FINAL REPORT MAARKEBEEK
TRANSLATION OF THE MANAGEMENT SUMMARY

For the full report see "PP2 WP3 A3.2 O 3.2 Final report Maarkebeekvallei_eindrapport_def.pdf"

The Maarkebeek Valley area concept planning process has undergone an evaluation exercise, as commissioned by the Province of East Flanders. The planning process attempted to link the reduction of flood risks as much as possible to other spatial challenges in the area (space for farming, housing, experience, ...), while paying attention to local circumstances and values, in order to create a coherent and integrated target vision for the valley area. To that end, an open process was conducted between 2015 and 2017 with the various users of space in the area.

This evaluation is part of the Interreg 2 Seas programme-funded STAR2Cs project, which is based on the observation that climate adaptation plans at local and supra-local level often remain only words on paper because their measures now require heavy investment in many cases, while the benefits become apparent only in the longer term. The project therefore seeks to develop a climate adaptation planning methodology that increases the likelihood of an effective implementation process.

The first part of the two-part evaluation involves undertaking a critical process-oriented review of the decision-making process focused on the Maarkebeek Valley area concept First of all, an evaluation was made of the planning process itself.
The effectiveness and efficiency of the approach adopted were examined in the light of the process analysis.

The implementation capacity of the area concept itself was also reviewed in order to determine whether it provides sufficient impetus for effective and efficient implementation. The evaluation highlights the strengths, weaknesses and underused potential.

Part two of the research study provides recommendations for the development of a planning process for an area concept on climate adaptation. These are based on an analysis of the Maarkebeek Valley, a review of other reference processes (Kerkebeek Valley, Demer Valley and Kleine Nete Valley), the expertise of the research team and insights from the literature.

The evaluation insights will lend support to the start of and approach to a new decision-making process for drawing up a Zwalm Valley river contract. The Province of East Flanders is coordinating this process in partnership with the Flemish Environment Agency (VMM).

While not being a goal in itself, the recommendations do seek to provide guidance and insights that can be taken into account and applied in practice. A crucial factor in the start-up phase of a process is to make a deliberate choice (jointly) about the design and approach. A programme-based approach is better than a project-oriented one when an area-specific focus and area-based programme are being pursued.

A programme-based approach is aimed not only at maintaining a degree of flexibility and room for manoeuvre, but also at realising where it is possible and necessary. A typical feature of a programme-based approach is the creation of cohesion and focusing on cohesion.

What approach is adopted will depend on a number of factors, including, of course, what is already available and the specific circumstances in which we operate.

It is invariably a case of customised solutions, while the process is generally never started from scratch. It is important to focus on the common task and objectives of the process and to define them. In other words, what we want to achieve together with our partners and, above all, what we do not want to achieve.
Attention is paid to the interests of the partners and stakeholders as a result of defining the scope and objectives. A shared goal is essential for ensuring the various stakeholders are willing to join and engage in the process. The success of a feasible area-based action and programme depends on the success of the individual initiatives and projects and the commitment of the various projects and stakeholders. Supervision and guidance should be focused on managing the process dynamics and movement. Process management is mainly a question of facilitating cooperation, (internal) communication and decision-making, seeking to strike a balance between efficiency (and progress) and commitment.

It is important to recognise that uncertainty will invariably be an integral part of complex planning processes or tasks. Hence the need to create the necessary flexibility and room for manoeuvre to develop sufficient adaptive capacity to respond to dynamics and opportunities.This also means 'hassle' and raising issues and getting to work on them effectively. The importance of this level of flexibility and openness has to be appreciated in view of the dynamic environment and background.
This dynamic includes the engagement and disengagement of the various partners or stakeholders. Complex processes call for a process-based approach to work and thinking in terms of movement. To that end, it is worth bearing in mind the key principle of divergence, convergence and consolidation. The role and structure of vision formation in the process and the methods used (design-driven research, for example) should also be investigated from the very outset.

An area-based action urgently requires a clarification of the role of vision formation and its scope during the initial phase. The vision gradually becomes more precise and defined throughout several of these processes. Additional and targeted research is sometimes needed to establish an overarching vision and decision-making framework. Placed in the service of the process, the necessary framework and transparency of the decision-making process, these investigations make a specific contribution to the need for feasibility and achievement. It is advisable to make smart and parallel connections and to use targeted research that is necessary in any case or makes a contribution in the interests of progress, feasibility and support. Making a provision for this during the already intensive and participatory process itself usually saves a great deal of time, while boosting the support for the next steps to be taken.

