

Contemplations on and practical guidelines for cooperation in the Dutch-German borderland

Reflexións e orientacións practicas sobre a cooperación na fronteira xermano-holandesa

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Abstract

Despite decades of European financial stimulation for cross-border projects, the attention for cross-border cooperation (CBC) is still volatile. The focus on CBC has been fluctuating for decades, depending on political and economic trends among other aspects. Irrespective of that, it remains difficult to encourage citizens in the Dutch-German borderland to engage in cross-border working and living. Without commitment among citizens at grassroots level, CBC will primarily remain an enjoyable pastime for the euroregional elite. Based on scientific debates on border studies, this paper highlights CBC by reflecting on border-related policy. By way of illustration, this research will zoom in on the northern Meuse-Rhine Euroregion, one of the Dutch-German Euroregions. Based on some contemplations on Dutch-German cooperation in recent decades, this article concludes with some action-oriented principles for CBC which could contribute to strengthening its impact.

Keywords: Cross-border cooperation; Borderland; Cross-border policies and guidelines.

Resumo

A pesar das décadas de estímulo financeiro europeo aos proxectos transfronteirizos, a atención á cooperación transfronteiriza (CT) segue sendo volátil. A atención á CT flutuou durante décadas, dependendo das tendencias políticas e económicas, entre outros aspectos. Independentemente diso, segue sendo difícil animar aos cidadáns da fronteira neerlandesa-alemá a participar no traballo e a vida transfronteirizos. Sen o compromiso dos cidadáns a nivel de base, a CT seguirá sendo principalmente un pasatempo agradable para a elite eurorrexional. Baseándose nos debates científicos sobre os estudos fronteirizos, este documento pon de relevo a CT reflexionando sobre a política relacionada coas fronteiras. A modo de exemplo, esta investigación centrarase na eurorrexión do norte do Mosa-Rin, unha das eurorrexións neerlandesas-alemás. A partir dalgunhas reflexións sobre a cooperación neerlandesa-alemá nas últimas décadas, este artigo conclúe con algúns principios orientados á acción para a CTF que poderían contribuír a reforzar o seu impacto.

Palabras chave: Cooperación transfronteiriza; Fronteiras; Políticas e directrices transfronteirizas.

JEL Codes: H11; O19; R58.



1. INTRODUCTION

The years 2020 and 2021 explicitly highlighted the challenges associated with cross-border cooperation (hereafter: CBC). The will among public authorities for CBC is present, but the cooperation cannot yet sufficiently prevent citizens from being hindered by the effects of their proximity to the national border. This became evident for example during Covid19 in many European borderlands. One of these borderland is the Dutch-German borderland. An area characterised by decades of strong tradition in cross-border cooperation and lively border dynamics. Here Covid19 clearly highlighted the dichotomy between two very different narratives: that of citizens at grassroots level on the one hand and that of the euroregional network on the other hand. Or, to put it another way, an unpredictable daily reality at the border versus good but often insufficiently forceful intentions to prevent citizens from the barrier effect of the border.

In one narrative, citizens and companies experienced in recent years the negative consequences of living and conducting business in the borderland. Due to Covid19, their daily urban system was split into two different realities at times, due to the differences in legislation, policy and measures enforced by the different member states of the European Union. In addition, systematic monitoring of Covid19-related data often tailed off completely at national borders (Cloosterman et al., 2020), which resulted in crossing the border becoming an even greater barrier. Furthermore, unambiguous communication in the border regions generally left much to be desired, making it difficult for example for tourists, students and employees to find out what measures were in force in places just a few kilometres away from their homes. From a consumer perspective, at moments, crossing the border to go shopping was made nearly impossible, even for those who normally do their daily shopping in a supermarket or pharmacy on the other side of the border.

Also, retailers in the border region that rely heavily on consumers from the neighbouring country were hit particularly hard by this dissuasion policy designed to prevent cross-border movement. While food retail benefited massively from the lockdowns, this was not the case for food retailers targeting consumers from the neighbouring country. And finally, a recent study by the [Institute for Transnational and Euregional cross-border cooperation and Mobility \(2020\)](#) shows that little consideration was given to the border regions when rolling out national measures to keep the coronavirus under control. As a result, entrepreneurs who work in one country and live across the border in a neighbouring country were not eligible for compensation in some cases, for example, the temporary financial support arrangement for entrepreneurs.

The other narrative is that of the existing euroregional network, which is primarily made up of administrators, politicians and government bodies. A network that sustains itself through mutual congratulation. Something which is perfectly understandable in view of the exemplary role that administrators and other public figures have in fostering and facilitating CBC. However, the way the network fulsomely praised the excellent coordination between the neighbouring countries during the Covid19 crisis was rather questionable, especially for those who, during covid19, are particularly affected by the lack of bi-national coordination ([Grenslanconferentie, 2020](#)). Besides, there is no doubt that cooperation has also led to success, for example, in making hospital beds available to patients from across the border.

It is true that a positive message is what citizens and above all the euroregional network needs in order to keep people aware of opportunities across borders. However, in times of crisis, it is precisely the proper management of negative effects that should be given priority.

Nonetheless, many citizens and entrepreneurs suffered from the lack of adequate CBC. In most cases, the national administrations on each side of the border only took action when citizens and entrepreneurs had already been subjected to extreme duress.

Covid19 has clearly shown that CBC is anything but self-evident along Europe's internal borders. Years of step-by-step policies towards more intensive CBC have suddenly been shattered by an unexpected crisis. On top of that, according to recent research by [Cloosterman et al. \(2020\)](#), border regions are less resilient and actually more vulnerable to sudden economic shocks like that caused by the Covid19 pandemic than more inland regions, which in turn is partly caused by the proximity of the national border ([Janssen and Dagevos, 2022](#)). This once more demonstrates the importance of CBC, both for shock prevention and shock response.

