

Cross-border Spatial Planning Creates Opportunities in Shrinking Regions

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1. Background and Definition of the Originally Problem: Shrinking Regions

The population growth that Belgium and the Netherlands are expecting to see during the next decade will mostly take place in centrally situated and easily accessible metropolitan regions such as the 'Flemish Diamond' and the 'Randstad Conurbation'. The peripherally situated provinces of Limburg (in the eastern part of the region Flanders (Belgium) and the southeastern corner of the Netherlands) present very different dynamics in terms of both economic and population growth. Although the cross-border region around the centrally located city of Maastricht functions as a single regional housing market, we also see that the national border is playing a dominant role. On the Flemish side (in the adjacent municipalities of Lanaken and Riemst) there are prospects for growth, while on the Dutch side there is 'shrinkage', with structural vacancy, surplus of housing etc. In recent decades there has also been extensive immigration of Dutch nationals into these Flemish municipalities. Among those living in the suburban municipality of Lanaken, 26,1% are now Dutch nationals, while 16,1% of all residents in the rural municipality of Riemst are Dutch nationals. These tensions in the housebuilding market, which have also been expressed by administrative bodies, formed the impetus for the creation of a cross-border collaboration.

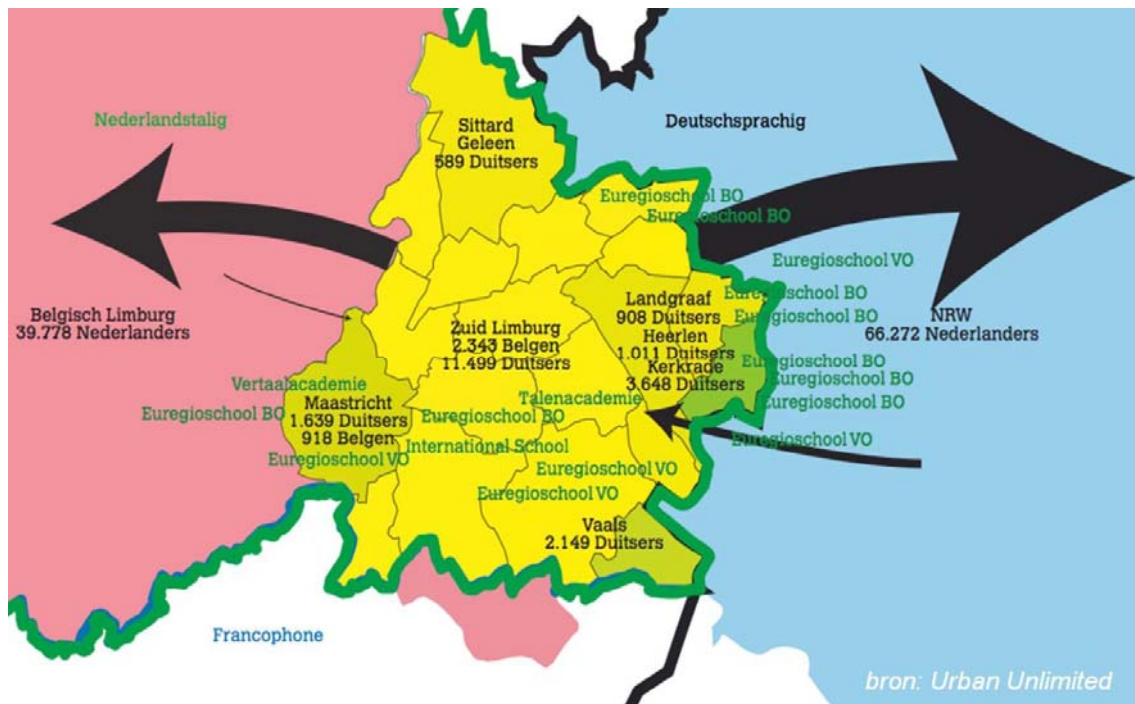


Figure 1: Emigration from Southern Limburg (illustration from Urban Unlimited)

2. Collaboration on Multiple Levels

2.1 *The Charter between the Provinces East and West Limburg*

The collaboration between the two provinces of Limburg that fall within the Euregio requires a degree of transcendence of the remaining internal borders. A labour market and an education system at the Euregio level, a cross-border public transport network etc. are all prerequisites for economic development. Signing a 'Charter' is one step towards the harmonisation of a policy 'from below'. Making full use of these cross-border opportunities and possibilities requires a policy that is much more explicitly focused on a de facto integration with the other side of the border. The Charter lists 10 specific opportunities for integration and sustainable (economic) development. These are as follows: (1) integrate the transport infrastructure, (2) activate the knowledge infrastructure and innovation, (3) encourage labour mobility, (4) make use of the available education, (5) support the care sector and stem demographic ageing, (6) strengthen tourism, (7) coordinate safety, (8) bundle the media, (9) strengthen the culture and (10) optimise spatial development. Innovative, inspiring projects are being set up to address each of these opportunities.

