

Gaëlle Hubert

## European funds in Brussels: from principles to practices

Translation : Jane Corrigan

The present article focuses on the way in which the Brussels Region uses European Structural Funds – in particular the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) – in view of carrying out several economic and social projects in its territory. It attempts to analyse the evolution of ERDF programmes in Brussels from 2000 to 2013 and takes a critical look at the so-called ‘regional policy’ in this area. The latter is having a hard time getting through the institutional barriers and is characterised by strong inequalities between stakeholders – during the elaboration of programmes as well as in the implementation of projects – despite approaches based on partnership and integration which characterise the European Funds. By taking the European Funds in Brussels as an example, this article examines the logic of ‘concrete public action’, between strategic policy and incremental process, and between formal procedures and the concrete practices of stakeholders.

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## Introduction <sup>1</sup>

One often tends to view the European presence in Brussels through the prism of the different institutions located in its territory. As inescapable as the establishment of the EU institutions is in the Belgian – and European – capital, it does not constitute the only dimension of the complexity – in particular physical – of the two entities. In Brussels, a great number of building restorations and socioeconomic or sociocultural initiatives are the result of joint financing with Europe. As a European region, the Brussels Region is able to benefit from European funds intended to compensate for economic and social inequalities between member states. These different funds are grouped under the banner of the 'European regional policy'.

Reformed at the end of the 1980s as part of a move to decentralise the means of public action in most European countries (Nay, 2001), the specific feature of this policy is that, on the one hand, it gives a dominating role to infra-state entities by involving them in its elaboration<sup>2</sup> as well as in the management and implementation of funds (Smith, 1995) and, on the other hand, it requires partnerships at each stage of its implementation involving regional and local authorities, economic and social partners and all competent bodies in the issues concerned. Its decentralised approach with respect to the territory, the development of the local level, networking, etc. make this European policy a real 'territorialised', 'global' and 'integrated' policy which is characteristic of the new paradigms of public action (Fontaine, Hassen-teufel, 2002; Pasquier, Weisbein, 2004; Pasquier, Simoulin, Weisbein, 2007).

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<sup>1</sup> This article stems from the doctoral thesis in Political and Social Sciences entitled 'Penser l'Europe en action. Les Fonds structurels européens à l'appui de politiques régionales bruxelloises', which was defended on 31 October 2008 at Facultés universitaires Saint-Louis, under the direction of Olivier Paye (CReSPo) and Luc van Campenhout (CES). The research lasted three and a half years and made use of several methods: documentary research, a traineeship in the Brussels section of the Belgian Permanent Representation to the EU, interviews with stakeholders in European regional policy – from Brussels for the most part (at political, administrative, associative, public and private level, etc.), but also from the European Commission.

<sup>2</sup> As evidenced by the intensive lobbying strategies conducted by the European regions and encouraged by the Commission.

In Belgium, the federated entities benefit fully from this European policy. Generally speaking, while it is already possible for them to represent Belgium at the Council of the European Union,<sup>3</sup> they may elaborate their own programmes in the area of European regional policy and negotiate them directly with the European Commission. The Brussels-Capital Region therefore does not confine itself – like the majority of European regions – to a lobbying strategy before the adoption of general regulations in the area of Structural Funds, and afterwards, to a mere management role under the supervision of the central authorities. It participates fully in the procedures for obtaining European funds which are likely to support its regional development policies. The wide scope for action enjoyed by the Brussels Region is politically significant in view of the themes covered by European regional policy (land-use planning, economy, employment, environment, etc.), for the most part equivalent to those within the remit of the Belgian regional authorities.

How are these European funds received in the Brussels territory? Beyond the actual content of the fund use programmes and the types of project implemented, what do we learn from the way in which the Region has organised itself in order to benefit from funding? In the following pages, we shall begin by reviewing the situation of Structural Funds in the Brussels Region. This detailed description is an essential requirement for a closer analysis of the processes involved in the use of these funds (the ERDF in particular) in Brussels. Then, after a review of how ERDF programmes have evolved in Brussels from 2000 to 2013, we shall examine the concrete means by which they came into being. In so doing, we shall add nuance to the relatively smooth and consensual picture we have of them on first reading. In our analysis of the procedural framework of Brussels governance in the area of European regional policy – which privileges requirements for partnership and ‘good governance’ – we shall see how Structural Funds in Brussels may be viewed as a small laboratory for public action, which questions political action in a more general way.

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<sup>3</sup> This became possible with article 146 of the Maastricht Treaty, which stipulates that ‘the Council shall consist of a representative of each member state at ministerial level, authorised to commit the government of that member state’. In Belgium, the federated entities and the federal state organised themselves gradually in order to extend the division of powers within Belgium as regards the organisation of European affairs, thus legally establishing the equality between the federal state and the federated entities, as specified in the Constitution. The terms are laid out in the cooperation agreement of 8 March 1994 between the federal state, the Communities and the Regions, concerning the representation of the Kingdom of Belgium at the Council of the European Union (*Moniteur belge*, 17 November 1994, p. 28209).

