

**The 'place' of multi-level governance? Defining the policy agenda for regional development in Western Flanders**

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**Conference on Multi Level Governance at the  
Political Economy Research Centre Sheffield  
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**TITLE: THE 'PLACE' OF MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE?**

**DEFINING THE POLICY AGENDA FOR REGIONAL**

**DEVELOPMENT IN WESTERN FLANDERS**

**ABSTRACT**

*The policy-making function of the principal agency for regional development is examined. Are institutional and governance forms for Regional Development as much a product of specific local and regional conditions (the 'place' of multi-level governance) as they are a part of the mechanisms that facilitate their reproduction- such as the state, economy, society and the widely interpreted term 'globalization'? Following on from this, are multi-level policy priorities for regional development influenced more by the 'business-led agenda' and its 'positional elites' than the regional- local institutional capacities and by the local actors 'outside of the game'?*

*Paper to be presented at conference on "Multi Level Governance: Interdisciplinary Perspectives" at Political Economy Research Centre University Of Sheffield June 28- 30 2001*

## **INTRODUCTION AND SOME CONCEPTUAL REMARKS:**

In this paper<sup>1</sup> I examine the manner by which the principal agency at the regional/ sub- regional level for regional development formulates policy. The paper asks whether- in terms of these policy agendas, what is loosely termed 'place' exerts the main influence on the priorities that have emerged.

Is it the case that the policy agenda for regional development reflects the particularities of place and the specific conditions of this place-focus within a multi level policy and governance<sup>2</sup> environment? This view- broadly that of what has been termed in the UK, the 'New Regionalism'<sup>3</sup> starts from the premise that 'governance' (including the type and role of existing institutions; the political system/ process; the local/ regional culture; the myriad web of overlapping programmes, institutions and actors) has the strongest influence on the policy agenda that emerges for regional development<sup>4</sup>. Some research concentrates on the institutional capacity of governing regimes and alliances to manage these changes and the relationships and strategies they adopt to do this (Healey et al, 1999)<sup>5</sup>. They state that one result of this 'recognition' is that "institutional design" (the process by which the agencies and policies of regional development are configured) and 'institutional capacity- building' are of increasing importance in regional public policy. This capacity varies from place to place and is related to place- specific characteristics as well as structural phenomena. This poses a challenge

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<sup>1</sup> This paper draws on my on going doctoral research programme. This doctorate is a cross-national study looking at the formulation of RDA policy agendas in England (UK) and Flanders (Belgium). It is supported by a Faculty scholarship, Faculty of the Built Environment, UWE. My supervisors are Dr. Clara Greed and Professor Murray Stewart.

<sup>2</sup> Please refer to Appendix One for a table outlining the difference between government and governance.

<sup>3</sup> "In what represents an emerging regional political economy, regions are being hailed as the most vital sites with which to convene and capitalize on the flows of knowledge that are abound in contemporary globalization (Castells and Cooke). In particular, regional coalitions are being roused to actively create a series of economic and social relations to help facilitate interactive learning, innovation networks, institutional thickness, and soft social capital (Amin; Cooke; Putnam, 1993 and Storper, 1997). ...[these approaches, many of which can be seen] to follow the codes of an earlier doctrine of *endogenous growth* (Piore and Sabel, 1984) and work on new industrial spaces (Scott 1996 and Henry et al 1996) to suggest that globalizing forces are paradoxically "being played out at the regional level" (Cooke, 1995). It is perhaps also worth pointing out that one effect of this academic outpouring has been a tremendous *political* appeal to the regional scale in territorially configuring economic prosperity (Jones and MacLeod, 1999). In a recent contribution to the debate, John Lovering (1999) labels this a 'new regionalism' in academic and political discourse" (Macleod, 2000)

<sup>4</sup> I arrived at the start of my doctoral programme with the clear view that 'place' IS a significant driving factor behind policy agendas. In that sense public policy that concentrates on endogenous factors [Bryson et al 2000], entrepreneurial infrastructure (Flora et al 1997), skills-enhancement and learning/knowledge based activity (Lagendijk, 1999) were- in my view at that time (1998) reflecting the wishes and needs of their populations- both 'ruler' and 'ruled'.

<sup>5</sup> "...Of critical importance is the recognition that state, economy and civil society are not discrete spheres of activity, but continually interpenetrating, through the relational dynamics which evolve as people live their lives, firms conduct their business and agencies perform their activities. Viewed in this way urban governance is about the way 'collective concerns' about the qualities of cities, their nodes and neighbourhoods, their facilities and networks, are articulated and translated into specific action programmes and governance routines. In this sense, as is now widely acknowledged, urban governance encompasses more than just what formal government organisations do. It stretches across multiple institutional nodes or 'arenas' where actors get together to mobilise for change, or to design and deliver specific programmes" (Healey et al, 1999).

to researchers and policy-makers in terms of comprehending the interrelations between structuring forces and agency interpretation in the field of RDA policy formulation. A key recent addition to this battery of *regio-explanadum* is that of Halkier:



(source: Halkier, 2001)

This diagram represents the pre- eminent view of regional development as *theoretically* implied by the modes of operation of RDA's (the 'European model' of RDA's) and their own *rhetoric* of policy-making from secondary and primary sources. Halkier's framework separates out into 3 distinct and interlocking components:

- As a form of public policy, regional policy has its political sponsors namely the executive and legislative entities and their personalities (leading politicians);
- The implementing organization- the RDA- interacts indirectly with firms, private actors and the administrative framework of governance. It manages the various options and incentives of regional policy;
- The targeted private actors- in this model- are supposed to make decisions based on a behaviour-modification scenario where "spatial economic objectives are to be achieved by making individual firms and other private actors behave in ways they would not otherwise have done" (Halkier, 2001).

Therefore, this particular part of the new regionalist ensemble stresses inter- organizational relationships and premiums those place- based operations of the 'implementing organization' i.e. the RDA.