The above findings concern only a few indicators that reveal something about the impact of CBC. Nevertheless, these indicators show that the cooperation seems to be not robust enough in times of crisis. There is a serious chance that crises such as Covid19 would have lesser impact if CBC would be more intensive. That CBC can have an impact on for example the agglomeration force and resilience of the cross-border region, has already been demonstrated in several studies ([Actieteam Grensoverschrijdende Economie en Arbeid, 2017](#); [Centraal Planbureau, 2016](#); [Pijnenburg, 2019a](#)). Despite the fact that governments on both sides of the border are increasingly developing policies aimed at CBC, which is evidenced by, among other things, the Dutch government's 'Regio Deals'¹, the unprecedented opportunities of CBC remain mere words, confined to policy papers.

This paper aims to present a bird's eye view on cooperation in the Dutch-German borderland in recent decades. The observation that Covid19 has shown that CBC along the Dutch-German border still has a long way to go before citizens are capable in optimally using the opportunities a border context is providing them, calls for a perspective on the cooperation as it is today, and at the same time for practice oriented guidelines for action in order to improve and enhance the robustness the cooperation. The purpose of this study is not to examine the effectiveness of different cross-border policy instruments like the European Union's financing tool INTERREG, but to identify a number of principles for cross-border cooperation for the future. The formulation and implementation of such principles is a step that precedes the development of policy instruments.

2. THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

Action research in the Dutch-German borderland

This study, from a methodological perspective, is characterised by a mixed methods approach. The most common quantitative and qualitative data collection methods have been used: statistical data and document analysis, interviews and observations and. The data collection has been an ongoing process in 2020 and 2021 of exploring the Dutch-German border landscape. It can be seen as an itinerary, a series of actions and activities implemented to engage stakeholders and civil society in cross-border cooperation. Interviews were conducted with representatives from government, business, politics and education from both

¹ Adapted from "Regio Deals", by Rijksdienst voor Ondernemend Nederland, 2018 (<https://www.rvo.nl/subsidie-en-financieringswijzer/regio-deals>)

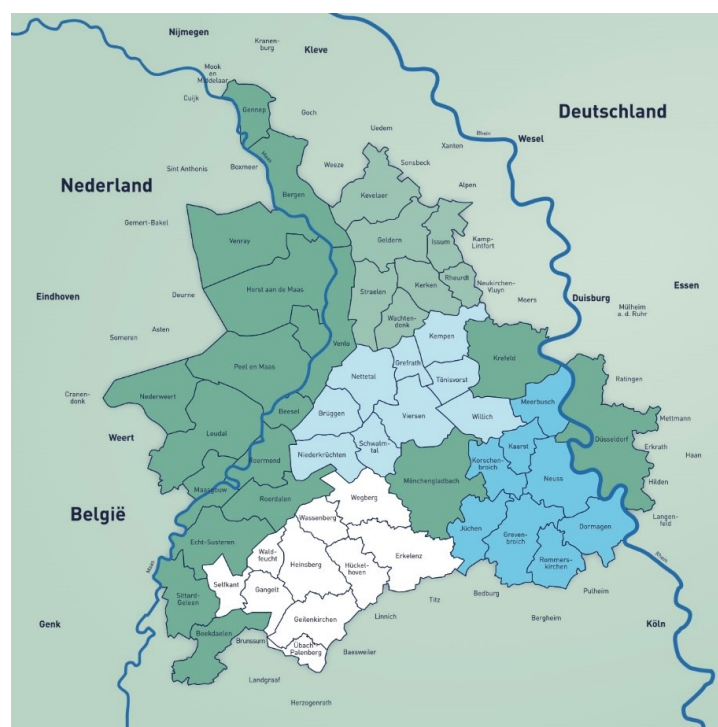
sides of the border. In addition, several workshops and webinars were attended for observational purposes.

The border between Germany and the Netherlands has been a fairly stable area for the last 200 years and, as a border between two members of the Schengen Agreement, it is also largely barrier-free. Physically crossing the border is unimpeded by any obstacles. Though, the border is more than just a line on the map and still affects our mind-sets and habitual approach to daily life and work, which are coloured by a primarily inland-oriented focus. This is one of the reasons why CBC remains necessary.

The Dutch-German borderland is characterised by the presence of several euroregions. This study focuses on the Dutch-German Venlo – Lower Rhine region (Figure 1). This area is located primarily within the territory of the long-standing public body – founded in 1978 – ‘euroregion rhine-meuse-north’. The euroregion rhine-meuse-north (henceforth: euroregion), as one of the four binational cross-border regions along the Dutch-German border, can be spatially classified (Sohn and Stambolic, 2015), from a European perspective, as a polycentric in-between border region amidst three metropolitan core areas, i.e. the Randstad, the Ruhr Area and the Flemish Diamond. Since the borderscape is a flexible concept, it is not possible to frame a cross-border relational space in one spatial grammar, that of territory. Using the term euroregion, is solely intended to be able to make it workable as a subject of study.

The euroregion under study forms an important logistical-economic connection between the ports of Antwerp and Rotterdam and the European hinterland. The economic composition of the region is fairly unambiguous on both sides of the border: agri-food, manufacturing and logistics are the three most strongly represented economic sectors (Pijnenburg and Szillat, 2021). In addition, from a cross-border mobility perspective, there is a strong cross-border dynamic in the areas of tourism and retail. A study by Van Lieshout and Lenderink (2020) shows that Germans spend 691 million euros annually in the Province of Limburg, the area that includes the Dutch part of the euroregion, for daily shopping and recreational purposes.

