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Regional development and regional policy in the Netherlands: are there peripheral regions?

Die Stellung peripherer Regionen in der Regionalentwicklung und Regionalpolitik in den Niederlanden

Keywords: Regional policy, regional development, EU, Netherlands, peripheral regions, spatial positioning, European integration

Schlagwörter: Regionalpolitik, Regionalentwicklung, EU, Niederlande, periphere Regionen, räumliche Positionierung, europäische Integration

Abstract

In this paper, the position of 'peripheral regions' in the Netherlands is discussed from a European as well as from a Dutch perspective. In the context of an enlarged European Union, and a shift in orientation of regional policy towards strengthening the competitive position of all regions, peripheral regions are required to explore new policy responses. In the Northern Netherlands, this has led to a stronger emphasis on cooperation, both among Dutch provinces as well as with international partners, in an attempt to strengthen the economic performance and political standing of the region in national and international arenas. The rationale or connectivity of international cooperation strategies such as the Northern Development Axis may perhaps be secondary in comparison to the enabling power of such strategy-building in fostering cooperation and governance structures at regional and inter-regional level.

Kurzfassung

Dieser Beitrag diskutiert die Stellung 'peripherer Regionen' in den Niederlanden aus der europäischen sowie der niederländischen Perspektive. Im Kontext der erweiterten Europäischen Union und dem Umdenken in nationaler und europäischer Regionalpolitik hin zu einer Stärkung der Wettbewerbsfähigkeit aller Regionen, sind periphere Regionen zunehmend gefordert, neue Handlungsstrategien zu entwickeln. Im Norden der Niederlande wird dazu die Strategie einer verbesserten Kooperation zwischen niederländischen Provinzen und mit internationalen Partnern verfolgt, um sowohl die wirtschaftliche Struktur der Region als auch ihr politisches Gewicht auf nationaler und internationaler Ebene zu stärken. Die Frage der Erreichbarkeit der kooperierenden Regionen in solchen Initiativen erscheint sekundär im Vergleich zu ihrem Potential, die Kooperation und die Governance-Strukturen innerhalb und zwischen europäischen Regionen zu stärken.

Introduction

The Netherlands are located in the densely populated, well accessible and economically strong 'core' of Europe. The answer to the question of whether there are peripheral regions in this country may therefore seem rather obvious at first sight. However, regional disparities also exist in small and overall wealthy countries. Moreover, whether a region is considered 'peripheral' is also a question of scale.

The northern part of the Netherlands has traditionally been lagging behind the development of the rest of the country. Over many years, regional-economic support was given in an attempt to increase welfare and levels of

accessibility in this region. Since the late 1980s, however, the Netherlands have pursued a regional policy approach that expects regions to 'stand on their own feet' (op eigen kracht) rather than relying on public subsidies to balance out disparities. Peripheral regions are thus required to find ways to strengthen their economic competitiveness by providing the conditions that will attract and embed investment.

In doing so, as the example of the three Dutch Northern provinces shows, peripheral regions also seek to develop transnational cooperation networks and foster econom-

ic and cultural links within the enlarged European Union (EU). The political ambition to develop a 'Northern Development Axis' between the Northern Netherlands, Scandinavia, Northern Germany and the Baltic States is a story of such 'spatial positioning' (Williams, 1996: 97). It highlights some of the challenges that peripheral regions – even those in the core of Europe – face in a changing spatial and socio-economic context.

This paper discusses the relative position of peripheral regions in the Netherlands from the European and Dutch perspective. Using the example of the Northern Netherlands, it considers the options of peripheral regions in an integrated European Union and in response to shifts in national and EU regional policy. The paper concludes by suggesting that the changing framework conditions may present opportunities for such regions in providing an incentive for fostering regional governance structures and strengthening international cooperation.

