

NETWORKING AND GOVERNANCE AS SUCCESS FACTORS FOR RURAL TOURISM? THE PERCEPTION OF TOURISM ENTREPRENEURS IN THE *VLAAMSE ARDENNEN*

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Abstract

Rural tourism is dominated by SMEs. This is also the case in Belgium. These SMEs often experience difficulties in terms of exploiting technology, constrained managerial capabilities, low productivity, etc. In order to overcome these problems, the international literature insists on collaboration ('coopetition') as part of a solution as well as on the part of institutional intermediaries in facilitating networking among the stakeholders in (rural) tourism. Therefore, the theoretical framework of this contribution focuses on collaboration and networking as well as governance, with particular attention to brokers and (their) leverage tools.

This framework underpins an empirical research among tourism entrepreneurs in the area, called the *Vlaamse Ardennen* (Flemish Ardennes - Belgium). The results highlight the attitude of tourism entrepreneurs towards participation, importance of brokers and commitment in tourism development as well as the impact of a white paper as a leverage tool for local tourism. The conclusions show a differentiated picture but the main finding refers to a gap between visions, wishes and complaints about communication and participation on the one hand and actual attitudes in practice on the other hand, a strong willingness to participate seldom being turned into real action. The direct collaborative capacity building among the tourism industry stakeholders and based on the white paper incentive, was and is rather disappointing. But it resulted, unexpectedly, in a more effective and stronger leadership among the public sector as well as in a better understanding of the tourism business among institutional agents.

Keywords

rural tourism, SMEs, collaboration, participation, governance, brokers, white paper, *Vlaamse Ardennen* (Flemish Ardennes)

Résumé

Le tourisme rural est dominé fréquemment par des PME. Cela est également le cas en Belgique. Les PME ont des difficultés avec le mise en œuvre d'applications technologiques, des capacités limitées d'ingénierie, une productivité basse, etc. Afin de surmonter ces problèmes, la littérature internationale insiste sur la collaboration ('co-opetition') comme un pas vers la solution, ainsi que sur la part des intermédiaires institutionnels afin de faciliter la collaboration entre les agents (stakeholders) du tourisme en zone rurale. Cela explique l'accent sur le travail en réseau et sur la gouvernance, avec une attention particulière aux intermédiaires (brokers) et les (leurs) instruments leviers.

Ce cadre supporte une recherche empirique parmi des entrepreneurs touristiques dans la région appelée Vlaamse Ardennen (Flandre - Belgique). Les résultats mettent en évidence des attitudes divergentes parmi les entrepreneurs touristiques locaux concernant la participation, l'importance des intermédiaires (dont les « brokers ») et l'implication dans le développement touristique. Ils soulignent aussi l'impact d'un livre blanc comme instrument de levier pour le tourisme local. Les conclusions donnent une image nuancée mais la principale constatation renvoie à l'existence d'un divorce entre les opinions, les volontés et les plaintes concernant la communication et la participation, d'une part, et les attitudes actuelles, d'autre part, caractérisées par un désir de participation qui se traduit rarement en action réel. L'amélioration de la collaboration entre les acteurs du secteur touristique, basée sur la rédaction d'un livre blanc, était et est plutôt décevante. Mais cela a eu pour résultat inattendu un leadership plus ferme et efficace parmi le secteur public et une compréhension inattendue de l'entreprise touristique parmi les acteurs institutionnels.

Mots-clés

tourisme rural, PME, collaboration, participation, gouvernance, intermédiaires (brokers), livre blanc, *Vlaamse Ardennen*

I. SMALL BUSINESSES IN RURAL TOURISM: ALL THAT GLITTERS IS NOT GOLD

Tourism, and rural tourism in particular, is dominated by small businesses. This has been stated in the past and is still valid in the present as the following quotes indicate: “As a matter of fact the European tourism industry is not dominated by SMEs, rather by SEs, by small enterprises. 94% of European tourism enterprises employ less than 10 persons!” (Kohl, 2002: 25), “SMEs are prevalent in the hospitality industry: in Europe, SMEs employ 83 per cent of all hospitality workers” (Buhalis & Peters, 2006: 118), “For every large-scale national or international company operating in travel and tourism, there are at least 1000 micro-businesses... Although the big players dominate tourism expenditure, the smallest players collectively generate perhaps a third of total tourism revenue, and much more locally” (Middleton *et al.*, 2009: 44).

