policy funds helped to increase or decrease differences about 1/3 sees a (slight) decrease in the differences in the development levels on the one hand between poorer and richer regions in their country and on the other between their own country and other European Union Member states.

Statements which can count on major approval are that the spending of Cohesion policy funds is adequately controlled (63%), Cohesion policy funds finance those investment projects which their

municipality/region needs the most (58%) and that there have been many positive changes in their municipality/region thanks to Cohesion policy funds, which would not have been achieved without the funds (42%).

63% of the respondents agrees with the fact that the monitoring and evaluation reports provide adequate information on the implementation and performance of the programme(s). 32% agrees with the statements that the monitoring and evaluation reports of the programme/s are easily accessible and that they are used to improve policy-making and implementation.

One of the stakeholder interviewees stresses that as the programmes progress in time, there is an increasing shift from efficiency to accountability in the programme. Whereas at the start of the operational programmes focus was on the content of projects, it is now more on monitoring, control and checks of the projects. The interviewee sees this as a sort of iron rule of a policy instrument: at the start it is used efficiently and during time it is more institutionalised and more accountability is requested. This impedes the focus on content and can be seen as a problem: at any moment there are so many rules that you no longer have to do with the content. The interviewee holds the opinion that the programme is currently in that phase.

### *3.2.2. Partnership*

As introduced in section 1.1.3 on Implementation framework and partnership structures, the Monitoring Committee is considered as the main integration platform for all key sectors addressed by the programme. They are involved throughout the different phases of the programme.

Policy preparation with respect to Cohesion policy programmes always takes place in Soundboard groups with policy-makers from the three provinces, but also with representatives of various tiers of government (local, provincial, national), regional development companies, representatives of key knowledge institutions and key businesses. The broad composition of the group facilitates a debate on focus policy areas, and development goals for the region. Subsequently this policy is then translated into a programme and into provincial agendas.

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> programme period it is considered as a challenge to shift towards tailoring the calls more toward the target groups and developing the information of the subsequent calls accordingly. For the implementation of the programme the regional development companies network is consulted in which LIOF covers the province of Limburg. This organisation assists potential applicants. Triple helix networks in which government, business and knowledge institutions cooperate are also consulted in starting up new calls.

Participants in the Monitoring Committee, Steering Groups or the more informal Soundboard groups are not formally required to be open and accountable to civil society. They do, however, represent their sector and its interests.

In the stakeholder survey respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed on a number of statements on the operation of the partnership principle in practice. The partnership principle requires the participation of a wide range of partners throughout the different stages of programming and implementation through consultations, monitoring committee work and other mechanisms. No one disagreed with the statement that the way the programme partnership operates is inclusive, open and fair. 63% agreed (either agree or strongly agree) with the statement that the operation of the programme's partnership principle facilitates a shared understanding and shared commitments by partners to achieving the programme's objectives. The results on the statement that partners are only interested in promoting their own organisational and financial

interests showed a varied image, with 21% agreeing, 32% not agreeing and 32% neither agreeing nor disagreeing (the last 15% does not know).

### 3.3 Assessment of added value

The indicators and financial figures which have been presented in section 1.2.1 constitute the quantitative result of the OP Zuid programme. But the results of this programme go beyond just quantitative data. Choices made in the period 2007-2013 also resulted in the formulation of the South Netherlands Regional Innovation Strategy for Smart Specialisation, also called RIS3. This serves as a basis for OP Zuid 2014-2020 and MIT Zuid which is the Subsidy scheme to stimulate SME to innovate in top sectors in South Netherlands. The strategy is to commit to those top sectors in which a region performs well. This is also shown in new policy agendas towards 2020 such as Europe 2020, Top Sector Policy and Brainport 2020 and the three provinces relate with their policy choices to this strategy.

## 4. Cohesion policy communication

### 4.1 Approach to communication

The Management Authority is ultimately responsible for communication. Stimulus acts as the portal for project applications for the provinces but does not handle the formal procedures. The communication staff working on OP Zuid is employed at Stimulus.

#### *Communication plan OP Zuid 2007-2013*

The communication plan of OP Zuid 2007-2013 states that the implementation of OP Zuid communication is considered as an important policy instrument. With communication they mean all exchange of information between the OP Zuid programme management organisation and the various target groups. This concerns both internal communication and external communication. The role of communication in OP Zuid is primarily to provide information about the (grant) possibilities of the programme and to report on progress of programme and approved projects. A second important function of OP Zuid communication is contributing to promotion of awareness of the EU's activities in a broader public. The OP Zuid programme management organisation applies the communication conditions of ERDF in its communication activities and its means of communication, but also ensures that grant recipients and project executives comply with these communication conditions.

The three main objectives of communication for OP Zuid 2007-2013 which have been formulated, are the following:

- Communication is used to generate sufficient projects that fit within the objectives and priorities of OP Zuid. This requires that the (eligible) target groups are informed about facts, content, method and (project) results of the programme.
- A more general role of communication in relation to OP Zuid. This is a general informative role towards the general public (citizens, companies, other organizations and media) about the contribution of the EU (ERDF) to OP Zuid. The European Commission attaches great importance to this type of communication as by doing this citizens of the member states become more involved in EU activities.



- A last role of communication is aimed at the internal alignment of policy, (work) processes and the work in progress within the OP Zuid programme organisation. This also includes promotion of content of OP Zuid among the various organizations involved in financing and/or implementation of the programme.

The formal communication structure of OP Zuid is built up as follows:

- External communication to the various communication audiences will consist of a mix of oral communication and print and digital communication. Particularly this external communication will have to make a significant contribution to achieving the objectives of OP Zuid. The communication plan focusses on this external communication.
- Internal communication within the organization of the organization and its associated network of back-office organisations. This internal communication is largely oral, as in the consultation and meeting times of Monitoring Committee, Steering Groups, Programme Management, Support Points and Special Workgroups. In addition to this formal communication, some activities are organised to promote the link between the various internal (communication) target groups and their dependents.

Keywords in the communication strategy for OP Zuid 2007-2013 are the following:

- *Targeted*: in the communication about the opportunities in OP Zuid it is important that it is well-tuned to the different target groups which are eligible for funding by the various priorities. For example priority 1 has a significantly broader scope than priority 2 and certainly than 3. This has to be expressed in the means of communication and in oral information by the various persons/ organizations that communicate about OP Zuid.
- *Open, accessible, flexible*: because of the broad scope of potential projects for Zuid an extra effort is needed in the field of (personal, direct) communication by the programme management towards potential project applicants.
- *Observable*: by presenting what type of projects have been rewarded by OP Zuid new project applications are expected to follow.
- *Two-step flow*: given the size of the OP Zuid region, the number of parties involved in the implementation of the programme (as represented in the Monitoring Committee and Steering Committees) and the range of target groups to be reached, it is useful in communication to make as much use as possible of existing networks and means of communication of relevant organisations.

In the communication plan the main message has been differentiated to target groups with a general message and a specific section for, for example, internal audiences, potential beneficiaries, the general public and intermediary organisations.

In 2010/2011 Berenschot performed a midterm evaluation on OP 2007-2013 for the 4 Dutch OP regions. One of the themes was the evaluation of communication. The results of this midterm evaluation will be addressed further in this chapter in the section on evaluation. The Berenschot conclusions were also addressed in the AIR OP Zuid of 2010 and communication was adjusted on the basis of this evaluation.

#### *National OP communication strategy 2014-2020*

In the period 2007-2013 the compilation of a communication plan for the entire period was mandatory. One of the conclusions of this 1<sup>st</sup> programme period was that the timespan was too long to justify for one communication plan for a period of 7 years. It was suggested to formulate a joint national communication strategy and to elaborate this in yearly and region specific communication plans for each region for the period 2014-2020. The underlying idea of a more national approach is

also that scaling up leads to more effective communication toward the general public. The annual communication plan of the fund or programme may describe the specific actions in the field of communication. Each year, these communication plans are adapted to the current situation. This broadly formulated communication strategy serves as the framework for annual communication plans.

The joint communication strategy of OP includes:

- A description of the actors which have committed to the joint strategy;
- The strategy and the collaboration model;
- The communication objectives and target audiences;
- A description of the design of a national web portal for European programmes;
- An indication of how the visibility and awareness of the public on Structural Funds are shaped.

Table 4.1. Overall approach to communication.

Communication strategies/plans					
2007-2013			2014-2020 (national communication strategy)		
Main objectives	Measures	Target groups	Main objectives	Measures	Target groups
Generating sufficient projects which fit the objectives and priorities of OP Zuid	Informing target audience of facts, content and (project) results of the programme	Potential beneficiaries	Phase 1: Introduce target groups with the new programmes and methods	Not specified according to objective	Specified according to phase: potential beneficiaries
Awareness of contribution of the EU (ERDF) in OP Zuid	General communication towards general public	Citizens, companies, other organizations and media	Phase 1: Acquire high quality projects	Not specified according to objective	Specified according to phase: potential beneficiaries
Internal alignment of policy, (work) processes and work in progress within the OP-Zuid programme organisation	Promotion of awareness of content and development of OP-Zuid with the various organisations involved in the financing and / or implementation of the programme	OP Zuid programme organisation	Phase 2: Show the target groups what happens to European money and what the results and effects are	Not specified according to objective	Specified according to phase: triple helix organisations, regional development companies, employers' organisations
			Phase 2: Develop, a positive feeling/ more involvement with Europe for target groups, based on the results	Not specified according to objective	Specified according to phase: triple helix organisations, regional development companies, employers' organisations
			Phase 2: Develop willingness to the target groups to use ERDF, ESF and other European funds in the future	Not specified according to objective	Specified according to phase: triple helix organisations, regional development companies, employers' organisations

Source: Communication plan OP Zuid 2007-2013 (2007); National communication strategy 2014-2020 (2014)

The annual action plan contains:

- A description of the programme specific communication audiences and objectives;
- A description of the communication message;
- A description of the means of communication used in the year in question, or the way in which communication is communicated with the target groups;
- A description of how communication is taken into account in relation with people with disabilities;
- A description of how beneficiaries are supported in their communication activities;
- An evaluation of the communication;
- The annual budget for communication activities;
- An indication of the required human power for communication (*Monitoring Europese Programma's in Zuid-Nederland*, 2016).

