



DERREG

Developing Europe's Rural Regions in the Era of Globalisation

*An interpretative model for better anticipating and responding to
challenges for regional development in an evolving international context*



Westerkwartier

**D5.3 Case study summary report
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1 INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

The Westerkwartier is one of the ten rural regions across eight EU countries studied in the EU-funded research project DERREG (Developing Europe's Rural Regions in the Era of Globalization). The aim of the project is to produce an interpretative model that will enable researchers and regional development actors to better anticipate and respond to the key challenges posed by globalization for rural regions (see www.derreg.eu for more information).

The Westerkwartier has been object of study in two Work Packages:

- 1) WP1 Global Engagement and Local Embeddedness of Rural Businesses. The aim of WP1 was to assess the importance of international links for rural SMEs, and to examine the factors that enable or limit their involvement in transnational networks;
- 2) WP4 Capacity building, governance and knowledge systems. The aim of WP4 was to explore and analyze the embeddedness of rural regions in knowledge systems and the processes of learning and innovation that are facilitated in order to understand how regions build capacity to engage effectively with globalization.

In addition, a contextual study was done for the Westerkwartier.

This case study summary report presents the main findings of the research done in the Westerkwartier, starting with a summary of the contextual report below. In Chapter 2, the main findings for WP1 with regard to the importance of networks for rural businesses are synthesized for the Westerkwartier. In Chapter 3, the main findings for WP1 are presented: how the support of joint learning and innovation is actually arranged in the Westerkwartier and which arrangements are considered as well-working by their beneficiaries. In Chapter 4, development in the Westerkwartier is framed and discussed as the result of the interplay between 'global' forces reshaping the area and the development of individual and collective capacities in the area that enable a more place-based development.

The context¹

From a Dutch perspective, the Westerkwartier is still seen as a predominantly rural area in the West of Groningen province, situated in the region North Netherlands. From a comparative European perspective the Westerkwartier is however regarded as a peri-urban area, strongly influenced by nearby urban centres such as Groningen city, Drachten and Assen.

In comparison to the other DERREG case study regions, it is densely populated with 173.4 inhabitants/ km². It comprises an area of 345 km² -of which 80 % is agricultural land- and includes the municipalities Grootegast, Marum, Leek and Zuidhorn (see figure 1). It can be divided into a Northern and a Southern part. The Northern part (parts of Grootegast and Zuidhorn municipalities) is characterised by open grasslands, large farms and scattered, small

¹ This section offers a synthesis of two DERREG reports: *D1.1 Annex: The DERREG Case Study Areas: Business Environment and Structure* and *D5.2a Westerkwartier Contextual Report*, both accessible at the DERREG website (<http://www.derreg.eu/content/resource-centre/case-study-reports>)

villages. The Southern part (Leek, Marum and part of Grootegast municipalities) shows a high density of villages, small farms and fields which are embraced by hedgerows.

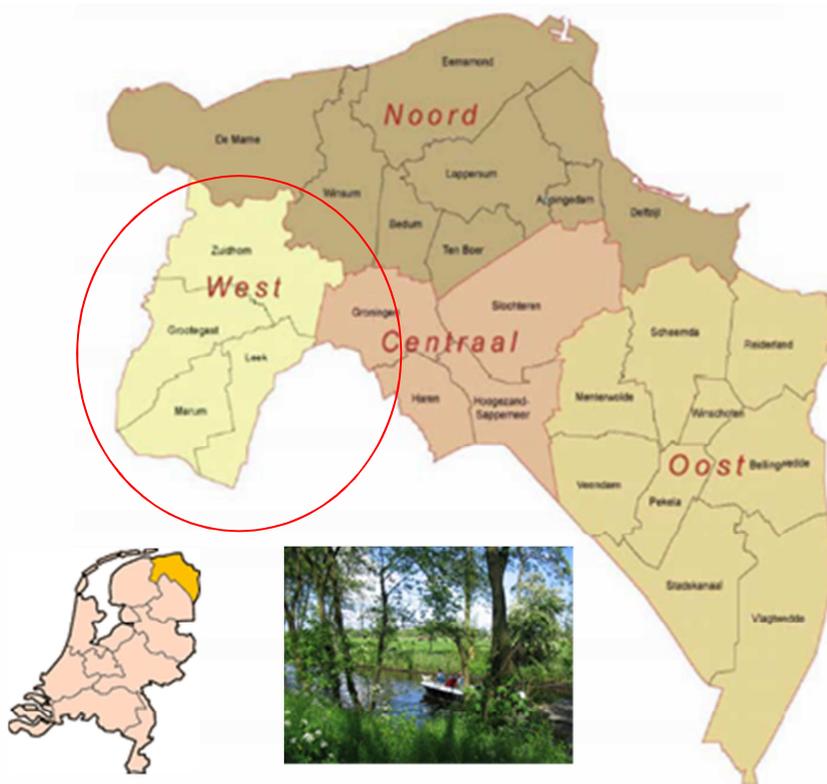


Figure 1: Groningen Province and ‘Westerkwartier’

The Westerkwartier is well connected to the main northern cities such as Groningen city, Assen (capital of Drente province) and Leeuwarden (capital of Friesland province) by bus services, a motorway passing through Marum and Leek municipalities and a railway passing through Zuidhorn municipality. This makes the Westerkwartier an attractive residential area for (young) commuters and their families. Newcomers in the area bring along a new interest in the rural area and the quality of life it offers and are of important to its vitality. This development is quite contrary to the north and east of Groningen province experiencing a shrinking economy and a decline and ageing of population as well as a subsequent loss of public and private services. The Westerkwartier appears thus to better positioned to take advantage.

The regional economy has grown faster than the national average, whereby it has moved away from its traditional dairy farming base towards a more diversified economy, in which both manufacturing and service sectors are increasingly important. Here, the commercial service sector appears to be particularly dynamic. One quarter of all agricultural businesses in Groningen province, however, are still situated in the Westerkwartier (e.g. 2.65 farms per km²). In Grootegast and Zuidhorn municipalities, agriculture is therefore still seen as an important element in the local landscape, while the landscapes in Leek and Marum municipalities are transforming into residential areas for commuters and spaces for business parks.

With 75 % of the firms having less than 10 employees, the regional economy is dominated by micro-enterprises. The small firm sizes in rural Westerkwartier are promoted by spatial planning policies which discourage an expansion of firms in the countryside. Following the spatial planning policy, all firms with expansion plans need to relocate to industrial terrains. In the Westerkwartier, industrial terrains can be found along the motorway A7 in Leek municipality and to a lesser extent around the municipal capitals. Most of the firms residing in these industrial terrains are SMEs employing up to 50 employees. Across the Netherlands - including the Westerkwartier - more than half of all new enterprises are the result of inward investment.

The Westerkwartier is seen as a strong, predominantly rural or peri-urban region, because of net in-migration, depending on external incomes of commuters travelling to close-by urban centres (Groningen city, Drachten and Assen) as well as benefitting from a growing internal employment market at the developing business parks, in the nearby cities and in smaller urban centres in the area (e.g. Leek).