Following a broadly new regionalist approach would entail a rejection of alternative perspectives, important amongst which- although not the only alternative understanding- is the concept of the 'globalization'<sup>6</sup>. This concept (in a majority of definitions, see for example the review by Thrift, 1999) argues that the agenda of public policy is broadly the agenda of the globally focused business-

<sup>6</sup> The working assumption is that globalization is the neo-liberal spatial fix (Castells, 1996) that favours places which provide higher than average productivity, lower than average labour regulation, high consumer consumption, dynamic financial markets, high levels of technological innovation, lower than average taxation rates, 'friendly' state' regimes and friendly/ able localities and regions in terms of positional elites and workforces i.e. "Globalization must be seen as a multi-scalar, multi- centric and multi- temporal process. There are many competing versions of globalization as an economic, political and socio- cultural project and they are just as open to analysis in terms of the 'old' problem of social formation and agency-structure. Among the new concepts that I have found useful in this regard are spatio- temporal fix, time- space distantiation and time- space compression. These provide more sophisticated ways of thinking about the problems of power and domination involved in structure-agency dialectics" Jessop 2000a

led elite. In this scenario 'place' is a side issue and governance reflects the priorities of business and not those of politicians or public<sup>7</sup>. Of course business retains its control over the agenda through its local and regional representatives (business and commerce organisations and 'positional elites'; Stewart, 1998) but, nonetheless, that local and (increasingly) *regional* agenda is the national and supranational agenda, servicing the latest capital accumulation strategy- Globalization, a 'chaotic conception' (Jessop, 2000b). Two 'populist' volumes<sup>8</sup> have- to varying degrees of influence and popular 'success' (and widely different reviews)- pushed this viewpoint since I began my doctorate. Ensuingly, this perspective is beginning to pick up more headway and to be discussed both within and outside the academy (Hertz, 2001; Klein, 2000). I welcome this although- as I make clear later on- in terms of *regional* policy, it can be argued that this realisation of elite/ business power is simply a re- scaling of older debates about the role of 'positional elites' (Basset, 1996; Hambleton and Thomas 1996; Oatley, 1998; Stewart, 1994, 1996, 1998). in urban policy. Furthermore, there has already been much written about Globalization and I note in particular the work of Bob Jessop (1998, 1999, 2000b).

Taken together, these two sets of literature offer the researcher a multitude of ideas on which to base a research agenda. They are nicely compatible in that the tendency of the globalization theory approach to concentrate on national-level reactions (and *problems* in reacting) to global phenomena is balanced by an equally strong emphasis on local / regional factors within the new regionalism. However, perceived weaknesses need to be identified in order to prosecute the empirical research in a systematic manner. With the globalization literature, the overriding problem concerns the very abstract level at which the main arguments are proffered and, of course, the simple multitude of competing definitions.

Similarly, the new regionalist body of work sets up a reasonably persuasive general argument about the growing importance of local milieux and 'place'- based factors (as opposed to national regulatory regimes or wider international and supranational policy agendas) to regional development. It also suggests that factors that are open to public policy influence - higher education institutions, physical and electronic communications infrastructures, environmental quality, cultural assets - now play a greater part in the locational 'offer' (the socio- economic pull of a 'place') than more traditional factors of production such as agglomeration economies and access to raw materials, power sources and pools of unskilled labour. This can be criticised as a gross oversimplification of socio- economic phenomena (e.g. McLeod, 2000) as it premiums the fashionable so- called 'knowledge and skills based economy'. This is the current favourite of the political and regional

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<sup>7</sup> Or, more accurately, politicians and people had better reflect the needs of business if they want to 'compete and survive'.

<sup>8</sup> Both Naomi Klein and Noreena Hertz's volumes have received widespread media coverage and both authors have become 'observer-celebrities'

elites across the advanced capitalist regimes (not least my own UK Prime Minister) and almost (arguably) fetishes the concept of endogenous economic growth potential- building.

In summary- are the policy priorities of regional development agencies influenced mainly (or entirely, even) by the local and regional-specific drivers of policy agendas, for example the networks of individuals and organisations in an area that can be argued to be 'positional elites'. Or are other influences of more importance and relevance (from an academic explanatory perspective) to understanding the policy agendas of RDA's.

## Multi Level Policy Making for Regional Development: Flanders.

The Flemish Provinces (sub- regional governments):



In attempting to articulate a possible explanation of what drives the policy agenda for regional development agencies in Flanders it is necessary to briefly sketch the constitutional and institutional framework within which they operate. From that point an outline will take place based upon qualitative empirical data gathered by the researcher in pursuit of a doctorate. An attempt will then be made- in the concluding section of the paper- be made to draw on the conclusions of the PHD pilot study (Stevens, 2000), the specified policy priorities of the RDA's, their linkages and workings with the Sub Regional Platforms (SRP's) and what this implies for understanding the nature of the key drivers of regional development priorities in the two provinces of western Flanders.

The researcher conducted a series of semi- structured interviews with RDA officials; advisors from selected Flemish-wide organisations and academics from Flemish universities with expertise in the field.

### **The Belgian Federation**

In total there are six decentralized authorities co-existing and interrelated in Belgium. Since 1980 they have received their own executive, first elected by the national MPs of the respective region or community, and from 1995 onwards by the directly elected Regional parliaments and by the Community parliaments (see Appendices 2 and 3). They retain the majority of the powers. The federal state keeps only defence, justice and security, social security, fiscal policy. However, Flanders now claims parts of the social security and the fiscal policy. Additionally, in the last year

(October 2000) agreement have been reached (in principle) to transfer tax raising and spending powers more fully to the regions and provinces.

### **Flemish ‘Governance’**

Flanders is the Dutch-speaking northern region of Belgium. Although when conversing with family and friends certain Flemish dialects (of Dutch) will be spoken (on a locality basis much similar to the English accent<sup>9</sup>) I formal and institutional contexts ‘standard’ Dutch is the language written and spoken and this process has accelerated in the last 25 years. Governance in Flanders is a fusion of the institutions of the Flemish Region and Community (see Appendix 4). The regional parliament has 118 seats. The Community parliament is composed of the 118 members of the regional parliament plus 6 members elected on the Flemish lists in the Brussels regional parliament. The Flemish parliament and government issues regional decrees that apply to the Flemish Region. It also issues Community decrees that apply both to the Flemish Region and to the Brussels Region on ‘Flemish Community matters’ (such as cultural or social institutions – like schools - functioning solely in Dutch). The Flemish government is elected by the Flemish Parliament.

