

# **THE FLEMISH CITY-REGION: A PIECE OF URBAN REALITY IN FLANDERS UNRAVELED**

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## THE FLEMISH CITY-REGION: A PIECE OF URBAN REALITY IN FLANDERS UNRAVELED

Ellen Wayenberg & Tine Vermeersch

### ABSTRACT

In this paper, we present the first results of an ongoing research project<sup>1</sup> that focuses upon the issue of spill-over effects in the context of a city-region. This is an intriguing issue as these (presumed) effects are often a source of tension between a core city and its hinterland. After all, the city presumes that it fulfils a wide array of functions that create benefits for the surrounding local governments whilst having to solely carry the costs involved.

Which functions create these kinds of spill-over effects today? Are they financially or otherwise equalized on behalf of the locality that fulfils them? And is this locality always the core city or is it also thinkable that a small(-er) local government of a city-region fulfils a function that spills over into the city? These and related questions are raised and preliminary answered in the following paper.

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<sup>1</sup> This project is executed by Tine Vermeersch under guidance of Ellen Wayenberg, Filip De Rynck, Herwig Reynaert and Kristof Steyvers.

## **SPILL-OVER EFFECTS IN THE FLEMISH CITY-REGION**

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

As northern part of Belgium, the Flemish region counts 308 local governments. 13 of them are labeled as core cities as they surpass the others in the urban hierarchy based upon population density, multi-functionality and geographical location. (Studiedienst van de Vlaamse Regering, 2008) One can presume a city-region around each of these cities, composed out of the core city and several local governments that surround it at the edge. Today, there is no formal-institutional recognition of this reality of city-region in Flanders. Years ago, there was (Belgian) legislation to create so-called 'federaties van gemeenten' on a supra-communal basis to execute functions regionally that could not be fulfilled (anymore) by individual localities.<sup>2</sup> Typical examples of these functions deal with employment, mobility, health, and housing. Such federations of localities were never created in the Flemish region.<sup>3</sup> However, this does not mean that the reality of a city-region does not exist in Flanders. It prevails as a bottom-up grown reality of localities that have decided on a voluntary basis to collaborate. The best Flemish example so far is the city-region around Turnhout. This city-region encompasses four localities: the city of Turnhout and the bordering local governments of Oud-Turnhout, Beerse en Vosselaar. They all collaborate extensively in territory-oriented matters such as the location of new business parks or the development of a regional mobility plan, thus jointly serving an area of over more than 80 000 inhabitants. (De Ceuninck, 2009, pp. 107-108) Hence, this city-region around Turnhout is put central in our paper.

In the following paragraph, we focus upon a major potential source of tension in the context of a city-region: the spill-over effects of functions fulfilled by one locality in a city-region on behalf of others. What is meant with these spill-over effects and how did we deal with them in the course of our research project?

### **2. SPILL-OVER EFFECTS IN THE CONTEXT OF A CITY-REGION**

When focusing upon city-regions, the issue of spill-over effects quickly arises as they might be a major source of tension between the collaborating localities. Spill-over effects emerge out of so-called regional functions. These are functions fulfilled by one locality with effects that spill over into the surrounding localities because the latter's inhabitants also make use of these functions.

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<sup>2</sup> Wet van 26 juli 1971 betreffende de federaties en agglomeraties van gemeenten, B.S. 24 augustus 1971.

<sup>3</sup> The law of the 26<sup>th</sup> of July 1971 (see footnote 1) was abolished by a law of the 30<sup>th</sup> of December 1975.

(SERV, 1995) Tension then might arise when one locality carries all the costs of fulfilling these functions whilst their benefits also go to (inhabitants of) the bordering localities. So in that case, there is no equalization of the cost-benefit balance on behalf of the function-executing locality by means of a compensation made by its other beneficiaries.