These cross-border projects aim to remedy the various border-related hindrances that affect the setting in which people live their lives, go to work and make their homes. They are a response to the day-to-day needs and practical problems encountered by local citizens.



Figure 2: Geographical situation of the provinces East and West Limburg

2.2 *The ALBERTKNOOP Cross-border Project*

Since 2009 the local authorities (the municipality of Lanaken in Flanders and the city of Maastricht in the Netherlands, together with both provinces East and West Limburg) have been working on a strategic cross-border planning process in this border area, with support from the Government of Flanders. This partnership is entitled ALBERTKNOOP (Albert Canal Link). A border region manager has been appointed to push forward and coordinate this complex cross-border project. This project comes under opportunity 10 of the Charter: optimise spatial development.

The spatial policy plans (known as structural plans in Flanders and structural visions in the Netherlands) put forward by the four local partners mentioned above, all undergo mutual

critical review and ongoing harmonisation. In parallel with efforts to develop a joint long-term vision, work is also underway on specific projects such as the development of a cross-border industrial area, a new fast tram link joining the cities of Hasselt (in West Limburg) and Maastricht (in East Limburg), the development of a shared green belt in the 'Zouwdal area' etc. The strongly diverging housing markets in the border region within Flanders and the South part of the East Limburg region in the Netherlands are also being jointly monitored and cross-border relocations are being mapped. Standard statistics gives rather global information. Therefore a detailed survey is being used (in the Flemish municipalities of Lanaken en Riemst) to ask relocating households about their housing preferences and specific factors affecting their housing-related cross-border actions.



Figure 3: "Albertknoop" planning concept

3. Housing Survey

In recent years immigration from the Netherlands into the municipalities of Lanaken and Riemst has virtually ceased. This actual period of 'reduced pressure in the housing market' has been used to gain a better insight into housing-related preferences and reasons for relocating cross-border. In early 2011 the idea emerged within the ALBERTKNOOP working group of questioning those departing from and arriving in the Flemish municipalities of Lanaken and Riemst to identify their reasons for moving into and out of these municipalities. If a representative response was obtained, the working group aimed to make use of the

results in local housing and planning policy and improve housing and planning policy harmonisation between the three municipalities (Lanaken, Riemst and Maastricht). Data processing was carried out by the Research and Statistics Team within the Municipality of Maastricht. The level of response to the survey was at least 22%, which gives a reliability of 90% or more.

Results for the period March 2011 till April 2012.

The survey showed that **a change in the family situation** (setting up home independently, new cohabitation or separation from a cohabiting partner) is the most important factor underlying a cross-border relocation. This applies to those arriving in Lanaken and Riemst and also (albeit to a lesser extent) to those leaving these municipalities. **Housing and housing-related factors** provide reasons for relocating more commonly among those arriving in this area than among those moving away. Work (a new job or distance from home to work) is more important for households leaving the area than for those moving into it.

On further analysis of the factors determining arrivals and departures, the housing preferences of households moving into the area seem to confirm the characteristics of the municipalities of Riemst (more rural) and Lanaken (more suburban). Each of these municipalities has its own particular residential character, with different housing characteristics. Reasons for coming to live in a specific municipality are often associated with this environment and his quality.

People arriving in Lanaken often wish to live in a smaller community, wish to move away from their previous neighbourhood due to a lack of facilities and seem to attach much more importance to their immediate surroundings than those arriving in Riemst. Those arriving in Riemst more often express a wish to live independently or live with a partner, or to become a homeowner. These people also seem to attach more importance to owning their own home. The average household size of respondents arriving in Lanaken is 2.05. In the case of those leaving it is 2.29. The average household size of respondents arriving in Riemst is 2.32. In the case of those leaving it is 2.34.