In the Brussels Region, there is also a Flemish Community Commission, but this only implements the Flemish Community decrees issued by the Flemish Parliament. This illustrates again how the Flemish Community is fused with the Flemish Region into one single Flemish authority. Furthermore, it illustrates again the extreme complexity and asymmetry of the Belgian federation. Appendix 4 contains a diagram of how Flemish governance slots into Belgian Governance:

These formal institutions of Flanders (government, parliament, and administration) have to a large extent taken over the role and function of the Flemish movement (Buelens et al, 1998). They actively and – under the current institutional arrangements also obviously – defend the interests of Flanders. The Flemish Movement, with its major yearly rituals and feasts, has become marginal and deeply divided, only getting media attention because of its "glorious" past and because of the current weakness and ongoing strategic quarrels.

Both the previous and the current Flemish government have been very active and visible policy makers. Their economic policy is a mix of what Keating (1998) calls a *nation-building project* and *bourgeois regionalism*. Its origins go back to the early days of the still incomplete Flemish autonomy in the 1980s, when Prime Minister Gaston Geens launched his ‘Flanders Technology’ campaign. It was the previous government led by Luc Van den Brande however that really accelerated change in this direction. It stopped using (sub) state money to help keep alive declining

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<sup>9</sup> Although a Flemish dialect is not based on social-class, as arguably speaking with (strong) accent would imply in England. If you are from a particular dialect locality and are speaking on an informal basis with someone from the same dialect-locality you will in all probability speak dialect.



enterprises and sectors (like ship building or mining). The 'growth power' of the economy was to be reinforced, it was argued, by stimulating an 'entrepreneurial attitude' (especially the stimulation of the 'fast-growing new economy') by fostering innovation and a 'learning' attitude amongst the workforce. A better balance had to be found between endogenous and exogenous economic growth, which actually meant that the endogenous component had to be strengthened more than ever before. This focus, of course is a main reason for choosing the Flemish RDA policy as the other country (alongside Britain) from which to gather data.

The current Flemish government, now led by the Liberal Patrick Dewael, follows the same strategy- indeed, one of the arguments of this paper is that this strategy (or policy-agenda) is the 'only game in town' because it is at the behest of certain structures and imperatives that governments do not rebut.. The Flemish economy is going through a phase of structural change and this is viewed positively by employers and by the State. This "innovative strength" of Flemish enterprise is however still weak.

The Policy focus of government is based on the belief that the economy of the 21st century will be based on knowledge and brains, and these commodities – not the capital, one of the major beliefs of Van den Brande, and of course heard often by the UK prime Minister and Finance Minister. The business sector is seen as the dynamic motor of economic development and renewal in Flanders- as it is across the western capitalist world. The official documents, and especially those of the current government, produce quite some 'Third Way' language, the terms of which are imported straight from The Netherlands and to there from Mr Blair.

To a Briton this will of course all sound very very familiar. Prime Minister Tony Blair is regularly heard making identical arguments. Indeed, the similarities continue, in that the Flemish government argues that Education should be better matched with the 'needs of the economy' (Cabus 2001). Flanders needs a more integrated 'region-based' management of the regional economy. The perceived fragmentation of actors at the sub-regional level has to be 'streamlined', in order to bring all the 'living forces' together (Flemish Government 2000). The government wants to realize a number of infrastructure projects by setting up public-private partnerships. It becomes clearer why my focus is on the question whether 'place' or 'other' issues head the list of reasons for why a region, or indeed a country adopts the particular policy agenda priorities that it does. It has already been illustrated that the Belgian (and *insequi*, Flanders) has a complicated and multi-levelled constitution and system of (regional) governance.

### **Place and Policy 'Entrepreneurs.'**

In trying to unpack the role of 'place', the role of individuals that make-up/ contribute to such place-based ensembles is quite instructive.

Flanders has for eight years been associated with the (now former) Prime Minister Luc Van den Brande. His personal leadership was active and very prominent (Deschouwer and Van Dyck, 2000). He was very committed to the development of Flanders and very much believed and believes in the strategy of building a strong cultural identity. In this sense his model of region-building (*nee* regional development) is very much a 'place' focussed entourage of inward proclamations that are outwardly utilised. Policy agendas are generated endogenously. He very often referred to Wallonia as a negative model, resulting then in Walloon and Francophone retorts which proclaimed Flanders as conservative, nationalist and racist. The latest Prime Minister Dewael has a different style, a lower personal profile and deliberately tries to build interregional links. My RDA interviewees often referred to the inspiration of Van den Brande to explain why a certain approach to the 'region' and to regional *policy*, was so heavily promoted. However, Luc Van den Brande's removal from power has not produced substantial policy agenda changes, although policy-making is proposed to be more centralised on a horizontal basis- the 'doing' aspects of policy remaining with RDA's (in the field of Regional Development) whilst the 'Thinking' tasks are proposed to be transferred to more central 'policy-points' (rough translation). This is (at writing) still a controversial on-going topic and caused the RDA interviewees in particular, some concern.

### **Regional Development Agencies in Flanders**

The Dutch acronym for RDA is GOM and throughout this text they are used interchangeably. To tackle the economic problems of the post-war period, the Flemish provinces decided to establish provincial Economic Councils. In East Flanders, the Economic Council for the Province of East Flanders, a non-profit organization, was inaugurated. Its main goal was to encourage businesses to expand or to invest in new activities. New industrial estates were developed and foreign enterprises were offered favourable conditions if they set up businesses there. The national government attempted to operate in conjunction, not only by attempting to (in Keynesian demand- management fashion) create an increase in the country's gross national product, but also by dividing the welfare transfer subsidies in an equal manner across the whole of Belgium. This support strategy was beneficial and in the sixties it was decided to formalise this whole process and to create an official framework for these Economic Councils.

## **The Legal framework**

The Act of July 15, 1970 defined the general organization of economic development and decentralization. It contained provisions for the implementation of regional development agencies (GOMs) into institutions incorporated under public law. The GOMs acquired their full status in 1975

Towards the end of the 1980s Belgium went through a number of fundamental institutional reforms<sup>10</sup>, and three regions were created as a result of this state reform. By then, the needs and requirements (and *perceptions* of these needs within Flanders) in terms of regional economic incentives had changed dramatically and the Flemish government opted to place GOMs more central in terms of policy decisions for regional economic issues. These new circumstances and policy interactions were concretised with the passing the Decree of July 12, 1990. This resulted in a new interpretation of the GOMs' responsibilities, and enabled them to respond more 'flexibly' to the "changing needs of trade and industry". The decree reinforced the position of the GOM as the central policy instrument for regional conversion, investment, marketing and development. The responsibilities of the GOM were defined by law as "the stimulation of socio-economic advance in its region". In this sense the central prescription of GOM activity includes a social element as a primary concept.