The main objective for communication in relation to OP Zuid is: to inform the external communication audiences with information about the opportunities of OP Zuid with the ERDF support and to promote support for and involvement in OP Zuid with relevant communication audiences in order to generate appropriate projects along which the development vision of the OP Zuid programme can be developed.

This main objective can be divided into a number of sub-goals:

- Acquiring brand awareness and global awareness with the content of OP Zuid;
- To increase knowledge about the specific possibilities of the programme in the different target groups (and in particular potential project invigilators);
- Promoting a positive attitude towards contributing to the realization of the objectives of the programme;
- Activating the development of appropriate projects and the use of subsidies;
- Report (publicly) the results of projects and programmes;
- Strengthening the image and confidence of the region and regional socio-economic actors;
- Increasing knowledge about EU activities and ERDF subsidy fund (Communication plan OP Zuid 2007-2013).

The basic condition for good (internal and external) communication is the proper organisation of that communication, the so-called communication infrastructure. This means the overall the organisational structures along which formal communication takes place and the flow of information through means of communication (such as website, newsletters, meetings, brochures, etc.).

In the communication plan for OP Zuid 2007-2013 only the external communication is addressed. The external communication with various communication audiences will consist of a mix of oral communication and print and digital communication. Particularly this external communication will have to make a significant contribution to achieving the objectives of the OP Zuid. The communication plan of OP Zuid focusses on the external communication (Communication Plan OP Zuid 2007-2013). An additional measure which is not listed in written material but was raised in stakeholder interviews are field visits with the press to a number of funded projects.

Additional to the communication by the management authority there is also communication by the projects which have been co-funded by OP Zuid. There are strict EU regulations on their communication of results. In the co-funding funding of communication has been taken into account. The communication staff at the management authority facilitates and supports the projects in this communication.

Communication specialists in the OP regions South, West and East hold the opinion that “the general public is not interested in ERDF and ERDF not in them” (Berenschot, 2011, p. 29). They suggest to focus communication for the general public on ‘the project’ and then on ‘Europe by packaging Europe in another message’. For the target group of (potential) beneficiaries they recommend to use the order of ‘Europe’, ‘ERDF’ and ‘OP’ in communication.

#### *Indicators on communication*

In the Annual Implementation Reports of OP Zuid 2007-2013 a number of output indicators have been used to yearly evaluate the communication activities. No result and impact indicators have been used (Table 2.2).

Table 4.2. Monitoring indicators in the AIRs OP Zuid on communication in the programme period 2007-2013

Communication tools	Output indicators
Kick-off meetings	number of visitors
Information meetings	number of visitors
Own events	number of events
Website OP	number of hits
Free publicity	number of media reports
Newsletter	Increase in number of subscriptions
Direct mail	number of reactions

Source: AIRS OP Zuid 2007-2013

Table 4.3. Monitoring indicators in the midterm evaluation of the Communication strategies Dutch OPs 2007-2013

Communication tools	Output indicators	Result 2007-2010 for OP Zuid
Kick-off meetings	number of meetings	1
	number of visitors	350
Meetings (specific audience and on invitation)	number of meetings	10
	number of visitors	459
Events for a broad audience	number of events	14
	number of visitors	1,400
	number of visitors national event	35,000
Website OP	number of visitors per month	2,813
Website Europa om de Hoek	number of hits	751
Free publicity	number of press releases	42
	number of news items in media (incl. local media)	n.a.
Advertisements	number of advertisements	n.a.
Brochures/leaflets	number of printed copies	5,500
	number of copies handed out	5,000
Newsletter	number of subscriptions	630
Annual implementation report	number of issues	3
	number of printed copies	600
Direct mail	number of reactions	1,000

Source: Berenschot, 2011, p. 31-32

In the midterm evaluation of the four Dutch ERDF regions by Berenschot (2011) a more elaborated list with output indicators has been included (Table 2.3).

In the two available Annual Implementation Reports on the 2014-2020 programme period (2015 and 2016) no indicators on communication have been addressed as well as the available budget for communication in this programme period. However in each AIR the FTE involved for communication is presented.

### *Budget for communication*

Table 4.4 below indicates the budget available for communication in OP Zuid for both programming periods.

Table 4.4. Communication budget

<b>Total budget</b>	<b>OP Zuid communication</b>	<b>Unit</b>
Budget [2007-2013]	1,060,862.50	EUR
Budget [2014-2020]	Not available	EUR
Yearly realisation	54,500 (until 2010) + 333,750 for once only costs	EUR

Sources: Communication plan OP Zuid 2007-2013 (2007); AIR OP Zuid 2010

### *Governance*

In OP Zuid 1.0 FTE is available for communication. This staff member is based at Stimulus which is responsible for programme management. There is some cooperation with communication staff of provinces and local authorities participating in OP Zuid, but this cooperation is less intensive than in some other Dutch OP regions.

Table 4.5. Governance framework in communication

<b>OP Zuid 2007-2013 and 2014-2020 (no change)</b>
<b>Communication networks</b>
Management Authority
Main partners: provinces of Noord-Brabant, Limburg and Zeeland, regional development companies
Main cities
Intermediaries: Chamber of Commerce, knowledge institutions, private sector
At higher level, with other Cohesion policy funds and the EC
<b>Bodies responsible for implementation of the measures</b>
National ministries (overall communication strategy and coordination)
Management Authority
Main partners: provinces of Noord-Brabant, Limburg and Zeeland
Project beneficiaries

Source: Communication plan OP Zuid 2007-2013 (2007); *Nationale communicatiestrategie 2014-2020* (2014)

The stakeholder survey shows that the communication tools less used are television, radio, national newspapers and film clips. The other communication all score relatively high: local and regional

newspapers, workshops, seminars, brochures, leaflets, newsletters, press releases, programme website, plaques/billboard with EU flag, social media).

A communication plan for the programme period 2007-2013 has been put together. This is evaluated yearly and updated in an Annual action plan which is presented in the Annual Implementation Report on the OP Zuid programme. Communication is a fixed agenda item in all Monitoring Committee meetings as communication is considered as a key priority in the implementation of the programme. The programme website is a central communication tool. This provides information on all projects with European co-funding in the region. Events for different target groups and the Newsletter are other crucial communication tools.

## 4.2 Assessment of effectiveness of communication strategies

### *Evaluations*

Berenschot (2011) scrutinised communication in the 2007-2013 period in a midterm evaluation. It addressed all four Dutch regions with an Operational Programme (South, West, East, North). Both performance and communication were evaluated. For this purpose available documentation was studied and interviews with about 50 people were conducted. In addition a survey was held for each OP region among four different target groups ( general public, potential beneficiaries, beneficiaries and intermediary organisations) as well as a media scan of national and regional newspapers. This material was analysed and tested in group discussions with the OPs communication professionals and with managers of OPs programme management. The midterm evaluation by Berenschot (2011) was complemented with region specific annexes. The OP Zuid midterm evaluation was addressed in the AIR OP Zuid 2010.

The following conclusions relate to all regions and to South in specific. In this evaluation the awareness of ERDF and the individual programmes is considered as satisfactory. Approximately half of the public and potential beneficiaries are familiar with the fact that the EU provides grants for projects in the field of innovation and attractive cities and regions. However ERDF is less known, even though more than 35% of the public and potential beneficiaries knows ERDF. The beneficiaries and intermediaries are, of course, well-acquainted with ERDF, the OP of their region and its objectives. One of the COHESIFY stakeholder interviewees is of the opinion that when addressing potential beneficiaries, the focus is on the 'usual suspects': the ones already having received funding, whereas if pursuing innovativeness the focus should be on finding actors (incl. SMEs) with potential for innovativeness.

For potential beneficiaries leaflets, mailings and newspaper articles have been the best-known communication tools, for intermediaries and beneficiaries these are the information gatherings. The websites of the OPs have been an important part of the communication, regardless of the target audience. The communication activities conducted towards public, (potential) beneficiaries and intermediaries have generally been well appreciated.

Berenschot (2011, p. 7) concluded that in the realisation and implementation the guidelines of EC Regulations on communication (on what has to be done minimally and what is not allowed) have been highly determinative in the design of communication in the OPs. As a result, little creativity has been introduced in strategy, use of resources and activities. In the realisation of communication plans no explicit analysis has been made of its context. For the four regions four different logos and programme names have been used. However, the communication task and the problem are largely the same for all regions. Even though there is cooperation at national level, the use of communication tools could have been designed more efficiently. An interesting remark in the evaluation is that there

was no benchmark on awareness at the start of the programme period, which makes it difficult to measure the effectivity of communication halfway and at the end.

Some stakeholder interviewees observe that communication is often with the 'usual suspects': organisations already involved in one way or another with ERDF funding, whereas part of the communication should be focussed on those organisations (for example SMEs) not yet involved.

*Effectiveness in raising visibility and awareness of the policy, funds, programmes; of achievements in economic/social/territorial development and benefits for citizens; and the role played by the EU*

One of the (sub) objectives in the communication plan is awareness or familiarity with ERDF, OPs and the role of the EU in this plan. Therefore, it has been investigated in to what extent the different target groups (general public, potential beneficiaries and intermediaries) were familiar with these. In the AIR OP Zuid 2010 the results have been presented. This was partly as a response to the midterm evaluation on communication by Berenschot (2011).

With respect to familiarity with European funds for projects in the field of innovation, knowledge economy and entrepreneurship, attractive regions and attractive cities two target groups were distinguished: on the one side the general public and potential beneficiaries and the other side intermediaries and beneficiaries. About half of the general public in the South Netherlands region is familiar with the existence of these European funds. Among the potential beneficiaries this is about two thirds. When looking at beneficiaries everyone knows that the programme from which they receive or have been allocated a grant is supported by the EU. Among the intermediaries, the persons who inform companies and organizations about subsidy opportunities, nine out of ten are familiar with the European funds.