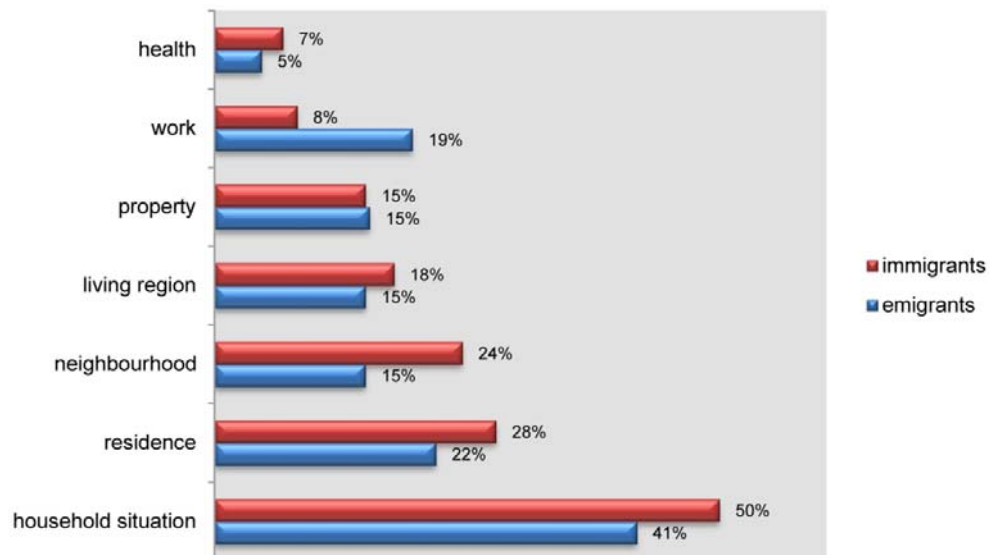


Figure 4: Illustration showing reasons for cross-border relocating

4. Conclusions

4.1 Collaboration Should Focus on Integration

Although issues relating to housing have often been raised on an isolated and sectoral basis, it is clear from the collaboration frameworks that precisely the 'integration' of substantive themes is a key concept in this respect. The ALBERTKNOOP collaboration framework works in an integrated and cross-sectoral way under the umbrella of the East and West Limburg Charter.

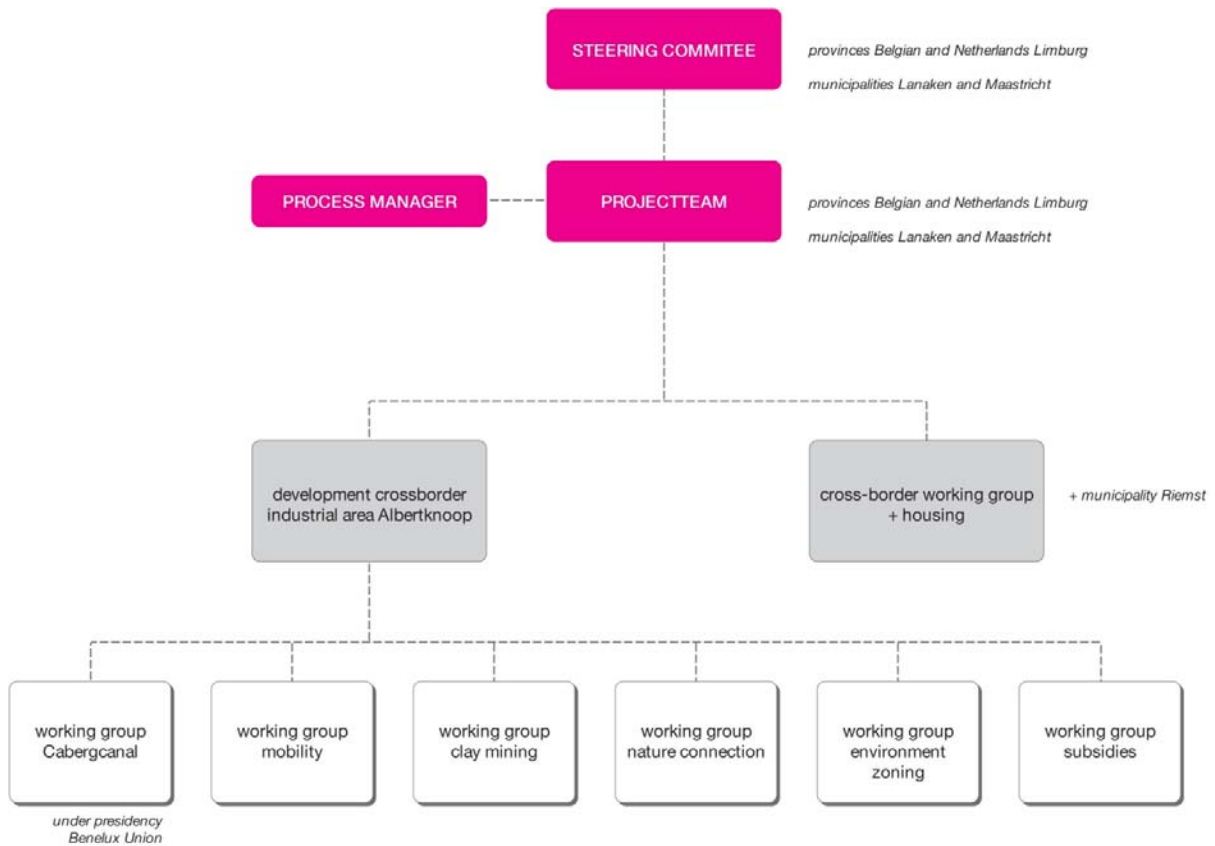


Figure 5: Diagram of the Albertknoop collaboration framework

Innovative and strategic multi-track planning of this kind results in a creative dialogue that aims to strike the right balance between growth aspirations and measures to address shrinkage. This creates links between housing and economic activity, recreational green spaces, cultural infrastructure, cross-border public transport, liveability of housing estates etc. The border region manager stimulates this multi-track approach.