A vision does not in itself need to have the formal status of being 'legally enforceable' or 'binding'. The vision - or parts of it - acquires status through field operations and legally enforceable instruments having legal effects, such as a spatial implementation plan (SIP). The vision also needs to be more binding. It is important to achieve coherence between different (sectoral) visions and agendas within an area and amongst stakeholders. These obviously have their own points of view, contexts and dynamics and have different objectives and time perspectives. Partners are prepared to commit themselves insofar as they can recognise themselves in the vision, gain something from this and see their own interests reflected. The vision creation process should not be a goal in itself. Rather than being a static concept, the ultimate image should provide sufficient room for manoeuvre for the future. It is a tool for bringing the partners together and providing a guiding principle for the further development and implementation of projects and initiatives.

Rather than providing momentum at the end of a process or area-based action, a programme design should be in place right from the start.
The various actions and efforts included in the programme also cover those very activities that have already been started (together) within the process, thereby helping

to facilitate a sense of shared ownership and shared responsibilities.
The design of the programme will take account of the relationship and interdependence between the different actions, efforts and projects as well as the extent to which they help to achieve the objectives.
Agendas and ongoing actions or processes are synchronised and consolidated so they can be integrated into the programme. The programme offers a phased approach.
It is important to make a shift early on from the implementation of abstract objectives to a (spatial) action programme. Defining subprojects and actions increasingly ensures a focus on achievements, rather than getting stuck in an abstract concept(s) or vision(s).

The trick is to strike a balance between the development of a vision and a focus on achievement, taking into account feasibility and the level of support. It is particularly important to grasp opportunities and achievements that are already (partly) in line with the common task and objectives, with programming playing a key role in this respect. Visible results and progress towards achieving them play a key role in the (lasting) dynamics of the process. This makes a significant contribution to the required commitments and (shared) ownership of the stakeholders involved.
Making a clear distinction between a programme level with a process-oriented approach and a supporting 'project level' with a more project-based approach (projects, actions, efforts, initiatives) may encourage the automatic recourse to a result-oriented approach. The distinction has implications for the independence of initiators, shared responsibilities, leaving powers where they are, strengthening capacity,...

It is therefore not the process managers who are the driving force behind specific actions and projects - in most cases even better not - but other partners, organisations or even colleagues, assigning responsibilities to their rightful places and ensuring they remain there.

The 'project level' also includes processes for specific project areas or areas of interest and actions that are also needed for this purpose, such as design-driven research, integrated planning processes, impact assessments, targeted research, feasibility and instruments,.... A key concern is the need to shift more quickly to a (phased) approach to implementation. The development of an (area-based) vision - even in the short term, and not only in the long term - does not rule out the possibility that (sub)projects may be resumed or completed even before the vision has been "approved", especially when priorities and clear interests are at stake. However, attention should be paid to the question of interference and interaction as a result of including this in the more general process and by making smart connections. A goal-oriented approach is obviously another important factor: focusing together on priorities and making courageous choices according to the contribution to the programme's task and objectives.

The regular and systematic inclusion of a suitable process reflection and evaluation mechanism is both a desirable and appropriate objective. Not only implicitly as is the case today, but also explicitly and even as part of a team, as this may deliver significant added value by helping to identify bottlenecks and opportunities in good time and, but above all, being in a position to make the necessary adjustments to the process as well. Hence the importance of paying attention to several areas of the process. Apart from the more substantive aspects, this also means focusing on cooperation, process organisation, dynamics, involvement or the degree of acceptance. This kind of reflection is a boon not only in terms of flexibility but also in the case of a result-oriented approach, and should also make it possible for changes to be made (as a result of changing circumstances or insights, for example).

The collaboration and team dynamics between the partners and stakeholders in such complex processes are of crucial and decisive importance for success.

The success of a collective creation process stands or falls on effective multilevel inter-team and intra-team cooperation and therefore also on personal interactions.

As each team has its own dynamic characteristics, it is vital to (continue to) pay sufficient attention to effective teamworking. It is often implicitly assumed that effective teamwork is synonymous with substantive collaborative efforts. The principles and challenges of team development and cooperation for 'established' teams and departments within organisations apply equally to (core) teams within a temporary partnership and network. This is an aspect that is often ignored or underestimated, while the challenges are even greater. Special attention must be paid to the need to deal with any setbacks and issues that may arise. Because setbacks and complications are part and parcel of such processes and people and organisations tend to deal with these in different ways, it is useful to discuss a joint approach to tackling these setbacks from the outset. The chances of success are all the more likely if everyone understands that setbacks may be part of the equation, that this is not a tragedy or failure, but something to discuss together and resolve. Little attention is often paid in practice to arrangements for cooperation. As the arrangements for interaction and cooperation are usually undocumented and self-evident, it is not always evident that this kind of process involves close cooperation with people from other organisations or departments who sometimes have very different cultures. Temporary cooperation initiatives often raise the issue of loyalties being split between one's own organisation/department on the one hand and the cooperation on the other.