In sum, the contemporary economic, social and environmental situation of the Westerkwartier is characterised by:

- On the one hand, a distinctive, historic landscape of small-scale agricultural production in the South of the Westerkwartier, that has avoided land consolidation and agricultural modernisation, but which is of environmental and cultural value.
- On the other hand, open grasslands and dairy farms in the North of the Netherlands, intensively farmed and thus in contrast to the Southern part of the Westerkwartier.
- Proximity to a medium-sized city and regional centre, stimulating population growth through counter-urbanisation and demands for leisure and recreational use of the Westerkwartier landscape, but also providing employment for a large number of residents through commuting.
- A local economy characterised by a preponderance of small businesses and one-person enterprises, mainly in the service sector but including some small-scale industry.
- An agricultural sector that has declined in economic importance from a once dominant position, but which is still significant in employing over one in ten of the region's workforce.
- A strong cultural identity that compensates for the absence of a single local government body for the district, but which is reflected through partnership working between local institutions and the creation of a LEADER local action group focused on the area.
- An accessible location with a motorway running through the region and several large cities in the Netherlands and north-western Germany within two hours travel time.

The dynamics of social and economic development in the Westerkwartier are therefore in many ways typical of peri-urban districts. The distinctive landscape and the strong cultural heritage and identity marks the Westerkwartier out from more homogenised peri-urban zones, but it is not unique. Examples of comparable areas include the Pennine moorland communities on the peri-urban fringe of Manchester and the Albufera district on the fringe of Valencia.

2 RURAL BUSINESSES AND THEIR NETWORKS²

Rural regions and small businesses are often assumed to be marginalised in relation to contemporary processes of globalisation. Globalisation is perceived to be mainly an urban phenomenon, with indirect (and predominantly negative) impacts upon the countryside. This popular understanding has been investigated in five case study areas in rural areas across Europe, among which the Westerkwartier. The investigation has focussed on the spatial and ‘relational’ structures of the business networks of small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), with the objective to explore the extent to which business networks of rural firms are global in nature. Subsequently, it was investigated to what extent rural firms take advantage of a globalising economy instead of merely being marginalised by it. Next to this, the importance of policy arrangements and network brokering activities for rural firms in the different five study areas where investigated looking for ‘good practices’.

Next to a desk study, the research on business networks of rural firms included three surveys:

- 1) An email survey of entrepreneurs or managers to map their firm’s relations with other firms and agencies.
- 2) A structured, face-to-face interview with a selection of respondents to explore in more detail the characteristics of different kind of interactions and the importance of these relations to the interviewee.
- 3) Interviews with a range of ‘network brokers’, from public, private and voluntary sectors to explore the importance of these intermediating agents in developing business networks for the benefit of rural firms in the case study areas.

In the remainder of this section the main findings for the Westerkwartier are presented from a comparative perspective.

Business networks of rural firms in the Westerkwartier: main findings

Out of the 42 firms that participated in this study, six firms are situated in the industrial terrains of the municipal ‘capitals’ and 36 firms are situated in the rural areas of the Westerkwartier. Of these firms, 36 are micro firms with up to nine employees. Only two stated to have between 10 and 49 employees and four firms employed up to 249 employees. Most of the participating firms are registered as one-man businesses (n=27) or limited companies (n=6) while the rest operated as collectives or partnerships. Even though the economy of the Westerkwartier is shifting away from the primary sector, the majority of sampled firms still belong to the primary sector (n=9), followed by the sector ‘financial and insurance activities’ (n=7). the sector ‘health care’ (n=5) and ‘arts, entertainment and recreation’ sector (n=4).

On average, their spatial outreach appears to be mostly limited to the region “North Netherlands” and to a lesser extent into the Netherlands. European and global interactions appear to be marginal in terms of trade, collaboration and other support functions. On the basis of these results, one may argue that economic activities in the Westerkwartier are strongly

² This section is based on the D1.4 Summary report of Work Package 1 ‘Global Engagement and Local Embeddedness’ accessible at <http://www.derreg.eu/content/resource-centre/case-study-reports>.

anchored in the local economy and that international trade or network activities have only little influences on the local firms. There are, however, at least three confounding variables that question the representativeness of these results.

In the first sampling process, only those firms residing in rural areas of the Westerkwartier were approached. Their contact details were taken from a list of those possessing an internet domain and providing contact details on their firm-owned website. The number of contacted firms was thus limited and more than 600 firms were not contacted. Furthermore, nine of the respondents were recruited through the business women in the network “WichterWest”. Members of this network are often starting entrepreneurs and their firms are often an economic side-activity. International networking of these firms appeared to me marginal.

A second sampling process was conducted to actively search for internationally operating firms in the Westerkwartier. Out of the 10 firms sampled, five of these firms can even be considered ‘global’ on the OECD index of SMEs. Six of the sampled firms, however, are resident in the industrial terrains of Leek municipality. One can therefore raise the question to what extent these firms can still be considered ‘rural’ and hence contributing to the ‘rural’ economy. This leads to a further question, whether ‘rural’ economies can be viewed in isolation of other, regional and urban economic activities as all ‘rural’ areas appear to be in spatial vicinity to urban centres. Most likely, ‘rural’ economies depend (and hence benefit or suffer) from economies in adjacent urban centres.

Finally, three internationally operating firms are active in the primary sector. At first, this sector was deliberately excluded from the sampling process as this study focuses on rural non-farming activities. Regarding this result, one can argue whether an initial inclusion of the agricultural sector would have influenced the outcome of the research results. To find out more about - particularly international- firm networking activities in the Westerkwartier, the ten internationally operating firms of the second sampling process were interviewed in-depth about their networking activities. These firms ranged from micro-firms (n=3) to small SMEs (10-49 employees, n=4) to large SMEs (50-249 employees, n= 3). Three of the interviewed firms were engaged in the primary sector, two firms were each engaged in the recycling, metal and food processing industry and one firm in the wholesale sector.

Interestingly, only one of the interviewed firms stated to be economically dependent and bound to products produced in the Westerkwartier. All other firms stated to buy and sell products outside the Westerkwartier. Nevertheless, these firms feel attached to the Westerkwartier due to family or firm traditions, the quality of the Westerkwartier as a living environment, the working mentality, short and easy relations with public administration and affordable costs of labour and land.

Networking activities are mostly regarded as important for ‘complying with rules and regulations’, ‘improving production processes’, ‘bringing in new businesses’ and ‘reacting to consumer needs’. The most important groups of actors in their respected networks are considered as being customers, suppliers, shareholders (owners) and banks. Interestingly, the use of the networking activities differs between economic sectors. The business networks described

by firms in the primary sector can thus be classified as ‘production’ oriented, the network of the wholesaler and firms in the recycling sector as ‘marketing’ oriented and firms in the metal and food processing industry use their network for ‘compliance with rules and regulations’. The geographical scale of these outlined business networks appears to be with more than 80% restricted to the Netherlands. There seems to be, however, a great variation amongst individual firms, making a generalisation difficult.

Formal networks, organised by public administration or trade unions, are often used as ‘stepping stones’ to make business contacts. More important than formal networks, however, are informal contacts made through via-via contacts, recommendations, mouth-to-mouth propaganda and trade fair representations/visits. One interviewee explains: *“we have been going to the biggest trade fair in our branch for 20 years. (...) On this fair, you are able to talk with people and you will receive business cards of others. There are also ambassadors of producer countries like Peru or Hungary. (...) Also, you get to know producer groups who want to chat and want to come and visit. In this way, (...) you get easy contacts”* (NL_39). These contacts are maintained on an informal basis, which is regarded as a strategic tool for keeping successful business contacts. Thus, although the internet has been given high importance by 70% of the international operating firms, it was agreed that personal, face-to-face contact with potential business partners is crucial and cannot be replaced through internet technology: *“Contracts are made on the basis of trust, so in the end it has to do with the people. The personal component can therefore not be overcome”* (NL_44).