### Structural Funds in Brussels: a review

European regional policy accounts for more than a third of the Community budget,<sup>4</sup> and is aimed at financing projects in member states. It consists of different financial funds ('Structural Funds') earmarked for a period of six years with specific objectives.

The ESF (European Social Fund) was already included in the 1957 Rome Treaty (article 123), and today has the mission to prevent and fight against unemployment. Its use complies with the EES (European Employment Strategy). The ERDF (European Regional Development Fund) emerged at the beginning of the 1970s, and is aimed at correcting the main imbalances between the regions in the Community. Created in 1994, the CF (Cohesion Fund)<sup>5</sup> is intended for the least prosperous member states in the EU<sup>6</sup> and finances up to 85% of eligible expenditure for large-scale projects devoted to the environment or to transport infrastructures. Finally (even though, strictly speaking, it has no longer been part of the European regional policy since the recent reform), the EAGGF (European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund), created in 1964, provides support for the adaptation of agricultural structures and rural development, and the FIFG (Financial Instrument for Fisheries Guidance) seeks to reach a balance between fishery resources and their use.

The objectives of the different funds are redefined for each new programming period. Table 1 illustrates the evolution of these different objectives during the last two programming periods (2000-2006 and 2007-2013).<sup>7</sup>

In concrete terms, each member state has to submit one programme per objective. These programmes present the strategy for the use of the funds in different thematic categories and, within them, in different concrete measures, and are integrated into the legal framework of the various European regulations regarding Structural Funds. They establish the objectives according to which the funds will be distributed, with regard to the strategic Community orientations<sup>8</sup> and the Lisbon Strategy,<sup>9</sup> in accordance with the European regional policy requirement for coherence between Struc-

<sup>4</sup> For the 2007-2013 programming period, this represents a total of 336.1 billion euros, i.e. the second biggest EU budget after the CAP.

<sup>5</sup> The Cohesion Fund is not always categorised with the 'Structural Funds' and is sometimes designated separately.

<sup>6</sup> Namely the countries whose GNP per inhabitant is lower than 90% of the Community average (i.e. since 1 May 2004, Cyprus, Spain, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia).

<sup>7</sup> This table is an adaptation of the one presented in the Communication of the European Commission, *Third report on economic and social cohesion*, July 2004 [COM(2004) 107 final - Not published in the Official Journal].

<sup>8</sup> The strategic Community orientations (SCO) define a general framework (essentially theme-based) in which the Structural Funds will intervene. They take into account the broad economic policy guidelines (BEPG) and the European Employment Strategy (EES).

<sup>9</sup> The Lisbon Strategy was launched during the Lisbon European Council in March 2000. It is aimed at making the European Union 'the most competitive economy in the world' and at achieving full employment by 2010. It was reformed in 2005 and has since focused on two objectives: growth and employment.

Programmation 2000-2006		2000-2006 programming period	
Objectives and CIs	Financial instruments	Objectives	Financial instruments
<b>Cohesion Fund</b>	CF	<b>Convergence and competitiveness</b>	CF
<b>Objective 1</b>	ERDF, ESF, EAGGF-Orientation FIFG		ERDF ESF
<b>Objective 2</b>	ERDF, ESF	<b>Regional competitiveness &amp; employment</b> <b>regional level</b> <b>national level: EES</b>	ERDF ESF
<b>Objective 3</b>	ESF		
<b>Equal</b>	ESF		
<b>Urban II *</b>	ERDF	<b>European territorial cooperation</b>	ERDF
<b>Interreg III *</b>	ERDF		
<b>Leader +</b>	EAGGF-Orientation		
<b>Rural development and restructuring of fisheries outside objective 1</b>	EAGGF-Orientation, FIFG	EAGGF-Orientation becomes EAFRD (European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development). FIFG becomes EFF (European Fisheries Fund). These funds now have their own legal basis and are no longer part of the cohesion policy	
<b>9 objectives (4 O + 5 CIs)</b>	<b>6 instruments</b>	<b>3 objectives</b>	<b>3 instruments</b>

Table 1: Structural Fund objectives, 2000-2006 and 2007-2013 programming periods  
The grey boxes in the table indicate the objectives which concern the Brussels Region.

