

From border case to core business



Ben Bierings, Maastricht (Netherlands) and Aachen (Germany)

In May 2006, six Belgian, German, and Dutch Universities of Applied Social Sciences, signed a contract for continuing and intensifying co-operation after the completion of the European Interreg-project 'Euregional Certificate Social Work – E@SW'. The co-operation contract was signed in the building of the Provincial Government in Maastricht, at the same table where 15 years before the European heads of Government had signed the well-known 'Maastricht Treaty'. This symbolic action emphasizes the motivation and ambition of the Euregional partners to prepare new generations of social workers for their future professional practice in an integrating Europe.



*Bridge over the river Meuse at Maaseik,
between Belgium and The Netherlands. Photo: BB*

Previous history

It is not obvious that successes in European co-operation will be easily achieved. Mostly these processes take a long time, and creativity and perseverance are important factors of success. Preconditions like respect and trust, go beyond procedures and cannot be enforced; they have to be gained during the actual collaboration. This development is also well recognisable for the Interreg-project 'Euregional Certificate Social Work – E@SW'. The formal project-term comprises a period of 3 years, but the roots of the co-operation go back more than 10 years, when a few universities in the Euregion Meuse-Rhine started a series of Socrates Intensive Programmes.

The Euregion 'Meuse-Rhine' is a central part of Europe, where Belgium, Germany and The Netherlands meet. With the Treaty of Maastricht (1992), the national borders were abolished and the interest in the neighbouring countries has been increasing noticeably ever since. At the same time it has become clear that many social problems occur on both sides of the border and even some problems are typically related to this border.

National outskirts or European experimental garden?

The concepts of 'Euregion' and 'Euregional' are frequently used in the daily media reports in the European border regions. Probably these terms are insignificant for those who live in other regions, far from the borders. Therefore we give you a short geographic and historical explanation.

Euregions are regions within Europe, which consist of at least two different national areas. You will find Euregions in Lapland but also, strangely enough, in Sicily. In the border regions of Belgium, The Netherlands and Germany, as many as seven Euregions can be distinguished. Without boasting, you can say that the 'Meuse-Rhine' Euregion is one of the most exciting and certainly also one of the most complex Euregions. The 'Meuse-Rhine' Euregion consists of (parts of) the Bundesland Nordrhein Westfalen (Germany), the provinces of Limburg and Liège (Belgium), and the province of Limburg (The Netherlands). The cities of Aachen, Liège, Hasselt, and Maastricht are the most important landmarks in the region.

About four million inhabitants with three different cultures speak three languages. Distances are relatively short. Within one and the same day it is no problem to do some early morning shopping ('Frühschoppen') in Aachen, to explore the 'Marché aux puces' in Liège, to have a glass of gin at the Hasselt gin museum, and to finish the day at the 'Vrijthof' square in Maastricht. On the map of the 'Meuse-Rhine' Euregion the southern part of the Province of Limburg (The Netherlands) is situated in the middle. It is surprising to see that the Dutch province of Limburg has over 150 kilometres border with the neighbouring countries, and the distance between Sittard and the Belgian and German borders is only 7 kilometres!! On old maps, the territory of the Dutch Republic of the Seven Provinces, and later the Batavian Republic, does not reach further than the area just below Eindhoven. With regard to this background it is not surprising that during the revolt of Belgium against the Dutch rulers (1830-1839) most towns and villages which are now part of Southern Limburg (in The Netherlands), uttered that they wanted to belong to Belgium. In the following century many inhabitants of this region felt like second-rate citizens of the Netherlands; good enough to deliver coals, but too stupid and too catholic to participate in political and cultural activities. Actually, Holland is a province in the North-Western part of The Netherlands in which the political-economic power was/is concentrated. Because of the increasing influence of the national governments and the new borders more and more inhabitants of this region turned their backs on each other. Brussels, Berlin and The Hague were in charge. But now the old neighbours again seem to have an interest in each other because of the rising importance of Europe and the disappearing national borders.



A Social Europe starts in the Euregion

Hopefully you will get a better idea of the surroundings in which this story is taking place. With the current discussions about the European constitution, the question arises again how far the influence of Europe should reach. Citizens seem to feel little involved in Europe and politicians proclaim louder and louder that the European interference has almost reached its limits.

In spite of this scepticism you can increasingly notice the advantages of the cross-border cooperation in the Euregions. The most striking example is the way in which the fire brigades cooperate. They make sure they have the appropriate couplings and fire-hoses so that they can fight fires across the borders. It is a good thing, and everybody agrees, that the police no longer have to wave goodbye to thieves when they reach the border, but can also pursue and arrest them on foreign territory. The misery of the waiting lists for medical treatment in Southern Limburg (The Netherlands) can be relieved because of the possibility to go to the 'Klinikum' (hospital) in Aachen (Germany) or to the hospitals in Tongeren or Genk

(Belgium). These are remarkable advantages of the cross-border cooperation. But what about Social Work?