Lastly, the financial crisis of the recent years has had negative as well as positive effects on the firms interviewed. For some, sales increased and it was argued that this was due to the high quality of their products, the demand of customers for high quality products and the independence of financial institutes: *“Before the crisis, people were buying more things but of less quality. Through the crisis, customers have become more aware of the money they spend and are looking for quality products. It takes longer for them to decide whether to buy something. If they decide to buy, they choose for quality products [...]”* (NL_38). Other firms experienced drawbacks and expanded their networks nationally and internationally to avoid local competition and to search for new businesses assignments: *“In the past, the business was only oriented towards Groningen province and city. [...] Now, more firms have entered the local market, leaving less work for everybody. [...] With the growing competition and the impacts of the financial crisis, we need to expand our area of operation [...]”* (NL_37).

Network brokers and networking initiatives in the Westerkwartier

The Westerkwartier has witnessed a gradual decline in exports as a proportion of output in recent years. Therefore, a number of network brokering initiatives have been started to reverse this trend. International networking activities in Northern Netherlands are stimulated by regional network brokers. These are focussing on firms with more than ten employees, residing in the economic core zones and engaging in one of the economic spearheads identified by the region North Netherlands. Although important for the employment market of the Westerkwartier, regional networking support actions are not aimed at micro-firms within the rural areas of the Westerkwartier: *“The Westerkwartier is part of Groningen Province which forms part of Northern Netherlands. We receive money from the EU to stimulate economic growth in Northern Netherlands. We do not distribute this money evenly across Northern Netherlands but we focus it on economic core zones. In the Westerkwartier, only Leek forms part of the economic a core zone.”* (Public administration 3, 2009).

Regional network brokering activities include the project organisation “Nordconnect” of the North Netherland Provinces which is concerned with the establishment of international networks at public administration level in order to agree on favourable international trade regulations. It is especially concerned with strengthening the collaboration between Northern Netherlands and Northeast Europe. Furthermore, the Chamber of Commerce North Netherland runs the export stimulating programme “WIN!” to initiate the creating of international firm networks and the subsidy regulation “Prepare2start” to offer free-of-cost advice and subsidised services to prepare the firm for international networking activities.

Micro-firms in rural Westerkwartier are not considered by regional network brokers because they are too small for international networking activities and because they operate outside of the economic spearheads of the Northern Netherlands Provinces: *“It costs too much energy to connect firms with less than five employees and to lift them to a higher level. There are also many small firms who do not have the ambition to grow. Many entrepreneurs make the conscious choice for a one-man business and do not want to grow”* (Network broker 1, 2011). An exception is the numerous web shops and ICT firms residing in rural Groningen, including the Westerkwartier. Networking activities dealing with other micro-firms in rural Westerkwartier are initiated by rural network brokers. They aim to engage micro-firms in local business networks in order to facilitate local contact and new product development.

Firm networking activities within industrial terrains and rural areas of the Westerkwartier are thus supported and facilitated by different policy frameworks and consequently different network brokers. This raises the question as to whether the development activities in the industrial terrains of the Westerkwartier are actually part of the rural economy or, better, whether rural economic development can be regarded separately of the regional economic development. This question becomes particularly to the fore regarding the small size of the Westerkwartier and its good connection to surrounding urban areas.

In the regional as well as rural context it was argued that network brokers are important for the initiation of networking activities. It was thus argued that entrepreneurs do not show own initiatives to form networks with other firms because *“they are too busy doing their own business”* (Network broker 2, 2010) and because *“they often do not see the advantages that joining a network entails for their firm”* (Network broker 1, 2011; Network broker 2, 2010). This appears especially the case amongst the 75% of firms in rural Westerkwartier with less than ten employees: *“micro-firms in the Westerkwartier are not keen on working together and regard each other as competitors”* (Public administration 1, 2009).

When looking for successful network support actions that are able to reach firms operating in Europe’s rural economy, activities of rural network brokers need to be considered. Here, it is particularly interesting to highlight the broker function of the touristic catalysts, the Association Groningen Villages and the national farmers union in collaboration with the manager of the national rural development programme. All of these brokers have been installed through rural development funds. They initiated different networks by facilitating contact between different types of micro-firms and provided networking assistance and advice on becoming independent legal entities.

The key factors to create successful and lasting firm networks appear thus to be based on building networks with firms of shared interest (e.g. economic sector, firm as side-activity etc.) and the creation of a sense of ownership, for example by stimulating joint product developments. Furthermore, *“a region has to discover its strength and it has to use this strength to do international business”* (Network broker 2, 2011). In the Westerkwartier, the efforts of rural network brokers have shown positive effects. For example, through the networking support actions of the touristic catalysts, firms have found each other in the touristic platform to offer touristic and recreational arrangements such as cycling tours with stops at different touristic enterprises. The former chairmen of the LAG also states that entrepreneurs start to recognize the benefits of the network and that they are joining to stimulate more recreation and tourism activities in the Westerkwartier. This development, he argues, is positive for the development of the employment market as it creates job opportunities: *“There are people who earn their money with these activities and this ensures that people are coming into the area. They invest money into the region. This money is very important for the economic development of the rural area”* (Public administration 2, 2010).

Conclusion

The results of the Westerkwartier suggest that making a separation between rural and regional economic development may be arbitrary or even artificial when analysing the development of the economy in a rural area, as these are clearly related or intertwined in peri-urban areas. Based on the results, it appears necessary to take an integral perspective to economic development in an rural-urban area, i.e. to consider its wider entanglement (see Woods, 2007). To understand its specific development, the Westerkwartier has to be positioned in the wider context of North Netherlands, where the differentiating influences of global forces are more apparent.. Although hardly engaged in global business networks, micro firms appear to be of crucial importance to the vitality of the Westerkwartier and its quality of life. The public support for and strengthening of local business activities and networks across various sectors (agriculture, tourism and recreation, services, etc.) enhances the vitality and subsequently the attractiveness of the Westerkwartier as a residential, business and recreation area. The results suggest that the role of network brokers of utmost importance to stimulate this development.

3 GOVERNANCE OF JOINT LEARNING AND INNOVATION IN ‘WESTERKWARTIER’

In regional and rural development policies, capacity building, elevating the ‘capacity to act’ and self-efficacy of inhabitants individually as well as collectively, is generally seen as key to promote more resilient, robust and inclusive European rural regions in an era of globalisation with economies depending ever more on knowledge creation and innovation.

Different public policies along different administrative levels are implemented to support various capacities & skills built by various inhabitants engaged in various development activities at various places across the EU. Some (e.g. regional or economic) policies aim to support the development of ‘globally’ competitive business activities in a region. Other, (rural renewal) policies, specifically aim at the development of predominantly rural areas, based on place-specific assets and resources, and yet another set of public policies aims to support local community development by facilitating grassroots development activities and supporting knowledge creation, empowerment, education, learning and innovation.

Aside from the political question what kind of development activities need public support, the question is how public support can be best arranged to be effective and beneficial to the development activities of choice, and particularly: how to best support joint learning by doing among those engaged in grassroots development initiatives. To be effective in supporting grassroots development initiatives, policies need to interact with actors in place, their on-going activities and their motivations as well as their concerns and goals. In order to engage public administration and the knowledge infrastructure in rural regional grassroots development initiatives, specific operational arrangements can be made with regard to interfaces operating between supporting policies, learning and innovation supporting facilities and grassroots development activities.