Peripheral regions in Europe

Economic integration has always been at the heart of the objectives of the EU, as a means to promote European competitiveness at the global level and to ensure economic and social cohesion within the Union by reducing regional disparities. The combined processes of globalisation, European integration and the increasing interdependence of regions in Europe have had manifold and ambiguous effects on regional and territorial development. On the one hand, they resulted in a reduction of socio-economic differences between the poorer and the richer member states as the poorest (so-called 'cohesion') countries (Greece, Spain, Ireland and Portugal) have undergone a process of 'catching up'. On the other hand, an increase of disparities between the regions of the EU and thus within member states can be observed (CEC, 2007). Following the Eastern EU enlargements of 2004 and 2007, inter-regional disparities between the more prosperous and poorer regions have increased further, although some of the new member states (e.g. Slovenia, Estonia) are currently experiencing high growth rates and new growth centres outside the traditional 'core' of the EU are emerging (e.g. Dublin, Madrid, Helsinki, Stockholm). As a consequence of these complex processes, the current picture is thus one of increasing diversity and uneven economic growth, with considerable variation in regional labour markets. As elsewhere in Europe, this has led to concerns in parts of the Netherlands over the position of the more peripheral regions in a globalised economy and an enlarged EU.

Traditionally, peripherality has been synonymous with geographic remoteness and rurality, which implies below than average levels of accessibility and of economic and social performance (in terms of gross domestic product per capita, levels of employment, and outmigration) and low population density. These aspects go along with high transport costs due to longer distances and lack of com-

petition in the provision of transport services, lack of substantial industrial bases and high dependency on small businesses or on single industries which are often sensitive to economic shocks. Yet, whether a region is (or feels) peripheral is also a question of scale. For example, transportation and accessibility issues may have more weight at the regional or sub-regional level, whereas peripherality to political decision making may have greater significance at the national or European scale. Hence, in discussing whether a region is peripheral, the question of 'peripheral to what?' first needs to be answered. In other words, what are the key factors that are not present in, or are inaccessible to, a particular area that engender a sense of isolation or peripherality? 'Being peripheral' (or feeling peripheral) may thus be considered from a number of different perspectives: geographic, economic or social and related to main transport networks, main urban centres, political decision making, economic opportunities, and/or social opportunities (White and Alden, 1999). On the other hand, there are not only disadvantages of being peripheral. Positive aspects of peripherality may be associated with a high-quality natural environment, the natural resource base, comparatively low costs for housing, and cultural and linguistic diversity (Tewdwr-Jones, 2003). Some peripheral regions in Europe have succeeded in building on their strengths and international heritage. For example Northern Scandinavian and Scottish regions reportedly have a decidedly international outlook, show a high commitment to international cooperation and share a 'bottom-up' approach to action (White and Alden, 1999).

Official policy responses to peripherality have traditionally mostly focused on development, predominantly transport and infrastructure provision, tourism projects, and the enlargement of settlements with increased services. EU Structural Funds are often used to support such developments and initiatives, for instance in the field of the tourism economy and to improve accessibility. Yet seeking solutions to economic and accessibility problems through development projects can have negative impacts on the advantages of peripheral regions (Tewdwr-Jones, 2003). Transport infrastructure development may not only provide ease of access for tourists, it may also result in pressure for holiday homes and with it higher house prices, pressures on the natural environment and a 'way out' for the more mobile population (which more often than not are the young and well educated). It has therefore been argued that policy responses in peripheral areas should, besides providing economic and transport development, should focus on solving some of these regions' deeper problems, while also protecting the quality of places and their environmental, cultural, and linguistic attributes (Tewdwr-Jones, 2003).

Within the EU, the discussion about peripherality is linked to the preoccupation with its core. The best known examples of the spatial conceptualisation of the EU's core and periphery are the 'Blue Banana' and the 'Pentagon'. The

'Blue Banana' (RECLUS, 1989), which depicts a highly developed area stretching from the south east of England to the north of Italy, has prompted much debate about spatial development in the EU and the fate of regions that are located outside this core area. The 'European Spatial Development Perspective' (ESDP) (CSD, 1999: 61) identified the concentration of economic activity in the EU-15 as being located in 'a pentagon defined by London, Paris, Milan, Munich and Hamburg. This area represents 20 % of the total area and contains about 40 % of EU citizens producing about 50 % of the EU's total GDP. The core-periphery debate has prompted policy responses over the past years that aim at achieving a more polycentric and balanced development of the European territory overall to reduce negative consequences of the ongoing processes of polarisation and to ensure territorial cohesion in the EU.