Period 2000-2006

- Objective 1: to promote the development and structural adjustment of regions whose development is lagging behind (GDP < 75% of the Community average). It concerns outermost regions and low population density regions (former objective 6).
- Objective 2: to support the economic and social conversion of areas experiencing structural difficulties. Overall, it concerns the evolution of industrial or service sectors, a decline in traditional activities in rural areas, difficulties affecting fisheries activity and a crisis situation in urban areas.
- Objective 3: to support the adaptation and modernisation of education, training and employment policies and systems in regions not eligible under objective 1.
- EQUAL: to promote a better model for working life by fighting all types of discrimination and inequality in a context of national cooperation, and to encourage the social and professional integration of asylum seekers.
- INTERREG: to strengthen economic and social cohesion throughout the EU, by fostering the balanced development of the continent through cross-border, transnational and interregional cooperation.
- LEADER +: is part of the European policy to promote rural development (2nd pillar of the CAP).

Period 2007-2013

- 'Convergence' objective: = 78.5% of the total financial amount. This objective concerns the regions whose GDP per inhabitant is < 75% of the Community average. It is equivalent to 'Objective 1' of the previous programming period (2000-2006).
- 'Regional Competitiveness and Employment' objective: = 17.2% of the total financial amount. This objective is aimed at strengthening competitiveness, employment and the attractiveness of the regions.
- 'Territorial Cooperation' objective: This last objective is aimed at strengthening cooperation at cross-border, transnational and interregional levels. It concerns the regions situated along borders (internal and maritime).

\* For 2007-2013, Equal and Urban II have been integrated into the 'Regional Competitiveness and Employment' objective as well as the 'Convergence' objective.

tural Fund interventions and EU priorities. The regulations also establish the award criteria for the funds as well as the follow-up and management procedures which will govern their use. In Belgium, each Region is concerned with its own objectives and therefore elaborates its own programmes, in consultation with the European Commission. In the present case, we are mainly interested in the use of the ERDF in the framework of objective 2 (46 million euros) and the Urban programme (7 million euros) for 2000-2006, and in the framework of the 'Regional Competitiveness and Employment' objective (58 million euros) for 2007-2013.<sup>10</sup>

Calls for tender are made in the framework of the programmes.<sup>11</sup> The projects must be in keeping with one of the different measures provided for in the particular programme. They must benefit from co-financing, in accordance with two principles: that of additionality, whereby European aid is granted along with national aid, and that of partnership, as mentioned above.<sup>12</sup> The implementation of the different projects is managed by the 'management authority', i.e. Brussels-Capital Region (BCR), and undergoes an *ex ante* evaluation halfway through the programming period, as well as an *ex post* assessment.

In essence, what do the Brussels authorities lay emphasis on in these ERDF programmes and what types of initiative and operator do they favour? Is there a noticeable difference between the 2000-2006 and 2007-2013 programming periods?

### **The ERDF programmes in Brussels from 2000 to 2013: continuity, breaking apart and rhetoric of the integrated project**

The content of the ERDF 2000-2006 and 2007-2013 programming periods is partly similar and partly different.

The programmes are similar in their diagnosis of the socioeconomic situation in Brussels. Budgetary weakness (Zimmer, 2006; Lambert J.-P. *et al.*, 1999), an under-qualified workforce, structurally high unemployment<sup>13</sup> and an urban exodus of the middle classes (according to taxes based on the place of residence) are some of the

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<sup>10</sup> For the amounts, see the reference brochure published by the CCFEE: 'Emploi, Formation et Cohésion sociale: l'intervention des Fonds structurels européens en Région de Bruxelles-Capitale pour 2007-2013', October 2007. The brochure may be downloaded at <http://www.ccfée.be/index.php?id=80,0,0,1,0,0>. These amounts are modest, to say the least, compared to the scale of other programmes in Europe and Brussels, but they are nevertheless significant at Brussels level given the major divisions involved – see below – and the fact that this European aid comes in addition to national co-financing, which must intervene for 50% of the total.

<sup>11</sup> In the case which interests us, this involves BCR's single programming document 'Objectif 2 des Fonds structurels européens' of 3 July 2001, the operational programme 'PIC Urban, programmation 2000-2006' of 12 November 2001 and the operational programme 'Objectif 2013. Investissons ensemble dans le développement urbain' of 22 March 2007.

<sup>12</sup> More precise selection criteria are defined in the programmes by the Brussels Region.

<sup>13</sup> At more than 20%, it has the highest rate of the three Belgian regions, with more than half of the jobs in Brussels being held by non-residents of the city. Ministry of the Brussels-Capital Region, 'Baromètre conjoncturel de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale', Brussels, Editions Iris, 2007, p.18.