Figure 1. The Dutch-German euroregion rhine-meuse-north



Borders: a plural concept

Much has been written about borders and CBC in recent decades. Before we look at ways to improve border policy, we need to understand how the meaning of borders has been changed over time. This helps us to understand on the one hand the complex and multifunctional character of borders and dynamics in borderlands and on the other hand how cross-border policies and actions changed over time.

Borders are complex, ambiguous and ambivalent phenomena. When we look at the literature on borders, we see that the study of borders has moved from a prevalent concern with formal state borders to the study of borders at diverse socio-spatial and geographical scales (Kolossoff and Scott, 2013). Today, within border studies scholars are more interested in the way that borders are socially constructed and managed as well as by how they impact our daily practices in the transition spaces and borderlands that are in a constant state of flux (Newman 2006). It is people who give meaning to the border and their actions are influenced by national regulations and legislation, among other aspects. The meaning of the border is therefore highly subjective and diverse, and as such associated with a low level of certainty. For demonstration, Covid19 shows that the function of the border can change rapidly, from an invisible, open border to an equally invisible, yet more closed border. At present, nobody knows whether such unforeseen incidents will lead to structural changes in cross-border mobility. As a result, actors, be they retailers, educational institutions or consumers, have to deal with a high degree of uncertainty.

Before 1950, in fact, border regions were viewed as buffer zones that helped to protect the nation from invasion. Borders and border regions functioned as territorial demarcations, as lines of spatial distinction whose function was to safeguard state sovereignty. In the decades after WWII the interest in border studies declined due to the focus on states and its institutions. Borders were relevant to this line of inquiry only to the extent that they separated one government's economic policies from those of neighbouring states.

It was only in the early 1960s that border studies began to focus on the functional characteristics of borders and the ease with which they could be crossed and enable transboundary contact (Newman, 2006). From the 1970s to the 1990s border practices were characterized by processes such as globalization and the emergence of new spatial entities: cross-border regions. The emergence of cross-border regions in Europe includes but is not limited to what has become known as 'euroregions': territorially delimited entities characterized by the presence of national borders cutting through them. During the 1980s and 1990s, border studies dedicated a great deal of attention to the analysis of transboundary cooperation and functionality of cross-border regions (Anderson and Wever, 2003; Perkmann and Sum, 2002; Scott, 1999).

Especially the early 1990s, according to Diener and Hagen (2009), marked a period of extraordinary geopolitical change. Borders were characterized by their increasing openness partly as consequence of the EU's enlargement, the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union; and the fall of the Iron Curtain (Sohn and Stambolic, 2015). As Paasi (2013) stated: "Borders rapidly became highly important during the 1990s, in the wake of the end of the Cold War's dividing line between the capitalist and socialist blocks, the rise of many new states from the ruins of the former socialist states, the awakening of old nations and ethnic groups, and the acceleration of globalization".

As the European Community was taking shape and cross-border regions were multiplying, the geographical research community started a debate about CBC (Eker and Van Houtum, 2013: 141). This phenomenon has been related to economic and regional geographic studies

and linked to concepts such as clusters, districts, networks, trust, transaction costs and learning (Van Houtum, 2000a). The launch of the Community Initiative INTERREG gave a boost to CBC, which had been previously dominated by sporadic, bottom-up initiatives (Gualini, 2003). The INTERREG funding regime acted as a catalyst for cross-border institution-building, often in the form of euroregions. However, recent academic studies have tended to criticise its project-driven culture, excessive bureaucracy and vanished spontaneity (Van der Giessen, 2014).

The development of 'fenced' borders and more restricted regimes to enter territories are processes of re-bordering (Kramsch et al., 2004). These measures are a geopolitical response that uses the closure of borders as a safety mechanism against threats from beyond. An increased border securitization has followed the 'war on terror', economic protectionism, and anti-immigration sentiments (Johnson et al., 2011).

In recent decades border studies have grown interested in multi-disciplinary approaches and concepts such as cross-border regions, cross-border metropolises, borderlands and borderscapes. Whereas the border region was previously conceptualized as a European laboratory for development (Van Houtum, 2000b), the current academic debate conceives borderlands, border landscapes and borderscapes as central spatial concepts (Buoli, 2015). The conceptual meaning of the border has changed in recent decades: rather than a closed entity, it is now seen as a dynamic construct that depends on interpretation, narration, and confirmation (Newman, 2006; Van Houtum and Van Naerssen, 2002). As Doevenspeck (2011, p. 129) points out: "The border must be conceptualized as a part of daily life to understand the logics and concrete processes of its diverse perpetuations instead of seeing it as an abstract construct."

The attention in border studies has moved towards the dynamics that take place in close proximity to the border. Nowadays, the border is seen much more in relation to its immediate surroundings. The focus is not only on the protectionist function of the border, but also on the influence of the border on people's daily lives. For that reason, cross-border interactions are an important starting point in the discussion on borderlands and border landscapes. It is all about people and interaction, about practice and daily life. That brings us back to practice in the German-Dutch borderland.

3. DYNAMICS IN THE DUTCH-GERMAN BORDERLAND

CBC in the Dutch-German borderland has increased significantly over the past years, partly thanks to the European INTERREG funding programme. At the same time, in spite of numerous good intentions, we see from a more quantitative perspective that the number of people who live, work or study on the other side of the border is still very limited. An economist would question whether the benefits of crossing national borders justify the costs. This chapter provides some quantitative facts and figures. Such data do not paint a complete picture of the dynamics in the border area, nor foresee they in a complete set with indicators in order to measure the impact of CBC. Yet they do offer an indication.

