

REGIONAL ACTION PLAN WEST FLANDERS



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PART I: GENERAL INFORMATION

Project name	TraCS3
Partner organisation	Provincie West-Vlaanderen
Country	Belgium
NUTS2 region	Provincie West-Vlaanderen
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PART II: POLICY CONTEXT**Impact action plan**

The Action Plan aims to impact:

- Investment for Growth and Jobs programme
- European Territorial Cooperation programme
- Other regional development policy instrument

Name of policy instrument

- Initial policy instrument (2018): *West Deal*¹
- Updated policy instrument (2021): Economisch Masterplan 2020-2025
- Policy owner: Member of the Provincial Executive for Economy and International Cooperation, Province of West Flanders

Initial challenges

Actions under *West Deal* mainly foresee in activities/projects stimulating local/regional research , technological development and innovation via :

- Stimulation of local co-creation
- Supporting transfer and dissemination of new technologies with a focus on valorisation of knowledge and commercialisation

They however do not touch upon the importance of international knowledge exchange, the international need for cooperation in research and education, the international development of skills and advantages of optimised use of infrastructure.²

Description of policy instrument *West Deal*

The policy instrument *West Deal* (2013-2020) draws the strategic lines of the economic policy of the Province of West Flanders. The plan supports the sustainable economic transformation of West

¹ Application form TraCS3, version number 3, p. 10.

² Ibid., p. 15.

Flanders into a knowledge-driven economy, imbedded in a Flemish and international context. The plan consists of 6 so-called operations:

1. Operation Start West: start-up policy
2. Operation Factories of the Future (FoF): the adaptation of the Flemish New Industrial Policy into a West Flemish context
3. Operation West Gate: a future-proof logistics strategy
4. Operation Technical University Alliance West Flanders (TUA West): development of higher education cooperation in West Flanders
5. Operation West for Middle-Class: support for retail
6. Operation Westhoek: economic development of the Westhoek region

Combined, these 6 priorities are the answer to specific economic challenges West Flanders faced before the implementation of the policy instrument in 2013, e.g. a low start-up ratio, a shortage of multimodal logistics platforms, a need for qualified staff in companies, a lack of cooperation between higher education institutions, a need for future-proof and sustainable research infrastructures etc. Moreover, *West Deal* strives to create strong societal support.

Regional innovation infrastructure policy is tackled by the priorities FoF and TUA West. Operation FoF executes the industrial transformation strategy, with a strong focus on SMEs. It is based on Triple Helix cooperation and supports the transformation of the S3 clusters Food, Blue Energy, New Materials, Mechanical Engineering & Mechatronics, and Healthcare. The FoF support the development of new knowledge hubs (e.g. test facilities and incubators) and support SMEs, by promoting the usage of innovation facilities.

Operation TUA West acts as a facilitator between the university campuses of KU Leuven and Ghent University, and the University Colleges Vives and Howest. It aims to improve the cooperation between the knowledge institutions based in West Flanders, in order to support SMEs.

The FoF and TUA West are the focus point of *West Deal* in TraCS3. Given the importance of both the FoF and TUA West for the economy of West Flanders, the bridge they form between the economic policy and the innovation infrastructures in West Flanders and their contacts with the regional innovation infrastructures and knowledge institutions, these 2 organisations are key stakeholders of the TraCS3 project.

The achievements of *West Deal* in general, and the FoF and TUA West in specific, are numerous. The past 7 years a strong Triple Helix cooperation was developed between the Provincial Development Agency (POM), West Flemish SMEs and the academic world. Moreover, various innovation facilities were built due to the influence of both operations, e.g. *Ostend Science Park* in Ostend and the *Circular Materials Center* in Kortrijk. In fact, due to the operation of the FoF and TUA West, the road to a sustainable and future-orientated economic and innovative development of West Flanders has finally been taken, in accordance with the Flemish Economic and Science Policy.

The international dimension of the policy instrument 'West Deal' can be further fine-tuned and elaborated by creating European cooperation between public authorities, agencies, research centres and clusters from Europe's most dynamic regions. Creating learning experiences and possibilities in sharing research facilities and optimising infrastructure.

