

Title: Exploring processes of region-specific rural development in Flanders.

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Theme: E. Developing Rural and Peripheral Regions

A variety of global processes of change affect and challenge rural areas all over Europe. Policy, social, environmental and economic change processes, in combination with globalization as an overarching process have resulted in homogeneous and uniform rural areas. Rural areas have become increasingly interchangeable. There's a significant loss of the diversity of rural landscapes, rural products, farming techniques and crops, and other cultural and environmental differences of rural areas. As a reaction to this, a growing attention for place-based rural development can be witnessed in society, science and policy.

These change processes have also had an impact on rural areas in Flanders and we also notice more attention for place-based rural development. In Flanders, a substantive part of place-based rural development initiatives emerges at the regional level. This regional level is situated between the provinces (NUTS 2) and municipalities (LAU 2). It is at this intermediate, regional level that bottom-up and top-down initiatives meet. On the one hand, local actors often cooperate and organize bottom-up development initiatives on a regional level. On the other hand, government focuses more and more on the regional level. In other words, the region emerges as an operational interface between established public administrative levels to enable better coordination and implementation of top-down policies and to enhance and create institutional space for bottom-up, place-based strategies. The Flemish government defines place-based rural development as region-specific rural development.

In this paper we explore how actors and policy interact in processes of region-specific rural development in four rural regions in Flanders. We have conducted semi-structured interviews and organized focus groups to investigate this. We analyzed the themes indicated by regional stakeholders as relevant and crucial for future regional development, as well as their strategies for region-specific rural development. Second, we scrutinized how the rural development policy of Europe, Flanders, the provinces and the municipalities all together shape and guide the regional strategies for region-specific rural development in the case study regions.

Our analyses have shown that the stakeholders involved in region-specific rural development in all the regions, have a very similar profile. When looking for a wide range of actors involved in region-specific rural development, it seems that the same

kind of people can be found in every region. This leads to similar constellations of rural development actors in each region. Second, the stakeholders involved in our research all indicated several themes which they found important for the development of their region. Although the themes were rather numerous and diverse, we could easily distinguish four broad themes that are crucial for the future rural development of the case studies. What is striking, is that these themes appeared to be the same for all the four case study regions. Respondents of all regions all indicated the following themes as key themes for future rural development in their region: 1) open space and landscape, 2) tourism and heritage, 3) regional identity and regional brand, and 4) livability and mobility.

The analysis of the rural development policy affecting the regional stakeholders in the development of their strategies has revealed that all the case study regions are affected in the same way by the European and Flemish rural development policy. The differences that influence region-specific rural development are mainly at the provincial level. And these differences don't concern the provincial policy, but rather the provincial organization for rural development. Overall, we can conclude that the interaction between policy and regional stakeholders is dominated by a top-down approach by the Flemish and provincial governments. It seems that the Flemish government as well as the majority of the provincial governments (with exception of West Flanders) prefer a steering and controlling role in region-specific rural development. They haven't taken up their roles of enablers and supporters of rural development. They still interfere at the regional level and want to maintain control over what happens in regions. In that respect, the Flemish and provincial governments don't really succeed in their objective to enable region-specific rural development and they are 'stuck' in their roles of steering, planning and controlling development.