4.2 The Housing Issue is Closely Related to the Identity of a Place

The results of the survey of housing preferences and reasons for relocating are sobering in one sense, since decisions (with cross-border effects) are made by residents for personal reasons rather than on the basis of planning considerations. On the other hand we can also conclude that there is a very good match between the identity (and morphological character) of a municipality and people's demands in relation to their homes and the environment in which they live.

4.3 Shrinkage Creates Nothing but Opportunities at the Local Level

There are a large number of diverse reasons and rationales underlying cross-border relocations. Shrinkage is primarily also linked to economic processes at the regional and national level. Employment is a significant factor, as are the distances and travelling times between home and the workplace. Macroeconomic trends and developments can hardly be influenced at all at the local level. For this reason the power of a cross-border local collaboration has to be seen as an opportunity to strengthen identity, both at the level of administration and in terms of creating high-quality spatial planning projects. It creates an opportunity to set up joint projects that will meet specific needs and help to improve the spatial quality of border regions.

4.4 Strategic Planning as a Useful Tool

In addition to the need to work in an 'integrated' way (see point 4.1 above) it is also vitally important to guide this activity along three tracks: a long-term track to build a (cross-border) vision, a short-term track to take specific actions and a third track to create a broad base of support. The strategic aspects here include both selecting areas and projects and selecting themes (always within a coherent context).

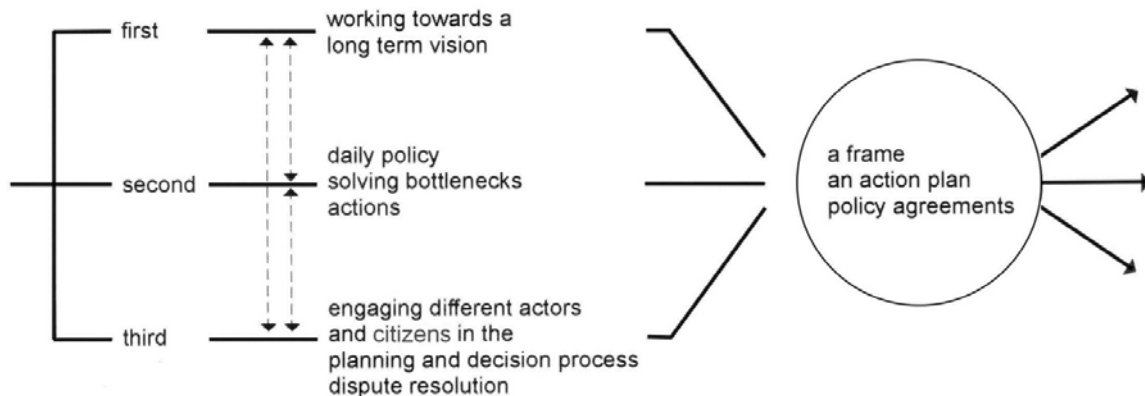


Figure 6: Diagram depicting three-track planning

The rationale for the division into three working tracks lies in the different objectives and character of the planning activities, and the different and complementary skills to be used in the process. The three working tracks, which can be seen as sub-processes (Louis Albrechts, Jef Van den Broeck 2003) are: a first track for the elaboration of a strategic plan (a framework, a long-term programme and a short-term action plan), a second track 'to manage everyday life, extinguishing fires, scoring points and creating trust by solving problems through actions on a very short term (Jef Van den Broeck 1987) and a third track for the involvement of the key actors in the planning process. The proposed tracks should not be viewed in a purely linear way, but rather as a permanent, often incremental interaction of subprocesses in specific places and specific contexts.

Important issue is the process organisation with a Steering Committee and a project team with civil servants of all partners, supplemented by an process manager in this case called the border region manager (external consultant, author of this paper).

Fortunately, the cross-border process is supported and guided by a set of brilliant individuals: the deputies of the provinces and the mayors of the municipalities as (rolling) Chair of the Steering Committee, leading civil servants of the Flemish, the provincial and the municipal administrations, key politicians and professional consultants. Their skills (technical, social, communicative) and dedication were crucial for the process.

Also important is their ability to make a distinction between their 'own' viewpoint and the viewpoint of the group, as well as the question of trust between the cross-border actors. The fact that the main political actors (two deputies, two mayors) believed in the process and took part very actively in the Steering Committee is crucial to the success of this cross-border process.

The three track approach can indeed work to provide qualitative answers to persistent problems and integrated challenges.

References

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