Table 4.6. Familiarity in South Netherlands with the provision of EU subsidies in the field of innovation, knowledge economy and entrepreneurship, attractive regions and attractive towns, per target group

<i>Statement</i>	<i>General public</i>	<i>Potential beneficiaries</i>	<i>Intermediaries</i>
I am not acquainted with it	53%	30%	11%
I have heard about it, but I don't know about which programme or projects it is about	46%	56%	32%
I am acquainted with it and know the programme or projects that receive subsidies	2%	14%	57%

Source: AIR OP Zuid, 2010, p. 51

When looking at familiarity with ERDF, we see the same dichotomy as with the European funds, even though ERDF is less familiar to people, according to the survey conducted as part of OP Zuid implementation reporting (AIR OP Zuid, 2010). Yet over one third of the general public in South Netherlands is familiar with ERDF. Also almost half of the potential beneficiaries is more or less familiar with ERDF. Those who know ERDF often also know that this is an EU funding programme. Among the intermediaries and beneficiaries, ERDF is much more familiar, naturally. Nearly two thirds of intermediaries knows ERDF and also knows what it is and almost all beneficiaries know ERDF (AIR OP Zuid, 2010). The COHESIFY citizens survey paints a less positive picture of the awareness of Cohesion policy in Limburg, however (see section 5.1).



Table 4.7. Familiarity in South Netherlands with the European Regional Development Fund, per target group

	<i>General public</i>	<i>Potential beneficiaries</i>	<i>Intermediaries</i>
I never heard about it	62%	53%	11%
Sounds familiar but I don't know what it is	26%	26%	25%
I know what it is, but I have never used it/ had to deal with it	10%	13%	29%
I use it / I deal with it	2%	9%	36%

Source: AIR OP Zuid, 2010, p. 51

When asking about the Operational Programmes almost 20% of the general public and 30% of potential beneficiaries are more or less familiar with OPs. Among the potential beneficiaries, the OP is more familiar than in the rest of the Netherlands. 62% of the general public and 91% of the potential beneficiaries who are familiar with OPs know that this there are EU funding programmes. Among the intermediaries the share familiar with OPs is much bigger than the other target groups; almost all intermediaries are more or less familiar with OPs.

Table 4.8. Familiarity in South Netherlands with the operational programmes, per target group

	<i>General public</i>	<i>Potential beneficiaries</i>	<i>Intermediaries</i>
I never heard about it	82%	70%	4%
Sounds familiar but I don't know what it is	12%	6%	11%
I know what it is, but I have never used it/ had to deal with it	4%	20%	32%
I use it / I deal with it	2%	5%	54%

Source: AIR OP Zuid, 2010, p. 52

### *Policy lessons and recommendations*

The midterm evaluation by Berenschot (2011) paid attention to the visibility and awareness of the operational programmes and the role of the EU in this. Apart from the compulsory (required by the EU) indicators communication was evaluated in a broader sense. The midterm evaluation is considered as the benchmark to compare it with the second part of the programme period. Eight overall recommendations were formulated partly as suggestions for the EU:

- The EU should indicate clearly in a next programme period what the scope for communication is. Communication specialists should take more initiative to make use of the available scope in writing communication plans and their translation into means and activities;
- The EU should phrase the regulations less restrictive yet more inspiring and should indicate what the scope for communication is. This will lead to more creative strategies and approaches. It is advised to do this in dialogue;
- The evaluation supports the idea of addressing communication in a more generic way for the Netherlands as a whole and making it more region specific in the elaboration;
- The quality and thus the effectiveness of communication can be increased when a thorough contextual analysis and SWOT analysis are made for the purpose of a communication plan;

- Target group research would be useful both in the continuation of the current and in a future programme period in order to receive input for an effective communication plan. Create means, activities and prior knowledge about ERDF and (comparable) regulations in relation to that;
- The quality of core messages is sufficient in all regions. In spite of the fact that the effectiveness could not be measured, the key message could be varied per target group in order to increase effectiveness;
- The advice not to mention ERDF in the communication to the general public seems to be a correct one as ERDF is less relevant than mentioning Europe;
- It is recommended to use the evaluation data as a benchmark in order to be able to use them at the end of the programme to measure the effectiveness of communication.

For the 2007-2013 programme period an Action plan for communication was formulated to concretise the plans in the overall Communication plan. The Action plan for communication distinguished between external and internal communication. At the end of each year the communication activities were evaluated and the evaluation was taken into account into the next Action plan. The Annual Implementation Reports (AIRs) summarised the main communication activities. They also pay attention to the communication conditions (flag, website etc.). In each Annual Implementation Report about 5 pages were dedicated to communication. No research has been done on the effectiveness of communication measures.

#### *Communication strategy in 2014-2020*

Lessons from the 2007-2013 have been used to develop the national communication strategy 2014-2020. The purpose of this strategy is to establish the model for cooperation and to state the focus points for communication in the new programme period. This joint communication strategy is considered to strengthen the message to citizens and to strengthen the position of the Netherlands in Europe. It will be more efficient and cheaper because of joint actions and resources.

The strategy was developed in cooperation between the 4 ERDF regions in the Netherlands, the Ministry of Economic Affairs and the Dutch Agency for ESF. In order to reach this strategy the Factor C method has been used, which assumes that 80% of policymakers' work consists of communication. It involves receiving context signals and translating these into policy and communication. Factor C is a vision that states that policy can also be 'communicative', that is, in contact with the context/environment. Working on this method has contributed to a broad consensus for the strategy and the annual and action plans for the various funds (*Landelijke communicatiestrategie EFRO en ESF periode 2014 – 2020, 2014*).

The European Commission sets out a number of explicit requirements for the communication strategy in Regulation 1303/2013. Some of these requirements are addressed in the communication strategy, others are further elaborated in a year or action plan per fund, programme or management authority. The following issues have to be included either in the communication strategy or the year or action plan of the programme:

- Description how to communicate with the target groups;
- Description of communication material for people with disabilities;
- Description how beneficiaries are supported in their communication activities;
- Indicative budget for implementation of the strategy;
- Description of the required human power for communication;
- Set up of a website and/or portal (provide relevant information for relevant target groups);
- Indication of how the general public's visibility and awareness of Structural Funds are shaped;
- Proposal for evaluation and feedback of results and effects of the programme.

In the previous programme period one of the conclusions was that a context analysis was recommended. For this purpose a SWOT was elaborated in which cooperation between funds and programmes was central. The conclusions of this SWOT were:

- A joint strategy provides clarity and grip for all concerned;
- A joint strategy provides equal messages to (potential) beneficiaries and citizens;
- Cooperation provides a clear interpretation of the regulation;
- Collaboration is cheaper and more efficient;
- Cooperation gives the Member State a better position in Europe, because one speaks more than before 'with one mouth';
- There should be room in the collaboration model for an own regional or programme-specific implementation;
- Cooperation should enrich, not limit.

The national communication strategy lists a wide range of target groups for communication:

- **Relating to internal communication:**
  - communication workgroup;
  - the Managing Authorities of all funds;
  - consultants and supervisors;
  - Programme Office;
  - European Commission;
  - Dutch Representation of the European Commission;
  - policy-makers own organisation.
- **In relation to external communication**
  - business, especially SMEs;
  - knowledge institutions;
  - governors (national, provincial, local government tiers);
  - civil servants (national, provincial, local government tiers);
  - beneficiaries;
  - potential beneficiaries;
  - general public/citizens;
  - media;
  - social partners;
  - (European) Parliament, Provincial Executives, City Councils.

Additional to the national communication strategy the stakeholder interviews and survey provide input on communication. A respondent of the stakeholder interviews put forward that recent historical research (forthcoming) shows that results in co-funded projects only become visible after 4-6 years. This might affect the way the managing authority deals with communication by beneficiaries. A possibility might be to ask beneficiaries to communicate about project results for a longer period than is currently requested.

Stakeholders were asked in a survey to express their satisfaction with a number of aspects of communication. Respondents were most satisfied with 'the support of the EC on communication', 'the targeting of different groups with different communication tools' and the administrative capacity and resources dedicated to communication activities'. The other aspects show a balance between satisfaction and dissatisfaction: 'the way Cohesion policy is communicated to citizens', 'the branding and messages used to communicate Cohesion policy' and 'the use of human interests/personal stories'. Another question in this survey relates to the extent to which categories of communication activities are considered effective. Here 'conveying the achievements of Cohesion policy programmes overall and the role of the EU', 'conveying the achievements of co-funded

projects and the role of the EU' and 'using social media to promote the programme and projects (e.g. Twitter, YouTube, Facebook)' were considered to be the most effective ones.

### 4.3 Good practice examples

The midterm evaluation of the Dutch Operational Programmes 2007-2013 provided some useful recommendations on future communication. Some of these suggestions were already implemented in the OPs 2014-2020, such as an overall national communication strategy which will have to be elaborated in yearly and region-specific communication plans for each Dutch OP region.

Also guidance is given in this national communication strategy how each region should deal with the strategic main message which is not one ready-made slogan, but provides elements which together form a story. This story can vary by programme and audience, but is always built according to the 'look-because-therefore' method:

- **Look:** position or development; answers the question: why should I know this?
- **Because:** statements, facts, arguments; answers the question: do I find this logical?
- **Therefore:** vision, decision, proposal; answers the question: what should I do with this?

With respect to the general public the emphasis should be on 'the project' first and then on 'Europe'. This is framed as 'packaging Europe in another message'. In relation to the (potential) beneficiaries, communication specialists focus their communication on 'Europe', 'ERDF' and 'OP', in succession.

In the Euregio Maas-Rijn programme one of the funding lines is for so-called 'people-to-people' projects. The objective is to stimulate cross national cultural cooperation. It has a relative small budget but is very effective in raising awareness of EU funds and the EU among the general public. An example is cofounding of a Euregional football tournament or another type of cross border event.