## **Administration and financing**

The GOMs are self-governing, but the provincial as well as the Flemish government can commission studies from the GOM (and both finance its activities) and the Flemish Government regularly cooperates with European official bodies, utilising GOM expertise. The GOM collects and processes social and economic information about the economy, infrastructure, environment and physical planning, and helps formulate the policies of the Flemish government, along with the GOMs own policy agenda. It also implements certain aspects of these multi- levelled policy agendas such as promoting investment, encouraging exports, locating suppliers, advising on plant location, providing training for start-up companies, arranging technology transfers to SMEs, and running an environment and planning ombudsman service for business, as well as implementing European support programmes. Furthermore it implements a number of specific projects, including business centres, industrial parks, etc.

The operation of a GOM is based on cooperation between the public and private sectors; the Board of Directors and the Management Committee of each GOM are made up of representatives from the public sector (Provincial Administration, Municipalities and Associations of Municipalities) and from the private sector (large companies, SMEs, agriculture and the unions). Furthermore, every

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<sup>10</sup> Belgian State reforms- see above.

two years the Flemish government prepares a directive in which it sets out its policies regarding the GOMs. The most recent signalled a Flemish Government intention to centralise the policy formulation activities of the GOMs, who would principally retain the policy implementation responsibilities.

### **RDA Priorities**

From the primary and secondary data collection it is possible to state quite clearly what the key priorities of BOTH provincial RDA's and the Sub Regional Platforms (see below) to which they contribute.

These are:

- The formulation and promotion of social and economic development (including preparatory studies, the collection and processing of social and economic information),
- The promotion of enterprise so that individual companies benefit, the stimulation of investment in the region,
- The provision of support for subordinate administrative organs and the promotion of small-scale economic initiatives (linking in with SRP's).

In terms of the pilot study conducted did this pan- European set of RDA priorities fit into the framework of observable phenomena. The pilot study concentrated on the issue of cluster-development policy. Specifically how far a cluster is a product of 'place' - is embedded in the socio-economic characteristics of a locality/ region- and how much external factors (and other issues) are the main drivers for this aspect of the RDA policy agenda/ priority.

The recent experience of Flanders generally tends to the view that the historically smaller and/ or 'lagging' countries often have difficulty in the independent/ endogenous development of clusters (Houthaeve, 1998; Van Haverbeke, 1999), whereas foreign involvement in these clusters (e.g., investments by firms originating from the leading countries) is very significant. Except for the 'automobile cluster', the Flemish experience with overseas driven clusters rests mainly in the field of chemicals (known as the 'petro-chemical' cluster)- in the eastern Flemish portion of Antwerpen and its surroundings.

Furthermore, 'traditional' industries and their descendents- even if based in an agglomeration- can fall behind organizations operating as a tight network. The example of the "construction and home furnishing" business cluster in West Flanders (Van Haverbeke, 1999) illustrates how traditional

competitive strengths, based upon craftsmanship, flexibility and customised services, can be undermined by competitors that are highly organised within a customer-oriented business network.

There are 'endogenous' experiences to draw upon, however. In the view of the GOMOV (East Flanders) personnel, for example, the Gent 'bio-tech' cluster evolved around the feedback mechanism of 'technical interdependency', which emanated from new scientific discoveries, and the ability/ decision of those researchers to utilise their innovations. In other words, it requires scientific and educational institutions to develop, and a culture that values the researcher and their work.

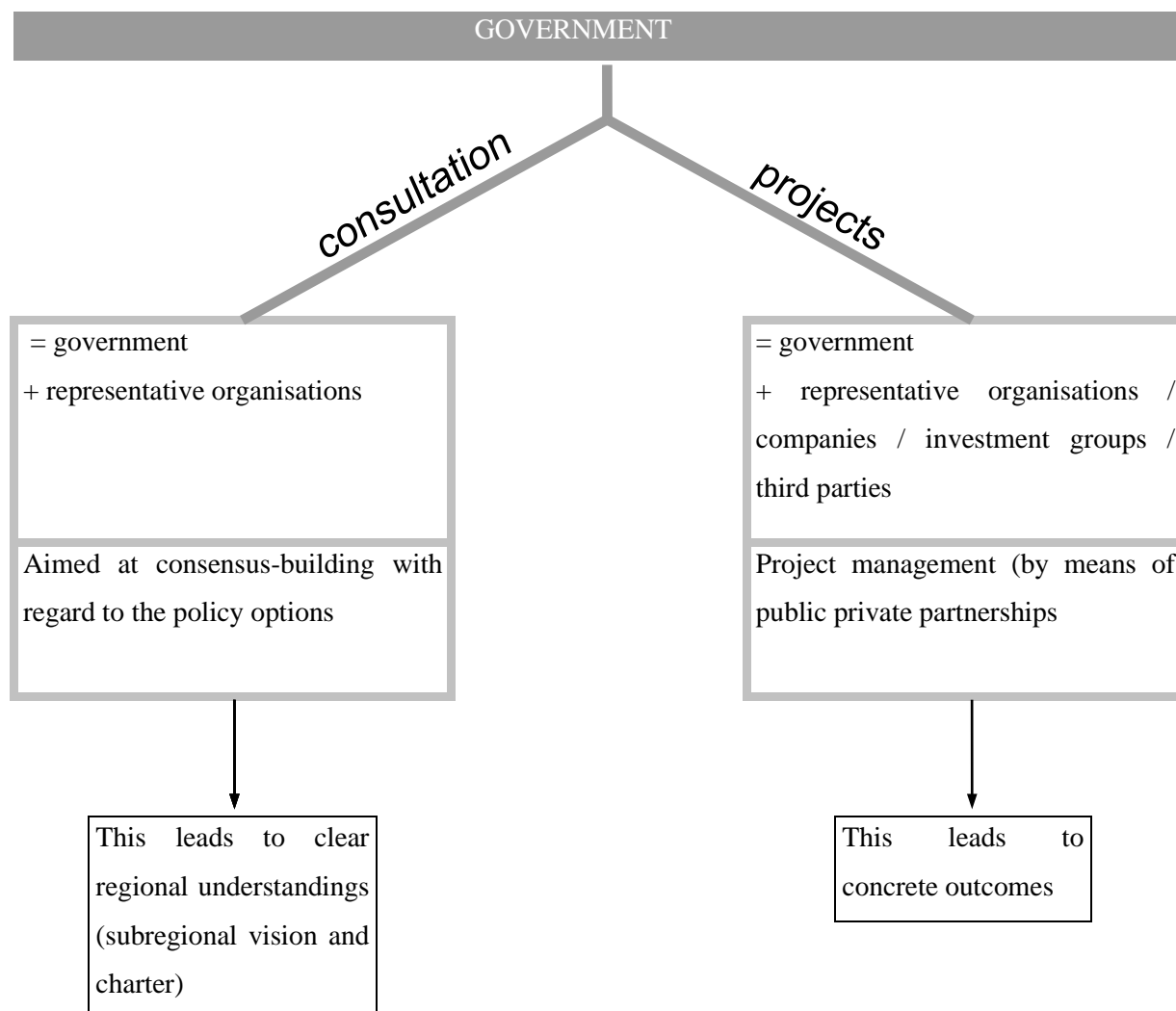
Cluster policy- a major fixation of the both the Flemish and Blair (England) governments- is a classic new regionalist 'place' focussed concept. Though not the original invention of the wide body of work ascribed to institutional and associational governance, it has been adopted by those commentators who view 'place' and relational, cultural and social assets as the key to comprehension. It is, however, a fundamentally business-friendly idea that one can hear- all over the worlds- business people championing. It is also far more like the old 'agglomeration' economics than its faddish supporters would like to admit. The concept is highly developed in Flanders, though recent experiences in the West Flanders language Valley (where fraud and share price collapses have caused turmoil) have taken the gloss of some of the perceived successes.