Furthermore these S(M)Es are mostly family businesses, especially in rural regions (Getz & Carlsen, 2005).

The smaller the tourism company, the more it shows a business to customer (B2C) service image and the greater the chance such a business is owned by a local. Connections with other entrepreneurs in the surroundings are important so as to reduce leakages towards other regions or even countries and to stimulate a multiplier effect on local employment and income creation (Getz & Carlsen, 2000 & 2005; Vanhove, 2005). Certain research results do confirm this hypothesis (Wanhill, 2000) but a caveat should be entered in the sense that these mutual links between entrepreneurs (in tourism) may not be taken for granted. Small and/or local businesses are not, by definition, willing to collaborate, even when situated in proximity to each other (Hall C.M., 2005). Since S(M)Es are predominant in the tourism industry, especially in rural areas, a number of characteristics, typical of small businesses, make the (rural) tourism industry vulnerable, such as: “*little or no formal qualifications; little access to formal sources of capital; family resources most used; over-reliance on non-paid family labor; lack of formal business plans and strategies for future growth; no clear marketing strategies; often no marketing takes place; number of business owners semi-retired; driven by non-economic motives*” (Shaw & Williams, 1998: 248). Recently the OECD confirmed difficulties in fields such as financing, exploiting technology, managerial capabilities, productivity and adapting to regulations (OECD, 2010) as the most persistent traditional problems among SMEs.

Furthermore, the non-entrepreneurial attitude of some SMEs, especially among rural B&B owners, sometimes hinders an effective contribution to the competitiveness of a rural region as a destination. This has to do with the fact that “*the tourism industry in particular attracts numerous entrepreneurs with predominantly*

lifestyle motives.” (Getz & Carlsen, 2005: 238). Per se, there is nothing wrong with tourism (family) businesses that prefer ‘lifestyle’ to profit maximization and growth but the danger exists that these businesses lack a sound business structure as well as a drive for quality or innovation. A non-entrepreneur (Shaw & Williams, 1998) who becomes a consumer instead of a producer of his own product is rarely interested in (sustainable) tourism development of the region. Of course the picture is seldom completely black or white and a non-entrepreneur may also contribute to conservation and authenticity.

In addition to that, many visitors explore rural areas driven by a kind of ‘rural idyll’ which means that they expect not only an attractive natural environment, characterized by peace and quiet, but also “*repertoires of older ways of life and cultures that respond to the postmodern quest for an antidote to the anomie of urban living*” (Cawley & Gillmore, 2008: 317). Since this is not necessarily what rural areas are, or inhabitants of these areas aim at, there is a risk of a mismatch between supply and demand. If communities do adapt to the demand, there is a threat of turning the small (rural) communities “*into playgrounds for the middle class*” or even gentrification unless they resist, negotiate and reinvent their position (George *et al.*, 2009: 154-155).

Finally, rural isn’t necessarily synonymous with *remote* but it is not exceptional for rural areas to be situated too far from urban agglomerations to attract visitors for leisure on a regular basis. In such cases accessibility may be a problem and therefore a number of services that are expected - even taken for granted - by visitors, may be simply absent (North & Smallbone, 2000; Getz & Carlsen, 2005). It is also important to acknowledge that rural tourism is much larger than farm based tourism. Therefore, rural tourism implies more than a stay on the farm and the development of some agricultural products. This implies the development of the destination linked with a national or even international value chain (Hall C.M., 2005). Unlike large tourism companies or tourist resorts, SMEs lack resources for winning new clients by carrying out targeted marketing.

These inconveniences and problems are not insurmountable and rural tourism has high development potentials as is confirmed by many scholars (Butler, 2003; Lordkipanidze *et al.*, 2004; Hall D. *et al.*, 2005; Garrod *et al.*, 2006). The precondition is that the rural community (which is larger than solely the entrepreneurs in tourism) finds a way to compensate for the absence of economies of scale and, more generally, for the typical disadvantages of tourism entrepreneurship and development in a rural context. One of the main recommended strategies is to develop collaborative networks and tools that motivate, stimulate and facilitate collaboration of stakeholders directly and indirectly involved in tourism (Wilson *et al.*, 2001).