In pursuit of the EU objectives of economic and social cohesion, the EU has pursued a regional policy to balance out regional disparities in the European territory since the late 1970s. With the implementation of the single market and Economic and Monetary Union, the objectives of EU regional policy have broadened (alongside its budget) to overcome the barrier effects of national borders and balance out the spatial-economic polarisation tendencies in an integrated Europe. Today, the EU's regional policy (now called Cohesion Policy) has grown to be the second largest EU budget (the largest budget being focused on agricultural and rural policy). With successive enlargements of the EU, regional policy has been adapted several times to respond to the needs of an increasingly diverse collection of territories and development issues (such as sparsely populated regions or regions undergoing industrial restructuring).

Since its inception, however, the main concern of EU regional policy has been the support of 'structurally disadvantaged regions' that are lagging behind in their economic development and where income levels are below the EU average, although other objectives have been added to this over the years, such as for example support for transboundary cooperation. In the discussions on the reform of Cohesion Policy for the current funding period 2007–2013, the European Parliament argued that EU regional policy funding should also be more directly targeted to regions with 'permanent geographical handicaps' (such as island regions, mountain areas or sparsely populated areas) independent of the level of income in their regions (EP, 2003). Such a more geographic perspective of an EU Cohesion Policy focusing on 'least favoured areas' is, however, not being pursued in the current funding period 2007–2013, where funding is directed at achieving the three objectives of convergence (funding for regions with a below-average economic performance), regional competitiveness and employment (all other regions), and European territorial cooperation (cross-border, transnational and inter-regional cooperation). The debate on whether EU Cohesion Pol-

icy should be more geographically oriented and what the most appropriate criteria would be to decide over the allocation of Structural Funds is, however, still ongoing.

The Netherlands from a European perspective: are there peripheral regions?

Looking at the Netherlands from a European perspective, the country seems all but peripheral. The Netherlands are one of the most densely populated countries in Europe. While the population density in 2006 in the European Union of 27 member states (EU-27) was on average around 115 inhabitants on each square kilometer, there are 484 people per km² in the Netherlands. Moreover, the Netherlands are located in the North-west of Europe, that is, the traditional European core region with high economic activity, high accessibility and high population density. In terms of accessibility, Amsterdam airport ranked fifth in Europe for passenger transportation (behind London, Paris, Frankfurt and Madrid), and third for cargo (behind Paris and Frankfurt) in 2007 (Airports Council International, 2007). The port of Rotterdam is the largest seaport in Europe and in 2006 was the world's seventh largest container port (Port of Rotterdam, 2008). The major economic centres are, however, located in the west of the country, with the city ring of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Utrecht and Den Haag forming the political, economic and transport core of the country. Outside the Randstad, lower levels of accessibility and economic development can be observed.

Reflecting the comparatively strong economic situation of the Netherlands over the past years and the changing context following the recent Eastern enlargements of the EU, the country is now one of the main net contributors to the EU's budget but receives comparatively little support through EU regional policy. There are no recipient regions of Objective 1 (i.e. convergence) funding in the current EU Cohesion Policy period (2007–2013), although the fact that all regions have a GDP per head that is above 75 % of the EU-27 average (the main eligibility criterion for the convergence objective) should not distract from the fact that there are regional disparities within the Netherlands. As all other EU regions not covered by the convergence objective, also all of the Netherlands are also eligible for EU Cohesion Policy funding to stimulate 'Regional competitiveness and employment' (Objective 2, 2007–2013). For the Dutch regions, EU funding of EUR 1.660 billion is available, which have to be matched with public and private funds, thus resulting in total funding available for the country of at least EUR 2.310 billion in current prices (CEC, 2008). For the Netherlands there are four Operational Programmes: for the North (the provinces of Groningen, Friesland and Drenthe), East (Overijssel and Gelderland), West (Noord-Holland, Zuid-Holland, Flevoland, Utrecht) and South (Zeeland, Noord-Brabant and Limburg) The EU funding for 'regional competitiveness and employment' in the Netherlands is focused on seven prior-

ity areas: strengthening innovation and entrepreneurship, raising the attractiveness of regions, investing in the socio-economic viability of cities, increasing the labour supply, promoting an inclusive labour market, increasing adaptability/investing in human capital and promoting effective cooperation with neighbouring countries. In addition, 'European territorial cooperation' funding is available for Dutch regions and municipalities to engage in cross-border, transnational or inter-regional cooperation.