Figures from the [Dutch-German Chamber of Commerce \(2022\)](#) show that the trade volume between the two countries in 2021 was around 206 billion euros. The trading relationship between the Netherlands and Germany, which includes both goods and services, is only exceeded in terms of trading volume by the trading relationship between two much larger nations, the United States and Canada.

For the Netherlands, Germany is by far the most important trading partner, both in terms of imports and exports. Germany is followed at a comfortable distance by the Netherlands'

only directly adjacent neighbour via land, Belgium. The Netherlands comes second to Germany when it comes to imports and fourth when it comes to exports. In addition to the Netherlands, Germany actively trades with countries such as China, France and the United States ([Dutch-German Chamber of Commerce, 2022](#)). This strong trade relationship is reflected in the goods and services trade figures. When we consider the four European freedoms - the free movement of goods, capital, services and labour - as the cornerstones of the internal European market, we see that goods and services cross national borders with little difficulty.

Figures from the national statistical agencies in the Netherlands and Germany, respectively Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek and Destatis, show that in 2021 the Netherlands has imported goods worth about 92 billion euros from Germany. On the other hand, the Netherlands has exported goods from the Netherlands to Germany worth 133 billion euros². To put these figures into perspective. The Netherlands imported only 52 billion euros from Belgium and exported only 62 billion euros worth of goods to Belgium. Especially in the Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics level 3 areas along the border (hereafter: NUTS3), many goods exporters export to neighbouring Germany. Here more than 60% from all the exporters exports at least to Germany in comparison to less than 45% in many NUTS3 regions in the western part of the country. Furthermore, almost 30% of all goods exports from the Province of Limburg go to Germany ([Creemers et al., 2020](#)).

When we look at the export of services, we see there is also a strong trade relation between the Netherlands and Germany. Services worth about 22 billion euros were imported in 2021 from Germany to the Netherlands. This is just over 10% of the total services imported to the Netherlands. Germany, in turn, imported services worth 27 billion euros from the Netherlands. Again, a comparison with Belgium shows that trade relations between the Netherlands and Germany are strong. Only 14 billion euros was imported from Belgium and 12.5 billion euros of services were exported from the Netherlands.

There can be no doubt that the sheer volume of trade, worth roughly 190 billion euros in the years before Covid-19, and 206 billion euros in 2021 is evidence of an intense trading relationship between the Netherlands and Germany. The above figures show that many companies, including those in the borderland must be involved in a certain way of business with and in the neighbouring country.

Another European freedom, the free movement of capital, is also immense between the Netherlands and Germany. Investments from the Netherlands generally end up in the German federal states of North Rhine-Westphalia, Hesse and Bavaria. Of the total investment volume in Germany, 20% comes from the Netherlands ([Creemers et al., 2020](#)). The other way round, more than 10% of all capital investments from Germany flow to the Netherlands.

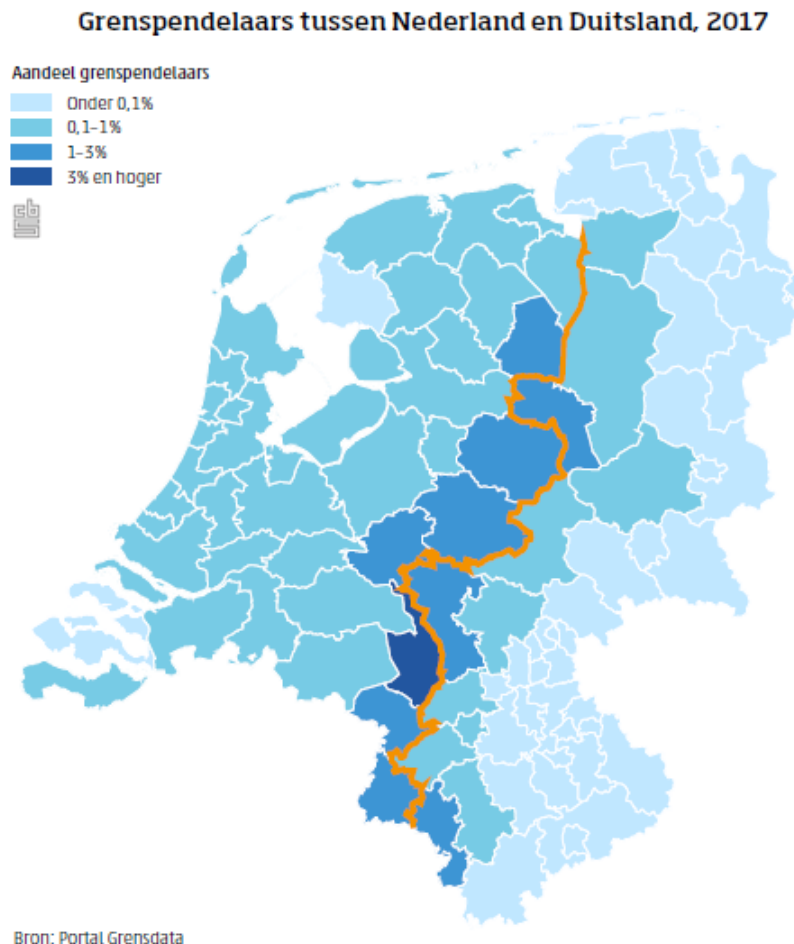
When we look at the free movement of 'labour' in Europe, the figures paint a completely different picture. There is hardly any cross-border commuting to work (i.e. labour). [Figure 2](#) shows that in most NUTS3 regions along the Dutch-German border, the number of cross-border commuters is between 0.1 and 3% of the employed population.

Only about 43.000 people living in Germany cross the border every day to work in the Netherlands. Many of them are Dutch nationals who live in Germany and in turn work in the Netherlands. The flow in the other direction amounts to just over 9.000 people who live in the Netherlands and travel to their work in Germany ([Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2022](#)).

