



MP4 WP1.3 Transnational Assessment of Practice



Interbestuurlijk
Plattelandsoverleg/
Intergovernmental
Rural Dialogue



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Context & the need for place-keeping

In Belgium, elements of landscape infrastructure in the countryside are largely situated (or constructed) on sites which are owned by public authorities. These elements are diverse and range from hedgerows, waterways, cemeteries, monuments and landmarks, bridges, picnic sites, footpaths signs and information boards. Apart from the associated construction costs there are also management costs, which are covered annually by the public authorities. In practice, some regional authorities find that the management cost is becoming the defining factor as to whether or not infrastructure work is carried out. At the same time, linear infrastructures (e.g. waterways) are sometimes under the management of different organisations, making it unclear exactly who coordinates the management.

The increasing demand for recreational activities in the countryside requires ongoing maintenance of the landscape. These dual pressures on the rural landscape can only be met if at the same time efforts are made to create efficient, affordable and well coordinated management of this infrastructure.

Provinces, municipalities and regional public authorities take responsibility for the maintenance and repair of landscape infrastructures. Financing the maintenance of these infrastructures is a hard task for the regional authorities as resources and knowledge are not always present and machines or personnel are also not always available.

In some areas regional landscapes take initiatives to carry out the coordination of the management, in other areas the provinces take the lead in this. Sometimes temporary staff from special temporary employment projects can be deployed. In other cases farmers (cooperatives) are called in to take care of the management.

If the recreational joint use and landscape upgrading of the countryside are important objectives, then alternative, renewing opportunities must be sought to jointly finance these maintenance costs. It is important that during the design phase the issue of maintenance is already taken into consideration at an early stage.

The project & the 'place-keeping' approach

The impetus behind this project is the growing demand for a solution to how to maintain an attractive countryside which also supports recreation. It was clear to the Intergovernmental Rural Dialogue (IPO) that to do this effectively, investment in the maintenance of rural infrastructure was critical. Such investment would need to be efficient, cost-effective and well-coordinated to ensure that the infrastructure was maintained to a high standard.

In January 2006, it was decided that an agenda document "Execution and coordination of the maintenance of the landscape and recreational infrastructures in the Flemish countryside" was required. This was conducted via a process of consultation led by the IPO – the Inter-governmental Rural Dialogue. This IPO working group was initiated by the regional coordinator for the Province of West-Vlaanderen at VLM (the Flemish Land Agency), who was the secretary of a previous working group focusing on "the countryside as a public space". This working group (of which there are many) came rather quickly to the conclusion that the theme of maintenance needed more attention and had to be put "on the map". It was decided by the IPO that this theme should be discussed using a consultation approach to achieve a successful outcome in the form of the agenda document. Taking a consultation approach to a policy problem at a regional scale has been done before in Belgium but was like a pilot project for solving the scheduled problem.

Three aspects of maintenance were focused on in this project:

- **Small landscape elements (SLE)** and associated land management techniques. These are wide-ranging and include:
 - hedges, hawthorn hedges, hedges, wood side, hedgerows, pools, coppice management, forest management, tree management including pollarding (willow), cutting and milling (trees, including fruit trees and drove), pruning and support (orchards);
 - mowing (paths, roadsides, meadows, reeds, grassland, grass squares);

- exotic species control, natural area establishment, species protection measures, maintenance of cemeteries, and marketing.
- **Elements of small historic heritage (SHH)** which include:
 - fountains, kiosks, pumps, specific parts of farms (pigeon towers, culverts, gates, fences, roofs), baking ovens, ice room and orangeries;
 - war monuments, (field) chapels, landmarks, convent walls, mills, bridges, forts, bunkers, castle parks and historic landscapes.
- **Elements of recreational infrastructure (RI)** including:
 - litter clearing
 - access paths and networks including club trails, church paths, cycling, equestrian and footpaths, learning paths, green roads, mountain trails, towpaths
 - maintenance of signage including signposts and information boards
 - maintenance of tourist infrastructure including picnic sites



Figure 1. Paths, hedges and trees: examples of different elements of landscape management.



Figure 2. Signage: an example of an element of recreational infrastructure.



Figure 3. Example of maintenance activities.