Team conflicts are also an integral part of the dynamics of cooperation, as signs of something requiring attention and often owing to the difficulty of coping with diversity, differences and contradictions.
Hence the need for conflict management in teams to be adopted as a deliberate and active approach. This means learning to deal with conflicts in a viable and transparent way, dealing constructively with 'hassle'. A conciliation-oriented approach to (potential) conflict issues can make a significant contribution here. Several roles are incorporated in complex processes and a wide range of tasks have to be carried out. This is a complex and challenging task within the process coordination framework. The partners coordinating the process have to think carefully about the roles and responsibilities to be undertaken, on the basis of process management as well.
Roles may need to be duplicated, depending on the complexity and development of the process.

Making a distinction between more process-based expertise (cf. programme manager) and more substantive tasks can help in this respect, as other kinds of expertise are also expected. The trend is erring more on the side of managing large-scale, complex area-based actions or visions within a team and partner relationship. The key is to create a high-performance organisational and consultation structure without adding to the administrative burdens and workload. Where these exist, they can be based on existing platforms, particularly in the case of administrative coordination.
The challenge is to avoid creating unnecessarily complex consultation platforms without sacrificing a sufficient level of coordination, coherence and social support. The role and objectives of the various consultation and decision-making platforms must be clarified in order to avoid any duplication.

Largely determined by the decision-making steps in the process, an internal communication strategy should help foster openness and exchanges.
It is best not to undermine a project's own dynamics and also to include the appropriate project-level consultation platforms.

A complex process guidance or management exercise often involves facilitating progress and decision-making without having the power to enforce decisions.
It is crucial to ensure continuous monitoring and the involvement of administrations, in

particular urban and municipal authorities. It is essential to keep in touch with the administrative culture, political undercurrents and sensitive issues. This also requires room for manoeuvre in the process in order to make choices such as staying on course, scaling back, being open to negotiations and compromises, and the engagement and disengagement of stakeholders, for example. It is best from the outset to gain an understanding of decision-making and adjustments to the decision-making process, and to reach agreements on mutual understanding here, too: procedural rules, powers, dealing with any escalation or a lack of consensus.

The role and objectives of a policy or steering group should be identified, while careful attention should be paid to their composition. A steering group is responsible not only for formal decision-making when crossing milestones but also for essential adjustments to the process (scope, objectives, resources, ...). A process manager may also be explicitly entrusted with these responsibilities and powers, depending on the terms of reference he or she receives from the steering group or client, whereupon regular feedback and a validation of any changes of course will continue to be necessary.

As process management is a key factor in the decision-making process, sufficient time and energy should be provided for the purpose.
Also taking account of the political framework and continuity during the process.
This can help determine the approach and requires the appropriate amount of time and energy for coordinating with the various authorities.
The success of a project depends on reaching agreements on a regular basis and committing them to paper. Equally important is the need to streamline the decision-making process and conclude agreements.

A structural approach to participation is required for complex processes.
One of the key factors is to develop a target-group-oriented participation strategy on the basis of the task and objectives, with a stakeholder and force field analysis, and to define the level of participation. The next step is to determine which methods and working methods are best suited to achieve their goals. Participatory working formats and methods therefore provide a means and not an end in themselves. An essential focus of a participation strategy and approach is the need to include it in the process strategy and not to use it only once in the initial phase, but to use it dynamically throughout the process.

Nevertheless, as participation and methods have their own strengths, customised solutions should always be provided (also within the process) and pitfalls should be avoided. Participation should not be seen as the number one solution for creating broad support and ownership. As mentioned above, support and ownership are created by focusing on multiple factors. The serious question that has to be addressed about this type of participation is the heavy workload and investment involved.

Communication efforts represent a major component of complex processes and especially area-based action. First of all, a communication strategy has to be developed and a communication plan provided. It is best to use a mix of offline and online channels, using the communication channels of the various partners as much as possible. A specific communication working group could even be set up to coordinate and streamline the communication strategy and its development.
Apart from external communication activities, internal communication and information-sharing among the partners should also be part of the communication strategy, which is at least as important, if not even more so, if close cooperation is to be established.

The insights and recommendations resulting from this study provide guidelines for the implementation of the goal and challenges as formulated in the Province of East Flanders' Key Memorandum on Space - 2050. In particular, they stimulate the fields of activity defining the way in which the province seeks to implement its substantive goals: spatial governance, a more robust area-oriented approach, working according to a result-oriented strategy,...