² Adapted from "Groter belang buurlanden in goederenhandel in 2021", by Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2022 (<https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2022/35/groter-belang-buurlanden-in-goederenhandel-in-2021>).

So, in spite of the Schengen Agreement, a European or euroregional labour market is still very much an illusion. In recent years, several border information points have been set up along the Dutch-German border to inform job-seekers and employers about working across borders. The future will show whether this policy will increase the number of cross-border commuters.

Figure 2. Cross-border commuters between the Netherlands and Germany in 2017



Apart from employment reasons, people can also cross the border for other purposes, such as living and leisure. When it comes to living, the number of people who live on the other side of the border is small. A few years ago 77.000 Germans are residing in the Netherlands (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2022). A number that has been rising steadily for years. According to Destatis, 150.530 Dutch citizens were living in Germany in 2020³. Two thirds of them live in the states North Rhine-Westphalia and Lower Saxony, which border the Netherlands. Reasons for Dutch people to live in the neighbouring country are mainly the lower prices of housing and living (BPD | Bouwfonds Gebiedsontwikkeling, 2018). Germans choose the Netherlands for its social climate and the joy of living. An important reason for not living in the neighbouring country is the administrative burden.

³ Adapted from "Bevölkerung und Erwerbstätigkeit", by Destatis, 2020 (https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Gesellschaft-Umwelt/Bevoelkerung/Migration-Integration/Publicationen/Downloads-Migration/auslaend-bevoelkerung-2010200207004.pdf?__blob=publicationFile).

From a leisure point of view, we see that many people find the effort worthwhile to cross national borders. The border opportunities outweigh the border barriers to such an extent that many citizens cross the border in their spare time. There is a strong cross-border flow of day trippers and tourists who have booked overnight stays. Hardly surprising, as recreation requires little in the way of preparations and effort. And the benefits are many, for example, differences in prices, product range and experience (Arts, 2021). If we disregard Covid19 for the moment, people who cross the border for leisure purposes do not have to familiarize themselves with laws and regulations. On top of that, crossing national borders gives many people even a kind of exotic holiday feeling (Eker and Van Houtum, 2013).

Other than living, working and leisure, there can be a fourth reason for crossing the border: education. For Germans, the Netherlands comes in second place behind Germany as the most popular country for a course of study. This number has increased from less than 5000 students in 2000 to almost 25000 students in recent years⁴. This cross-border mobility from Germany to the Netherlands is encouraged by factors such as the widespread availability of courses with English as the working language in the Netherlands and the more practice-oriented approach in Dutch universities of applied science compared to the type of education offered in the equivalent institutions in Germany. The higher education institutions in the border region in particular, such as Maastricht University and Fontys University of Applied Sciences are cleverly exploiting the proximity of German students.

Conversely, Dutch nationals who enrol for a course of study in Germany do so mainly as part of the European Union programme for education, training, youth and sport, known as the Erasmus+ programme, which only lasts for one semester. Germany, however, is not the most popular Erasmus+ destination. Most Dutch students choose to go to Spain, followed by the United Kingdom in second place. Germany is third on the list (Vereniging van Universiteiten, n.d.).

In summary, cross-border mobility is not widespread in practice. It involves a group of people who, in the border area, effectively exploit the opportunities that the border situation offers. For example, people acting in the role of consumers, entrepreneurs or tourists. The facts presented above do not present the whole story. It is therefore not fair to associate the success of CBC only with these quantitative indicators. For example, less is known about the impact of cross-border commuters on the intercultural awareness and skills of foreign colleagues in the organisation they work for, the number of companies cooperating with for example suppliers from the neighbouring country and the way students from the neighbouring country integrate into the daily dynamics of the city or region. Furthermore, the research has shown that citizens often come across CBC, but do not register it as such. For example, people work together with their colleagues from the neighbouring country, do their weekly shopping and buying fuel across the border, and have a daughter with some of their friends from the neighbouring country. In such examples, it is difficult or even impossible to directly connect these border-related dynamics to cross-border policies effects.

4. CROSS-BORDER POLICIES

When comparing the theoretical viewpoints on borders with daily practice in borderlands, an interesting paradox becomes apparent. A paradox between daily practices

⁴ Adapted from "Hoger onderwijs, internationale Studenten, nationaliteit", by Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2022 (<https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/cijfers/detail/85124NED?dl=643A7>)

and dynamics in the border region on the one hand and, on the other hand, the static manner in which the border is still often seen and defined in policies. In many policy documents, the border is often still referred to as a distinct line that separates two systems, languages and cultures from each other. An integrated approach that takes into account social developments in the border region and the influence on them caused by the proximity to the state border is still awaited.

This chapter discusses the results of the interviews, observations and document analysis that together form an important part of the foundation of this study.

At the moment CBC is a hot topic, which is illustrated by among other things that the Dutch national government in recent years strongly has been paying attention to CBC. The former responsible Secretary of State oft-repeated the slogan: “growing at the border, rather than the border as barriers to growth” (Van Hoof, 2019). On the German side of the border, the federal state authority in North Rhine-Westphalia is also intensely interested in cooperation with the Benelux countries in particular. Even since a few years both governments together organize the annual ‘Borderland conference’⁵ and annually develop a ‘borderland agenda’.