In the words of a SERV official- clusters are embedded as long as the TNC or European or national company wants them to be. When they withdraw the embeddedness ends...'No more cluster'. In this regard 'place' factors would appear to be secondary.

### **Flemish Regional Governance, the RDA's and SubRegional Platforms<sup>11</sup>**

It is clear from Flemish Government documentation and the many interviews conducted that the sub region has been perceived as *the* level to identify optimum policy-making. This sits well with the idea that it is the 'place' of governance that is the most coherent and recognisable medium for setting policy agendas. Indeed, great importance in recent years has been placed on the so-called Sub Regional Platforms- designed to assist in the idea that regional governance is a networked enterprise (Cabus 2000). In order to provide a 'Flemish renewed regional policy' (VESOC) with a solid foundation, a 'cell' (best translation) regional economic policy was created on the 1<sup>st</sup> of March 1995 within the economic competency responsible at the time for regional policy. In the VESOC-agreement, this cell is regarded as a crucial element within the new approach of regional economic policy.

The overarching strategic-policy concept is indicated in the following diagram (source: Flemish Government 2001):



It is clear that the sub-regions institutional infrastructure is being utilised/ earmarked for policy-making. Indeed the VESOC agreement itself sets out priorities and competencies that delineate a classically ‘institutionally thick’ (Amin, 1999) approach:

The VESOC-agreement stipulated that the focus is on:

- The development of a Flemish reference framework: an integrated long-term view for regional development in Flanders and a managing of the Flemish and the European regional economic policy;
- The gathering and supply of documentation and sources related to regional economic policy in coordination with the General Planning Service, complementary research for example

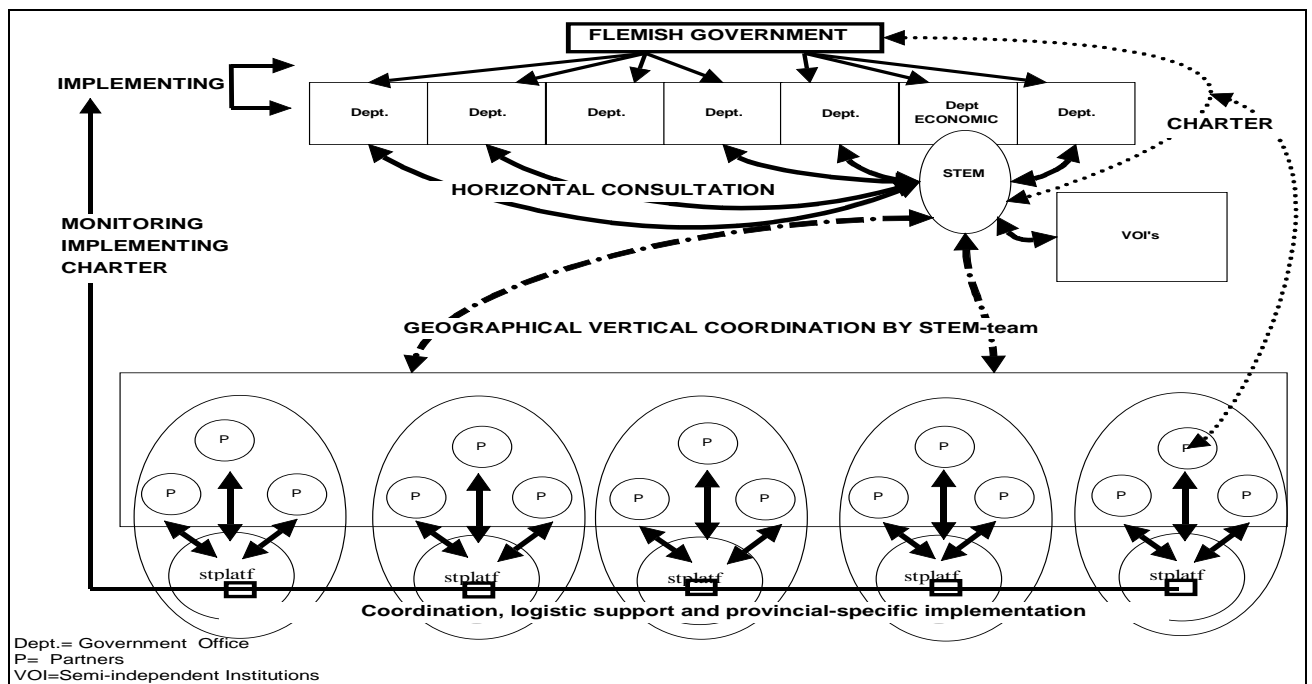
<sup>11</sup> For this section, I am greatly indebted to Ellen Wayenberg for her sterling assistance in the translation of Flemish

with regard to the link between economic performances of companies and a regional analysis;

- To involve subregions without endogenous capacity for growth to regional lever-work in the regional economic policy of the Flemish government;
- The demarcation of regions in Flanders which can be viewed as sociological and socio-economic coherent subregions
- The evaluation of strategic projects proposed by the subregions

These SRP's or cells have themselves been seen as a potential threat to RDA's policy-making function in some respects (interview with GOM officials) but- in terms of the occasions where GOMS have the organising function- a common occurrence- they are sometimes seen as more discursive than doing. At the time of writing this paper there are 17 subregional platforms active in Flanders. For the actors who are situated outside the subregional platform (but who are relevant for the subregional platform with a wide societal-economic finality), the situation looks confusing.

