The relationship between regional identity and regional development
Introduction

- Case studies:
  - 6 in Belgium
  - 2 outside of Belgium

- Methodology
  - Interviews with stakeholders
  - Online surveys with residents
  - Focus groups

⇒ Regional identity / development / branding
Introduction

TYPICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF A REGION

(original landscape, natural vegetation, soil composition, climate, land use, built environment, economic situation, history, culture, dialect, ....)

- stereotypes
- preconceptions
- observations
- interpretations

DOMINANT REGIONAL IDENTITY

Alternative Regional Identity

- manipulation
  - in conflict
  - in accord

DOMINANT REGIONAL PRACTICES

Alternative Regional Practices

- resistance
- exclusion
- cooperation
- inclusion
Introduction

• Nature, culture and agriculture
• Geographical situation of the region

• Regional identity

• Regional actors
• Involvement of residents
• Cooperation and coordination
• Economic sustainability of the projects
Success of regional identity and regional branding is partly dependent upon these characteristics.

Some regions have more chances than others to initiate an identity-based regional development trajectory.
Meetjesland: we have the advantage of a green region together with the advantage of being situated close to Ghent.

⇒ Proximity to towns and cities can be an advantage.
Regional identity

⇒ Regions with strong natural, cultural and agricultural characteristics do not necessarily build up strong regional identities
Any regional branding process entails competition between regions
Regional identity

⇒ Any regional branding process entails competition within regions
Regional actors

Top down vs bottom up?
Regional actors

- Institutional fragmentation
- Power struggles
Cooperation and coordination

Demarcation of working areas
“Continuity and sustainability are also criteria for the selection of funded projects, but there are no guarantees that after the termination of the time span, the project can continue. (...) If there is no structural funding, it is not simple for the associations.”

“Most of the times, if we talk about a tourist levy, the money is reinvested in new tourist infrastructure, but not in landscape or nature.”

➡ Alternative financing mechanisms
Involvement of residents is crucial

Passionate and motivated initiators

**Meetjesland maak het mee!**
How to set up identity-based regional development processes?

- Natural, cultural and agricultural characteristics
- Geographical situation of the region
- Cooperation and coordination
- Involvement of residents
- Regional identity
- Regional actors
- Economic sustainability of the projects
How to set up identity-based regional development processes?

• The use of identity in regional development is context-specific

⇒ There is no catch all solution that fits every region
  – No blueprint institutional organisation
  – Top-down versus bottom-up?

⇒ Start from the local context
Recognize diversity of rural areas (inside & outside)

**Identities of Westhoek**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Westhoek is a rural, quiet region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westhoek is a region with beautiful landscapes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westhoek is a region with lots of open space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westhoek is an outstanding example of an agricultural region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westhoek is a conservative region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westhoek is a region with history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westhoek is a social region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westhoek is an authentic and humble region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westhoek is a small-scale region</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How to set up identity-based regional development processes?

Recognize diversity of rural areas (inside and outside)
How to set up identity-based regional development processes?

• Strengthen local qualities by fostering existing identities and stimulating the development of new identities

• Recognize diversity of rural areas
  – Diversity of identities
  – Diversity regional characteristics

• Development of long-term vision
How to set up identity-based regional development processes?

• Regional identity
  – Important resource for collective action and place branding strategies
  – Dynamic, social construct

• Regional identity can be created
  – Gradual, time-consuming
  – Dynamic concept, open to new (external) perspectives
  – Participation of all stakeholders
• Be aware of overestimating the potential of regional identity

• Creation of regional identity and implementation of identity-based policy depends on regional assets to anchor the regional identity on:
  – Regional characteristics
  – Presence of motivated leaders and networks among regional actors

⇒ Some regions are more eligible for regional branding than others
However, pay attention to

- Competition for creation of regional identity
  - Different municipalities
  - Different regional visions
  - Different regions

“I do not see what connects the Meetjesland. Aalter and Sint-Laureins seem two separate regions to me. In other words: the polders in the north and the woodland in the south seem to me two regions.”
Cooperation and coordination are indispensable
  – Among different sectors and actors (integrated)
  – With other regions

“There’s a need for the establishment of a central structure that
groups the economic actors, the tourist actors, the environmental
actors, the local action groups, the cultural associations, etc…”
  – Regional demarcation by different actors
  – Power struggles

“Our working area is now Pajottenland and Zennevallei, these
regions are not the same. So Zennevallei thinks it is very difficult to
start regional branding under the name Pajottenland. The people
from Zennevallei told us that they don’t agree with that.”
However, pay attention to:

- Residents as target group of identity-based regional development

  “This is something we face daily, when people don’t want something, it will never be realised. (...) The moment that the residents themselves want to realise something (...) it will be possible. It is much more important to convince people to do something than to regulate everything through legislation.”

- Importance of leaders

  «Now, there is one person in Pajottenland that can take credit for positive evolutions in the region. (...) You have to be blind to not notice what a positive influence this person has had on the regional cooperation. This man stimulates links among people, has been an important factor in the set-up and organisation of Pajottenland+.»
Implications for policy

- European Union: strengthen place-based approach
- Funding bodies: provide long-term financing
- Stimulation of alternative financing models
- Mechanisms that ensure effective coordination and integration of all local development programmes at the level of the region
Implications for policy

• Flanders:
  – Strong rural development policy
  – Rural development fund
  – Flexibility

• Wallonia
  – Policy measures that enable development and implementation of regional identities and rural development strategies on regional scale