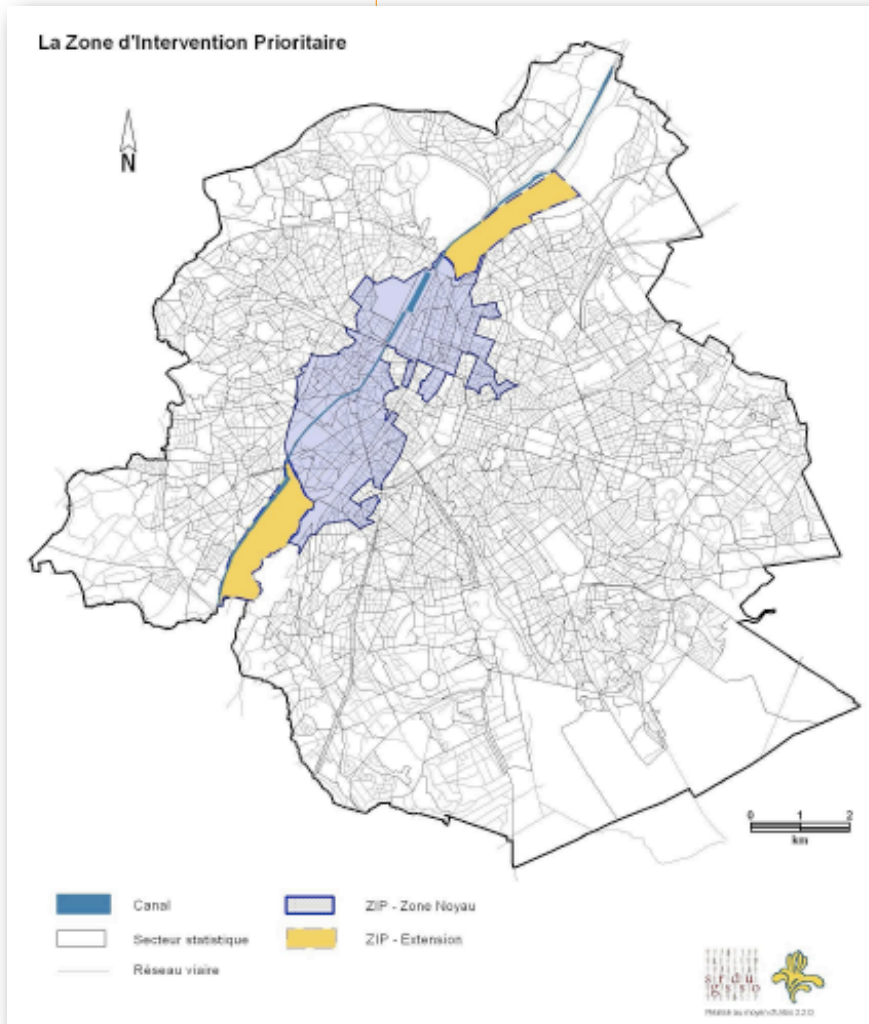


Figure 1: Priority intervention zone

Source: 'Objectif 2013. Investissons ensemble dans le développement urbain', BCR operational programme for the 'Regional Competitiveness and Employment' objective, p.38.

characteristics which make the Brussels Region a 'European paradox': it is among the six European regions with the highest GDP per inhabitant, yet its employment rate is significantly lower than the European average. The Region emphasised this information in view of benefiting from Structural Funds, and it has hardly changed in six years.

The situation is, however, highly contrasted within the city itself. Historically, BCR developed around the canal in an area referred to as 'the Pentagon', which spread gradually to include other neighbouring municipalities at the time of industrial expansion. A whole series of bigger and greener municipalities (the 'outer ring' or 'outer suburbs') added themselves to this 'inner ring' or the 'central neighbourhoods', and became home to the well-to-do populations from the historical central neighbourhoods. The dualisation of the two 'rings' became more pronounced with the decline in industrial activity. Today, the central neighbourhoods include urban eyesores and old neighbourhoods with little greenery, which are unattractive from an economic standpoint. A large part of the inhabitants of these areas are from an immigrant background and have a low income. This 'double ring' situation whereby the areas of poverty are concentrated in the central neighbourhoods of the city

still distinguishes BCR from most European cities. It was used as a reference in defining the area of intervention of the ERDF for the two Structural Fund programming periods, despite the fact that the European Commission abandoned the microzonation system for the 2007-2013 programming period. Figure 1 illustrates the ERDF area for 2000-2006 ('PIZ-centre' below) and for 2007-2013 (extension of the PIZ to the north and south along the canal).

The extension of the area from 2007 was motivated in particular by the new methods of resource concentration put forward by the European Commission, insisting

on the necessity of interventions in support of regional coherence rather than interventions at microgeographic level. This is where the two European programmes in Brussels (2000-2006 and 2007-2013) differ. For the 2000-2006 programming period, the scale of intervention of the ERDF in Brussels was essentially local. A large part of the beneficiaries were municipal authorities,<sup>14</sup> with the idea being to combine ERDF projects with neighbourhood contracts. The neighbourhood contracts initially involved housing and public spaces and then widened their scope to include social and cultural dimensions. An economic dimension was added in order to meet all of the criteria for the award of European funds.