### THE GENERAL STRUCTURE OF SRP POLICY-MAKING



(Source: Flemish Government 2001)

The SRP is seen as the driving force behind VESOC. It is the driving force of strategic planning at the sub-regional level. It has been compared to the board of directors of a company (one of the directors, and often the Chief executive, being the RDA). The SRP usually consists of

government documents.

representatives of what the Flemish Government call 'living forces' in a region. These are the chamber of commerce, the provincial government, significant politicians sitting in a individual capacity, trade unions (selected on political party basis), sub-regional advisory organizations, leading academics with a relevant expertise, CEO's of important companies in a sub- region, Flemish Government and the RDA. Indeed, a veritable 'positional elite' of policy-makers. The SRP carries out SWOT analysis and this work- as with much analysis and policy work is prepared by the research departments of the RDA's. This is a typical regional development exercise and utilises the standard categories such as R and D, Mobility, Culture, tourism, economy etc.

Despite this myriad representation of the SRP- the classic 'thick' institutional representation, their power should not be overemphasised (Cabus, 1996). Furthermore, what- at the end of these seeming tortuous interactions has been the effect on regional development priorities. They are still concerned with what can be called the standard 'learning region and new economy' orthodoxy. In this way it can be argued that a hugely multi- levelled regional policy is still re- producing itself according to standard business requirements of the day, as regional policy (arguably) has always done.



## CONCLUDING REMARKS

“A further policy-related danger is that a one-dimensional focus on cooperative and soft institutions can draw attention away from the way that regions are increasingly subjected to (and of course contribute towards) the ruthless global geographies of competitive capitalism. For instance, the 1980s and 1990s have seen the fortunes of localities and regions become more deeply inscribed into the structural power and analogous global geographies of transnational corporations and financial capital (Peck and Tickell (1994) highlight this context when they liken contemporary localities and regions to ‘hostile brothers’, who, in their feverish attempts to compete in the global marketplace, hurl themselves ‘into the competitive process of attracting jobs and investment by bargaining away living standards and regulatory controls ... [with] the losers ending up with more than their share of global unemployment’. One significant point to note at this stage is that even some of the most notable regional success stories often internalize a less-than-progressive system of exploitation in terms of class, gender, ethnicity and other social divisions (Amin and Harrison). In some senses, then, beneath the veneer of ‘learning’, ‘knowledge’ and ‘innovation’ that predominates in contemporary academic and policy-related discourses of economic development, lies a capricious political economy of uneven development, savage inter-territorial competition, over accumulation, devaluation and welfare retrenchment (Harvey, 1982)” McLeod 2000

From the evidence gathered and analysed so far it would appear that the business-led agenda still holds strong and that ‘positional elites’ have ‘rescaled’ in tandem with the latest accumulation strategy.

Some commentators would suggest that what we are dealing with in this kind of empirical project is observable reality. Indeed, there is a widespread view in the academy- particularly ‘post 1989’, that we need to analyse and prescribe what exists and offer policy advice (e.g. Hoggart, 1996; Martin, 2001). Others (e.g. Lovering, 1999) are a little bit more sceptical and my case studies have led me dialectically to this position, from a starting point where I was initially very favourably inclined to ‘place-based’ approaches.

RDA’s are a lead mechanism in the integration and facilitation of public and private monies both between programmes and across programmes and directed according to the perceived priorities that are- *ostensibly*- defined locally and regionally. However, the experience of Flanders has illustrated that, although the *rhetoric* is inspired by capitalising on perceived premiums of the ‘regional offer’, the *actual* policy agendas differ very little across very different regions (in the same country) and between countries with very different approaches to ‘governance’ (from the English part of my doctoral research).

It would appear that the 'needs of commerce'/ the business-led agenda dominates the policy agendas of the RDA's, much as it did<sup>12</sup> during the 1980's and the 1990's when the 'geographic scale' focus/ academic fashion was on the neighbourhood and urban policy level (Basset, 1996; Hambleton and Thomas 1996; Oatley, 1998; Stewart, 1994, 1996, 1998). This is despite the (seemingly) cursory glance towards more social and environmental objectives.<sup>13</sup> The 'bottom line' (an unintentional term of irony in this context) is that it is still the historical aspiration of regional policy to 'get those jobs at all costs'. We need to 'get the economics right' before we can tackle (if we so wish) the other issues, and that means (under the rules of the current accumulation strategy, Jessop 2000a; 2000b) most of all inculcating into the population that Blairite-beloved work ethic of "lifelong learning and re-skilling" where we all become internet success stories<sup>14</sup> in the new 'social geography of reflexive capitalism' (Macleod, 200 drawing on Ulrich Beck). Although now ostensibly played out at the regional scale, it would appear that those general economic imperatives of business and commerce still exert the major influence on policy agendas- transmitted as they are down through RDA's and their business colleagues. The positional elites (Stewart, 1998) are the geographic embodiment of the ability of Capital to entrench itself spatially whilst also penetrating into the heart of the policy-making process. This is something not merely welcomed by the administration in England, but actively pursued by it. It is at the heart of the Blairite project and forms the basis of nearly every new public policy prescription, masked as it often is by word such as 'community', 'neighbourhood' and 'partnership'<sup>15</sup> It is also an almost automatic aspect of the working *consciousness* of the RDA professionals in Flanders. A positional elite would imply a very locally-specific phenomena, but in actual policy terms the elites follow the same agenda across the western world, attempting to temporally-spatially distance themselves from each other with the historical tool of place-marketing. This would imply a continuation of the spatial fix for development policy identified in the 1980's when research programmes concentrated on urban policy.