Often, it is assumed that the core city of a city-region fulfills the functions that spill over to the bordering localities. This is the classical assumption that points to a uni-directional relationship going from the city-center into its hinterland. (Depré e.a., 1989) In our research project, we presume(-d) that the opposite is also possible i.e. that a locality at the edge of a city-region fulfills a function that benefits inhabitants of – and thus – the core city. (Vermeersch e.a., 2009) We also presume that such a locality always borders the core city. This presumption is not made out of conceptual reasons as we believe that a city-region should not be limited to a core city and the local governments that directly surround it. But it is made out of methodological concerns which brings us to the following part of our paper.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

In our research project, we delimited the city-region of Turnhout to four local governments: Turnhout, Oud-Turnhout, Beerse en Vosselaar. These four localities lie at the heart of the city-region as it grew bottom-up from 1999 onwards. The reason for this limitation sprang from our assumption mentioned earlier on: if we presume that not only a core city fulfils regional functions, then we can not limit the data collection on prevailing regional functions and their spill-over effects to respondents from such a city. We then also have to involve respondents from other localities in the city-region. And as we wanted to screen various policy domains on the prevalence of regional functions, this meant that quite a high number of respondents would be involved in the data collection – at minimum one from each locality for each policy domain.<sup>4</sup> Hence, our choice to limit ourselves in our analysis of the city-region around Turnhout to four localities.

In each of these localities, we have contacted experts in various policy domains and interviewed them face-to-face as to make an inventory of the so-called regional functions, their spill-over effects on the basis of data on the domicile of their users and the solution that might be worked out to wipe out the tension caused by such a regional function. As such, we aimed at building a firm empirical foundation for the issue of spill-over effects in the city-region of Turnhout, one of the objectives of our research project. (Vermeersch e.a., 2009, p. 3)

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<sup>4</sup> So far, almost 30 people have been questioned in our data collection on behalf of the city-region of Turnhout.

The policy domains that are put central in the data collection concern leisure, safety and welfare issues. These domains were not chosen arbitrarily but follow out of a solid review of studies focusing upon – often amongst other things – the issue of regional spill-over effects in Flanders. After all, this review pointed out that regional functions prevail the most around leisure, safety and welfare issues. (Vermeersch e.a., 2009)

In the following paragraph, we present some preliminary results of our ongoing data collection in the city-region around Turnhout.

#### **4. PRELIMINARY RESULTS**

For each of the three policy domains, we are first presenting some findings before indicating what each domain can learn us about the urban reality behind the city-region in Flanders.

##### 4.1 Policy domain 'leisure'

This policy domain encompasses cultural, youth and sports activities.

There are clear examples of spill-over effects in this domain although the notion 'clear' might deserve some nuancing in this regard. After all, respondents did not always seem to be fully aware of the fact that they were dealing with a regional function spilling over into the bordering localities. Often, only when asked about it, they recognized its existence together with the tension its fulfillment brought about amongst the localities involved. A 'clear' example concerns the music academia in Turnhout. This facility is used extensively by inhabitants from the surrounding localities. In particular, no less than two thirds of the academia's students come from outer Turnhout. But the city's policy-makers only recognized this function as 'regional' and as creating a financial burden for Turnhout after being asked about it.

On the contrary, other functions are well-known regional functions just because of their long-standing problematic nature. A clear example concerns the swimming pool of Beerse. This pool attracts more people from outside Beerse than from Beerse itself because there are no equally-sized pools in its immediate environment. This situation is well-known as problematic amongst the locality's politicians and civil servants as Beerse carries the costs for the pool's construction and maintenance whilst its benefits flow to (the inhabitants of) other localities as well. Such a situation is not that easily straightened out according to Beerse's policy-makers. After all, they

can not 'make' another locality build an equally-sized and -attractive swimming pool. For the moment, they do consider another way of equalizing (more) the cost-benefit balance on behalf of Beerse i.e. by charging users differently depending upon their domicile. A swimmer from outside Beerse would have to pay more than a local one. But so far, this system of differential user charges has not yet been introduced.<sup>5</sup>

Such a system has been introduced in the case of the youth care in Oud-Turnhout. This care is organized after school and in the summertime on behalf of children ranging between 3 and 12 years old. This care facility was immediately very popular but not only amongst its primary target group: children from Oud-Turnhout. After all, a lot of parents from the neighbouring city of Turnhout bring their children – who are often no older than 6 years old – to the youth care in Oud-Turnhout. They do this because Turnhout lacks child care for youngsters between 3 and 6 years old. Coming from Turnhout, these parents are charged a higher rate than the ones of Oud-Turnhout, be it that the problem is not considered as solved in this way. After all, policy-makers from Oud-Turnhout merely define this solution as 'a drop on a hot plate'.