### 4.4 Media framing of Cohesion policy

Media framing of Cohesion policy is very much on the basis of project results. The OP Zuid communication specialists have a list of EU co-funded projects which are newsworthy to be followed by the media and milestones for each of these projects to be presented to the media. These are called icon projects and are followed during a certain period of time to repeat the message to ensure recognisability. Thus, use is made of project branding in OP Zuid communication. Use is made of press releases on projects with EU co-funding. The local and regional news media usually remain close to the message in the press releases, national news media might use it as a starting point and give a more negative tone to it.

There is also close cooperation between the communication specialists and the spokesmen of the provincial governors. In visits to project sites and speeches they include a part on the value of European co-funding, thus raising awareness of EU funds and the EU. These governors also use Twitter professionally to trigger people and then referring them to the information on the website.

Annual information days on Europe (so called Europa om de hoek Kijkdagen) are also organised for the general public and for which the media are also invited. As this is a large event local and regional media, but also Facebook, are used to promote it. A point of attention raised by stakeholder interviewees in communication with the general public is the frequent use of abbreviations and Euro-speak in EU co-funded projects. This should be avoided as it makes it difficult for laymen to follow the storyline.

In the survey among stakeholders, the respondents were asked to what extent they agreed (or disagreed) with a number of statements on the effectiveness of a number of communication measures to increase citizens' awareness. Here we see that events (89%) and local and regional newspaper (79%) score highest, followed by social media (68%), television, national newspapers and video/film clips/presentations (all 63%). This is interesting when referring to section 2.1 (governance) where stakeholders indicated that among the communication tools less used to disseminate information about the use of Cohesion policy funds were television and national newspapers.

One of the interviewees saw a change in the framing of Cohesion Policy funds by the government tiers. The total available ERDF budget available for the OP Zuid region has decreased during the subsequent programme periods. As a result ERDF funding became more a minor additional source of funding than an important source of funding in order to accelerate regional economy. On the one hand, the national government is more involved in communication when it comes to communication on the EU and Cohesion policy, and on the other hand, project beneficiaries are more involved on communicating project results.

Media framing analysis<sup>6</sup> reveals further insights on how EU Cohesion policy is communicated in the Netherlands (for more detail see Annex 4). Framing in relation to economic consequences of EU Cohesion policy dominates, corresponding to roughly 48% of the news items analysed. This indicates that Cohesion policy is primarily viewed through the prism of its contribution to the economic performance of the country. It is also striking that 19% of news items frame the policy in terms of innovation, which is the highest of all COHESIFY cases. This tendency seems to reflect the strong focus of all Dutch regional programmes on supporting innovation. However, framing in relation to quality of life was also salient with nearly 18% of news coverage employing it, which, by contrast is the lowest percentage among the countries studied in the project. Again, this seems to reflect the thematic emphasis on innovation in the Dutch operational programmes and hardly any attention paid to investment in projects to improve the quality of life, which is already among the highest in Europe.

A further interesting aspect is that most of Dutch news coverage related to Cohesion policy has a positive valence. In fact, this is the case for 70% of the news items, the highest proportion among the countries studied in the COHESIFY project. However, surprisingly perhaps, 10.7% of the news items studied used framing related to fund abuse, which would indicate a concern for the way in which funding is managed.

Finally, it is worth stressing that there are differences in the way that Cohesion policy is covered in regional and in national media. The framing on the national level is slightly less often positive (65.7%), but more 'Europeanised' that is framed in relation to the EU (27.3%). That said, national media more often employ frames related to funding abuse issues (twice as often as in the case of regional media) and to power (which is not used by regional media). On the regional level, framing relating Cohesion policy to quality of life, incompetence of authorities and to cohesion is more often used than in national media. Regional media are also more positive about Cohesion policy (76.8%), but, unsurprisingly perhaps, less often stress the European dimension (4.3%).

#### 4.5 Implications for citizens Cohesion policy perceptions and attitudes to the EU

In the interviews with stakeholders, some interviewees argue that citizens are not very familiar with Cohesion policy and its related programmes, such as OP Zuid and the Interreg programmes. The only general public event which is organised once a year as a regional event is the already mentioned *Europa om de hoek Kijkdagen*, literally translated as Europe around the corner Open Days. These are

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<sup>6</sup> Media framing analysis was conducted by Vicky Triga and Konstantinos Vadratsikas, Cyprus University of Technology.

organised to present regional projects with European co-funding. But also this accessible type of event attracts few people. There was a comparable question in the stakeholder survey in which the respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a number of statements. The statement that communication activities have led to an increased awareness among citizens of the contribution of Cohesion policy to regional and local development was the most agreed with, whereas the statement that citizens mistrust Cohesion policy communication activities and messages or consider them to be propaganda showed lowest level of agreement by the respondents.

## 5. Citizens views of Cohesion policy and the EU

### 5.1 Citizens survey results

The citizen survey conducted as part of COHESIFY in Limburg adds more insight on the levels of awareness of EU funding and perceptions of its impacts among the citizens of that region and sheds more light on the citizens' positions on the EU and their identification with the EU and other territorial levels.

#### *Awareness of EU funding*

Like in the other Dutch case study, the survey indicated very low awareness of Cohesion policy among the citizens of Limburg, who may be positive about the EU but are generally unaware of whether and how EU supports the development of their city and region. Only 17.4% of Limburg respondents have heard about projects supported by Cohesion policy in their region, and 81.7% have not (see table 5.1). This is the lowest score on awareness of EU Cohesion policy among all COHESIFY case study regions (e.g. more than 80% of the respondents were aware of Cohesion policy in Polish regions, and, for instance, around 30% were aware of it in Baden-Württemberg, a German region of comparable level of economic development to Limburg). =

Table 5.1 Citizen survey: awareness of Cohesion policy

Have you heard about any such EU funded projects to improve your own region or city?

Yes	No	Refused	Don't know
17.4%	81.7%	0.0%	.9%

Source: COHESIFY Citizen Survey

Table 5.2 Citizen survey: Visibility of public acknowledgement of EU funding

Have you noticed any public acknowledgement of EU funding in your region/town in the form of banners, placards etc.?

Yes	No	Refused	Don't know
24.0%	74.7%	0.0%	1.3%

Source: COHESIFY Citizen Survey

Equally striking was that 74.7% of the survey respondents in Limburg (see table 5.2) had not noticed any public acknowledgement of EU funding on billboards which typically are placed near the sites where Cohesion policy funds were invested. By contrast, more than 90% of Polish respondents from Pomorskie and Podkarpackie regions declared they had noticed public acknowledgement of EU funding in their region/town in the form of banners, placards etc. Only 24% of Limburgian respondents said the same. This is also a lower score than in Flevoland (29.4%). Both in Flevoland and Limburg, these numbers are much lower than the COHESIFY case study regions average (51.1% of respondents having noticed those acknowledgements on project sites).

What is more, the survey results indicate that the rate of citizens in Limburg who have heard about specific funds is actually very low (see table 5.3). Only 26.3% of respondents heard about the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), which is consistent with Flevoland (28%), but much below average for all the regions surveyed (60.8%), much behind Polish regions for instance (more than 90%), but also much below German regions (more than 45%). The same pattern can be observed for Cohesion Fund (13.4%, much below average across the sample of 33.3%) and the European Social Fund: 23.3% in Limburg, consistent with Flevoland's 26%, but much below the average across the regions studied of 47.7%.

Table 5.3 Citizen survey: Level of awareness of individual ESI funds

Have you heard about the following funds?

Fund	Yes	No	Refused	Don't know
ERDF	26.3%	73.5%	0.0%	.2%
ESF	23.3%	76.7%	0.0%	0.0%
Cohesion Fund	13.4%	86.2%	0.0%	.4%

Source: COHESIFY Citizen Survey

The COHESIFY citizens survey showed that for those few respondents who did know about Cohesion funds in Limburg, most declared to have gotten their awareness from local and regional newspapers (73.2%), which indeed confirms the insights from the interviews with stakeholders, who said this was their preferred mode of communication (see table 5.4). Citizens in Limburg were less likely to have heard about Cohesion funds at the workplace (24.7%). Billboards seem particularly effective, with 49.5% declaring they got their awareness from them. This was close to regions in Germany with comparable development, but also close to Polish regions which rely more heavily on Cohesion funds. The radio seems a particularly ineffective way to communicate Cohesion funds to citizens in Limburg, as only around 28% of those aware declared they heard about Cohesion funds in the radio (both national and local). Surprisingly enough, this is also the case for social media (28.9%). This is surprising, given the penetration of social media in the Netherlands and the use of Twitter and Facebook by local authorities, but consistent with results elsewhere. Personal experience of projects accounted for 56.7% of all those who were aware of Cohesion funds.

Table 5.4 Citizen survey: Sources of knowledge about EU funded projects

Where did you hear about EU funding to regions and cities?

Source	Yes	No	Refused	Don't know
National newspapers	38.1%	59.8%	0.0%	2.1%
Local or regional newspapers	73.2%	26.8%	0.0%	0.0%
National TV	40.2%	59.8%	0.0%	0.0%
Local or regional TV	41.2%	57.7%	0.0%	1.0%
National radio	28.9%	71.1%	0.0%	0.0%

Local or regional radio	28.9%	71.1%	0.0%	0.0%
Internet	43.3%	56.7%	0.0%	0.0%
Social media	28.9%	70.1%	0.0%	1.0%
Billboard	49.5%	50.5%	0.0%	0.0%
Workplace	24.7%	75.3%	0.0%	0.0%
Personal experience or knowledge of projects	56.7%	43.3%	0.0%	0.0%
Other	14.4%	81.4%	1.0%	3.1%

Source: COHESIFY Citizen Survey

### *Perceived impact of EU funding*

Roughly half (50.5%) of the Limburgers surveyed thought that Cohesion funds had a positive impact in their region (see table 5.6), which is slightly below average across all regions surveyed (55.5%). Among the reasons why respondents found for failure to produce positive impacts, bad management, corruption and failure to allocate funds to the right projects were highlighted as important (table 5.5), but all scored below the average across the regions studied. Indeed, only German regions seem to have a better perception about the overall management of Cohesion funds, although it must be noted the Limburg has a significantly higher perception of corruption (42.3%) than Flevoland (33.3%).