In the previous EU regional policy period (2000–2006) the province of Flevoland (see Figure 1) still received funding under Objective 1 (for regions whose development is lagging behind), although as van Ravesteijn and Evers (2004: 33) have pointed out, the region 'was awarded Objective 1 status not because it was so backward, but because it simply met the requirements for having a low GDP per capita. Many Flevoland residents commute to other areas (mainly to Amsterdam) for work and, in the eyes of the EU, this means that economic production in the province is comparatively low'. The criterion of GDP per capita to determine eligibility for EU structural funding is criticised regularly for ignoring the spatial-economic interrelations between people working and living in neighbouring regions. As van Ravesteijn and Evers (2004: 42) point out, it 'flies in the face of common knowledge' that according to these criteria Groningen is the wealthiest region in the Netherlands (due to the income from offshore gas) and Flevoland the poorest. The rest of the Netherlands, as well

as nine Dutch cities in the prosperous western part, received EU funding under Objective 2 in the 2000–2006 period to support their economic restructuring.

Some provinces collaborate on regional policy and the management of EU funds. For instance, the three Dutch Northern provinces Drenthe, Friesland and Groningen (see Figure 1) combined all EU funds available to the Northern Netherlands region (derived from various sources of EU Structural Funds and EU common agricultural policy) in a 'Kompas voor het Noorden' programme (SNN, 2003). The main objective of this coordinated approach to regional policy intervention was to 'bring the level of economic development (measured in jobs) in this region into step with the rest of the country' (van Ravesteijn and Evers, 2004: 36). A review of the programme found it to be effective in stimulating economic growth and in particular rapid growth in tourism in all participating provinces.

The Netherlands from a Dutch perspective: regional economic development in pursuit of economic competitiveness

Until the late 1980s, the Dutch national government pursued a regional-economic policy aimed at stimulating economic development in regions which were lagging behind the national average. 'These were the peripheral regions in the north, east and south of the country, which had been heavily dependent on farming, or on traditional industries such as textiles in the eastern margin of the Netherlands' (Needham, 2007: 72). Structural assistance was also given to parts of Limburg in the south following the closing of the coalmines in the mid-1970s. Different types of measures were pursued to redistribute workplaces and population, such as giving financial incentives to companies to settle in these regions, extra infrastructural investments, and moving government offices from the west of the country to the north and the east. From 1975, the effectiveness of this 'spreading policy' was increasingly criticised, when following a period of economic growth the Dutch economy was hit by recession and unemployment was beginning to rise rapidly across the country. As a consequence, the 'interregional equity goal' of Dutch regional policy was abandoned, and the emphasis in the 1980s turned to the 'national efficiency goal' of regional policy, that is, the objective of achieving the maximum contribution of each region to national economic growth (Oosterhaven, 1996).

Following the publication of the 'Fourth National Policy Document on Spatial Planning' (VROM, 1988), which argued that regions must 'stand on their own feet' (*regios op eigen kracht*), the Dutch government largely stopped any redistributive regional policy and instead promoted a policy of stimulating economic growth in all regions by removing obstacles to growth 'irrespective of the position of one region relative to another region' (Min EZ, 2006: 18). Differences in welfare between different parts of the Netherlands were no longer reason for giving structural assist-

Figure 1
The Dutch provinces and towns with more than 100,000 inhabitants



Source: Kragt et al., 2003: 332

ance to the poorer regions - despite the fact that the north of the Netherlands has the lowest income per person (in fact, the expendable income per person is 8.5 per cent lower than national average, see Min EZ, 2006: 19) and that these regional differences in income are greater than in some other European countries (Needham, 2007). Although increasingly the most significant concentrations of unemployment and poverty can be found in the big cities, the discontinuation of any form of redistributive domestic regional economic policy is nonetheless remarkable and stands in contrast to other European countries.