Description of policy instrument *Economisch Masterplan 2020-2025*

In 2020 the European economy was hit hard by the COVID-19 crisis and Brexit. Both developments have had a considerable impact on the open economy of (West)Flanders, e.g. an increase of

unemployment, a decrease of the number of start-ups, custom formalities for the food and textiles industry etc. To deal with these challenges, the unfinished elements of the *West Deal* policy instrument will be implemented more rapidly by a new policy instrument, the so-called *Economic Masterplan 2020-2025* (EMP).

The EMP consists of 3 pillars:

1. Sustainable SMEs, with a focus on:
 - a. Transport & Logistics
 - b. R&D
 - c. Retail
 - d. Acquisition of foreign entrepreneurs
 - e. Sustainable business parks
2. Human capital and inclusive employment, with a focus on:
 - a. Socio-economic consultation
 - b. Material equipment
3. Youth, with a focus on:
 - a. Revival of technical education
 - b. Global students
 - c. Start-up friendly environment

Innovation and innovation infrastructures are tackled under the R&D focus of the first pillar of the EMP, but are also present in other elements, e.g. acquisition of foreign entrepreneurs. Key is the transformation of West Flanders into a renowned region for demand-driven industrial applications, and internationalisation. To achieve this, new science parks will be developed, with a focus on new materials, food, healthcare, blue energy, manufacturing industry, drones and sustainable buildings.

PART III: LESSONS LEARNED

Internal lessons: the gap analysis

In 2019 14 interviews with regional stakeholders in West Flanders were done as part of the gap analysis. Aim of this analysis was to identify the needs of innovation infrastructures for the nearby future (3-5 years). The results of these 14 interviews showed a need for³:

- **Capacity:** This refers to the available employees within the organization, their training and capacities that are necessary to perform optimally within innovation infrastructure.
- **Financing:** Financing as a need implies not having sufficient financial resources to carry out research, purchase equipment, afford personnel costs and so on. Respondents mentioned that different funding channels exist (provincial co-financing, VLAIO, FWO, Interreg, Horizon2020, etc.), but that many are also absent, such as:
 - o Financing for test projects
 - o Financing for strategic test infrastructure¹⁶
 - o Financing for operationalizing innovations
 - o Funding for fundamental research
 - o Financing for medium-sized investments
 - o Financing for standard equipment
- **Communication:** Communication as a need is a fairly broad concept that must be considered on two levels. On the one hand there is *top-down* communication or communication from the government to the innovation infrastructure. On the other hand, there is *bottom-up* communication, or communication from the innovation infrastructure to the outside world (to users or to other innovation infrastructure). Regarding the former form of communication, respondents mentioned that there are too many different channels of communication around subsidy acquisition and this at the different policy levels, creating confusion and uncertainty.
- **Specific infrastructure:** Infrastructure implies, on the one hand, the physical spaces/locations of the innovation infrastructures and, on the other hand, the equipment at their disposal to - among others - conduct research, provide services and train students. Just as with communication, half of the stakeholders indicate that infrastructure is a major need. The constant technological evolutions and innovations ensure that a lot of infrastructure quickly becomes outdated. Keeping this up-to-date entails a lot of extra costs.
- **(International) Cooperation:** cooperation between innovation infrastructures, e.g. sharing knowledge and expertise; cooperation between companies

External lessons

1. Site visits/good practice examples

During phase 1 of the project, more than 30 good practices were shared between the partners.⁴ The site visits of the TraCS3 project can be grouped as follows:

- Infrastructure examples: physical locations for innovation, providing services and sharing knowledge, e.g. *Health Hub Roden* (Groningen), *Bremer Institut für Produktion und Logistik*,

³ Based on the internal report 'Een kwalitatieve gap analyse van de West-Vlaamse innovatie-infrastructuur' (2019).

⁴ Including the good practice examples from West Flanders.