The IPO posed three key questions for these three aspects:

- Is the regular maintenance carried out to completely cover the entire area (of the particular authority's jurisdiction)?
- Is that regular maintenance carried out efficiently?
- Is that regular maintenance coordinated efficiently?

The collating of the answers to these three questions led to a clearer mapping out and understanding of the problem. The project was limited to synthesizing a number of conclusions which were written up as a final report. This report consists of two separate documents¹. Part one of the report contains the results and conclusions. Part two provides the associated appendices, including the development of the process, methodology, datasets etc.

¹ Available at www.ipo-online.be in the subject 'Onderhoud' (Maintenance) heading.

Partnerships

The Administrative Consultation of the IPO is made up of the following members: 10 Flemish ministers, 5 representatives of the Flemish provinces and 5 mayors of rural communities.

The IPO members decided not to make an external study (largely due to financial constraints) but to conduct this study in-house with the help of the experts who were part of this particular IPO working group. The aim of the working group was to learn more about the issue of maintenance. The IPO carried out the study under the supervision of the chairman and with research technology support from an expert. The group proposed a limited assignment to take stock of the situation so that the status of basic care could be analysed. To do this, different methods of investigating this issue were discussed, advised, led by the steering group and the executive board. The aim was to provide a solution for the problem of how to maintain the attractiveness of the countryside while supporting the needs of its recreational users.

A working group was initiated and led by the chairman who was from the “Regional landscape Kempen en Waasland”. He coordinated the working groups with a supporting theme coordinator from VLM. In this way, the group had an independent (apolitical) president who was not a VLM representative. The working group wanted to form for itself a general picture of the existing working systems in the area of basic care of the landscape and recreational infrastructures in the Flemish countryside.

There were 25 respondents selected in accordance with specific criteria of affiliation: provincial authority, town council with rural areas, local authority without regional landscape, cooperation or inter-municipal company, civil society organization. It was not possible to examine every aspect of landscape infrastructure and maintenance, and this project was part of a consultation process rather than a piece of academic research.

The following subject experts formed part of the working group and worked together on this study:

- subject coordinator with expertise in analysis
- chairman who was able to use skills of motivation and negotiation
- expert in process coaching, or project manager/ project management process expert
- experts / interviewers

The following organisations formed the experts of the working group:

| Organisation | English translation |
|--|--|
| Boerenbond | Farmer’s Union |
| Departement Landbouw en Visserij | Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries |
| Departement Ruimtelijke Ordening, Wonen en Onroerend Erfgoed | Ministry of Housing; Spatial Planning; Monumental and Rural Heritage |
| Landelijk Vlaanderen | Forest & Landowners Association |
| Milieu- en Natuurraad van Vlaanderen | Flemish Nature and Environment Council |
| Natuurpunt | Nature Conservation Association |
| Limburg - Provinciaal Centrum voor Cultureel Erfgoed | Provincial Centre of Cultural Heritage, Province of Limburg |
| West-Flanders - Dienst Gebiedsgerichte Werking | Department of Area-Oriented Activities, Province of West-Flanders |
| Regionaal Landschap Dijleland | Regional Landscape, Dijleland |
| Regionaal Landschap West-Vlaamse Heuvels | Regional Landscape, West-Vlaamse Heuvels |
| Toerisme Vlaanderen | Tourism Flanders |
| Trage Wegen | Association for Slow Roads |
| Vlaamse Contactcommissie Monumentenzorg | Flemish Liaison Committee on Monument Conservation |
| Vlaamse Vereniging van Steden en Gemeenten | Flemish Association of Cities and Municipalities |