The ERDF thus enabled the implementation of projects such as several business centres, a cultural centre, fitness facilities, an employment centre, an internet cafe and day nurseries in the framework of BCR's nursery plan.<sup>15</sup>

Support for community centres aimed at local development, employment and sociocultural projects was withdrawn in 2007-2013 in order to increase financial support for more large-scale projects and to reduce the number of categories of ERDF intervention, which is now centred on competitiveness and employment, in keeping with the Contract for the Economy and Employment and the Lisbon Strategy objectives.<sup>16</sup> In addition to favouring the opening of nurseries once again due to a blatant need for them, the new programming period allowed the implementation of projects such as training in eco-construction, an urban economic activity centre, several advanced technology centres, a strategic development plan in the economic sectors of the environment, etc.<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, although there is a continuity between the two programming periods – diagnosis of an unchanged situation in Brussels, same area of intervention and pursuit of new economic activities – a noticeable reorientation has taken place, in line with the Lisbon Strategy and the quest for a 'lever effect' created by projects involving the regional territory as a whole.

Above and beyond their distinguishing features, when looking at the programmes, we are struck by the impression of a unified and integrated project, well thought out in its globality with respect to European criteria on the one hand (regulations in the area of Structural Funds, the Lisbon Strategy, the European Employment Strategy, etc.), and with respect to the development challenges in Brussels on the other hand (continuity of neighbourhood contracts for the 2000-2006 programming period; obligations regarding the Regional Development Plan (2002) and the Contract for

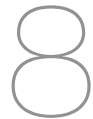
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<sup>14</sup> This includes the following municipalities: Anderlecht, Molenbeek, Saint-Gilles, Forest, Bruxelles-Ville, Schaerbeek and Saint-Josse.

<sup>15</sup> A description of ERDF projects which were implemented in 2000-2006 may be found in the following documents: Ministry of the Brussels-Capital Region, *Objectif 2 en Région de Bruxelles-Capitale. Rapport annuel d'exécution 2006. Période de programmation 2000-2006*, November 2006; Ministry of the Brussels-Capital Region; *Urban II en Région de Bruxelles-Capitale. Rapport annuel d'exécution 2006. Période de programmation 2000-2006*, November 2006.

<sup>16</sup> 70% of projects must comply with the Lisbon objectives.

<sup>17</sup> Details of the selected projects may be found at the following address: [http://www.brussel.irisnet.be/cmsmedia/fr/resume\\_des\\_projects\\_pdf.pdf?uri=ff808181181a2c3e01181ca3d52900df](http://www.brussel.irisnet.be/cmsmedia/fr/resume_des_projects_pdf.pdf?uri=ff808181181a2c3e01181ca3d52900df)



the Economy and Employment (2005) for 2007-2013). As well as inspiring the ERDF programmes, these development challenges in Brussels are inspired by other European programmes themselves: the neighbourhood contracts are the result of exchanges which have taken place in the framework of the European network for the rehabilitation of neighbourhoods in a crisis situation, and the Contract for the Economy and Employment is presented as complying 'fully' with the Lisbon Strategy. The ERDF programmes in Brussels are therefore at the junction of different regional and European policies, some of which wish to be integrated, with Europe supporting the Region, which in turn supports Europe. This quest for the uniformity of ERDF programmes is vital to the European Commission, which participates closely in their creation and ensures their overall coherence.

The situation in the Brussels Region therefore seems to be the object of a diagnosis shared by all – especially since it was based on regional documents written in collaboration with different stakeholders in Brussels, and was then approved by the government. These ERDF programmes are smooth and consensual, and seem to emerge from a territory which presents the same picture: a territory in which there is a consensus on policies, with stakeholders working together openly for the collective well-being. Does this mean that a regional course of action can be identified in the area of Structural Funds? Has a global regional strategy been devised and implemented by the government in view of benefiting from European Structural Funds, or is there a more fragmented approach whose coherence only exists on paper?