The leading research question was thus how public support and facilitation of joint learning and innovation within and between grassroots rural regional development initiatives can be best arranged, i.e. how operating interfaces can be best created between a) public policies, b) grassroots development initiatives and c) learning and innovation facilities, considering the contextual differences across the case study areas³. The focus was on mapping and analysing actual arrangements and operational interfaces and evaluating the support received by the beneficiaries. The research is limited in scope. Three subsequent research tasks were carried out 1) Mapping and analysing policy strategies to support joint learning and innovation through extensive literature reviews and semi-structured expert interviews with 10-15 informants; 2) Mapping and analysing regional development initiatives through inventorying 11 grassroots development initiatives receiving some kind of public support for joint learning and innovation and reflecting different kinds of development activities and 3) analysing and synthesising crucial features of well-working arrangements with regard to their contribution to the accessibility of the support structure for capacity-building, (joint) learning and innovation; collaboration in knowledge production, use and dissemination across development initiatives within and beyond

³ See Wellbrock, Roep, Wiskerke (forthcoming) for an elaboration on the framework of rural regional learning.

the case study area and the active engagement of public institutes and agencies in this. In this section, the main findings for the Westerkwartier are presented.

Overview of learning and innovation support strategies

Actors and policies that influence the design and implementation of policy objectives related to regional learning in the Westerkwartier can be categorized into five different governmental levels: the European Union, the state (national government), the region, the province and lastly municipalities and water boards.

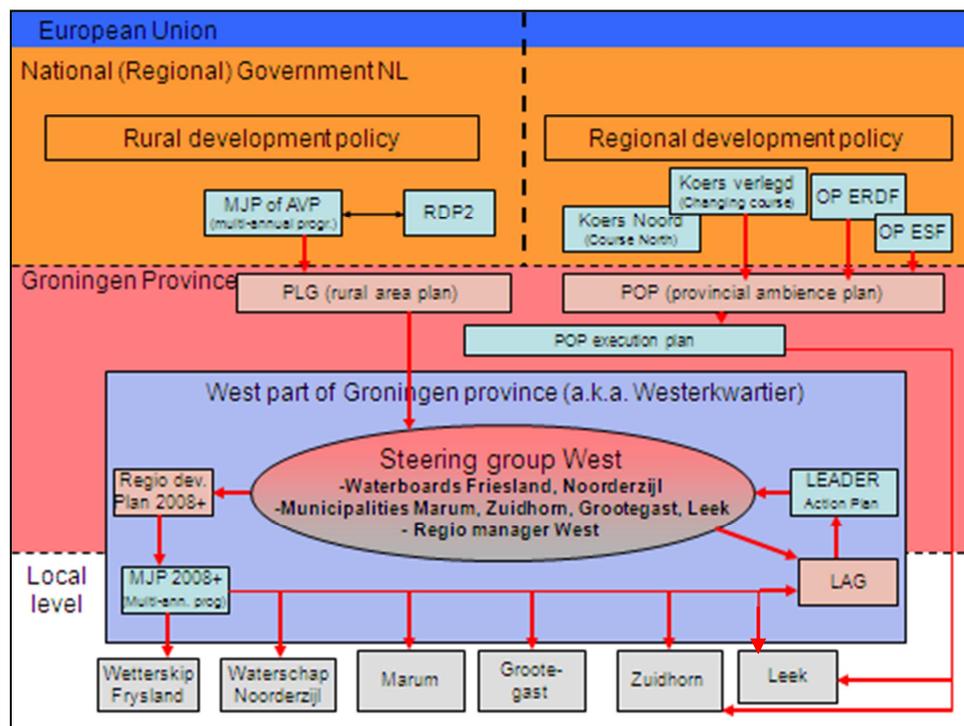


Figure 2 Relevant representatives and policies in public administration for the Westerkwartier (source: Wellbrock et al. 2010; Roep, Wellbrock 2011)

As shown in Figure 2, development in the Westerkwartier is framed by *rural* and *regional development policies*. At each governmental level, a development agenda with development objectives is formulated. At European and national level, agendas are still formulated very broadly and only state general objectives which should be aimed at by stakeholders at lower governmental level. Furthermore, general development steps are suggested which should lead to the fulfilment of the desired objectives in the different member states. These agendas are passed down the administrative hierarchy and at every level they are reformulated in a more precise way in order to fit the specific development needs at the different public administration levels.

Regional development programmes are formulated for and by the region North Netherlands which comprises the Northern provinces Drenthe, Friesland and Groningen. Of these, the policy agenda “Koers verlegd” (Changing course) explains how North Netherland should be transformed into a knowledge-based economy. It focuses on high-tech industry clusters. In addition, European policy objectives, also with regard to stimulating initiatives related to learning and innovation, are incorporated in the OP EFRO (ERDF). The executive programme “Koers

Noord” (Course North) follows up on the OP ERDF and presents a programme to strengthen the spatial economic structure in North Netherland. The *European Social Fund* is complementary to the EFRD policies and used to build human capital for a transition into a knowledge based economy. The EFS objectives have been taken on as national development goals, implemented through the operational programme ESF. Regional policy objectives formulated at higher governmental level, including those related to learning and innovation, are summarised and reformulated in the POP Groningen (Provincial ambience plan Groningen).

Looking at **rural development policies**, there is only one nationally applicable rural development agenda, namely the agenda “Vital countryside AVP” (see fig.2). This agenda integrates the RDP 2 and hence objectives of the European CAP 2 (amongst others the LEADER approach, axis 4) and national rural development objectives. Development objectives specified in the agenda “Vital countryside” were translated into strategies which are summarised in the operational Multi-annual programme vital countryside 2007-2013 (MJP).

The POP Groningen and Agenda Vital Countryside form the basis of the Development Programme West Groningen (a.k.a. Westerkwartier), a policy document formulated and implemented by the Steering Group West (see fig. 2). This steering group is comprised of members from the municipalities Leek, Marum, Grootegast and Zuidhorn, Groningen Province, water boards and the regional manager of the agenda “Vital countryside”. The Westerkwartier is further a LEADER region with a Local Action Group. It consists of members from the Steering Group West, the Westerkwartier Initiative Group and business partners, and acts as consultant to the Steering Group West regarding the socio-economic vitality of the Westerkwartier. The Local Action Group has elaborated a LEADER action plan 2007-2013 which has been taken into consideration by the Steering Group West in formulating an Integrated Regional Development Programme West 2008. Projects outlined in the Integrated Development Programme West 2008 are partially financed through European rural funds, national rural funds and provincial funds and partially through funds made available by the different municipalities. Nature, soil, water and other development is mainly financed through national funds. Socio-economic vitalisation, in contrast, is financed by LEADER, build mostly on European funds with an additional fund of Groningen province and partners. Development concerning the landscape and cultural history is funded almost evenly by the European Union, national government, the province and partners. The DLG acts as central financing organ of the perennial programme Region West Groningen 2008+ (including LEADER). Together with the Regional programme manager West, who is a member of the Steering Group West, the DLG also supervises the realisation of development goals within the RDP 2. Regional development funds play a less significant role as they are only applicable to parts of Zuidhorn and Leek which form part of regional development projects (e.g. Regio Groningen-Assen).

Support of joint learning and innovation in grassroots development initiatives

Figure 3 gives an overview of different arrangements found in the Westerkwartier to support and facilitate rural regional learning and innovation. A distinction can be made between operational interfaces providing support from public administration and the knowledge support structure.