Therefore, in the following sections we will focus on the utility of and preconditions for networking (in general and in tourism in particular) (section II). Furthermore, we will elaborate the proposition that successful networks are dependent on facilitating actors and proper governance (section III). After this framework based on international literature, we will present the methodology of our research in the *Vlaamse Ardennen* (section IV) followed by results from a survey among local businesses in the tourism industry so as to identify attitudes towards collaboration among tourism entrepreneurs, between tourism business and institutional actors as well as strategies and tools to enhance collaboration and participation in tourism policy (section V). This will be rounded off with the most striking conclusions, put into a more reflective perspective (section VI).

II. BENEFITS OF NETWORKING

The concept of *coopetition* is a contraction of ‘competition’ and ‘cooperation’ (Edgell & Haenisch, 1995: vii) and implies that entrepreneurs may be competitors “when possible” but, at the same time, can collaborate “when needed”. Since global competition makes it hard for small, independent (tourism) companies to survive, the possibility of sharing costs may open interesting perspectives for strengthening competitiveness. The same goes for combining certain resources such as information, knowhow, management and/or marketing skills (Hall C.M., 2005).

As far as networks and networking are concerned, many definitions are used but, despite that, the notion remains rather fuzzy (Vanneste & Cabus, 2007). One of the interesting definitions, especially in the framework of this contribution, can be found in the work of Yeung: “*I view networks as both a governance structure and a process of socialization through which disparate actors and organizations are connected in a coherent manner for mutual benefits and synergies.*” (Yeung, 2000: 302).

One of the major issues is the large variety of network types. Szarka (1990:11) provides us with a useful typology, making a distinction between i) *exchange networks*, within which companies implement commercial transactions among each other; in that case the entrepreneurs are *trading partners*, often working together for supply or outsourcing or sub-contracting (Vanneste & Cabus, 2003; Vanneste & Vanderstraeten, 2008); ii) *communication networks* within which entrepreneurs or organizations share information or provide third parties with information; in that case it is not necessary that the entrepreneurs are connected by commercial activities or transactions; public authorities, institutional organizations and other stakeholders’ groups (e.g. associations from the local community) can participate in this type of networking; iii) *social networks* which do not cover links between entrepreneurs, except for very informal contacts

and ties of friendship. Although this type of network is non-economic in nature, it may evolve towards economic relationships. The final outcome of networking can give occasion to the development of several formal forms of networks such as strategic alliances with the clear objective of exploiting a profitable activity together. A typical characteristic of this kind of alliance is that the partners work together to realize objectives to go beyond their own objectives. This type of collaboration is not easy to implement and is dependant on several factors. Pansiri describes them as follows: complementarities (differences and similarities), competence (knowledge, insights and skills), commitment, control and trust (2008: 101). As mentioned before, commitment implies, as in a marriage, that the partners will be able to realize more together than the sum of individual efforts. The possibility to be able to control the effectiveness of the collaboration is of utmost importance and the possibility to exert control on other partners, feeds trust among those partners.

As a result of networking, a cluster can develop, especially if networks are territorially based and show a certain degree of concentration in space. Such a cluster may involve a conscious policy by public authorities or other institutional agents or can develop from a spontaneous collaboration among companies that are characterized by spatial proximity. When networking or clustering is stimulated, a particular aim is on its grass roots: “*The purpose of tourism clusters and networks is to highlight the availability of certain activities in one destination or region and to get SMEs that would normally work in isolation to co-operate and build a successful tourism product in the locality.*” (Novelli *et al.*, 2006: 1143).

One should not forget that networking, although not necessarily connected to a region, can be anchored within a particular area. If this is the case, this may imply a movement and pathway of consumption of visitors or tourists within a destination (Hall C.M, 2005). This path not only benefits several sites within a destination over time but has the potential to contribute to real regional development. Of course, one has to make sure that this networked territory matches with a tourism destination. In this way, the visitor experiences the destination as an entity in a clear and comprehensive way and contributes to a more successful stay in the region. This stimulates repeat visits.