### **Regional course of action versus the institutional fragmentation of programmes**

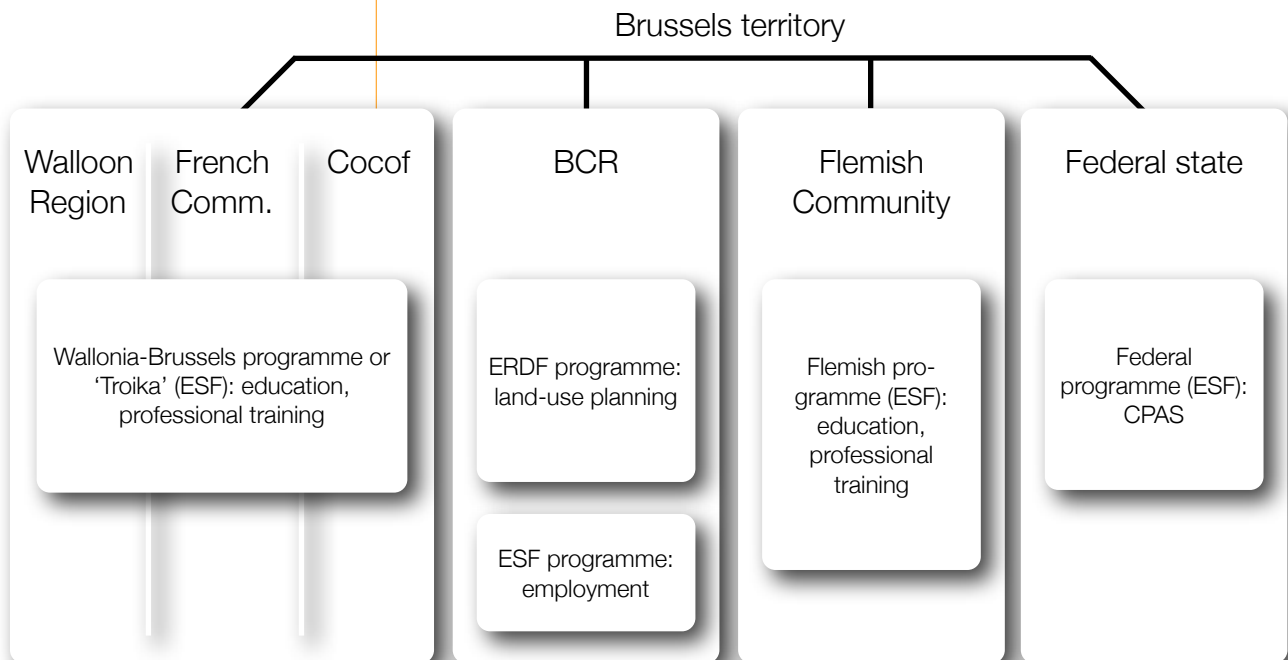
In order to answer these questions, an inevitable examination is required of how the different European programmes combine with the division in the scopes of activity in Brussels. The Brussels territory is institutionally fragmented and is at the crossroads of several territories managed by specific authorities, which collaborate or compete with one another (BCR, French Community, Flemish Community, CoCof, VGC, Co-Com, the federal state, etc.). This institutional fragmentation persists as regards European regional policy. For objectives 2 and 3 from 2000-2006<sup>18</sup> or for the 'Regional Competitiveness and Employment' objective from 2007-2013, there were no less than five active Structural Fund programmes in Brussels, as illustrated in the diagram below.

The accumulation of ministerial powers by one person should be mentioned here in order to shed light on the diagram. From 1999 to 2004, the same minister was responsible for employment, the economy and the rehabilitation of neighbourhoods and was minister-president of the Collège de la Cocof; therefore, the ERDF programmes in BCR, ESF in BCR and Troika (in its Brussels section) had the same supervising minister. This perhaps facilitated an integration of the programmes to a

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<sup>18</sup> Objective 3 is taken into account here for the purpose of comparison, as it was merged with objective 2 to become the new 'Regional Competitiveness and Employment' objective for the 2007-2013 programming period. The diversity of ESF programmes in the Brussels territory is also noteworthy.

certain extent, but from an institutional perspective, there was nevertheless a distinct programme for each authority.



Following the 2004 regional elections, these four portfolios were attributed to different ministers, emphasising the necessity for coordination in view of the 2007-2013 programming period. Coordination meetings were held in order to *'try to think more globally'* and to *'build bridges between programmes'*.<sup>19</sup> However, this search for complementarity was transient, in a context in which all of the stakeholders gave priority to the elaboration of their own programmes, whose deadlines were *'inconceivable'* according to some. These meetings thus appear to be secondary developments, establishing the institutional boundaries without overstepping or shifting them.

With one of the pillars of employment promotion being professional training, why do they have separate programmes? Why not benefit from ESF funding to develop professional training for new trades in keeping with ERDF priorities, such as eco-construction, for example? If there is a necessity for coordination and even a request for integration on behalf of European authorities, why was there not a programme in support of the Brussels territory itself, with a possible integration of employment and professional training – and even education – considered beyond institutional barriers within a limited territory and in a truly integrated manner, rather than just talking about *'integrated policies'*?

<sup>19</sup> Words of a SRDU member in charge of programme coordination.