With regard to support from *public administration*, the Foundation Westerkwartier Initiative Group (WSI) seems to be an important hub for representatives of public administration to make arrangements with grassroots development initiators and to create partnerships. As an umbrella for different grassroots development initiatives in the Westerkwartier, it arguably acts as a platform of innovation and is therefore a key actor for creating direct and indirect operational interfaces to support and facilitate learning and innovation in grassroots development initiatives in the Westerkwartier. The Foundation WSI is also represented in the Local Action Group (LAG), an example of a public-private partnership between representatives of public administration and regional initiators. The LEADER action plan acts further as a formal agreement and operationalizes arrangements that are aimed at supporting and initiating learning and innovation processes within grassroots development initiatives. Looking at fig. 3, at the time of investigation all operational interfaces (except the Association Groningen Villages which receives funds from Groningen Province) between public administration and regional grassroots development initiatives (coloured in yellow-blue) were co-financed by LEADER funds. This raises, of course, the question about their continuity after 2013 when the current LEADER phase is terminated.

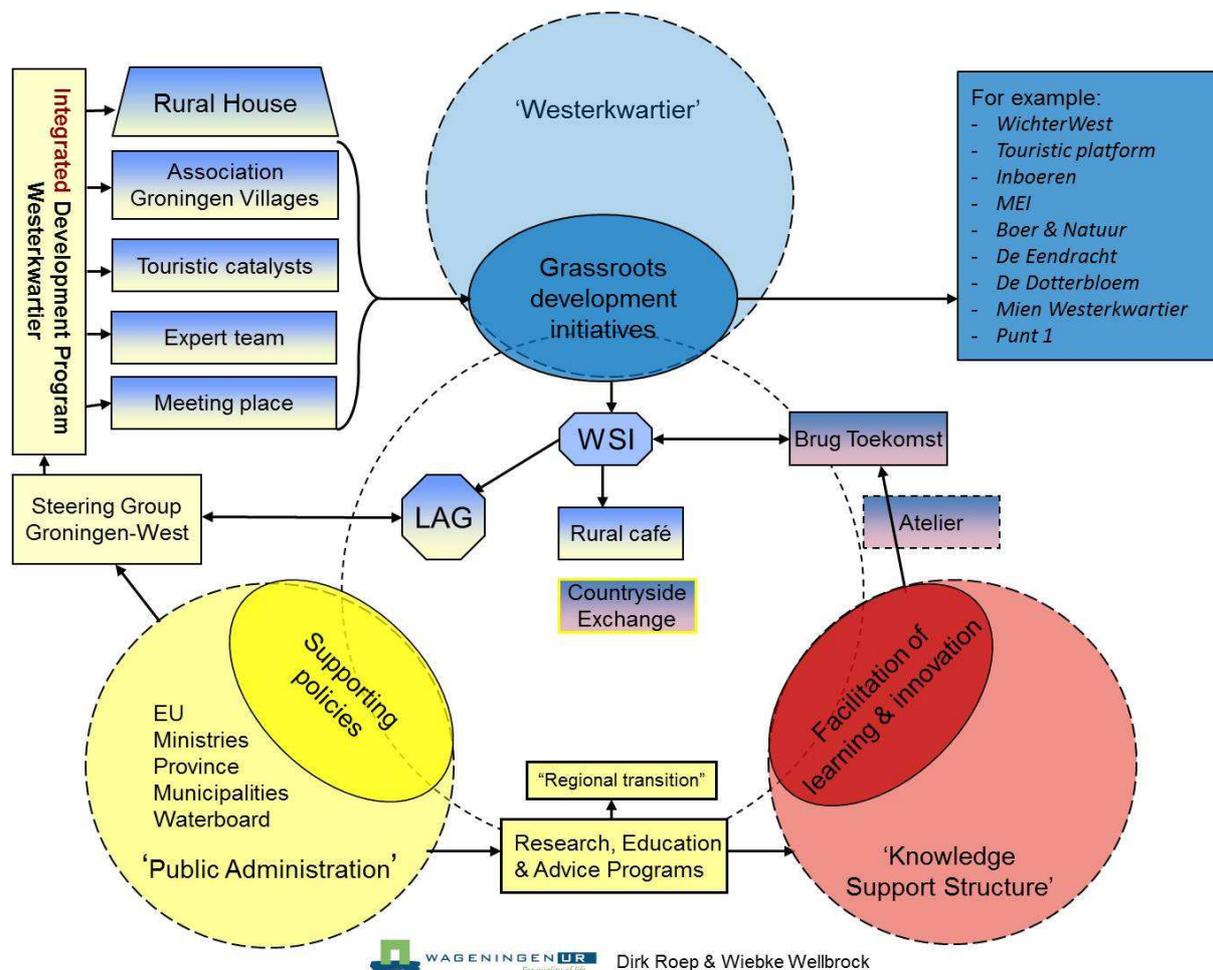


Figure 3 Arrangements for support and facilitation of learning and innovation in grassroots development initiatives in the Westerkwartier (source: Wellbrock *et al.* 2011a; Roep, Wellbrock 2011)

For example, LEADER funds have been used to open a rural house in the Westerkwartier in order to offer an easy accessible counter to initiate and support ideas in their development towards becoming a LEADER project. In the rural house, different supporters and facilitators can be found, namely a representative of the municipalities, the province, the LAG, the Association Groningen Villages, the touristic catalysts and the WSI, which offer direct support and facilitation to rural grassroots development initiators from the Westerkwartier. The rural house is accessible everyday by telephone and, if necessary, appointments are given out with representatives in the house. Furthermore, the different representatives of the rural house meet regularly as the Expert team (except the WSI) to ensure a knowledge exchange between the different levels of public administration, to communicate development issues back to public administration organs and to evaluate the contribution of incoming proposals towards the LEADER development goals. In this function, the Expert team is able to grant subsidies of up to 10,000 Euros from the Living Villages Window fund. This money is mostly used to conduct feasibility studies of bigger project plans. The Expert team also acts as advisor to the LAG for LEADER subsidy requests that are larger than 10,000 Euro. In addition, the rural house can also be used as a meeting place by rural grassroots development initiatives.

With regard to the *knowledge support structure*, there are numerous potential support facilities for rural regional learning and innovation in form of education facilities, research facilities, consultancy services, advice bureaus, professionals, organisations, private persons, etc. in the Westerkwartier. In fact, the number appeared to be so large that only publically funded knowledge institutes presently involved (or potentially relevant) in regional learning processes in the Westerkwartier were inventoried. Public administration offers support and facilitation for the knowledge infrastructure to engage with grassroots development initiatives in the Westerkwartier. Indirect support and facilitation is provided in two ways. On the one hand, LEADER and other public and private administration funds are provided to organize events such as the countryside exchange or rural cafés to facilitate an informal networking and coincidental encounters amongst regional stakeholders. Furthermore, provided LEADER funds can be used by grassroots development initiatives and arrangements to form agreements and partnerships with (public or private) knowledge institutes (such as education, research and advice). On the other hand, public administration enables support and facilitation of learning and innovation through providing education, research and advice through programmes funding the engagement of knowledge institutes with rural grassroots development initiatives. Here, programmes for ‘green’ knowledge institutes are made available by the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality and for ‘other’ knowledge institutes programmes are made available by other ministries such as the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and Ministry of Economic Affairs. To enable the involvement of ‘green’ knowledge institutes, there are several programmes available for different aspects of rural development including, for example, multifunctional agriculture, nature and landscape conservation and regional transition. A great share of funds available from the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality is given to Wageningen University for research activities (e.g. B009). Another example of how these funds are managed is the Green Knowledge Cooperation (GKC) which is promoting an involvement of knowledge institutes with regional research questions. Fig. 3 shows the programme Regional Transition is particularly interesting for rural regional development. Funds provided by the Green Knowledge Cooperation (GKC) are thus a further example of an arrangement for indirect

support of rural regional learning and innovation processes. As fig. 3 shows, two arrangements are indicated which have benefitted from indirect means for support and facilitation of learning and innovation activities, these are the terminated project Brug Toekomst and the arrangement Atelier. The project Brug Toekomst (2003-2008) aimed to test the cooperation of Wageningen University, Van Hall Institute and Larenstein University of Applied Science in a practical research setting. Through contacts within Larenstein University of Applied Sciences, the Westerkwartier was chosen as a research area. The first year of the project was exclusively financed by Wageningen but the remaining three years, the project also received funds from the Regional Transition Programme of the Green Knowledge Cooperation (GKC). The arrangement Atelier has been set up in various rural regions across the Netherlands. It aims to form a link between regional research question and the knowledge infrastructure. Apart from the mentioned funding possibilities, there are other, indirect means for supporting and facilitating learning and innovation activities within grassroots development initiatives, for instance, university funding, private investors and other public administration funds.