In tentative conclusion, the doubters (e.g. Deas and Ward, 2000; Peck and Tickell, 1992; Macleod and Goodwin, 1999a, 1999b; Macleod, 2000) are probably correct to argue that the current phase of

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<sup>12</sup> Prior to the 'new regionalist' concept of place and locality being extremely significant; and prior to the 'rescaling of policy and academic focus to the region.

<sup>13</sup> Indeed, in one English case study much has been made about the meetings, objectives and strategies towards sustainability but it is still business that exerts the predominant influence through groupings such as Business in the Environment and the fashionable idea of 'environmental compliance'.

<sup>14</sup> Indeed, "However, this turn towards economic reflexivity is also mirrored in the wider political and social spheres: those relating to employment possibilities, labor market governance, training, and education. In particular, many micro-actors, including academics, the unemployed victims of managerial 'downsizing' and the closure of nationalized industries, the skilled unemployed blue collars, and under-skilled employees, are all being summoned to either 'risk' a small business venture or personally fund a lifelong learning strategy. It is in these senses that I see the emerging regional world as one where individual agents are being more actively and directly interpellated in the absorption of socioeconomic risk. This is particularly the case as western societies search for an institutional fix to confront a traumatic future of post-Fordist insecurity and post-Keynesian 'workfare'" (Macleod, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> For example, see 2001 Labour election manifesto.

experimentation in regional policy-making (multi-level governance) and institutional restructuring is solely an attempt to identify a 'new spatio-institutional fix' as the lens of policy-makers (specifically across Europe) and the accumulation strategies of Capital have '*re-scaled*' (focussing on the regional level).

## **APPENDIX ONE: Features setting apart ‘GOVERNMENT AND GOVERNANCE**

(source: Schwab and Kubler, 2001)

| Government                                                                                                                                                     | <i>Dimension</i>                  | Governance                                                                                                                                                                |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| very limited number of participants<br>mainly state agencies                                                                                                   | <i>Actors</i>                     | high number of participants<br>public and private actors                                                                                                                  |
| few consultation<br>No co-operation in policy-formation / implementation<br>policy issues broad                                                                | <i>Function</i>                   | more consultation<br>Possible co-operation in policy-formation / implementation<br>narrow policy issues                                                                   |
| closed boundaries<br>territorially defined boundaries<br>involuntary membership                                                                                | <i>Structure</i>                  | extremely open boundaries<br>functionally defined boundaries<br>voluntary membership                                                                                      |
| hierarchic authority, interlocking leadership<br>Adversial interactions / conflictual relations<br>informal contacts<br>secrecy                                | <i>Conventions of interaction</i> | horizontal consultation, intermobility<br>Consensus on technocratic norms / co-operative relations<br>extremely informal contacts<br>openness                             |
| high autonomy of state re society (steered organising) / state dominant<br>no capture of state by societal interests<br>no balance or symbiosis between actors | <i>Distribution of power</i>      | low autonomy of state re society (self-organising) / diffuse domination of state<br>diffuse capture of state by societal interests<br>balance or symbiosis between actors |

Schwab and Kubler state: “The table is structured according to van Waarden's analytical elements and shows those categories where 'statism' (government) show different characteristics from 'issue networks' (governance).”

## **APPENDIX TWO: SCHEMATIC OF THE BELGIAN FEDERATION** **(source Belgian Government)**

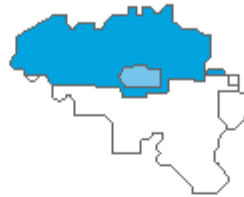
**BELGIUM**

**THE FEDERAL STATE**



**THE COMMUNITIES**

**THE FLEMISH COMMUNITY**



**THE FRENCH COMMUNITY**



**THE GERMAN-SPEAKING COMMUNITY**



**THE REGIONS**

**THE FLEMISH REGION**



**THE BRUSSELS-CAPITAL REGION**



**THE WALLOON REGION**



**APPENDIX THREE: THE COMPETENCIES OF THE BELGIAN FEDERATION**

**(Source: Deschouwer and Van Dyck, 2000)**

| <b><u>Distribution of Powers within the Belgian Federation: REGIONS</u></b>                                                                                                               |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| • <b>Area development planning</b> (e.g. town planning, monuments and sites, land policy, ...)                                                                                            |
| • <b>Environment</b> (protection, waste policy)                                                                                                                                           |
| • <b>Rural development and nature conservation</b> (parks, forests, hunting, fishing, ...)                                                                                                |
| • <b>Housing</b>                                                                                                                                                                          |
| • <b>Water policy</b> (production and supply, purification, sewerage)                                                                                                                     |
| • <b>Economic affairs</b> (regional economic development, economic policy, export policy - <i>Not included are monetary policy, price and income policy, labor law, social security</i> ) |
| • <b>Energy policy</b> (except for national infrastructure and nuclear energy)                                                                                                            |
| • <b>Subordinate authorities</b> (administrative control and finance of public works)                                                                                                     |
| • <b>Employment policy</b>                                                                                                                                                                |
| • <b>Public works and transport</b> (roads, ports, public transport, ...)                                                                                                                 |
| • <b>International cooperation within the limits of their competencies</b>                                                                                                                |