Table 5.5 Citizen survey: Reasons for the perceived lack of impact of EU funds

Why do you think there was no positive impact?

Reason	Yes	No	Refused	Don't know
Not enough funding	42.3%	42.3%	0.0%	15.4%
Allocation to the wrong projects	57.7%	26.9%	0.0%	15.4%
Bad management	61.5%	26.9%	0.0%	11.5%
Not executed on time	30.8%	46.2%	0.0%	23.1%
Corruption among government officials awarding tenders	42.3%	42.3%	0.0%	15.4%
Corruption among beneficiaries of EU funds	42.3%	42.3%	0.0%	15.4%
Other reasons	52.4%	33.3%	0.0%	14.3%

Source: COHESIFY Citizen Survey

The majority of Limburgers surveyed found that EU funding had benefited their region or city, with 11.3% indicating a very positive impact and 50.5% indicating a positive impact (table 5.6). That said, asked if they had benefited in their daily lives from a project funded by any of these three funds, Limburgers answered they had not: only 5.6% said yes (table 5.7). This is the lowest score from all the regions surveyed, slightly lower than Lombardy (5.8%) and lower than Flevoland (8.8%), but also much lower than German regions (10 to 17%), a result that underscores the low appreciation of Cohesion policy in the region and, possibly, the fact that the interventions supported with EU funds seem to hardly affect the citizens' lives. This is confirmed by the predominant perception (39.6%) that the region would have performed the same without Cohesion funding (table 5.8), consistent with perceptions in Germany, but very different from Eastern European regions, which are the main beneficiaries of Cohesion policy.



Table 5.6 Citizen survey: Perceived impact EU funding

How positive or negative was the impact of the funding of the European Union on your region or city?

Very positive	Positive	No impact	Negative	Very negative	Not applicable for my region or city	Refused	Don't know
11.3%	50.5%	18.6%	5.2%	3.1%	4.1%	0.0%	11.3%

Source: COHESIFY Citizen Survey

Table 5.7 Citizen survey: Individual benefits from EU funding

Have you benefited in your daily life from a project funded by any of EU funds?

Yes	No	Refused	Don't know
5.6%	87.5%	0.0%	7%

Source: COHESIFY Citizen Survey

Table 5.8 Citizen survey: Added value of EU funding

How do you think your region or city would have developed without EU funding?

Much better	Somewhat better	Same	Somewhat worse	A lot worse	Not applicable for my region or city	Refused	Don't know
4.1%	15.1%	39.6%	15.9%	4.3%	7.2%	0.0%	4.1%

Source: COHESIFY Citizen Survey

These citizen survey results seem to confirm the perception of Dutch authorities that European funding is not significantly appreciated in the Netherlands, because of the smaller percentage they represent in terms of the total budget of the country and the opinion that Dutch citizens are not so concerned about where the funds come from, but prefer to focus on the efficacy of projects. This is also consistent with the generalised idea that the Netherlands “gives more than it gets” from the European Union, which might have spurred the low adherence to the European identity and to the European integration in Limburg.

### *EU attitudes*

While half of the Limburgers surveyed claimed that Cohesion policy had been beneficial for the province and the cities of Limburg, this relatively positive view does not seem to go hand in hand with an appreciation of the EU. When asked whether they agreed with the sentence “My country has benefited from being a member of the European Union” (see table 5.9), only 13.4% of respondents strongly agreed, and 40% agreed, which is consistent with the results from Flevoland, the other Dutch province in the survey (13% and 40% respectively). This is one of the lowest shares of respondents strongly agreeing with this statement across all of the regions surveyed.

Table 5.9 Citizen survey: Appreciation of EU membership

To what extent do you agree with the following statement: "My country has benefited from being a member of the European Union"?

Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Refused	Don't know
13.4%	40.0%	15.6%	16.7%	9.9%	0.0%	4.5%

Source: COHESIFY Citizen Survey

While Limburgers are not opposed to European integration (only 4.7% are strongly opposed, slightly below the average of 5.1% across the regions studied), a good percentage of them are indifferent to it (33.5%, consistent with Flevoland with 33.8%), and 41.9% are either somewhat in favour (11.3%), in favour (22%) or strongly in favour (8.6%) (table 5.10). These positions on European integration in Limburg are relatively unenthusiastic, as compared to most other regions surveyed (on average across the sample, 10.4% respondents were somewhat in favour, 28.7% in favour and 19.5% strongly in favour).

Table 5.10 Citizen survey: Position on European integration

How would you describe your general position on European integration?

Strongly opposed	Opposed	Somewhat opposed	Neutral	Somewhat in favour	In favour	Strongly in favour	Refused	Don't know
4.7%	8.1%	9.7%	33.5%	11.3%	22.0%	8.6%	.4%	1.8%

Source: COHESIFY Citizen Survey

### *European identity and attachment*

The perceptions of the EU and the benefits of membership may be a reflection of the national attachment in Limburg (table 5.11). 50.7% of Limburgers declared they attach their identity to their country only, which is a solid majority, and much higher than the average across the regions studied of 32.2% (and also higher than Flevoland with 47%). Limburgers were the ones who identified with their nation the most among all regions surveyed, while 34.9% of respondents declared they identified equally as Dutch and as European. Only 6.6% identified first as Europeans.

Table 5.11 Citizen survey: Self-identification

Do you see yourself as...

Country only	Country and European	European and country	European only	Refused	Don't know
50.7%	34.9%	6.6%	6.8%	.4%	.5%

Source: COHESIFY Citizen Survey

That said, 42.3% of respondents in Limburg declared they identified with their city, town or village, indicating the strength of the most local locus of identification (table 5.12). According to anecdotal evidence and that from the focus groups, Limburg is meant to have a strong regional identity, however; surprisingly, the percentage of respondents who said they identified more with their region was comparatively low (40.9%), below the average across the European regions studied (52.8%), as compared to the percentage of those who declared they identified more with their country (61.6%, only slightly less than the average of 63.5%). These results are consistent across Limburg and Flevoland. Although the degree of identification with the EU in Limburg (21.1%) is slightly higher than in Flevoland (18.2%), both are below the average in COHESIFY case study regions (26.9%).

Table 5.12 Citizen survey: Territorial attachment

People may feel different degrees of attachment to places. Please tell me how attached you feel to:

	Very	Somewhat	A little	Not at all
Your city/town/village	42.3%	33.5%	14.3%	9.5%
Your region	40.9%	32.8%	16.5%	9.3%
Your country	61.6%	28.1%	6.1%	3.8%
European Union	21.1%	38.4%	23.7%	16.1%
Europe	27.2%	41.4%	18.6%	11.8%

Source: COHESIFY Citizen Survey

## 5.2 Focus group results

Three focus groups were conducted in the region of Limburg with 12 citizens (one of the groups was organised outside the region, with Delft University of Technology students hailing from Limburg).<sup>7</sup>

Table 5.13 Focus group demographics

Focus Group	Location	Date	Number of participants	Number of female participants	Age range (min age)	Age range (max age)
NL 4	Delft	19/09/2017	6	3	21	30
NL 5	Maastricht	21/09/2017	3	0	24	75
NL 6	Maastricht	28/09/2017	3	1	64	74

### *Cohesion policy*

In Limburg, participants were not familiar with the term 'Cohesion policy'. Only two participants said they had heard of the term before. After seeing a video showcasing examples of co-financed projects

<sup>7</sup> Additional analysis of focus groups was conducted by Andreja Pegan, Trinity College Dublin, as part of cross-case comparative study.

(NL4), participants associated Cohesion policy with attaining policy 'coherence' in the EU. Other understandings of the purpose of Cohesion policy included improving the image of the EU, development for disadvantaged regions and aggregate growth across the EU (NL 4). In one of the groups (NL5), where the video was not shown, two participants remarked that Cohesion policy involves a transfer of funds from 'rich' to 'poor' countries. They also agreed that the 'poor' countries – which were associated with 'Southern countries' – misuse this money because no conditionality is attached to the funds. In the third group (NL 6), the meaning of Cohesion policy was not discussed. None of the Cohesion policy funds was discussed in any of the groups.

Despite low awareness of Cohesion policy terminology, ten out of twelve participants could name a project that they believed was co-financed by the EU. Many of the projects related to infrastructure development, such as roads and urban regeneration, but cultural projects and investments in human resources were mentioned as well (table 5.14).

Table 5.14 Participants' reference to projects' co-financed by EU funds

<p>Infrastructure development:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Road infrastructure: Maastricht tunnel-ring (Buitenring), Willem-Alexander tunnel</li> <li>- Public transport: Renovation of area outside the Maankwartier station in Heerlen</li> <li>- Sports playground</li> <li>- Wellness recreation area in the centre of Kerkrade</li> <li>- Animal crossing bridge (Meerssen)</li> <li>- Sluice in Ternaaien</li> <li>- Recreation infrastructure: hiking trails, cycle paths</li> </ul> <p>Urban regeneration in Kerkrade (Parkstad), renovation of the building of the (provincial government) and Schunck building in Heerlen</p> <p>Culture and education:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Preservation of art and cultural goods</li> <li>- Museum in Kerkrade (Continium)</li> <li>- "I had a project at elementary school and that was also financed by the EU and that was about the Second World War, how the Netherlands had experienced it and how Germany had experienced it."</li> </ul> <p>Human resources development: Retraining workers that used to work in the factories in Meerssen</p> <p>Projects in Spain (roads), unspecified project in Belgium</p> <p>Other: Projects in an industrial areas in Limburg, Floriade, Grensmaas project</p>
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In the group comprising young citizens (NL 4), all the participants considered EU-funded projects to be positive. Participants believed that EU funds can play a role in making the region attractive and avoiding depopulation. One of the participants underlined that EU-funded projects can help the economy of countries that find themselves in distress, such as Greece. In the other two groups (NL 5 and NL 6), there were mixed opinions. Two participants believed that EU funds had no impact on their daily life, one participant associated positive impacts with the construction of the ring road in

Maastricht, while another one believed EU funds probably created positive impacts, but these were not visible or communicated to citizens. In both groups, the discussion shifted from the positive achievements of Cohesion policy to agriculture (NL 5) and food safety in the EU (NL 6).