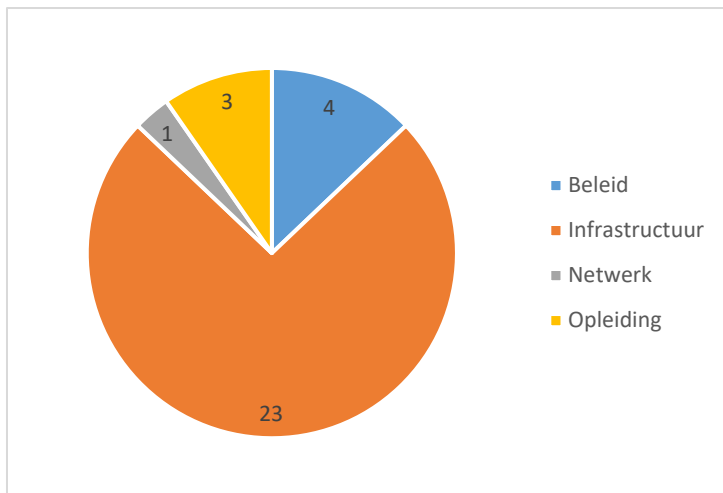


Figure 1: Good practice examples by type

Robotics Innovation Center (Bremen), ICAM (Romania), Kaunas Technology University (Lithuania) etc.

- Network examples, e.g. *Innovation Cluster Drachten (Groningen), DIH² (Tampere)*
- Education examples: higher education programmes that foster innovation in SMEs, e.g. *Entrepreneurship Bachelor (Bremen)*
- Policy examples: policy actions as good practice examples, e.g. *Smart Health (Tampere),*

In general, the site visits have a rather modest value for West Flanders, as many of the examples have already been developed and/or implemented in our region. The BIBA good practice of Bremen for example is very similar to the Sirris technological center in West Flanders. Other good practice examples are hard to implement in the own regional context. This is the case for the *Situational Picture of Innovation*, an innovation monitoring tool from Finland. Although such a monitoring tool could be of high importance to West Flanders (corresponding to the communication and cooperation need of the gap analysis) it is impossible to transfer it to the own regional context due to a lack of up to date data (result of stakeholder meeting discussion on December 17, 2020).

2. Interregional workshops and World Café discussions

Of importance for West Flanders was the World Café discussion organised on February 12, 2019, in West Flanders. Topic of the discussion was the usage of regional innovation infrastructure. A key conclusion was that innovation infrastructure throughout the partner regions is under used, compared to the available capacity. A survey in West Flanders showed that 35% of the respondents faced under using of their innovation infrastructure. The same was true for the other partner regions. To tackle this, the suggestion was made to develop interregional overviews of regional innovation infrastructure, mentioning the available expertise and services.

3. Policy actions of partner regions

Next to the site visits, interregional workshops, and World Café discussions, policy examples were shared during the start of every partnership meeting. During this introduction each partner presented their innovation policy and policy actions being undertaken to support innovation infrastructures in their region. One presentation was of particular interest to West Flanders, as it described the development of Digital Innovation Hubs in Bremen (partnership meeting in Bremen, May 27-29, 2019). However, the development of a Digital Innovation Hub is being facilitated by the Flemish Government via the EFRO Vlaanderen programme. The Bremen example therefore cannot be implemented in West Flanders independently, as it is coordinated by the Flemish Government in the different provinces.

4. Informal and bilateral talks with project partners

During the network moments of TraCS3, ideas were exchanged bilaterally between partners. Of interest to West Flanders was a discussion with the LP on the development of an innovation ecosystem based on Quadruple Helix cooperation, during the partnership meeting in Bremen, on May 27-29,

2019. Further information was shared online, e.g. the book *Engaged. Naar een krachtige regio*. This bilateral exchange of ideas is of interest as it combined solutions to needs identified in the gap analysis (e.g. lack of financing, communication and cooperation) and the EMP policy instrument, with links to the Flemish and European innovation policy. Other important bilateral talks took place online on May 31, 2021 with Bremen and on June 4, 2021 with Tampere. Topic of both discussions was the development of a visualisation tool, related to the above-mentioned World Café discussion on the usage of innovation infrastructures.