Operational quality of arrangements

Public administration supports grassroots development activities in the Westerkwartier along three lines: *initiation, advice, expertise and facilitation* and *finances*. These forms of support and facilitation appear to be particularly relevant regarding the focus of developing and pursuing a collective development aim.

Initiation

Out of the 11 grassroots development initiatives inventoried, four received help from operational interfaces in their initiation phase. As it was remarked by two of the initiators, setting up an initiative and keeping it running means a lot of work for its voluntary members. Necessary activities involve the securing of funds, making future plans and planning activities. The initiators remarked negatively that these activities take a lot of time from the volunteers and should therefore be compensated. It was further stated that volunteers are often too busy with their own business so that they do not find time for setting up and keeping an initiative running. It was therefore concluded that process managers are necessary to initiate development activities and keeping them running.

Advice, Expertise and Facilitation

Grassroots development initiatives that initiated their initiative themselves started to seek contact with public administration in their aim to create a joint development plan. In this process, the Rural house, Expert team, Association Groningen Villages and touristic catalysts appeared to be of particular importance. Landscape and nature management activities received advice on subsidy regulations, provincial management plans and possibilities to purchase nature protection land directly through members of public administration. The initiators remarked that it is necessary to have clear contact points (within the municipality) where advice on subsidies and regulations can be obtained. In the Westerkwartier, this function is arguably fulfilled by the rural house. In the rural house, initiators are able to receive support and facilitation all under one roof and they do not have to go to communicate with different persons within the region to get support and facilitation. The support and facilitation offered to initiators is further enhanced by an internal knowledge exchange between different stakeholders within public administration.

The rural house also transfers knowledge about on-going rural development issues to the municipalities. The people in the Westerkwartier are said to have an aversion against public administration. The low accessibility of the countryside house is therefore a good solution to counteract this aversion. It was, however, remarked that the rural house needs to be more proactive and that it needs to initiate own projects than merely re-directing people. It was further remarked that although public administration provides good and clear communication about their requirements to give out subsidies, help could be provided faster and that despite a good cooperative tenor, the process of receiving support was hampered by too much bureaucracy. The strict rules and regulations are thus argued to create a 'bottleneck' for rural development in the Netherlands. Furthermore, administrative boundaries have been argued to pose unnecessary obstacles for grassroots development initiatives. These boundaries of administrative units do not only slow down requests for subsidies but also the cooperation across borders of administrative units.

Financing

Within the developing fields of economy, agriculture and society, all but one initiative stated to receive or to be in the process of applying for finances through LEADER funds. It was therefore argued that LEADER funds play an important role for enabling the development of grassroots development initiatives in the Westerkwartier. Nevertheless, all initiators stated that the processes of receiving funds from LEADER was difficult. On the one hand, difficulties are related to obtaining shares from the municipalities, due to different interests or financial restrictions. On the other hand, the process of applying for subsidies was regarded as difficult, too. For example, writing a subsidy request means a lot of additional work to the volunteers of a grassroots development initiative. Also, in order to receive money from LEADER, grassroots development initiatives need to form a legal entity. According to some initiators, however, forming a legal entity has negative consequences on the willingness of members to join their activities. LEADER funds were either administered directly to the initiative or it was administered indirectly by providing money to operational interfaces with the task to enable the development of grassroots initiatives. Apart from LEADER, several initiators also mentioned other subsidy bodies, such as local financial institutes, the national farmer's organization or membership fees. It was further remarked that there are too many rules attached to applying for subsidies and that more funds should be made available from the province.

Most of the contacts between grassroots development initiatives and the *knowledge support structure* are established through informal networks and coincidental encounters. All initiators thus stated that the maintenance of informal, regular contacts with the knowledge infrastructure is important. Furthermore, learning and innovation was argued to occur when people meet and start to exchange knowledge and ideas. To stimulate the exchange of knowledge and ideas between people, all initiatives stated to organise network meetings or excursions for their members. Public administration also stimulates informal networking opportunities by organising themed rural cafés. Also opportunities to exchange informally with visitors from other regions, as organised by the Countryside Exchange, are valued for obtaining new knowledge. According to the questioned initiators, seeing the region through stranger's eyes has helped to stimulate new ideas. In addition to facilitating the establishment of informal networks and coincidental encounters, a number of persons (so called brokers) were identified as being active in the region

to establish connections between the region, public administration and the knowledge infrastructure. These connectors were regarded as important to elaborate ideas. The question is, however, whether these connectors are known in the area.

Support and facilitation provided by the knowledge support structure seemed to be highly relevant in the initiative's focus on acquiring joint learning capacities to jointly achieve development goal. Arguably, during this phase support and facilitation from public administration became less important and the relevance of the knowledge infrastructure for the grassroots development initiatives increased. The inventoried grassroots development initiatives were on the one hand supported by publically funded knowledge institutes, and on the other hand by private knowledge facilitators. The involvement of student researchers from publically funded knowledge institutes with grassroots development initiatives appeared to be least expensive due to public funding opportunities (see fig. 2). Other initiatives stated to make use of private and public knowledge facilitators such as experts, advisors or professionals with specific knowledge on certain topics. For these services, the grassroots development initiators paid the knowledge facilitators for their services through own resources or budgets taken from subsidies received. One can thus argue that besides necessary personal contacts within the knowledge infrastructure, a grassroots development activity also needs to have access to necessary funds in order to be able to engage knowledge facilities. Support and facilitation from the knowledge infrastructure was received along four lines: *Expertise/ Seminars, Research & Consultancy, Student research training and Training/ Skill development.*

Expertise/ Seminars & Training/ Skills provision

With regard to expertise/ seminars and training/skill provision, all grassroots development initiators stated to make use of experts from all kinds of backgrounds. It was thus stated that it does not matter where the expertise comes from, universities, professionals, advice bureaus, as long as the person providing knowledge is an expert in the relevant field. These experts are usually drawn from the extended network of the different grassroots development initiatives. Building networks was, however, regarded as effortful. Consequently, at least two initiators regarded the establishment of contacts with the knowledge infrastructure as secondary. The first priority was clearly seen as securing funds.

Research & Consultancy

In order to receive research & consultancy services from private knowledge facilitators, all grassroots development initiators stated to pay the experts for their involvement. Accordingly, the willingness of private knowledge facilitators to participate is always very high. For the grassroots development initiatives, however, the payment for private knowledge facilitators can be unaffordable.

Student research training

Most contacts between the public knowledge infrastructure and grassroots development initiatives occurred within the development field of landscape & nature management. Here, also the project Brug toekomst was active. It seems that many contacts between grassroots development initiatives and the region are established by coincidence. Also the contact with the

public knowledge institutes that took part in the project Brug toekomst occurred through coincidence and was established through informal connections and built on trust.