The EU's role in providing has therefore become prominent since the late 1980s, but whether a region is considered in need of structural assistance varies according to whether a national or a European perspective is employed. Even if regions are lagging behind in a national context, they may be performing well in comparison with other EU regions that are in greater need. For the past years the Dutch government has continued to argue that EU regional policy funding should be targeted to the poorest Member States, 'rather than allowing them to circulate among the wealthier countries as well' (van Ravesteyn and Evers, 2004). This position does not merely reflect the concerns over budgetary implications of a net payer country, but above all a different understanding of the role of regional policy and scepticism about the real influence of redistributive policies in changing spatial-economic structures. As van Ravesteyn and Evers (2004: 33) have pointed out, the EU's regional policy approach in pursuit of economic and social cohesion is 'somewhat of an anachronism in the Netherlands: it resembles national planning of three decades ago'. Before 2006, the policy priorities of EU regional policy (focused on redistribution) were thus arguably at odds with Dutch spatial-economic policy objectives to strengthen the competitiveness of the country (expressed in concepts such as the 'mainports' of Schiphol airport and Rotterdam harbour and the 'brainport' of Eindhoven (VROM et al., 2006). In the current EU Cohesion Policy period (2007–2013), EU and Dutch national objectives seem somewhat better aligned in their pursuit of economic competitiveness.

One effect of this change in redistributive policy in the Netherlands towards the strengthening of regional potentials is that 'experience with obtaining funds from Brussels has also lessened the habit of approaching national government for assistance. Larger cities and provinces are becoming more involved with the EU and many have assigned staff to investigate the best ways to obtain EU funds or work as lobbyists' (van Ravesteyn and Evers, 2004: 41). For the more peripheral regions in the Netherlands, such as the Northern provinces, the orientation towards the EU institutions also means that their benchmark for comparison are no longer other Dutch provinces, but the regions in the enlarged Union. The level of peripherality or disadvantage of Dutch regions is relative in this wider comparison. Regions that have for many years benefited from nation-

al or EU structural assistance, thus, need to consider alternative ways to use their potentials to strengthen their international competitiveness. One avenue that is frequently explored in this respect, and one that is strongly supported by the Council of Europe and EU institutions, is increased cooperation with other European regions in the pursuit of economic or political objectives and to foster cultural and historical links (Gabbe and von Malchus, 2008).

Besides receiving EU funding to support the 'Regional competitiveness and employment' objective of Cohesion Policy, Dutch regions are therefore also actively participating in the European territorial cooperation programmes on cross-border, transnational and inter-regional cooperation. Over the past decades they have succeeded in securing considerable EU funds for establishing cooperation with other European partners. However, despite the active involvement of many Dutch stakeholders in such European territorial cooperation, it has been argued that there 'is little evidence that the Dutch have "embraced Europe" in the sense of letting that influence the content of spatial planning in the Netherlands', other than occasionally making a plea for better infrastructure connections to the European heartland. [...] The content of Dutch policy for land use is still determined largely by local and national concerns' (Needham, 2007: 105). Territorial cooperation in the Netherlands thus seems at present to be pursued only in areas of cooperation that are perceived to benefit the spatial-economic structure of the regions and their position within the European or global economy, rather than being an integral part of Dutch spatial planning and spatial and economic policy-making. However, although attracting EU funding for such cooperation activities is surely an important aspect, the main drivers for 'spatial positioning' initiatives, such as the example of the 'Northern Development Axis', may be found in the recognition that regional and inter-regional cooperation can be a crucial factor in strengthening the regional economy.

Spatial positioning: the example of the Dutch Northern provinces

The Northern Netherlands, being expected to 'stand on their own feet', have over the past years undertaken considerable efforts to position themselves in the enlarged EU. The three Dutch provinces Groningen, Drenthe and Friesland have since the late 1990s jointly promoted the concept of the 'Northern Development Axis' (Noordelijke Ontwikkelingsas – NOA) in order 'fulfill the linking function between the Randstad (the Netherlands' Western cities) and North-eastern Europe' (SNN, 2005:4). This vision of an emerging transnational corridor from the Randstad via the Northern Netherlands, Northwest Germany, Denmark, Southern Sweden, and Southern Finland is considered to be the most promising path for the future economic development of the region. The argument for this development axis is based on two main aspects: the his-

Figure 2**The 'Nordconnect' initiative: Linking Northern Netherlands and Northern Europe**Source: <http://www.nordconnect.eu/> (visited May 2008)

torical links of the Hanse and the assumed common mentality in the region, and the economic growth potential of the new EU member states which may open new market potentials in Eastern Europe.