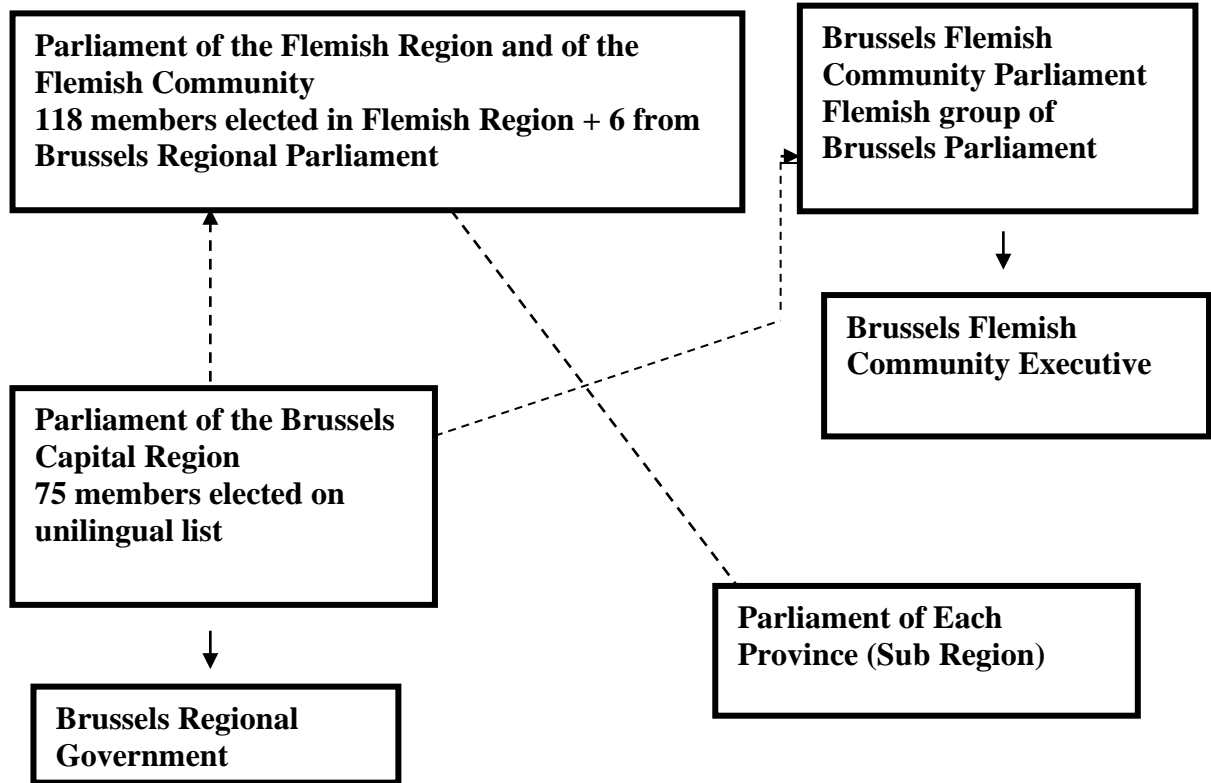
The competencies of the *communities* (Flemish, French and German-speaking) are:

| <b><u>Distribution of Powers within the Belgian Federation: COMMUNITIES</u></b>                                                                           |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| • <b>Cultural matters</b> (defense and promotion of language, arts, libraries, radio and television broadcasting, youth policy, leisure and tourism, ...) |
| • <b>Education</b>                                                                                                                                        |
| • <b>So-called ‘personalised’ matters</b> (health policy, assistance to individuals, ..)                                                                  |
| • <b>Use of language</b> (except for the localities with a special status, i.e. with language ‘facilities’ for language minorities)                       |
| • <b>International cooperation within the limits of their competencies</b>                                                                                |

**APPENDIX FOUR: Flemish Aspect of the Belgian Constitution (Source: Deschouwer and Van Dyck, 2000)**

**REGIONAL INSTITUTIONS**

**COMMUNITY INSTITUTIONS**



**APPENDIX FIVE: Tables representing the basic responsibilities given to GOM's in terms of the three inscribed centrally-driven priorities (source for all tables: Flemish Government)**

• **STIMULATING SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b><u>Stimulating socio-economic development</u></b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Conception and promotion of socio-economic development                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• to give support to sub regions</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• to give support to the functional policies of local governments e.g. cross-border files and planning of local industrial zones and infrastructure</li> </ul>                                                                         |
| Research, organisation and application of socio-economic data such as                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• all relevant statistical data giving insight into wealth creation and local and regional employment opportunities</li> </ul>                                                                                                         |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a permanent directory of available industrial sites using a GIS-system and Special Construction Plans (BPA) for industrial sites</li> </ul>                                                                                          |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• an evaluation of the traffic infrastructure</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Various tasks                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• to plan, to lead the way in various initiatives, to take part in the creation of an infrastructure for the business community: business centres, innovation and incubation centres, transit accommodation, research parks</li> </ul> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• logistical support for European programmes</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                |

• **ACTIVELY PROMOTING COMPANIES**



|                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b><u>Company promotion</u></b>                                                                                                                                                               |
| <u>Provision of general economic information and advice. Support for potential investors by:</u>                                                                                              |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• providing up-to-date information on available locations</li> </ul>                                                                                   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• personalised support in finding the right location, linked to an integrated information package of regulations and investment incentives.</li> </ul> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advice and support for Small and Medium sized companies and start-up companies:</li> </ul>                                                           |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• to organise group stands at foreign exhibitions; contact days</li> </ul>                                                                             |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• to initiate actions and to support companies in their international business programmes</li> </ul>                                                   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• information and incentive packages</li> </ul>                                                                                                        |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promotion, subcontracting of information, mediation and support re innovation and technology transfer.</li> </ul>                                    |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• by providing specialised databanks and publications of subcontracting directories</li> </ul>                                                         |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• by providing a permanent administrative support office which can act as a link between customer and supplier</li> </ul>                              |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• via a quarterly publication "Subcontracting Today"</li> </ul>                                                                                        |
| <u>Advice and support on building policies and environmental problems:</u>                                                                                                                    |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• information on legal matters and regulations</li> </ul>                                                                                              |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• frontline advice on permits and regulations</li> </ul>                                                                                               |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• advice on integrating environmental care into company policies and environmental technology</li> </ul>                                               |
| <u>Promotion of energy conservation:</u>                                                                                                                                                      |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• information on energy saving in companies</li> </ul>                                                                                                 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• energy audits and advice on energy saving investments</li> </ul>                                                                                     |

- **STIMULATING FOREIGN INVESTMENT**

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b><u>Stimulating foreign investments</u></b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• support and follow up of investment dossiers in co-operation with the "Flanders Foreign Investment Office". (FFIO)</li> </ul>                                                                                          |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• offer up-to-date information on possible locations, plus personalised support when looking for the required location, linked to an integrated information package on regulations and investment incentives.</li> </ul> |
| The Flemish Government issues a biennial "guidance note" in which it outlines its policy towards the RDA's.                                                                                                                                                     |
| The RDA core "autonomous functions" cover:                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• conceiving and promoting social-economic development (including the study, collection and processing of socio-economic data),</li> </ul>                                                                               |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• promoting individual companies,</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• stimulating investment in the region,</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                       |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• supporting regional governments,</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                            |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• promoting small economic initiatives.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                       |
| The Flemish Government also entrusts a number of specific assignments to the RDA's such as, currently front-line advice services for:                                                                                                                           |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• environmental care</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• environmental, town and country planning and energy conservation</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                            |

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