IPO - Inter-governmental Rural Dialogue

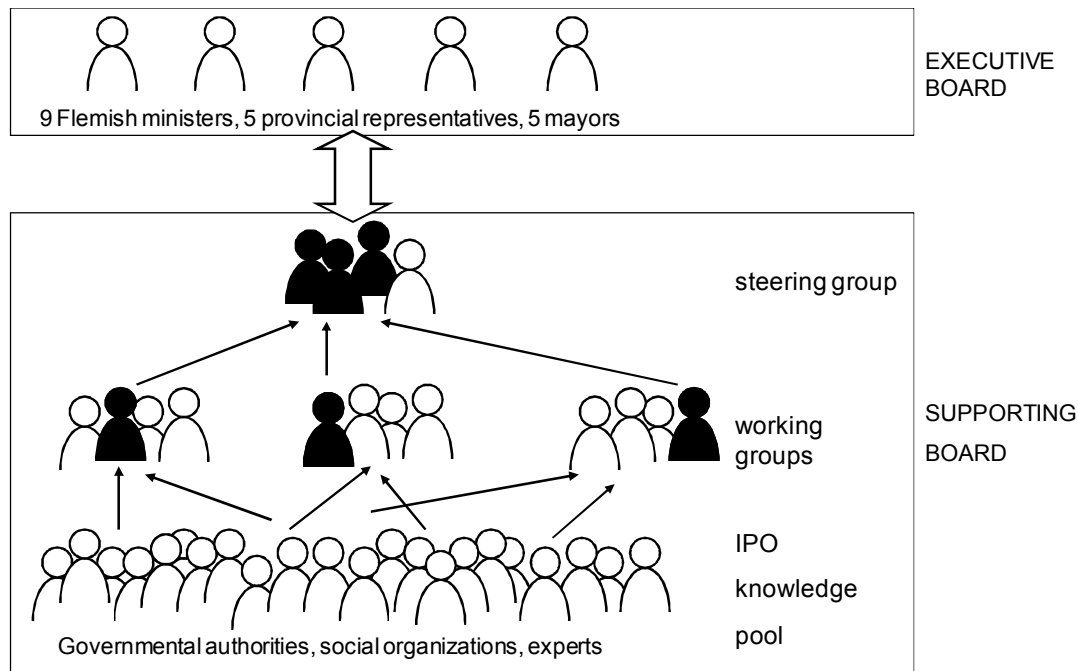


Figure 4: The structure of the IPO.

The following organizations were interviewed:

De Winning – Groenwerk
Municipality of Buggenhout
Municipality of Geetbets
Municipality of Hooglede
Municipality of Voeren
Municipality of Zoersel
IGEMO – Flemish inter-municipal association
IGO Leuven – Inter-municipal community work
Natuurpunt – Nature Conservation Association
Province of Antwerp
Province of Limburg
Province of East Flanders
Province of Flemish-Brabant
Province of West Flanders
Regionaal Landschap Vlaamse Ardennen – Regional Landscape, Vlaamse Ardennen
City of Brussels
City of Bruges
City of Hasselt
City of Mechelen
City of Ninove
City of Tienen
Vakantiegenoegens – Tourist organization
Westtoer – Provincial tourist company of West Flanders

While community groups were not included in this consultation process, the elected officials interviewed represent their communities and community groups. In this way, it can be argued that the communities interests were presented and taken into account.

Governance and Engagement

The study process involved a number of steps.

1. The working group formed to develop and carry out an interview survey.
2. The working group selected 25 respondents from a wider group of cooperating organisations. Respondents were selected for each of the five Flemish provinces.
3. The respondents were interviewed during the period February – May 2007.
4. The interview questions were focused on the execution of standard maintenance procedures and the efficiency of execution and coordination of the regular maintenance across the entire area. This was then repeated with focus on small landscape elements (SLE), small historic heritage (SHH) and recreational infrastructure (RI). The questions were related specifically to the working area (or jurisdiction) of the organisation represented by the respondent's. Respondents were also invited to consider the issues more broadly beyond their working area.
5. The results of each interview were entered on the questionnaire and checked with the respondents.
6. The working group formulated intermediate comments which resulted in one "master" dataset of all the interviews.
7. The dataset was analyzed.
8. The results were drawn from this analysis.
9. A number of conclusions were drawn from these results.

The working group selected a sample of organizations to participate in the interviews, with a view to generalising the results at a broader scale. The working group selected representatives from five kinds of organizations to capture the opinions of a representative group of respondents for Flanders. These organizations were:

- provincial authority;
- large city with rural areas;
- small local authority (situated outside a Regional Landscape);
- inter-municipal company or cooperation;
- coordinating organization or civil society organization (strong presence in the rural areas).