In addition, a growing interest in CBC at regional level can be observed, both among regional and local authorities and within education. This is demonstrated by the cross-border focus of regional grants and the recurring consultation structures initiated by the euroregion. Furthermore, in the rhine-meuse-north euroregion, economic development boards and agencies are increasingly active in cross-border cooperation. This cooperation is strongly driven by regional public authorities. In addition, in recent decades, German-Dutch bodies have emerged, such as the Business Club Maas Rhein, in which entrepreneurs, authorities, educational parties and cultural institutions meet monthly. Education on both sides of the border is also increasingly cooperating in the rhine-meuse-north euroregion, especially at the secondary, vocational and higher education levels. These are initiatives that come about partly through Interreg, but also through new subsidy programmes aimed at German-Dutch cooperation.

The growing focus on CBC means that more and more people are involved in cross-border governance at different levels. However, as history shows us time and again, this positive focus can also evaporate almost immediately in the aftermath of elections and shock events such as 9/11. The latter event caused a change in sentiment away from CBC towards a greater focus on national sovereignty and more restrictive borders. This does not mean that projects immediately came to a standstill, but the political trend in both countries was more focused on keeping national sovereignty. Respondents are afraid that Covid19 has caused a loss of interest in the neighbouring country among citizens. On the one hand, Covid19 has forced the existing euroregional networks to engage in more intensive discussion with each other regarding health and socio-administrative policy alignment and the continuation of projects. On the other hand, citizens and entrepreneurs have clearly experienced that borders took on a much more distinctive outline due to partial border closures and dissuasion policies.

CBC continues to be heavily dependent on political interest, which makes the intensity of the cooperation susceptible to political whims. The border is often used in politics and policy, and sometimes abused, as an instrument for binary framing (Van Houtum and Van Naerssen, 2002). Open versus closed, central versus peripheral, in versus out. This gives the border a

⁵ Adapted from “Grenslandconferentie Nederland – Noordrijn-Westfalen op 30 september in Enschede”, by EUREGIO, 2021 (<https://www.euregio.eu/actueel/grenslandconferentie-nederland-noordrijn-westfalen-op-30-september-in-enschede/>).

hard, inflexible and moreover multifunctional character, which is diametrically opposed to the developments we see in the theory, as outlined before. The border as no more than an invisible dividing line between two regulatory systems.

Furthermore, the study shows that the Dutch-German cooperation is largely driven by individuals. A small network of enthusiasts is the driving force here. It could be referred to as a euroregional bubble. For people from outside this bubble it seems to be difficult to enter. If one of the aims of CBC is to involve young people, the euroregional network must start by defining exactly what opportunities are open to them. Most citizens will not be spurred into action by only the prospects for peace or trade. The euroregional network must ask themselves whether their message is still powerful and appealing enough for younger generation. Generations that were brought into contact with the neighbouring country in their youth to a lesser degree. Reasons for this are: the decrease of available TV channels from the neighbouring country, the fact that the subject German is no longer obligatory in secondary schools, and the increased mobility and globalisation which made people less dependent on their own region.

In addition, the study reveals that there is no clear problem owner of border related challenges. This is probably one of the causes that there is no unified vision of the borderland. The 'common sense of urgency' is insufficiently strong (Pijenburg, 2019b). A clear guiding principle, a *Leitmotiv*, is lacking. Many parties stand to benefit from CBC, but few experience short-term negative consequences if they do not participate. Furthermore, people and companies can walk away from the border situation, in order to profit from different circumstances elsewhere, but the region itself cannot. This makes it a task that is mainly felt regionally, and that has difficulty in sinking in in the political capitals of both countries.

This theme calls for shared ownership. Many parties, from the national to the local level, benefit from cross-border cooperation, which suggests that creating a shared ownership should be likely. Governments have already taken up the challenge. Though, there is a general lack of cross-border political will to develop an integral and well thought-out approach and perspective for the borderland, as already stated in 2015 by Van Houtum and Eker (2015, p. 41). Due to the largely non-binding character of CBC to date, a lack of coherence between cross-border initiatives and the lack of a clear problem owner, the greater part of the population has not yet been reached. In other words, CBC is not yet bearing fruit in spite of its decades long history.

After years of many stand-alone initiatives, respondents emphasize that it is now time for a joint approach. An approach that is supported in both the political capitals of both countries and the region. In order to realize that, an ecosystem must be created within which it is clear what each other's strengths and pitfalls are, how parties can complement each other, and what is needed to develop effective policy. Furthermore, as a next step, in order to create a joint responsibility, the creation of an integrated and non-political vision on CBC is of utmost importance. An integrated vision of the borderland from an economic, demographic, inclusive and socio-cultural perspective, that goes beyond just that line on the map. A vision that could contribute to make the available grants, policies and actions more effective.

5. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

This study has shown that at the moment CBC is a hot topic in many political and administrative circles. As yet, the growing attention for this topic is not reflected in the statistics and sentiments on the streets. CBC is currently a phenomenon in the margins of society and therefore fragile. The cooperation is not yet sufficiently resilient to unexpected

crises such as Covid19. The borderland is in need of a permanent and widely adopted focus. One of the requirements for creating an effective and inclusive vision to ensure that all those who live in the borderland can benefit from the opportunities on either side of the border, is that the euroregional network must distance itself from its current image as a hobby and plaything of public administrators. Furthermore, the Dutch-German borderland requires a clear and consistent vision, meeting the following principles: a vision that guides action; a vision that shows what it stands for and shows how the borderland as a collective aims to develop; a vision that is not fettered by political trends; and a vision that must primarily benefit ordinary citizens.

The fact that opportunities are available across the border is nothing new. This extends far beyond cheap fuel and groceries. The next question actors in the borderland must ask themselves is: how do we, as a whole, intend to exploit these opportunities? A way need to be found to reduce the 'personal effort' of overcoming border related barriers and increase the 'benefits' of crossing borders. And a final, yet not unimportant question, is who is responsible for realizing all this.