Participants in the focus groups identified different problems. The lack of communication was widely discussed, for example:

*NL 4, Participant 3: "Apparently, the EU does something. But it's not the case that it is well communicated if you are not really looking for it, you really do not know."*

In two focus groups, participants felt that the EU does not finance projects which address the needs of the region:

*NL 6, Participant 2: "I used to get on the train here in Maastricht and I got off in Aachen. Now you have to go by bus. And to Belgium it is even worse. And that is European. That is a very bad example. [...] The European Union should give much more attention to that [transport], because that is very important to us. At least for South Limburg."*

In one of the groups (NL5), participants discussed problems with accountability and transparency of information about what projects are funded. While they believed that information is published, they thought it was impossible for them to know where to find it. Below we provide some extracts to highlight the way participants described the problems associated most often with Cohesion policy for the region of Limburg (table 5.15).

Table 5.15 Focus groups: Key problem associated with Cohesion policy in Limburg

Communication	NL 4, Participant 3: <i>"There is no promotion of what they [EU] actually do in the region, they do a lot, but nobody really knows that something is being done, and I think that communication would increase the confidence of citizens in the EU."</i>
Project utility	NL 6, Participant 2: <i>"Culture is always questionable, is it worth the money? Does it deliver? What does it yield?"</i>

### *European identity*

Participants spoke about European identity in terms of a feeling of closeness between EU citizens. This was illustrated with the example of their region and the relations with the Flemish community in Belgium, which shares the same culture. While admitting that the feeling of a shared identity with 28 EU Member States is more complicated due to the number and differences in cultures across the EU, they claimed that the crucial factor underpinning a common identity is common values, such as tolerance and human rights, which Europeans share together. However, this argument was undermined by some of the expressed views of participants, according to which there are more similarities between Western and Northern Europeans than between Europeans in the East.

Furthermore, because of the relatively remote location of the province in the Netherlands, the participants felt more Limburgers than Dutchmen.<sup>8</sup> One of the participants felt even more European than Dutch. Their attachment to Europe is not necessarily similar to attachment to the EU, however. Living so near Germany and Belgium definitively gives residents a feel for close-by-Europe, but not for the EU as a whole. The common dialect across Limburg and neighbouring German region might facilitate this attachment. In sum, as one of the stakeholders interviewer, Limburg can be described as the balcony of Europe: looking across borders but also looking for ways to cooperate and come closer to each other.

Participants represented a sense of being European beyond EU membership. For example, it was mentioned that the freedom of movement and travel can provide a sense of European identity, yet these freedoms were not associated with benefits arising from the EU. The EU institutions cannot promote European identity, because the EU is 'abstract' and 'far removed' from citizens. Citizens are either not informed or do not have an interest to be informed on EU issues, which prevents the promotion of a European identity through the EU. Such representations of the problems of European identity reflect commonly used arguments in the respective literature on European identity concerning the conflict between centre and periphery as well as the tensions between elites and citizens.

### *European identity and Cohesion policy*

According to participants in Limburg, Cohesion policy cannot produce a sense of identity for two reasons. Firstly, people are unaware of the operational mechanisms of Cohesion policy, and secondly, there is a perception that the policy is too expensive and not cost-effective. Yet some participants could perceive a potential for Cohesion policy to contribute positively to the creation of a European identity on the condition that Cohesion policy addresses real problems. But even then, peoples' perceptions of real problems are so different that the policy is unlikely to satisfy all groups of society. Cohesion policy might promote European identity in poorer countries, but not in the Netherlands, since the Dutch do not feel they are better off because of the European Union. Evidently, these views entail scepticism regarding the EU and its role.

## **6. Conclusions**

### **6.1 Key findings and scientific conclusions**

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 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 issues in 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.

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<sup>8</sup> This stronger regional attachment, however, has to be nuanced by the results of the COHESIFY citizen survey in Limburg, which indicated that 61.6% of Limburg respondents were strongly attached to their country, and 40.9% were strongly attached to the region (see section 5.1).

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 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, balance of powers is 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 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 project appraisal in 2007-2013 period with the potential beneficiaries (representatives of the provinces, municipalities) being members of the Monitoring and Steering Committees. However, once this problem was 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 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 as a 'European' programme; and (2) that there is limited awareness of Cohesion policy among the public. 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.

## 6.2 Policy implications and recommendations

The recommendations for Limburg are largely in line with those for Flevoland, given the similarity of the approaches to implementation of Cohesion policy and communication on its impacts in both regions:

- If Cohesion policy spending in the Netherlands is to have a greater impact on EU identification, it should be, at least partly, refocused away from innovation support towards on issues that have a more tangible impact on citizens' lives and their living environment,

such as the quality of the urban space, addressing socio-economic challenges in cities, or cross-border people-to-people cooperation. Designating part of the regional allocations for spending on local or regional priorities decided upon by the citizens themselves through participatory processes could be a way forward to achieve this, while mobilising and sensitising the citizens to Cohesion policy.

- Tailoring of the implementation of communication to regional media rather than national media to communicating Cohesion policy is recommended. What matters for the citizens is whether and how Cohesion policy touches upon their lives and what benefits it brings to them. In the case of Limburg, for instance, citizens tended to remark and value more the projects that supported cultural exchanges across the borders with the neighbouring countries, while ignoring the investment in infrastructure or innovation.
- Communication focuses on present and prospective beneficiaries of the funding, while neglecting communication to the wider public about the benefits that the investment brought to the community. While the emphasis in the Dutch Cohesion policy communication strategy placed on telling the stories behind the projects may be appropriate, it seems to hardly reach the citizens. Communication has to focus more on reaching out beyond the narrow circle of stakeholders of Cohesion policy to make the citizens aware of the policy and understand the opportunities and benefits that it brings or may bring to the region.
- Regional OPs in the Netherlands, like OP Zuid, are multi-regional and hence cover territories which are not the nexus of regional identity (which typically is the province) and remain abstract in the eyes of the citizens. Such territorial arrangement makes it also much more difficult to communicate on what benefits Cohesion policy actually brought to a particular province. Thus, while recommending to break down the multi-regional OPs into programmes at NUTS 2 (thus provincial) level may be unrealistic, given that the allocation of EU funding for the Dutch regions is relatively small and the present system appears to be effective in absorbing the funding, communication of Cohesion policy would benefit from gathering and making available (in an online database accessible to a wider public both literally and in terms of the language used) information on the funding invested in each of the provinces of OP Zuid and communicating on the positive impacts of that investment in Limburg (and, separately, other provinces covered by the OP) would make it much more tangible and visible to the citizens.
- While the citizens of Limburg may be aware that EU supports projects in their region, they hardly connect these to Cohesion policy, which is seen often unknown and/or misunderstood. In line with the overall messages of the COHESIFY project on communication of Cohesion policy, the EU funding should be 'humanised' through communication on the stories about people and places that benefited from Cohesion policy. In the Dutch cases, this is particularly important given the very low awareness of Cohesion policy. Local and regional media (press especially) would be the best outlet for those stories (given that these media are already telling a more positive story about Cohesion policy than the national ones and are the primary source of information on Cohesion policy for the citizens).
- Moreover, since the Cohesion policy acronyms (EFRO, ESF, OP West, etc.) remain hardly telling for the wider public, it is recommended to consider using simple language and emphasising more generic and widely understood terms like 'EU funds' or 'European funds', even if this would probably require a change of communication and 'branding' approach to Cohesion policy.
- While COHESIFY research suggests that overall the traditional information billboards placed near the EU-supported investment, mentioning EU financial support, are effective in communicating what the EU does for the region (a source of information on Cohesion policy



for nearly half of the respondents, according to the COHESIFY citizen survey), it is striking how little emphasis is put on social media in communicating Cohesion policy in the Netherlands. Not only social media become increasingly a prominent source of information and news for citizens, but also they could facilitate the said effort of 'humanising' the EU funds and telling the 'local' stories, with simple and visual material.

- Again, in line with the broader recommendations of COHESIFY on communication has to be on-going, continue after the projects end and be based on a strategic and place-tailored approach and ring-fenced communication budget both at OP level and in projects.

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## 8. Annexes

### Annex 1: List of interviewees in Limburg

Stakeholder	Date of interview	Type of organisation	Role in organisation
1	10-07-2017	Management Authority Euregio Maas Rijn, director ERAC	Former interim director
2	28-06-2017	Management authority OP Zuid ; Province of Noord-Brabant	Executive secretary
3	10-07-2017	Stimulus (OP Zuid intermediary body)	programme manager
4	10-07-2017	Province of Limburg	European Programmes, cluster Economy and Innovation, contact person of the Province of Limburg for OP Zuid
5	14-07-2017	Province of Limburg	Department of European Programmes, cluster Economy and Innovation, contact person of the Province of Limburg for Interreg programmes
6	04-09-2017	MC Advisory (beneficiary of ERDF)	Involved in implementation of ERDF projects
7	28-09-2017	Stimulus (OP Zuid intermediary body)	Communication staff
8	11-07-2017	Stichting Natuur en Milieu (Association Nature and Environment)	Member of Monitoring Committee OP Zuid
9	13-07-2017	Management authority OP Zuid ; Province of Noord-Brabant	Contact person of the Province of Noord-Brabant for Interreg programmes
10	04-09-2017	Province of Limburg ; Campus Chemelot	Partly delegated to campus Chemelot for implementation of ERDF projects (thus a beneficiary)

### Annex 2: Focus groups in Limburg

In the case study of Limburg, 12 participants (4 female and 8 male) took part in 3 focus groups (L1, L2 and L3). One focus group included 6 participants, the other two each three 6 participants.