A home for the elderly in the town of Echt, in the narrowest part of The Netherlands, wants to start an Alzheimer café. If a circle of 10 kilometres is drawn around the home in order to determine the region in which new clients can be found, it seems that a large part of this region is situated in Belgium and Germany. Fortunately, most of the medical insurance companies don't think in a limited way anymore and the Director of the home contacts the 'Mutualiteiten' (Medical Insurance) on the Belgian side of the border, and the 'Krankenkassen' (also Medical Insurance) on the German side. He has also involved institutions for elderly people in both countries in this project.

Another practical example of the Euregion: Maastricht is a beautiful city in which tourists like to stroll along the 'Vrijthof' square. However, there is also another kind of tourist, the drug addict from France or Liège, who is seeking 'herbe' (grass) or something stronger. Although the liberal drugs policy in The Netherlands can be understood, the annoying side-effect in the border regions is the attraction of foreign addicts. The police caught a young mother from Liège in the act of dealing in heroine and she was detained for a while. Nobody knew, also because fewer and fewer people speak French, that her baby was left at home unattended. Indeed, at such a moment it is very useful if a social worker of the CAD (Consultation Office for Alcohol and Drugs) can talk with the mother and through confidential contacts with the I.C.A.R. (Travail de rue de prostitution-drogue / Specialized street corner work) in Liège, can make sure that the baby is taken care of. Care and treatment of drug addicts in this region by definition has a cross-border character.

A final practical example of the Euregion for Social Care: For some time now, the Dutch have been able to enjoy their tax benefits (e.g. the deduction of the mortgage interest) abroad. Well, our neighbours know this very well. The cheaper houses and the bigger properties have tempted a lot of Dutch house hunters to buy a house across the border. Only much later many immigrants have found out that housing is much more than just a roof above your head. Recently the 'Jugendamt' (Counselling centre for Youths) in Heinsberg (Germany) contacted the 'Jeugd zorg' (Youth care) in Sittard, not far from Heinsberg. They would like to cooperate in order to react in a better way to problems of Dutch young people; problems which are the consequences of a lacking integration in the German society. For similar reasons social workers from institutions for youth work and youth aid from Genk (Belgium) have approached their Dutch colleagues.

The list of examples from which it is clear that the professional practice in the sectors of social care and welfare is starting to become Euregional is growing steadily. Shortly after the E©SW-project, practice organisations started their own border crossing project: RECES. This project aims at linking organisations in the fields of social integration and inclusion to exchange expertise. So this project offers a perfect complementary network for E©SW. Formally speaking, for example someone with a Dutch diploma of SPH can apply all over Europe. With the introduction of the BaMa structure the recognition of the different European diplomas will only improve, and there doesn't seem to be any problem at all for those who want to find a job within a limited geographical area in Genk (B), Geleen (NL) or Geilenkirchen (D). Yet the practical situation seems to be more stubborn. First of all new social workers behave rather traditionally on the labour market. Maybe during the study programme student have done some nice international things, but after the graduation they generally look for jobs in their own country. Those who persevere might get stuck because of a hesitant reaction of the employers who prefer people with a diploma that they recognise. But even if you would find employment, you will soon find out that not everything is going smoothly. Clients in another country have other expectations from you as a social worker than those in your own surroundings. You will get similar reactions from your colleagues or managers who, for example, think that Germans react rather formally, that very often Belgians

are tight-lipped or that sometimes the Dutch assertiveness is a synonym for unmannered behaviour. Further you will find out that you know really too little about legal issues, or that your limited knowledge of French is a barrier for mutual understanding. Cross-border work requires a special examination and a good 'Fingerspitzengefühl'!



*One street, two countries:
Kerkrade (NL) / Herzogenrath (D) Photo: BB*

Good neighbours or just friends?

The six universities in the 'Meuse-Rhine' Euregion became aware of the importance of preparing their students of Social Work very well for the Euregional labour market. Stimulated by enthusiastic reactions of students and motivated by intensive contacts between lecturers, an application for a project was submitted successfully to the European Interreg fund for interregional co-operation. The aim of the project E©SW – Euregional Certificate Social Work – was to establish a common 'Euregional Differentiation' course concerning Social Work training in the 'Meuse-Rhine' Euregion. Meanwhile, the differentiation course is part of the regular educational programme. Students who obtain the required number of ECTS credits in this way receive the Euregional Certificate with full recognition by the partner universities, besides their normal diploma.

Keeping in mind the practical examples mentioned above it is not so difficult to understand that you should acquire additional professional qualifications in order to work successfully in a neighbouring country. The core-competences are:

- The ability to define cross-border social problems in the context of social and political systems in the Euregion and Europe,
- Proficiency in the Euregional languages (French, German, Dutch),
- Command of intercultural competences in interactions with Euregional clients,
- The ability to manage new professional concepts in different (national) organisational contexts.