It is important to report that no individual citizens were contacted as part of the IPO project as this study concentrated on existing authorities and organizations, who were considered to represent their communities and community groups.

Policy

The project ended at the beginning of 2008 with a final report and a short publication². The results of the survey led to a number of conclusions. The members of the working group are able to make use of the report's conclusions to progress their preliminary policy work.

The principal issues which arose are as follows:

- Standard maintenance does not take place consistently across a given area or jurisdiction of a responsible stakeholder. The most important factors for this cited were: 'manner of execution' and 'social support'.
- More work needs to be done on the policy relating to the preconditions for subsidies.
- There is a need for training, technical support and extra resources for personnel.
- Many participants do their best within their own particular boundary and within their selected subject. Some restrict themselves to the regular maintenance of small landscape elements, small historic heritage or the recreational infrastructure.
- A process of coordination is missing. There is no one stakeholder responsible for the coordination of standard maintenance activities within the Flemish rural areas. This could be resolved by the creation of a framework (a coordinating organization) at the regional scale (Flanders) by which participants can organize themselves as a "bottom-up"

² http://www.ipo-online.be/SiteCollectionDocuments/Themas/Lopende/Onderhoud/vlm_ipo_brochure_finale%20versie.pdf

process. At the regional scale, the Flanders public authority can take up its responsibility in this and provide some kind of facilitating framework.

The key policy recommendations concern the facilitating role that Flanders would have to play. The working group proposes the instrument Loket Onderhoud Buitengebied (LOB – Counter for the Maintenance of Rural Areas). The LOB can be seen as a coordinating organization to which local authorities, organizations and citizens can refer for expertise concerning standard landscape maintenance.

The LOB's key task is organizing the maintenance through managing and coordinating the relevant activities. Other tasks include:

- monitoring the need for maintenance;
- detecting gaps in the existing maintenance activities;
- stimulating partners;
- creating awareness amongst the local population;
- initiating and/or organizing training;
- providing information and advice;
- following-up on the results and automating the control (planning of the work).

The LOB does not itself develop any new or additional infrastructure of the landscape and does not itself carry out any technical maintenance activities.

The working group also recommends the development of a code of good practice for the maintenance of small historic heritage and for the recreational infrastructure in accordance with the existing code for good nature practice for small landscape elements.

Finance policy³

Part of the conclusions of the project related to financing the maintenance activities outlined above. A second set of policy recommendations specifically concerned the deployment of the financial resources necessary to achieve this coordinated maintenance activity.

- Finance policy recommendation 1: A Flemish co-financing programme which would operate with mainly private partners who would carry out the maintenance work. This policy recommendation would require the Flemish government to provide basic funding for the LOB, as well as funding for the maintenance of the “structures” (e.g. tourist areas, land consolidation processes).
 - If the Flemish government has the ambition to further develop a Flemish countryside policy, then that also means that they must make resources available to tackle infrastructure maintenance for those fairly large rural areas where regular maintenance currently does not currently take place or is inadequate. This may be the case as it is the Flemish government and local governments who have put this subject on the policy agenda. It is the responsibility of the Flemish government to develop new, or strengthen the existing, structural finance channels for the maintenance of those landscape structures for which they themselves are responsible within the scope of restructuring projects such as land consolidation, land infrastructure, nature infrastructure, tourist areas, etc.
- Finance policy recommendation 2: The financing of municipalities can be revised so that rural authorities are encouraged and financially stimulated to maintain the open space correctly - which is also beneficial for its conservation. Municipalities with considerable amounts of open space must be rewarded for successful conservation and maintenance activities.

³ The costs of the project itself were covered by Flemish public authority resources. There is no other information available about the project costs.

- Finance policy recommendation 3: The working group proposes a more flexible system of management agreements. Currently, management agreements are voluntary for the duration of five years between a farmer and the Flemish government. As part of such agreements, the farmer receives compensation, for example, for the maintenance of small-scale landscape elements.
 - The provision of management agreements can be extended. The working group recommends more flexibility and a customized approach of individual farms within the scope of management agreements. Flexible and customized packages, which might involve new management agreements supplementary to existing ones, could increase the success of the landscape management plans. This also has the scope to promote region-oriented work and the development and distribution of expertise.