The same can not be said in case of the Warande, the cultural centre located in Turnhout. The Warande has a strong regional and even national appearance as even more than 70% of its visitors come from outside Turnhout. Instead of solely burdening the city's budget with the accompanying costs, another solution has been worked out. After all, the Warande has been transformed into an agency on provincial level<sup>6</sup> so that the issue of its cost-benefit balance has been lifted out of a merely city-regional context.

What does our preliminary analysis of the policy domain 'leisure' now tell us? First of all, fulfilling a regional function is not always experienced as problematic by the policy-makers involved. Undoubtedly, part of this has to do with the lack of data to underscore the domicile of each function's users and hence the direction in which the cost-benefit balance of fulfilling a regional function bends over (example of the music academia in Turnhout). Secondly, when a problem situation is widely recognized, it is not always easily resolved (example of the swimming pool in Beerse) and even when a solution is foreseen, it might just be partial in nature (example of youth care in Oud-Turnhout). Finally, the domain analysis confirms that it is not always a city-region's core city that fulfils regional functions on behalf of the others as half of the examples presented above are indicative of the exact opposite.

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<sup>5</sup> So far, such a system has been introduced with regard to school swimming as the swimming pool of Beerse is also used extensively by schools outside Beerse.

<sup>6</sup> Autonoom provinciebedrijf.

## 4.2 Policy domain 'safety'

In this domain, we focus upon the activities of the fireworks and the police. Recently, both activity fields have been subject to reform introduced by the central (federal) government.

In case of the fireworks, the reform boils down to the creation of larger support zones all over the country's territory. 'Taxandria' is one of these zones, encompassing the four localities of the city-region around Turnhout (Turnhout, Oud-Turnhout, Beerse and Vosselaar) next to eight other ones.<sup>7</sup> In essence, this reform hardly changed the activity of the fire brigades in the area as they already collaborated extensively on a voluntary basis, thus seeking to – amongst other things – also outweigh costs and benefits amongst themselves.

Likewise, the police has also been reformed towards a new zone system. The four localities out of the city-region around Turnhout are merged with three other ones into one police zone.<sup>8</sup> Costs in this zone are shared on the basis of the so-called 'KUL-norm', a distribution norm that spreads the costs amongst the localities involved thus taking different variables into account such as their number of inhabitants, their surface, the number of accidents on their territory etc.

This quick dive into the domain 'safety' thus teaches us two valuable lessons with regard to urban reality in Flanders. Firstly, a city-region is not that easy to delimit. It can contain a core city together with its bordering localities but it can also spread out further into the area, depending upon the function involved. Secondly, the decision upon a city-region's borders and/or activities does not always or merely lie in local hands as central government might be competent in this regard.

## 4.3 The domain 'welfare'

So far, we have not identified a clear regional function with spill-over effects in the domain of welfare policy. Undoubtedly, this is due to the state of our research as we have not had the opportunity to speak to all of the policy-makers involved. So far, we have just interviewed social workers out of the public center for social welfare that is part of local government in every locality. They told us repeatedly that they are not legally competent to help out inhabitants from other localities than their own. As such, they point to an another and institutional explanation for the

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<sup>7</sup> These others are: Arendonk, Baarle-Hertog, Hoogstraten, Kasterlee, Lille, Merksplas, Ravels, Rijkevorsel.

<sup>8</sup> These other ones are Baarle-Hertog, Kasterlee and Lille.

lack of regional functions in this domain, be it that our further research – involving amongst other things the local integration centre – will have to verify this further.

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