There is no such thing as an off-the-shelf package of measures that converts cross-border opportunities into results. History teaches us that cooperation across borders is an incremental process that requires long-term commitment. It was nearly sixty years ago that the first cross-border regions, the euroregions, were set up, the Schengen Agreement came into effect already more than thirty years ago and the euroregions have been using INTERREG funding to promote CBC for more than thirty years. In spite of these positive developments, CBC has gone through times of fluctuating interest.

From a quantitative cross-border mobility perspective, the current approach to CBC seems inadequate. In practice, CBC remains something vague that most border residents have difficulty in bringing into lasting focus in their conscious mind. Despite that, a situation in which the national border becomes invisible based on regional mobility data is not realistic, and may even be undesirable, more is required to achieve a structural breakthrough in CBC. This chapter presents the most important results of the study by introducing a set of principles for CBC. The intention of this set is not to provide a comprehensive overview. Moreover, not all findings apply to each cross-border initiative or project. The results outline the main thread. Principles which could help in achieving structural improvement and initiating action.

Changing perspectives

CBC is invariably associated with terms like periphery and population decline⁶. People often think in terms of the centre versus the periphery⁷. Bustling economic centres versus quieter country areas. The border regions are still often seen as peripheral, far away from everything. The place where the country we know comes to an end. That periphery is often directly linked to barriers and obstacles. It is obvious that national borders are associated with a number of barriers, such as differences in language, culture, regulations and law.

⁶ See, among others, Verwest and Van Dam (2010). Demografische krimp en regionale economie. *Rooilijn* 43(7), 508-513. <https://www.pbl.nl/sites/default/files/downloads/pbl-2010-rooilijn-7-demografische-krimp-en-regionale-economie.pdf>

⁷ Adapted from "Kloof tussen Randstad en Randland wordt steeds dieper", by Gebiedsontwikkeling.nu, 2017 (<https://www.gebiedsontwikkeling.nu/artikelen/kloof-tussen-randstad-en-randland-wordt-steeds-dieper/>)

On the one hand, the question is whether this terminology is correct, and on the other hand, whether it is desirable. Everyone probably has an image of what the centre of the country means. But is that image unambiguous among citizens? And does the centre even exist? Is it where the nation's politicians come together, is it the place where most people live and work, is it the place with the most congestion, or is it the place with the most expensive housing prices?

A legitimate question is whether this conceptual framework is still justified in times of far-reaching globalization. What if people were to follow the example set by [Eker and Van Houtum in their book *Borderland* \(2013\)](#) and think of the border area as a starting point and opportunity, rather than the outer limit of some geographical construct? What would their daily living environment, their daily urban system, look like if they did? What if they started thinking much more in terms of regional interests? It would certainly be appropriate in the light of the greater role and significance of the region on a cross-border scale.

Referring to the term periphery, in primary and secondary school, pupils are encouraged to think of the border as the area where the country as we know it comes to an end, so they automatically adopt an inward-looking attitude in later life. If, in the future, people continue to see the border merely as a barrier rather than an opportunity, it will continue to have an inhibiting effect on the development of the border region in economic, social and demographic terms. So a shift in perspective from 'national decentral' to 'international central' is of huge importance to revitalize the living environment in border regions. After all, without euroregional awareness, there can be no efficient euroregional action.

Starting with 'Why'

CBC often still focuses too much on the 'what': CBC. A better choice, as Simon Sinek once stated, is to start with the 'why'. The Golden Circle is a conceptual model that Sinek created after researching successful leaders and brands⁸. It assumes three levels on which organizations and people operate: what you do, how you do it and why you do it. His contention is that true success remains elusive because the third component is generally not given the attention it deserves. And that is exactly what is happening within the field of CBC. Although CBC is not a business, the 'why' is not sufficiently transparent, with the result that CBC has little followers. Within the euroregional bubble, it must therefore be made clear why i.e. companies should do business across the border and why a cross-border attitude can be beneficial for young people. Or in other words, clarifying what an organisation would miss if they did not operate across borders.

If we start from the 'why' in our analysis, we will hopefully be able to abandon non-intuitive terms used by civil servants, such as 'euroregion' and 'CBC'. These are terms that refer to the means and not the aims. Using such terms are hardly calls to action that inspire entrepreneurs or students. Furthermore, the added-value narrative has changed: the aim is no longer solely keeping the peace between European member states. Although this is obviously one of the functions of the border and cross-border institutes, there are many others as well nowadays. Speaking about goals and exploiting opportunities, as opposed to talking about euroregional cooperation, may lead to a different course of action. And finally, segmentation is also of utmost importance: solutions need to be customized. This is necessary given the

⁸ Adapted from "Start with why: How great leaders inspire everyone to take action", by S. Sinek. 2009, Penguin.

diversity of target groups. A pupil for example should be treated differently from a tourist or job seeker.

A multidisciplinary approach

Another aspect that currently characterizes CBC is its monodisciplinary character. Both in policies as in cross-border projects discussions often revolve around the language in the neighbouring country, regulations, cultural differences or innovations within a narrowly defined sector. Now one group of young people learning the language of the neighbouring country, and another group in a border area familiarizing itself with regulations and legislation.

What is missing so far, is an integrated perspective that connects multiple dots.

Dynamics in the borderland, such as labour market, demographical and economic dynamics, are strongly interconnected. In this context, the presence of the border is a binding and determining factor. Demographic decline, for instance, is influenced by the proximity of the national border. Or perhaps more accurately, due to a lack of skills among people to operate across borders. In many cases, young people feel compelled to leave the border region because of a prevailing feeling of a lack of opportunities, which has enormous consequences for the regional labour market. While the business field, on the other hand, needs skilled workers with an affinity to the neighbouring country. Such demographic developments, in turn, result in educational and sports facilities having to close. The border region thus enters a negative and self-reinforcing spiral (Ponds et al., 2013). Proposed solutions, resulting from grants and policies, are often unilateral in nature. Due to a lack of coherence between these one-sided but certainly good initiatives, the actual impact is rather limited.