Post-project action

In September 2008 these policy recommendations were submitted to the IPO's Administrative Consultation which posed no additional questions with regard to the problem addressed. The Administrative Consultation was in agreement with the proposed approach for a coordinating organization to oversee the efficient coordination of the maintenance of the landscape.

The detailed principles of the policy recommendations were communicated to the Flemish government in December 2008. No comments were expressed by the government.

In 2009 the debate was re-opened following the Flemish elections. During one of the IPO's Administrative Consultation meetings in April 2009 it was clarified that, despite the lack of political engagement, a technical working group could carry out preparatory work for the adoption of the IPO's findings in practice. The technical working group have been able to look for a balance between the *ideal* versus the *practicable*, the *desired* versus the *attainable*.

The group refined the criteria, resources and legal consequences of the LOB instrument. However, from the policy domain of Environment, Nature and Energy as well as the policy field of Rural Policy this turned out to be impossible in view of the budget restrictions. However, both political parties are in support of possible model projects.

During 2010, VLM will develop a model project in consultation with potential submitters of an LOB document. The model project together with a model budget will be discussed during the Administrative Consultation. The current draft model doesn't permit funding for the structural support of the LOB. The Minister refers to another existing type of funding (PDPO funding). Local authorities who want to start a LOB project can refer to a manual to guide them when submitting a project in the PDPO program. This manual was made by the VLM and based on the results of the working group.

Valuation

Using the survey which was sent to participants who come in contact with management in practice, a general picture is obtained through this study of the opportunities and the barriers regarding standard landscape maintenance activities and recreational infrastructure in the Flemish countryside. Using a partnership approach involving experts and practitioners which VLM considers to be well-coordinated, this project shows the potential for improving landscape management in Flanders better in the future.

There was no formal evaluation of the project itself, although the success of the project and the pertinence of its recommendations can be seen in the cross-political support that it has received (despite the constraints hindering the adoption of the proposed LOB model and recommendations into policy).

Transferable aspects of the case study

The management agreements could be transferable to other contexts, but the particular issues at stake would need to be reflected.

The "Loket Onderhoud Buitengebied" (LOB) or Counter for the Maintenance of Rural Areas, as a one-stop shop for expertise and knowledge exchange is a model that could be applied in other contexts. The LOB depends on good coordination and communication to ensure that stakeholders can use this as an important resource when managing and maintaining landscapes, urban as well as rural.

Format of this report

This report is based on the findings from a series of face-to-face in-depth interviews carried out with the IPO secretary in 2007, who granted permission for MP4 members to use their responses in this report in 2010. These interviews were semi-structured and conducted using the question schedule used in the data collection for all the case studies. In addition, the sources of secondary data which provided the contextual information are referenced in the footnotes. All photographs are reproduced with permission:

Figure 1: REGIONAAL LANDSHAP NOORD-HAGELAND

Figure 2: INTERGEMEENTELIJK OPBOUWWERK ARRONDISEMENT LEUVEN

Figure 3: REGIONAAL LANDSCHAP LAGE KEMPEN

Figure 4: FLEMISCH LAND AGENCY (VLM)

Glossary

'Place-keeping': relates to maintaining the qualities and benefits – social, environmental and economic – of places through long-term management. The management required to maintain these qualities and benefits, the approach adopted and the timescale will depend on the 'place-making' aims, the available resources and the life span of the 'place'.

Partnership: is defined as agreed shared responsibility between public, private and community sectors. It is a relationship which, in this context, is normally formed between governmental and non-governmental sectors – i.e. it is a manifestation of governance relationships.

Engagement: is a cross-cutting issue which describes successful models of working with communities and encouraging appropriate use. Engagement is an aspect of governance particularly relevant in forms of participatory governance and is intrinsic to the concept of 'governance' as defined below.

Governance: relates to the relationship between and within government and non-governmental forces. The term implies wider participation in decision-making than representative democracy or other forms of government, recognising a wider range of actors other than the state, and allowing for varying governance contexts and processes.

Finance: describes financial models for efficient long-term management.

Policy: is discussed within the context of embedding best practice into spatial planning and other policy.

Valuation: describes the economic impacts of improvements to open spaces, but also relates to wider socio-economic and environmental benefits.