We are forced to recognise the fact that the European programmes are adapted to the institutional conditions in Brussels. Despite the possibilities they allow, the opportunity was not taken to rethink the integration of scopes of activity in Brussels, where institutional fragmentation is currently being questioned.<sup>20</sup> Brussels authorities are probably not responsible for defining their own institutional framework – a complicated Belgian issue, to say the least.

### **The elaboration of the ERDF programme: partnership and inequalities**

This logic of adaptation does not only apply with respect to institutional scopes of activity: it also applies to the way in which a specific programme is developed. This is where it is interesting to examine the concrete mechanisms for the elaboration of programmes; we have done so for the 2007-2013 ERDF programme.

The method for the development of this programme was well thought out. It is meant to be based on partnership and 'fieldwork'; it therefore contrasts sharply with the practices of the previous programming period in which no prior consultation was carried out by the supervising minister for European funds. An urbanistic study, thematic seminars and meetings between 'key stakeholders' punctuated the implementation of the ERDF programme, under the supervision of a working group composed of the minister-president in charge of European funds, which coordinates everything with the help of a private consultancy firm and the SRDU (regional secretariat for urban development).<sup>21</sup> The SRDU is overseen by a political executive board composed of members of all of the Brussels regional ministerial cabinets, and ensures as it were that the programme receives the government's approval.

Thus, the ERDF programme for 2007-2013, elaborated according to a 'strategic' approach and in the framework of a partnership 'at each stage', has all of the characteristics of a political mechanism which meets the contemporary requirements of public governance. Although we may praise this will to involve Brussels stakeholders in European programmes, observations in the field indicate a marked inequality between stakeholders. These inequalities exist within the government itself (a) as well as between operators likely to invest in projects (b).

(a) In a polycentric model with multiple consultation, negotiation and decision-making authorities, the stakeholder with the ability to occupy a cross-cutting position has the capacity to instrumentalise procedures to further its priorities. Therefore, coordination is often synonymous with structuring: at meetings, discussions are predefined and are guided by the principles of the stakeholders who are the most involved in the process. If the discussion is open, it has a predefined basis which guides any subsequent proposal. Moreover, this basis is justified by its origin: Contract for the Economy and Employment, Regional Development Plan, European documents, etc. A resource of power therefore depends less on having a solid understanding of the content of discussions than on controlling the *framework* of dis-

<sup>20</sup> See in particular: Van Wynsberghe, Poirier, Sinardet, Tulkens, 2009; Delwit, Deschouwer, 2009.

<sup>21</sup> On 1 January 2009, the SRDU became the territorial development agency, whose central role is that of 'urban observer'.

cussions. In the diversity of means through which power is exercised, according to Foucault, it always involves 'action on action' (Foucault, 2001): it manifests itself in the capacity of a stakeholder to structure the field of action of others.

If coordination is synonymous with structuring, the establishment of smooth running coordination and consultation mechanisms is an approach which, in several respects, differs from a project approach as such. Using existing regional documents as a basis and organising discussion seminars and selective coordination meetings without any true integration, are initiatives which define a working area without necessarily getting to the heart of it, in contrast to a substantial policy directed towards a given content. The dynamics are based on discussions whose rhythm is determined by the procedures themselves, whereas the stakeholders do not have a thorough understanding of the content. It involves an incremental process in which no one has an overall view of the situation – not even the dominant stakeholder.<sup>22</sup> There is a lack of a well-defined project to the benefit of a series of individual interests, and 'everyone [tries to] pull the blanket to their side'.<sup>23</sup> The European programmes appear to be more like adaptations of existing programmes in Brussels.

(b) The inequalities become more explicit when we consider the projects implemented in the framework of these European programmes. A close examination of the ERDF projects approved in the framework of the 2000-2006 and 2007-2013 programming periods<sup>24</sup> tells us how much we need to qualify the theoretical assertion that European funding concerns all (para)public or private stakeholders and that they are liable to present a project. The existence of 'clusters of ERDF projects' is evidence of the many connections between them: the ties between networks are close and apply horizontally – with certain closely connected stakeholders wishing to present several projects together, and others relying on an accumulation of functions – and vertically according to political party, with all levels of authority combined. Benefiting from a local and/or regional political network<sup>25</sup> is a key resource; all the more so if one considers the relative precision of programmes in the area (several projects are already suggested, mentioning the type of operator likely to invest in them), well before the call for proposals as such.

'Knowledge' is necessary as well as 'know-how'. The sluggishness of procedures – with a financial plan in support of this – does not allow the small investors to get involved in the organisation of a project given its human and financial cost (not to mention the operating expenses for six years), without any guarantees regarding the project's approval. The requirement of expertise in terms of organising projects is all

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<sup>22</sup> These dynamics contrast with what may be compared with the pious hope sometimes mentioned or even invoked by certain stakeholders when they express their frustration regarding a lack of political vision.