Conclusion

The results of the Westerkwartier suggest that establishing contact with the public knowledge infrastructure is difficult. Furthermore, involvement with public knowledge institutes from outside the region is relatively low because universities have a too high level of abstraction. Nevertheless, it was agreed that cooperation with the public knowledge infrastructure is important for a mutual benefit. Research projects can, for example, facilitate the collaboration of regional stakeholders. Collaboration between a grassroots development initiative and public knowledge institutes was argued to require good coordination and communication. However, if there are more than one knowledge institute engaged with regional development questions, organisation and communication may become a problem and projects will not run well. Furthermore, it is very important for students to have structure and continuity, although not enough energy has yet been put into the process of installing a structure and continuity amongst students, lecturers and the region. Problems occur when students and lecturers who usually work within school buildings start working outside the school building. Furthermore, working outside school structures is costly in terms of money and time. It is necessary to reward lecturer for this extra effort. Also, often questions are imposed on a region by public knowledge institutes and not vice versa. The new arrangement 'Atelier' could help to solve the mentioned problems.

4 GLOBALIZATION AND DEVELOPMENT IN 'WESTERKWARTIER': A DISCUSSION

The development of the Westerkwartier is shaped by at least three major global influences. First, it is in the centre of an urban triangle between the internationally oriented cities Groningen, Drachten and Assen. Secondly, the industrial terrains along the motorway crossing the Westerkwartier are targeted by regional development policies that aim to stimulate an internationally operating, knowledge-based economy. Finally, national and international policies concerning the environment, agriculture nature and landscape, living and generally the quality of life are having an impact on the Westerkwartier, altogether shaping the development perspective and strategy for the region and its denizens.

Due to its location in the midst of a triangle between the urban centres of Groningen, Drachten and Assen, the Westerkwartier is considered an attractive residential area for high income commuters and their families. It is often termed the 'garden of Groningen city', reflecting the awareness, interest and value of residents for the landscape of the Westerkwartier. Commuters and their families thus choose to live in the Westerkwartier for reasons related to an attractive living environment (e.g. quietness, recreation possibilities, landscape) and therefore raise particular demands concerning the development of the region as a residential area. Driven by incentives of regional (economic) development policies, globally operating firms settle in the industrial areas of the Westerkwartier. These firms often value the availability of relative cheap business locations, the comparatively cheap labour costs, the working mentality and the attractive living environment for their employees. Focussing on economic development, firms and their employees also raise particular demands concerning the development of the Westerkwartier. Some of these demands conform with those of commuters (relating to an attractive living environment) but economic demands such as good connections and visibility on the world market are added.

Lastly, national and international policies concerning agriculture, nature and landscape interests are realised on the rural area of the Westerkwartier. The landscape of the Westerkwartier is thus influenced by international agreements and programmes for environmental conservation and protection, such as Natura 2000, which have cascaded down into national and regional schemes and designations, including Ramsar sites and the *Ecologische Hoofdstructuur* (Ecological Main Structure).

These three major global influences- alongside with other extra-regional circumstances- have considerably shaped the local development within the Westerkwartier. These (global) influences have thus resulted in a raising awareness of and concern for the specific assets and resources of the area, resulting in a cultural revival, a renewed identity overarching internal differences and various regional development initiatives. These local development impulses can be witnessed in a number of developmental milestones.

First, the global influences encouraged the creation of the Westerkwartier as a unit of development and platform for the coordination of various policies. The Westerkwartier consists of four separate administrative units (municipalities) which used to formulate and implement their own development and planning strategies in alignment with provincial development plans.

Sometimes the individual development plans resulted in competition between the different municipalities. The shared cultural heritage and shared regional identity has ultimately led to the merging of development plans of the four Western municipalities, resulting in the creation of a board West Groningen, a regional development plan West Groningen and the recognition of the four municipalities as the LEADER region Westerkwartier.

Secondly, the realization of international, national and provincial development plans, the collaboration of the four municipalities, as well as the diverse interests of denizens in the Westerkwartier has lead to initial tensions and arguments. These tensions are mainly based on conflicts between the historical use of the landscape as agricultural land and new- residential, recreational and economic- endeavours in the region. One of the most prominent examples is the indication of a nature protection area within the Westerkwartier (*Dwarsdiep*) as part of the Ecological Main Structure. This was indication was strongly opposed by local farmers and their organization hampers its implementation till now. More recently, the introduction of a residential and recreational area as part of the regional development plan “Regio Groningen-Assen” causes resistance amongst local farmers. Furthermore, conflicts arise due to different land use and landscape characteristics in the northern and southern part of the Westerkwartier. The Southern Westerkwartier is seen more valuable, causing the agricultural-driven Northern part to feel underrepresented in negotiations on the development of the Westerkwartier.

Thirdly, the aversions against external (global), intervening forces impacting the Westerkwartier, and the resulting conflicts of interests amongst different parties within the region, encouraged the formation of different interest and support groups. For example, in the 1970s, the province Groningen decided to reduce services in villages, concentrating them in urban centres. This development led to the formation of an activist group to conserve services in villages and hence ensuring a vital rural Westerkwartier. In addition, farmers opposing to the introduction of nature protection areas also formed new regional-based collectives to defend their interests in the early 1990s. These groups were starting to fight for their interests against public administration as the embodiment of extra-regional influences and claimed a more prominent role for farmers in maintaining nature and landscape values.

Fourthly, the Westerkwartier is also an example of how global influences encourage (or enforce?) the collaboration between collectives that promote various, often conflicting interests but acknowledge that they share an overall interest in maintaining and raising the quality of life in the region. On the initiation of an employee of the Dutch Forest Management Organization, assigned to arrange and maintain new nature protection areas in the region and at the time engaged researchers and lectures, the Westerkwartier Initiative Group was established. The Westerkwartier Initiative Group emerged to take a leading role in uniting different interests groups, and in the formulation of a common vision to develop and strengthen the Westerkwartier.

Finally, the Westerkwartier Initiative Group established into a platform through which implementers of national policy and local initiators started working together and in which new development projects are jointly invented and designed. This resulted in the establishment of a LAG in the Westerkwartier by the province of Groningen that used to be quite reserved to the

area because of its aversion to government interventions. The Westerkwartier Initiative Group has evolved into an important hub with extended networks, bonding denizens, bridging different stakes and linking local development interests and ideas to extra-local demands and opportunities. This has enabled development initiatives from the Westerkwartier to participate in local, national and international research and exchange programmes, such as the Countryside Exchange through which international guests were invited to express development ideas for the Westerkwartier and through which members of the Westerkwartier Initiative Group visited other regions in order to get new development ideas. Another institutional spin-off is the (knowledge) Atelier, an arrangement building on a previous experiences with the active involvement of education (students and lecturers) in development activities. Today, the Westerkwartier Initiative Group has formed into a foundation and continues to be an important think tank for new development initiatives. As an informal group, it provides advises the LAG and other instances on development plans for the Westerkwartier.