If people really need to be enabled to be active across borders, then, for example, only neighbour language education is not enough. Depending on the motive of the cross-border mobility, one needs competence in networking across borders, differences in digitalisation, intercultural skills, tax systems or legislation. In other words, an integral approach is required within the Dutch-German borderland.

An inclusive approach

From a border context perspective, inclusiveness could be described as every citizen must be able to take advantage of the opportunities in his or her immediate surroundings. Policy should at least allow citizens to make the best possible use of the opportunities in the nearby region.

If the euroregional ecosystem succeeds in creating a 360-degree community feeling, citizens will automatically come into contact with both sides of the border in the future. The pressing question is how a 360-degree perspective can be facilitated for each citizen. Retail and the tourism sector are already successfully exploiting the opportunities that exist in the neighbouring country, both from a supply and consumer perspective. Supermarkets, amusement parks and other recreational facilities already intelligently match their offer to consumers in the neighbouring country.

Education is of crucial importance to generating structural attention for the neighbouring country among citizens. Education can be a very powerful tool for raising euroregional awareness, thereby indirectly contributing to meeting the private sector's need for both low-level and high-level qualifications that are functionally relevant in an international environment. Start, for example, by ensuring that all elementary school children can playfully

get to know the area that defines who we are. And look for exchange possibilities with schools across the border. At secondary school level, subjects such as history, geography and social studies should reflect past events and events unfolding in the present just across the border. One can potentially create a continuous euroregional learning path by extending this line to secondary and higher vocational education.

Simultaneous action is required on the part of government authorities in order to initiate and give impetus to this shift. Public authorities bordering the neighbouring country should structurally ask themselves if and how decisions affect the inclusive nature of the surrounding region. Politicians and the government have the power to bring about change in the entire education system ([Planbureau voor de Leefomgeving, 2015](#)). The Dutch *Regional Deals* are a good example of this. A Regional Deal is a collaboration between central government and the regional and local authorities that aim to enhance the region's strength. Central government and the regional and local authorities work together in Regional Deals to improve the living environment for residents and entrepreneurs in the region. Within the Regional Deal in North Limburg, which is a part of the rhine-meuse-north euroregion, educational partners are working together with businesses to set up a continuous euroregional education learning path⁹.

Multilingualism

A characteristic of the current German-Dutch debate is the importance of speaking the neighbouring language. The neighbouring language is spoken to an ever decreasing extent¹⁰. This is partly due to the increase in the importance of the English language over the past decades, and also because of the shrinking number of German television channels available in the Dutch border regions. A few decades ago, only a few television channels were offered, of which a few channels from the neighbouring country in the borderland.

That language is an indispensable prerequisite for communicating with each other at all is a fact. The main question is whether the focus will lie exclusively on German or Dutch in the future. If it is up to the older generation, it is. In addition, little English is spoken in the smaller and medium-sized enterprises and family businesses, especially on the German side of the border. In contrast, among the German and Dutch youth English is increasingly the language of communication. Furthermore, it can be observed that teaching courses in English is slowly becoming more prevalent in German education. Obviously, this process will take time. At present, using English in many German SMEs and family businesses is often 'not done', but an interesting question is what the situation will be in 20 years' time. Taking the above developments into account, there seems to be a transition phase taking shape that is slowly moving towards English as a general language in the Dutch-German borderland.

Another interesting question is whether the desire of a relatively small group of advocates of German-Dutch cooperation can turn the tide in terms of speaking the neighbouring language. In the end, probably global developments will overshadow and decide the debate on

⁹ Adapted from "Regio Deal Noord-Limburg", by Rijksoverheid, 2020 (<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2020/07/13/regio-deal-noord-limburg>).

¹⁰ Adapted from "Duitse taal en cultuur minder populair op school en aan de universiteit", by S. Ajrovic, 2022. Volkskrant (<https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/duitse-taal-en-cultuur-minder-populair-op-school-en-aan-de-universiteit~b07668cf/?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F#:~:text=De%20interesse%20in%20de%20Duitse,in%20de%20Duitse%20taal%20mist>).

the choice of language, also in border regions. The principle should therefore be: communicating with each other is key, no matter what language is used.

Shared ownership and responsibility

Finally, CBC is an important theme for many parties. However, this broad interest also leads to significantly fragmented initiatives. At the same time, CBC is still underexposed. CBC is often the first item to be dropped from the list of priorities in times of emergency. As stated before, there is no clear problem owner. No organization feels that it has an intrinsic duty to take the lead in this area, so most parties adopt a wait-and-see attitude. An explicable phenomenon because of the multifaceted nature of the border context.

Yet CBC transcends the individual interest. This therefore calls for a collective approach with a multiple objective. Together placing a wide supported dot on the horizon. In the rhine-meuse-north euroregion, this initiative is already being taken by means of a cooperation between German and Dutch governmental bodies, educational parties and the business field. This in-development *economic action agenda* should in the future serve as a policy framework for new projects.

In conclusion, decades of attempting to implement CBC teach us that there is probably still a long way to go before one can truly speak of a fully integrated Dutch-German borderland. In order to make further steps towards this goal, it is of importance to discuss the right issues and not being afraid of working together to exploit opportunities and boost innovation. Furthermore, political jargon that tends to act as a deterrent: i.e. terms like euroregions and CBC, needs to be avoided. Instead, one should talk about opportunities, possibilities and addressing obstacles.

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