*One country, two languages:
Voeren-Fouron region in Belgium. Photo: BB*

The project has provided a number of concrete products:

- A scenario for a common 'Euregional Differentiation' course. In this scenario, the agreements between the universities are established concerning the profile and the dimensions of the course (about 20% of the curriculum).
- Twenty new modules regarding cross-border social problems, target groups, and social-legal systems in the Euregion. All modules are available in the three languages of the Euregion.
- A web-enabled Euregional work-placement database of institutions open to trainees from the neighbouring countries,
- A Euregional database of experts that is accessible to students, teachers as well as for professionals in practice. For this part, the E©SW-partners have started joint action with the RECES network of institutions active in the fields of Poverty, Marginalisation, and Migration in the Euregion 'Meuse-Rhine'.

The Euregional-course consists of compulsory as well as optional modules. Compulsory modules are: 'Introduction to the Euregion', 'Intercultural Competences in the Euregion', 'Comparative Social & Legal Systems in the Euregion', and 'Social & Legal System' of the region in which the work placements take place. Also language training plus a supervised work placement of at least 18-24 credits is compulsory, depending on the total duration of the academic degree (3 years in Belgium and Germany, and 4 years in The Netherlands).

The two optional modules can be chosen from any of the following: 'European Social Policy', 'Social Networking', 'Social Economy', 'Creative-intercultural competences', 'Demand-oriented Work', 'Inclusion of People with Disabilities', 'Poverty and social marginalization', 'Youth and Addiction', 'Migration and Social Integration', 'Aggression in Social Work', 'Community Safety and Crime Prevention', 'HRM and the Euregional Labour Market'. The chosen themes reflect the actual need of the professional world or contain a clear Euregional dimension.

The development of the modules was divided among the project partners, while groups of colleagues of other partners and practical experts acted as a sounding board.

Especially in the compulsory modules common seminars are important means to make students co-operate and to clarify the differences in culture and professional orientation. Of course means of communication like e-mail and Blackboard are good opportunities to continue the face-to-face meetings 'virtually'.

Euregional teams take care of the compulsory modules. In this way the lecturers involved, are offered a concrete and exciting way to participate in cross-border co-operation.

In principle, project partners can offer all the optional modules on the basis of the study material that is available in their own languages. Of course, it is more efficient to mutually exchange students or lecturers, depending on the demand in a certain academic year.

The different databases (work placements, experts, social-legal policy data) are built in accordance with the same format. In this way a student will get a clear view of which institutions offer work placements, of which experts are available in the sector concerned, and what the actual social situation and legal regulations look like in the region concerned.

The formal term of the Interreg-project has been finished since 1 January 2007, and all the defined goals have been achieved. Most important of all, of course, is the ‘appreciation’ of the new curriculum-option by the students. The evaluations of the 3 annual ‘cohorts’ since the start of the project, have been exceptional positive. The students indicated that, notwithstanding their language barriers, they had gained more insight into the background of the regional systems and the understanding of mutual differences.



Where three counties (B-D-NL) meet. Photo: BB

The future

When drawing up a project plan like E©SW, a lot of obstacles appear in the Euregional setting. The legislation concerning the educational systems in the three countries differs considerably. It is very difficult to remove these obstacles. For this reason the pursuit of double degrees, and in this case even four degrees (because of the differences between Flanders and Wallonia), was not an option. The Euregion-certificate, as a ‘diploma-supplement’, was an attainable and yet sufficiently recognizable aim. You simply can’t ignore differences in didactical models and visions regarding the professions; they are the essence of the cooperation. The working capital for the project was the exchange of information, a lot of discussions, respect for each other’s individual strengths, combined with creative ideas, and the intention to arrive at practical solutions in a joint effort.

In 1995 the Dutch Minister of Education, Jo Ritzen, launched the concept of “internationalisation by bike” and in some way the reactions were rather disapproving. Yet this is not an illusion in the Euregion. Means of communication like e-mail and electronic learning, as indicated earlier, have also been launched in this project, but the direct contacts,

which can easily be organised, are important assets for the Euregional universities. It is very easy to follow your own educational programme and at the same time to meet a group of fellow students for a common seminar, research programme, or a final project in the morning or at noon. Shopping for modules at partner universities, inviting guest lecturers for a short teaching period do not require a lot of effort.

The Euregional professional practice is still in its infancy stages. It is a Terra Incognita in which the cooperation between universities and institutions plays a pivotal role. Universities can do research for institutions, provide new expertise, and act as intermediaries with other institutions. At the same time institutions that add a true Euregional dimension to their services, provide universities the ultimate legitimacy to grant students a Euregional certificate. In the past, the citizens of the 'Meuse-Rhine' Euregion lived in a remote corner of their countries; now apparently this region seems to be an exciting testing ground in Europe!

The Euregional partners are: the Katholische Fachhochschule Nordrhein Westfalen in Aachen (D), the Katholieke Hogeschool Limburg and the XIOS Hogeschool Limburg, both located in Hasselt (B), the Haute École Hemes and the Haute École Charlemagne, both in Liège (B), and Hogeschool Zuyd in Sittard/Maastricht (NL).

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