As a territorial entity, the Westerkwartier has been shaped by the interplay of global restructuring forces and the regional capacity or agency built to negotiate the conditions of engagement in order to enforce a more place-based development. The story of the Westerkwartier highlights that in order to enforce a more place-based development against global forces, it is necessary to develop a region on the basis of specific resources and assets. It is also important to ensure that development is aligned with the overall interest of inhabitants. To do so, it is necessary to join forces, as well as to collaborate and strengthen the individual and collective capacities. The collaboration of different interest groups for their joint goal of ensuring a vital and attractive rural region appears of utmost importance for this process. The results have shown, however, that collaboration and the formation of networks amongst people of different interests do not occur by itself. The example of the Westerkwartier has thus shown that informal leaders are of crucial importance, as they are able to bridge various, sometimes conflicting, interests and bring all kinds of actors together, in order to work towards an overarching development goal: maintaining if not improving the quality of life in the area. In a later stage, this initial leadership has been delegated to professional agents contracted to initiate networking activities in the area (e.g. touristic catalysts, NGO Association Groningen Villages) to further enhance joint development activities.

The on-going development activities ensure that the Westerkwartier is a vital and attractive living environment for residents and it also attracts newcomers into the area. Global influences on regional development are thus not only passive circumstances that just 'happen' to the Westerkwartier. The denizens of the Westerkwartier are jointly learning and building individual and collective capacities to re-negotiate the conditions of their engagement in global processes, and to develop ideas, strategies and plans for the benefit of themselves and their region. In conclusion, compared to other rural areas (such as the close by eastern part of Groningen province), the Westerkwartier can be seen as a particular expression of how an area is shaped and reshaped at the interplay of global forces and the ability of regional actors to negotiate the terms of its engagement in global forces based on the acknowledgement and further development of a set of typical, regionally entailed assets and resources (Woods, 2009; 2011). The Westerkwartier is thus an example of how global processes can become a major driving force for place-based development, based on the development of place-specific resources and assets.

5 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR 'WESTERKWARTIER'

Given the strong influence of urban centres, regional economic development plans and (inter)national nature and landscape management plans in the Westerkwartier, one may argue that globalisation processes are mediated indirectly by national and regional factors.

Future opportunities and challenges for the future development of the Westerkwartier are also likely to be largely determined by the district's relations with the nearby urban centres, the influence of regional development policies and national nature development plans. These will also be informed and framed, at least indirectly, by the wider context of globalisation. The problem is, however, that rural and regional development trajectories are detached from each other. The results suggested, however, that both development trajectories are highly intertwined. The distinction made between rural and regional appears therefore arbitrary when seen in practice.

Even though the Westerkwartier differs from other rural regions considered in this study, several findings can be used to draw general conclusions and recommendations:

1. Global influences can promote the formation of regional development plans beyond administrative boundaries, focussing on regions or specific rural areas with a common history and cultural heritage and its resulting shared identity.
2. Global development trajectories can cause tensions and conflicts of interests in a region which need to be overcome by aligning different development interests to focus on a joint development plan.
3. Engagement of research, education and exchange programmes in grassroots development activities increases the ability to reflect on development, helps initiators to gain new, innovative development ideas and build individual and collective capacities.
4. To promote networking amongst grassroots development initiatives, it is important to identify (informal) leaders that can bridge between various stakeholders and, in a later stage, commissioned (professional) catalysts are able to stimulate joint development activities.
5. In order to benefit from globalisation processes, place-based development has to be enhanced and enforced by the built ability to renegotiate the conditions of engagement.
6. The Westerkwartier as such is a good example of the interplay between globalisation processes affecting the area and the agency built to enforce a more place-based development.

Next to these comparative conclusions, specific conclusions and recommendations for the Westerkwartier are:

1. Arrangements for the support and facilitation of joint learning and innovation (capacity building) in grassroots development initiatives have to co-evolve with the dynamics in the region. The framework of the rural learning region can be a useful tool to enhance reflexivity and alignment.

2. The distinct operation of rural and regional development policies in the Westerkwartier needs to be overcome as it hampers cross sectorial networks of entrepreneurs in the area. Rural businesses, even when very small as in the rural area of the Westerkwartier, have an impact on economic development and add to the quality of life in the Westerkwartier. Businesses located in business parks might have a higher impact in economic terms, but they nevertheless draw on and benefit from the specific resources and assets of the rural area of the Westerkwartier. The question is then how these businesses can contribute to the quality of life in the Westerkwartier as a whole, and how to engaged them in or support rural development activities.
3. To make support structures effective, well-working interfaces are needed, including operational agents, that can relate to grassroots development initiatives in the Westerkwartier, whether these are run by denizens or entrepreneurs. Well-working interfaces will enhance the engagement of denizens in development initiatives. Well-working interfaces and operational agents prevent support structures from becoming mere void (institutional) structures.
4. When choosing operational agents and agencies to make an interface work, it is important that these agents or agencies are rooted in the area and that they are able to create effective connections between potential beneficiaries and supporters from public administration and the knowledge support structure. These intermediaries, or brokers, can come in various forms: as a professional individual (e.g. catalysts or a member of an expert team) or as a network or organisation (e.g. NGO or association). To facilitate an easy access to public support, it is recommended to keep on providing one access point, either a physical or virtual window, to all types of available support as a front office in the rural area. This way, as the experience with the rural house and expert team in the Westerkwartier has taught, it is possible to create a low-threshold access point for beneficiaries while, at the same time, the coordination and realisation of requests by beneficiaries can be handled more efficiently.
5. Depending on the scope and scale of the targeted development activities, policy makers in consultation with targeted beneficiaries have to consider at what level the interfaces can best operate in order to provide the support needed. This can be at the level of the Westerkwartier, but in occasions it can also be at the level of Groningen province or at the level of the three collaborating northern provinces, the region North Netherlands.
6. The findings of the Westerkwartier have shown that (professional) catalysts with a temporary assignment can be crucial in initiating more long-term collaboration between different stakeholders. This is a good practice to be repeated in other occasions.
7. The Westerkwartier area provides an inspiring and resourceful learning environment for students at different educational levels. The active engagement of students in the Westerkwartier, as the project 'Brug Toekomst' taught, was not only beneficial to the students themselves and the quality of the education programmes, but also to the initiators and supporters in the Westerkwartier. Students helped them to reflect on their values and aims and made their actions more explicit.
8. Learning about similar developments in other areas, including the working arrangements and interfaces, can be very inspiring and a set-off for various, well-rooted development activities. Exchange programmes, like the Countryside Exchange where the Westerkwartier participated in, appear to be an effective instrument in initiating

engagement and creativity at grassroots level. The Westerkwartier has, and still is, benefitted from the Countryside Exchange programme. It is therefore recommend not only to focus on internal dynamics, but to exchange ideas, practices and experiences with others as well.

9. The LAG has proven to be an effective public-private partnership in the Westerkwartier, which is able to get things going. Its resources and reach are, however, limited. The founding of a more resourceful public-private partnership in the Westerkwartier, as it has recently been initiated, can significantly raise its strength and therefore its effectiveness in initiating and supporting development activities, and in arranging support for joint learning and innovation in grassroots development activities.
10. Informal networking activities (such as rural cafes) have lowered the threshold for the engagement of denizens in development activities in the Westerkwartier. It is therefore recommended to keep stimulating less formal meetings and events where all kinds of people with different interests can meet without reserve. The active engagement of denizens cannot be forced, denizens need to be tempted to participate and get involved. Informal meetings should thus appeal to the interests of the denizens of the Westerkwartier.
11. The further strengthening of a shared sense of belonging and overall identity in the Westerkwartier can be a viable strategy to overcome various, possibly conflicting, interests, and can help to formulate an overall development strategy for the Westerkwartier. Some conflicts of interest, however, will remain and new ones will emerge, also as a result of (perceived) differences in negotiation power. It is best to openly discuss conflicts of interest, because ignoring them can create dissatisfaction.

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