The concept of the Northern Development Axis is given considerable political and financial support by the Dutch Northern provinces, although its application has experienced some considerable setbacks over the years. The initial conception was explicitly related to the development of an infrastructure backbone that would carry the wider social and economic objectives of the Northern Development Axis: 'By improving the international connections the Northern Netherlands is setting out to benefit more from its position between the Western Netherlands and Northern Germany and beyond. The North is continuing to invest in the Northern Development Axis' (SNN, 2005). Two missing infrastructure connections were identified: the so-called Zuiderzee link, a rail link between Amsterdam airport and Groningen, and the A22 'Küstenautobahn' in Northern Germany, both with a timeframe of at least ten years until completion. There is no mention of the Northern Development Axis in the current national spatial strategy, the 'Nota Ruimte' (VROM et al., 2006), although a reference to its Dutch transport infrastructure section, the 'Zuiderzee link', was included. The German A 22 'Küstenautobahn' is included in the Federal Transport Infrastructure Plan (Bundesverkehrswegeplan), with construction expected to start in 2012 and completion intended for 2019 (BAW, 2006).

In November 2007, however, the Dutch Parliament decided to withdraw support the Zuiderzee link as the cost-benefit ratio was considered unfavourable. This turn of events has required a significant re-framing of the initial concept of the Northern Development Axis. While the transport connection of the Zuiderzee line was previously considered as 'indispensable to the Northern Netherlands' (SNN, 2005), following the Parliament decision to abandon the infrastructure project the website of the Dutch northern

provinces now points out that 'the NOA is thus not only a development axis in the infrastructural sense. The NOA is much more!' (www.nordconnect.eu, visited May 2008). The re-framing process also resulted in a renaming of the international cooperation initiative to 'Nordconnect', in order to remove any connotation with transport connections. Moreover, cooperation activities were re-focused on establishing cultural connections and business links in the identified growth potential sectors of energy, water and sensor technology. Any reference to the need for infrastructure investments to support such socio-economic interactions have been omitted in the new conceptual map of the cooperation region (see Figure 2).

The political efforts of the Northern Netherlands are remarkable, and they have undoubtedly begun to contribute to a feeling of 'togetherness' and regional identity among actors in the three provinces, if not in other regions of North-East Europe. Such cooperation structures, and a strengthened regional governance, will be invaluable in establishing a voice in the EU's multi-level governance system. However, whether it will also lead to economic success remains to be seen. Much of the interaction with North-East Europe in the future may still depend on improved accessibility. This is at least the case for some of the envisaged areas of cooperation, such as tourism, trade and other business links. This puts the spotlight on the completion of the German Küstenautobahn: should this project not go ahead as planned then the concept of the Northern Development Axis, even in its adjusted current orientation, remain limited to more 'virtual' types of inter-regional cooperation, and this will present serious challenges for achieving the political ambitions of achieving true economic and territorial integration.

While international connectivity may thus be important for the success of the 'Nordconnect' initiative, the territorial orientation of the cooperation activities may not necessarily require improved accessibility from the rest of the Netherlands. In fact, the parliamentary decision on the Zuiderzee link may even be a blessing in disguise. There are many examples of transport development in peripheral regions which, rather than bringing economic benefits to the region, have turned out to be a 'way out' for people and companies. Being a 'stepping stone' between the Randstad and North-Eastern Europe may have meant being a transit area between economically strong centres, where the economic benefits are minor but the environmental and social costs are high. Be this as it may, making an ambitious concepts such as the Northern Development Axis work will require continuous efforts over the years to come, and will require a solid embedding of the cooperation efforts in all areas of public policy.