PART IV: ENVISAGED ACTION – DEVELOPMENT OF A VISUALISATION TOOL FOR INNOVATION INFRASTRUCTURES

Background and project relevance

The proposed action is essential to deal with specific challenges described in Part II Policy context, i.e.:

- West Deal: the importance of international knowledge exchange, the international need for cooperation in research and education and advantages of optimised use of infrastructure.
- EMP 2020-2025:
 - 1.b: R&D
 - 1.c: Acquisition of foreign entrepreneurs

In addition, the proposed action is of relevance to the gap analysis, i.e. the need for communication and cooperation.

The action is a direct result of interaction within TraCS3, as it is based on two (informal) good practice examples of partners and on the results of the World Café discussion held in West Flanders on February 19, 2019, and offers a solution to various needs identified in the policy instrument at the start of the project and in the gap analysis.

Description

Development of an online tool that visualises all the physical innovation infrastructures active in West Flanders and the partner regions. The tool will have three important features:

- Geographical information: all the innovation infrastructures will be visualised on an online map, clustered by S3-sector, using different icons for different clusters
- Service information: for each innovation infrastructure the available expertise, services, user types and contact details will be listed
- Filters: the possibility to filter the data by sector, region, services and user types

Such visualisation tool is based on the World Café discussion in West Flanders (February 19, 2019), and the (informal) good practice examples of iaw Bremen University and The Baltic Institute of Finland (see before). These examples will be used as a starting point, to develop a similar tool for the innovation infrastructures in West Flanders. However, we aim to scale this up to the whole TraCS3 partnership, listing all the available innovation infrastructures.

The development of this tool is useful as:

1. An improvement of the EMP 2020-2025, i.e. for Pillar 1 (Investment in sustainable entrepreneurship), action D (acquisition of foreign entrepreneurs): the tool will help to attract foreign companies and investments as it will show the available innovation expertise in West Flanders, which is an important trigger for foreign investors. As such, the tool will serve as a mean to achieve the policy objectives of the EMP, improving the acquisition of foreign entrepreneurs and knowledge to West Flanders. At this moment, acquisition is a policy objective of the EMP, however the way to achieve this, is not clarified yet. The visualisation tool will be a solution to this problem.
2. An aid to *West Deal*, i.e. the importance of international knowledge exchange, the international need for cooperation in research and education and advantages of optimised use of infrastructure.
3. A service to SMEs: SMEs in need of innovation expertise can use the tool to see what expertise is available in their region and in other regions of Europe.

4. A service to innovation infrastructures: the tool will help to further promote the expertise and services of innovation infrastructures regionally and interregionally. In this way, the tool will help to attract (foreign) users. As such, the tool is an answer to the identified need for communication and cooperation in the gap analysis, and will help optimise the use of the infrastructures.
5. An aid to the development of interregional innovation ecosystems: the tool will help connecting innovation infrastructures in West Flanders to innovation infrastructures in the partner regions.
6. An aid to the development of new European partnerships: dissemination of the tool within the department of Economy, European and International Cooperation of the Province of West Flanders will strengthen our project advisors with knowledge on specific partners across Europe.

A prototype of the visualisation tool was developed during phase 1 of TraCS3, using Google Maps.⁵ The results look promising, however filter options are not possible and only the good practice examples of partners are included, instead of all the innovation infrastructures. Therefore, we will develop the tool using ArcGis, like our Bremen partners, and use the mapping analysis of our partners as additional input.