The first took place in one of the lecture rooms of TU Delft and included students (BSc, MSc and PhD) from Limburg studying at Delft University of Technology. Their age varied between 21-30 years. The other two focus groups took place in a meeting room in Stayokay Maastricht.

Focus groups were advertised with posters in all student buildings of TU Delft, on Facebook (Facebook group page Deelnemers/participants Maastricht: a group page with ads on participants requested), Whatsapp requests by dedicated persons (university students and staff) to Maastricht students and staff, advertisement in the regional newspaper, posters in Stayokay (for participants of local events) and with snowball sampling (emailing and calling all participants to ask for additional participants).

The focus groups lasted between 1h00 to 1h15. All three focus groups were organised during the day

(one in the morning and two in the afternoon, early and late). The same person moderated all three focus groups. The focus groups were voice-recorded and transcribed by a professional service. Participants received a gift voucher, and light refreshments were provided. All participants cooperated enthusiastically in the three workshops.

The participants of the 1<sup>st</sup> focus group were TUD students (BSc, MSc and PhD) having lived in Limburg until their studies in Delft. The video was used in this focus group and helped to explain what types of projects are ERDF co-funded. Also the co-funding aspect became clear to the participants. In the other two groups 5 of 6 in total were Limburgers. 1 was a student living in Maastricht for 4 years but originated from another (non-Randstad) province. They all had the Dutch nationality. In each of the two Maastricht focus groups there were a no-show which explains that each of them had only 3 participants.

Table 1: Focus groups

Group ID	Region	Location	Date of focus group	N of participants	N of female participants	Age range by year of birth	Filename
L1	Limburg	Delft	19/09/2017	6	3	1987-1996	FG_Limburg_1
L2	Limburg	Maastricht	21/09/2017	3	0	1942-1993	FG_Limburg_2
L3	Limburg	Maastricht	28/09/2017	3	1	1943-1953	FG_Limburg_3

Table 2: Participants

Group ID	Participant ID	Gender	Year of birth	Age when stopped full-time education	Level of education	Work situation
L1	Participant 1	Female	1992	still in education	I am still student	still in education
L1	Participant 2	Male	1993	still in education	I am still student	still in education
L1	Participant 3	Female	1996	still in education	I am still student	still in education
L1	Participant 4	Male	1987	still in education	I am still student	still in education
L1	Participant 5	Male	1996	still in education	I am still student	still in education
L1	Participant 6	Female	1995	still in education	I am still student	still in education
L2	Participant 1	Male	1993	still in education	I am still student	still in education

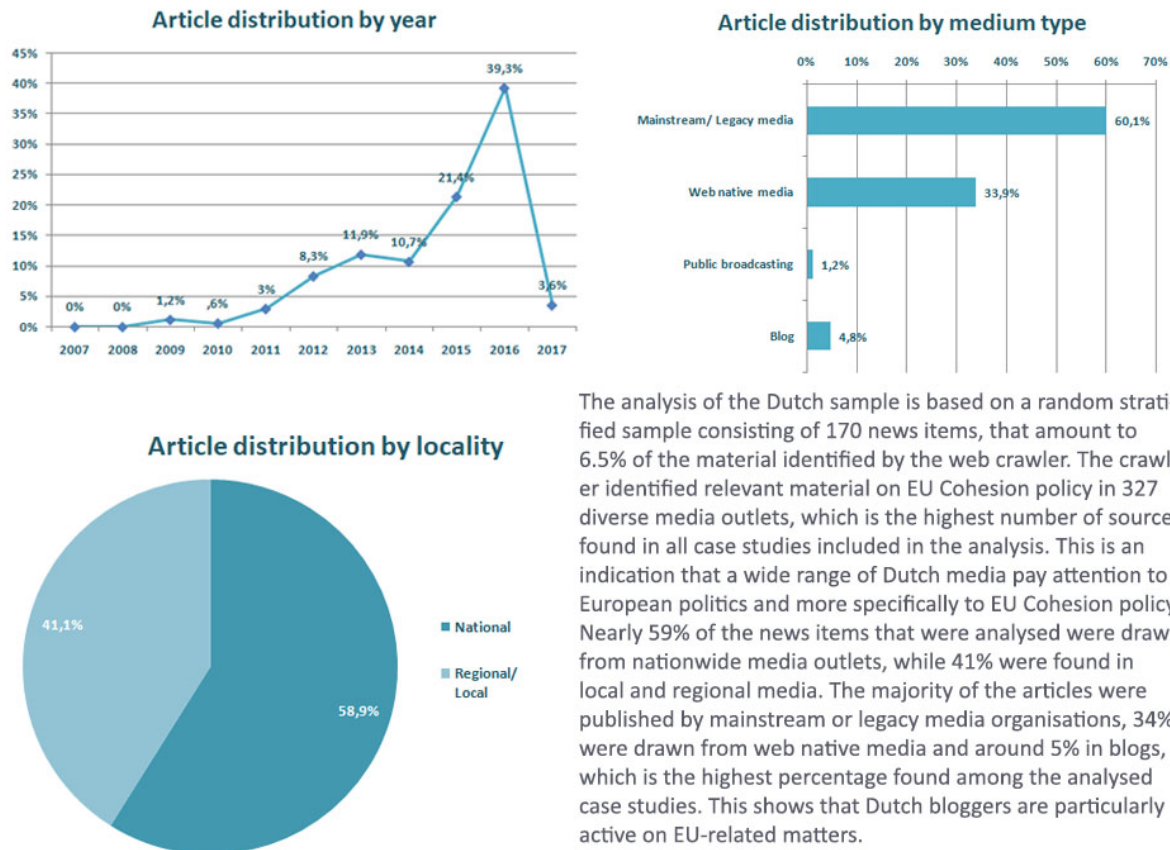
L2	Participant 2	Male	1942	16 years	secondary education	vocational	(early) retired
L2	Participant 3	Male	1945	17 years	secondary education	vocational	(early) retired
L3	Participant 1	Male	1950	25 years	Higher education or university	professional	(early) retired
L3	Participant 2	Male	1943	32 years	Higher education or university	professional	self-employed
L3	Participant 3	Female	1953	40 years	Higher education or university	professional	(early) retired

### Annex 3: Stakeholders survey

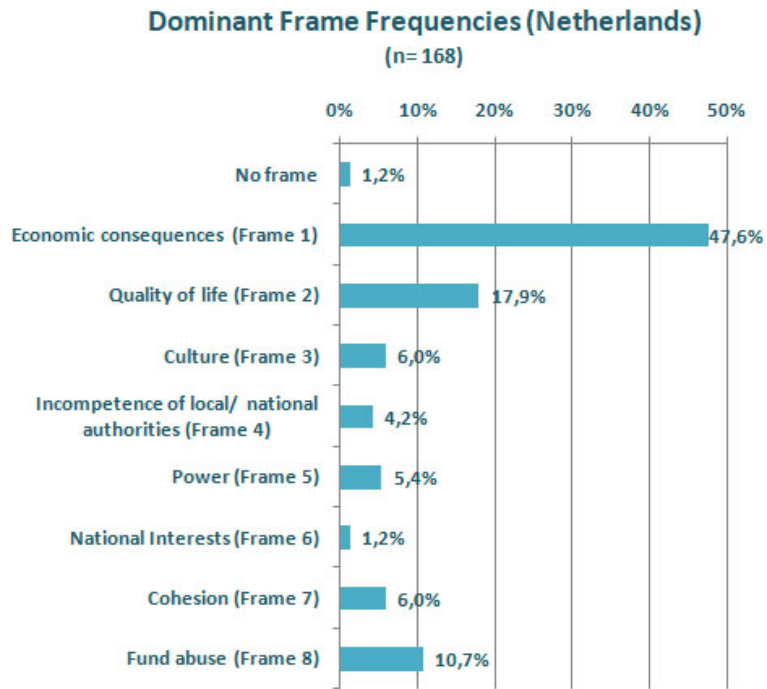
Region	Contacts	All responses		Full responses (FR)		Monitoring Committee Members
	<i>count</i>	<i>count</i>	<i>[%]</i>	<i>count</i>	<i>[%]</i>	<i>[% of FR]</i>
Limburg	238	60	25,2%	19	8,0%	52,6%
Total all regions	2191	803	36,6%	400	18,3%	51%