<sup>23</sup> Words of a member of the Brussels ministerial cabinet.

<sup>24</sup> In the framework of our doctoral research, we focused on the projects implemented in three municipalities in particular: Saint-Gilles, Anderlecht and Molenbeek.

<sup>25</sup> The local network was particularly important for the 2000-2006 programming period, considering the role given to municipalities in the implementation of ERDF projects.

the more necessary because of the short bidding periods;<sup>26</sup> we may understand why, without being properly equipped, relations are central. In this framework, the financial plans of projects are often developed hurriedly in order to meet short administrative deadlines. They are the product of patchwork between different public financing channels and, consequently, between programmes – neighbourhood contracts for the renovation of a building, Actiris for staff subsidies, urban renewal department for the management, etc. – without always considering the conditions for their viability. ERDF projects are often ready-made or proposed based on existing networks, prolonging or supplementing initiatives which are already under way (Vaesen, 2008; Francq, 2005). Therefore, a European policy with its own methodology is nevertheless incorporated into existing local configurations and adapted to them (Pasquier, Pinson, 2004; Marchand-Tonel, Simoulin, 2004; Négrier, 1998).

### **Conclusion. Concrete public action: from project to procedures, and procedures to practices**

Seeking to understand how European financing supports regional policies or, more globally, how public action takes place on a daily basis, involves a double shift of emphasis: 1) we should not confuse project and procedures and 2) we should not confine ourselves to formal procedures.

1) As regards the first shift of emphasis, two different ways of 'doing politics' are put to the test: on the one hand, a policy supported by a teleological and strategic aim, a policy of substance centred on a defined project as such, and on the other hand, a policy built on procedures, with the method attesting to the content which lies within this framework. The project itself is less important than the process according to which the policy is elaborated – which gives a direction to the policy in the end, without it being treated as such. This second way of proceeding is highlighted here. Public action is therefore justified by the *procedures* it establishes. A transparent methodology, partnership, consultation, 'fieldwork', etc. set the pace for the presentation of ERDF programmes in Brussels and cut short any opposition or criticism regarding their *elaboration* and their *content*: it appears that if such a procedure is respected, its content is naturally 'accurate' (Luhmann, 2001).

Without a project, we are faced with a logic of adaptation of policies in Brussels to European criteria and of the rhetoric in support of them. This is how, over the years, the Europeanisation of frameworks, ways of presenting issues and ways of dealing with these issues (supposedly) takes place in an incremental process. The hidden ideological impact of these frameworks is very strong: by claiming to be non-ideological reference frameworks, they constitute in effect a powerful ideology which ropes in the different stakeholders whether they like it or not.

This observation of a 'justification through procedure' may be interpreted in two ways. The first interpretation is that of *instrumentalisation*: the 'conspiracy theory' and the hidden agenda. The second interpretation, which we are more inclined to

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<sup>26</sup> For the 2007-2013 programming period, the operators had four months to present a project, from the opening date of the call for projects on 26 March 2007, until the closing date on 26 July 2007. '*In the middle of the summer holidays!*', as pointed out by an operator.

support, is based on the idea of *instrumentation*, in terms of 'all of the problems encountered due to the choice and use of tools (techniques, means of operation, mechanisms) which allow governmental action to materialise and to be operational' (Lascoumes, *Le Galès*, 2004: 12). It is logical and even inevitable for the incremental – and not the strategic – approach which characterises the elaboration of ERDF programmes in the Brussels Region to be affected by power struggles. The interest lies in how such political programmes are developed in concrete practices and political approaches, while they present themselves as 'strategic projects'. This method of governance is not specific to the Brussels Region: it also exists on a larger scale such as that of the European Union, where similar approaches are found (Hubert, 2008), although the higher number of stakeholders and parameters obscures the mechanisms of power, whereas they are more easily identified on a local scale. More fundamentally, the very meaning of political action is questioned. The Promethean definition of a policy defending a vision and its own ideology is replaced by a *modus operandi* which claims to reject all ideologies by remaining neutral.

2) As mentioned above, the second shift of emphasis consists in not confining oneself to the analysis of formal procedures. Rather than giving impetus to new approaches which lie within the scope of a strategic vision, the use of ERDF projects leads to the reinforcement of existing development programmes in Brussels, dynamics and networks of stakeholders. There is a certain autonomy observed in the practices with respect to imposed rules and asserted principles (partnership, good governance, etc.), to the point of freeing themselves from them altogether: at times 'great ambitions encounter the banality of public action during everyday life' (Fontaine, Hassenteufel, 2002: 16). These observations suggest that we should not take the concept of territorial governance literally. Instead, we should view the processes and concrete approaches of public action in terms of power struggles, individual interests and crystallised but not rigid practices, which adjust – and adjust to – all actions and political programmes.

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