Stakeholders

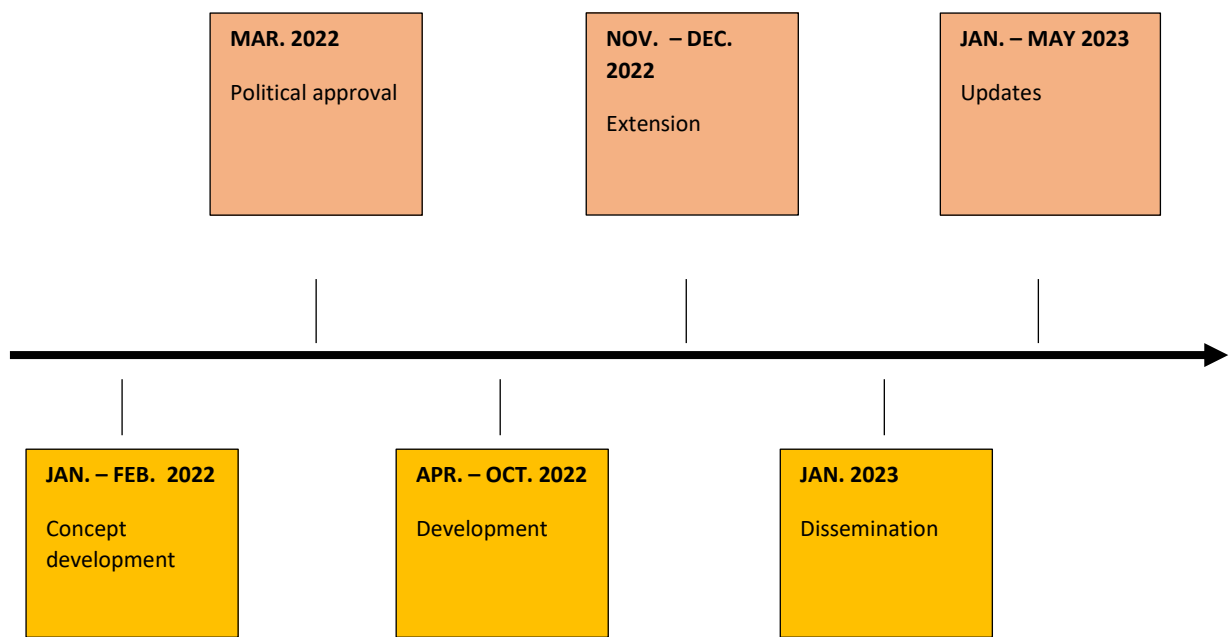
- Partner regions of TraCS3
- GIS Department of the Province of West Flanders
- POM West Flanders
- TUA West
- KennisWest
- Knowledge institutions, e.g. KU Leuven, Ghent University, Vives and Howest

⁵ See <https://www.google.com/maps/d/edit?mid=1Qg9JOLz5JZeseS5j7oiMgwDIkj0PE9ic&usp=sharing>

Sub actions and timeframe

Sub action	Description	Stakeholders
1. Concept development	<p>The first sub action focusses on the development of a conceptual framework for the visualisation tool. Important topics that will be tackled during this sub action are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Geographical demarcation: defining the geographical scope of the tool. Besides West Flanders, we hope to extend the tool to our TraCS3 partners and to some cross-border areas, e.g. Hauts-de-France. The exact geographical coverage will be discussed during this sub action. - Connecting regional initiatives: in West Flanders, different initiatives are focussing on promoting innovation infrastructures and visualising them. However, they are fragmented and offer no in-depth picture of the innovation landscape. During this sub action the existing regional initiatives will be connected. - Defining ownership: defining which regional actor will own and update the visualisation tool - Defining filter options/data types 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - POM West Flanders - TUA West - Knowledge institutions
2. Political approval	<p>In the second sub action, the conceptual framework will be presented to the Member of the Provincial Executive for Economy and International Cooperation of the Province of West Flanders for approval.</p>	<p>Member of the Provincial Executive for Economy and International Cooperation</p>
3. Development of the tool	<p>Based on the findings of the first sub action a visualisation tool for the regional innovation infrastructures, i.e. West Flanders, will be developed.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - GIS department of the Province of West Flanders - External service provider (if needed) - law Bremen University
4. Extension of the tool	<p>Adding extra data to the visualisation tool, i.e. innovation infrastructures from TraCS3 partners and cross-border regions, e.g. Hauts-de-France</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - TraCS3 partners - POM West Flanders

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - TUA West
5. Dissemination	During this sub action a communication plan will be developed and implemented for the internal and international dissemination of the visualisation tool.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - POM West Flanders - TUA West - KennisWest - TraCS3 partners
6. Updates	The visualisation tool will be continuously updated, e.g. new innovation infrastructures will be added, even after the end of the project.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - POM West Flanders - TUA West - KennisWest - TraCS3 partners



Budget

€2.000 – €3.000

Funding resources

Own funding resources; EMP 2020-2025