Concluding reflections

This paper started out with investigating of whether there are peripheral regions in the Netherlands, and what their

role and position may be in an enlarged and integrated European Union. So, are there peripheral regions in the Netherlands? Yes, there are – even if ‘peripherality’ may imply something different in the Netherlands than it does in Northern Scandinavia or on the Azores. The question of whether a region is peripheral, thus, is one of context and scale. Peripherality is usually considered in terms of levels of accessibility and economic and social performance, and in comparison to the rest of the country this makes the Northern Netherlands peripheral. While the physical distances within the Netherlands may be short, the cultural differences between different parts of the country can be remarkable. The question of whether there are peripheral regions in the Netherlands from a European perspective is, however, also one of context and comparison. Surely in comparison to other European regions, the Northern Netherlands seem rather centrally located and performing comparatively well. The example of the Northern Netherlands shows that peripherality is also a matter of perception: while the Dutch Northern provinces may be peripheral from a national perspective, they feel more closely connected to other regions in North-East Europe due to a common cultural heritage.

The international ambitions of the Northern Netherlands are, however, undoubtedly fuelled by shifts in Dutch regional economic policy since the late 1980s, as regions have been required to strengthen their economic position independently of national funding. Indeed, the gaze of the Northern Netherlands today seems directed mostly towards Brussels and the EU institutions where European funding can be secured and international contacts can be fostered, and towards the potential cooperation partners and markets in North-East Europe. The Dutch government in The Hague still plays an evidently important political role in the national context, but Dutch regions have over the past decades learned to direct their efforts to receive structural assistance elsewhere. For many Dutch provinces this has meant joining forces and collaborating on regional-economic development initiatives. Cooperation with neighbouring authorities is important, because as Gualini (2006) explains, Dutch provinces are too small in the EU context to make their voices heard. International cooperation is likewise of increasing importance in lobbying for EU funding or policy innovations. For the Dutch Northern provinces, cooperation with each other as well as with international partners is thus considered the way forward in strengthening the spatial-economic structure of the region.

Much political and financial effort is currently devoted to developing the concept of the ‘Northern Development Axis’ and to foster cooperation with partners in northern Germany, Scandinavia and the Baltic States. Implementing this strategy is an uphill struggle, characterised by uncertainties over transport infrastructure investments and the need for a continuous adaptation of the strategic objectives to political and economic realities. Time will tell

whether the Northern Netherlands will be able to achieve their ambition to establish long-lasting cultural and economic cooperation in this part of Europe, and to position themselves firmly in the European territory and the global economy. In any case, what they will have achieved is a stronger regional governance structure and well-established cooperation among the three provinces and with non-public actors. Joint strategy development and powerful images are crucial to the success of such cooperation initiatives, and can ensure that the core ideas are shared among all stakeholders (Dühr, 2007). Perhaps the political and governance dimension of the international cooperation strategy of the Northern Netherlands will have more value in positioning the region vis-à-vis the economically and politically powerful Randstad and in the European context than any infrastructure investment would ever have. However, to ensure that cooperation structures become long-lasting and solid, deeper and more meaningful cooperation, beyond ‘soft’ interaction in the field of tourism or culture, have to be actively pursued. Only cooperation on politically sensitive topics, such as economic development, and the consideration of the ‘North-East European dimension’ in spatial plans, regional economic development and transport strategies, will ensure deeper integration of the Northern Netherlands in the European territory. There are signs that disparities within countries (between regions and within cities) are likely to increase in the European Union. At the same time, regional policy support to the overall wealthier EU member states may be reduced again in the Cohesion Policy period after 2014. The funds that are currently available are directed at increasing innovation and knowledge and the economic competitiveness of regions, and at European territorial cooperation. Regions in Europe are therefore well advised to establish cooperation networks across Europe, as the basis for joint funding applications as well as to set up long lasting cooperation structures that may contribute towards social, economic and environmental objectives. The current efforts of the Northern Netherlands on establishing the Northern Development Axis may thus, after all, be the most logical investment in the future of the region.

Acknowledgements

The discussion of the ‘Northern Development Axis / Nordconnect’ initiative in this paper was informed by a ‘Zero measurement’ project for the SNN, which sought to assess the status quo and potential for cooperation along the Northeast Corridor. The author was involved in this study, which was led by COWI A/S Denmark and completed in 2005. The author wishes to thank the SNN for the opportunity to study the inter-regional connections between the Northern Netherlands and North-East Europe as part of this project.

The views expressed in this paper are the author’s own.

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