## Annex 4: Framing Analysis of Dutch Media

**Figure 3.12.1**  **Netherlands**



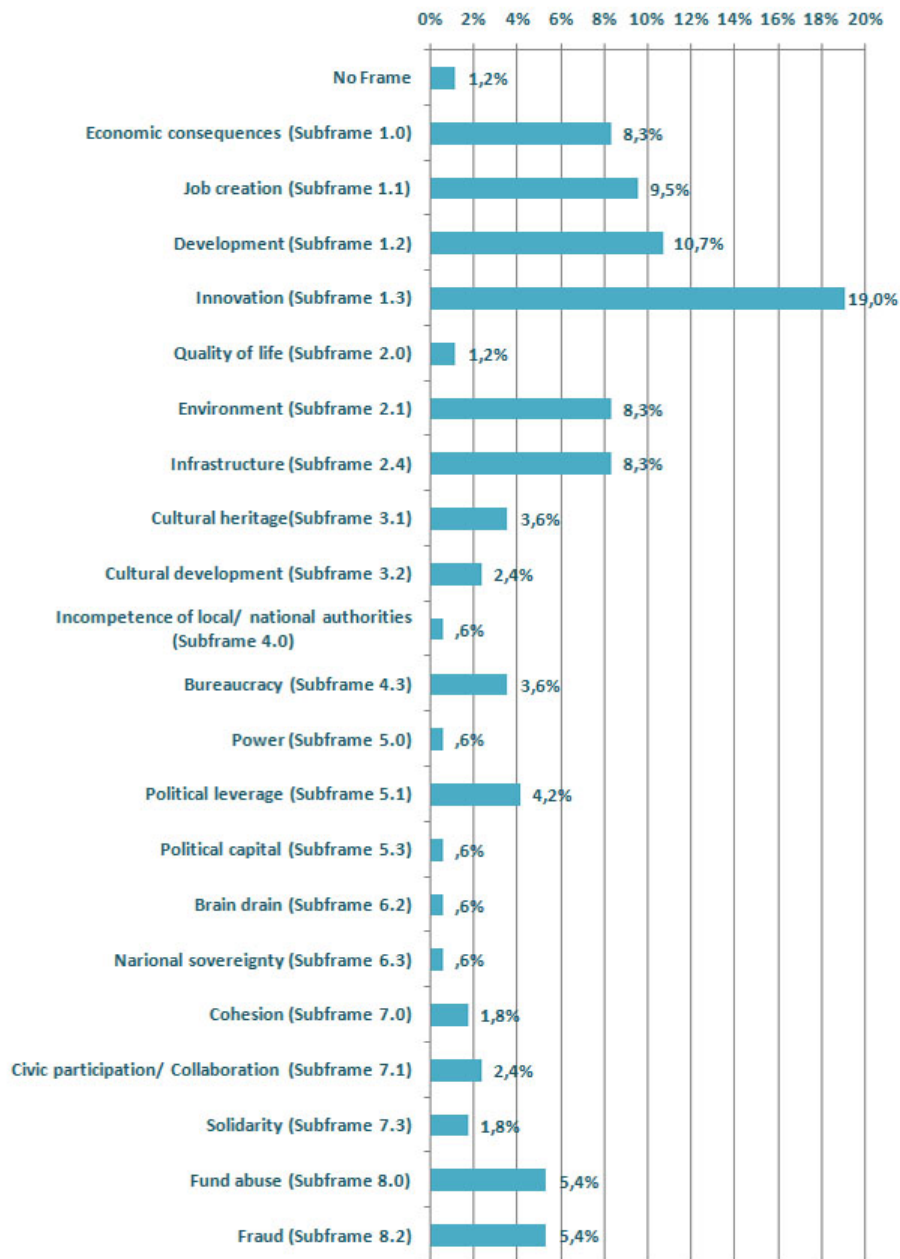
Evidence from the framing analysis indicates that the Dutch media approach EU Cohesion policy predominately in terms of economic gains and losses as the “Economic consequences” Frame dominates nearly 48% of the analysed news items. This could be attributed to the high percentage of articles (19%) framing EU Cohesion policy in terms of the “Innovation” Subframe (1.3) as shown in Figure 3.12.3. Among the analysed case studies, the Dutch percentage of subframe 1.3 is the highest, suggesting that the Dutch media interpret EU Cohesion as a mean to modernize the economic production methods by financing innovative technologies and by promoting research and development policies. The second most salient frame identified in the Dutch sample was “Quality of life” with 17.9%, although it is one of the lowest found in the examine case studies. Additionally, the Dutch media adopt the “Fund abuse” frame in 10.7% of the sample, indicating a concern regarding the management of EU Cohesion funding by national and local authorities. Finally, it should be noted that the Dutch media exhibit one of the highest percentages in employing the “Cohesion” frame, as well as the fact that they interpret EU Cohesion policy in terms of “Civic participation” (Subframe 7.1), more frequently than any other national media.



**Figure 3.12.2**  
*Dominant frame frequencies in Dutch media*

### Dominant Subframe Frequencies (Netherlands)

(n= 168)

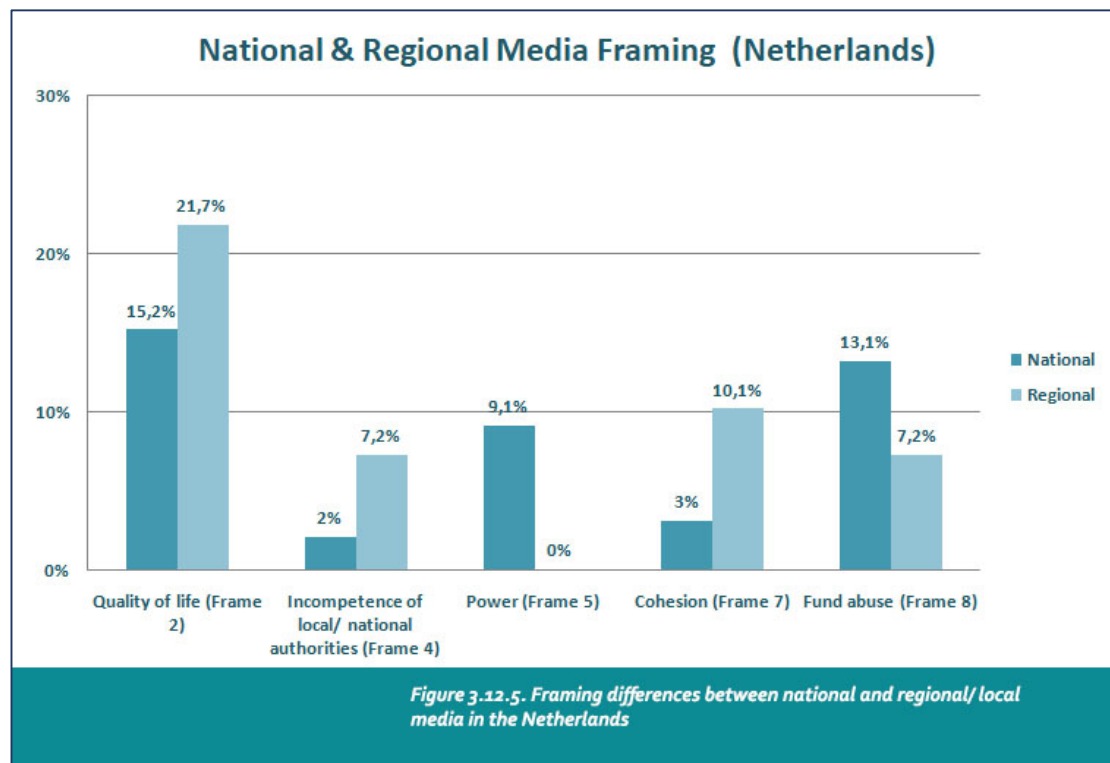


**Figure 3.12.3**  
Dominant Suframe frequencies in Dutch media

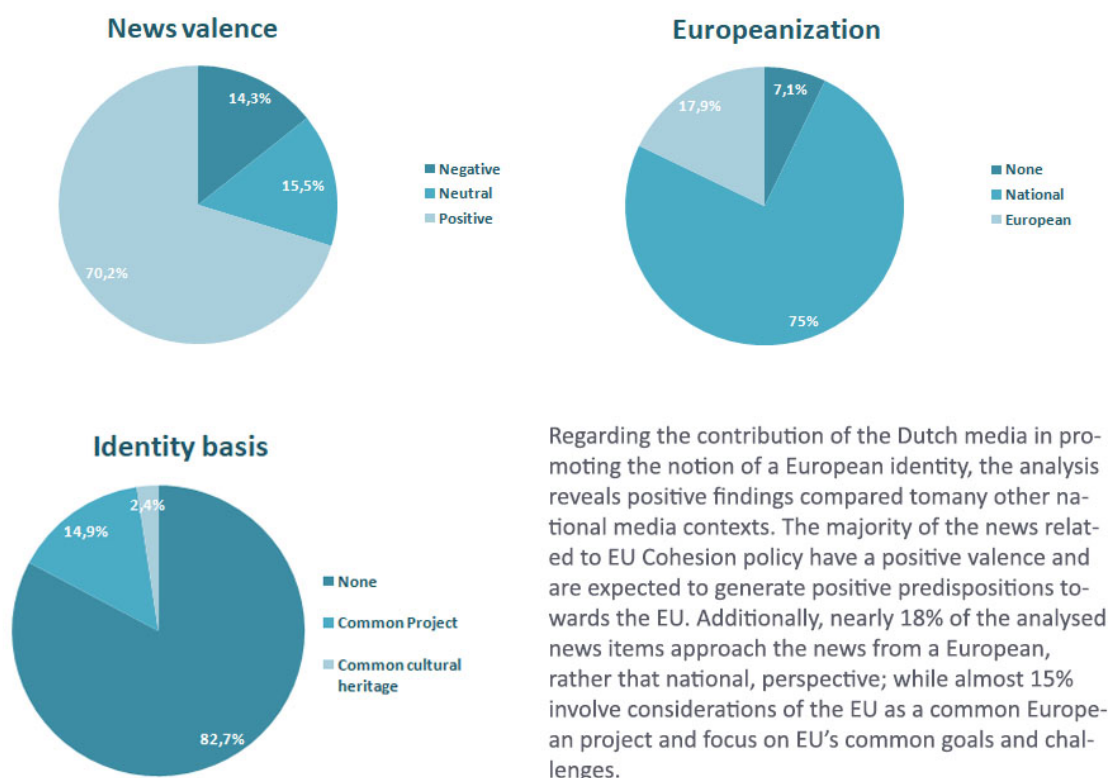
As shown in Figure 3.11.5, the analysis of the Dutch media uncovered some significant differences between regional and national media regarding the frames employed. According to the empirical evidence, regional media tend to use Frame 2 ("Quality of life"), Frame 4 ("Incompetence of local/national authorities") and Frame 7 ("Cohesion") more often than national media. On the



contrary, national media emphasize on “Fund abuse” (Frame 8) issues almost twice as often as regional media, while they also employ the “Power” Frame (5) that is inexistent in regional media coverage of EU Cohesion policy.



**Figure 3.12.4**  **Netherlands** - Europeanization variables



Several differences we identified in the analysis of the Europeanisation variables that are expected to affect European identity formation. As Figure 3.12.6 shows, regional media tend to present more positive and less negative news than national media, while national media perform better in the Europeanisation of the public discourse and in promoting the common European objectives, interests and cultural heritage.