Finally a combination of networking and innovation can be found. Of course, innovation is as important in tourism as it is for the economy in general: “*Tourism is one of the sectors of the service economy that is in a constant state of change and flux, and innovation and change are vital if businesses are to grow and provide the diversity of products to accommodate changing patterns of tourism consumption.*” (Page & Connell, 2006: 262). In many cases entrepreneurs need to be facilitated as far as discussions about new ideas for tourism development

in their (destination) area are concerned. Therefore, a framework and tools enabling collaborative networks, taken together under the umbrella concept of 'governance' will be dealt with in the next section.

III. THE 'GOVERNANCE' PERSPECTIVE

Only a few decades ago 'governance' made its entry in social science as a concept with a content beyond the notion of 'government' (Lequin, 2001: 76). While 'government' is clearly linked to public authorities, the concept of governance focuses on the steering function or at least on all kinds of influences exerted by a whole range of organizations (which does not exclude government agencies) on different levels.

Fennell and Dowling (2003) identify *governance* as an amalgam of regulations by policy agents, institutional organizations, management and leadership, while according to Painter and Goodwin "*Governance emphasizes that regulation is a continuous process of governing which is, above all, embedded in a wide set of practices and is far larger than the state and the agencies of formally elected local political institutions.*" (Painter & Goodwin, 1995: 337).

The agents within the 'governance' concept are, according to Shaw and Williams, among others: companies (employers as well as employees); trading associations and sector organizations; local, regional and national volunteers; public authorities (Shaw & Williams, 2002: 137). This confirms Morrison's list of organizations that may be considered potential partners in networking with particular advantages for small (tourism) firms: wholesalers, firms and organizations from the tourism industry, public authorities or agencies and voluntary organizations or NGOs (Morrison, 1994: 22).

The concept of governance is also related to community-based development and participative approaches (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008), more or less reducing vertical hierarchy to vertical coordination (Bertucci, 2002). It has been pointed out that participation can be situated on different levels from being informed to real co-creation of plans. In other words, *community-based development* (CD) refers to the process by which the (local) community participates in an active way in the development of the community's future and the way that tourism is attributed a role in it. In such circumstances, stress is on the process and not on an action plan which is considered a final stage.

By involving many people one tries to avoid tourism development producing winners and losers and benefits going to a restricted number of entrepreneurs while (large) costs are taken by the community. Furthermore, "*the community development approach also develops processes and skills that encourage all members of the community, including entrepreneurs to make decisions and select priorities together. Through this process, the*

community moves forward as a 'group'" (George *et al.*, 2009: 229). This contributes to a sense of pleasure and satisfaction among locals and tourists.

Community development is also related to alternative development based on less authoritarian and more facilitating kinds of leadership. Facilitating leadership encourages participation and simplifies empowerment and change (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008; George *et al.*, 2009) but also brings responsibilities for the different stakeholders in the community. Furthermore, research shows that this kind of approach stimulates skills, trust and dialogue among 'peers'. Therefore procedures should be put in place that assemble the stakeholders who are willing to engage in this (tourism) development. In general several meetings are organized during which experiences and points of view should be sought about the present strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the community and the role of tourism and its imagined future, with and without evolutionary changes. This isn't an easy approach since effort and time is needed to develop and reconcile the different perspectives and to translate these into real initiatives. Unfortunately sometimes time fails and/or commitment of the participants diminishes through the process which explain why this community-based or bottom-up approach is not always successful.

Another source of failure may be a missing facilitating actor. Sometimes a so called 'champion' among entrepreneurs or a (local) 'hero' may have a stimulating influence. Sometimes governments explicitly promote a destination management structure that allows local tourism leaders to become destination champions (Sustainable Tourism Online, 2010).

Destinations may benefit more from the involvement of a 'broker' or (strategic) 'enabler' who is only indirectly concerned by (tourism) development, e.g. brokers from institutional organizations. This facilitating person or organization enables economic or destination development to take place in a more professional, coherent and planned manner via a bottom-up approach. If entrepreneurs take the role of a broker, the danger exists that their approach is explicitly enterprise-oriented and that they tend to claim the development for personal use or at least that it is appropriated by a limited group. The same goes for politicians. They can be tourism brokers but, often, their timeframe is limited by elections and continuation of policy is not always assured during a longer period. One can find brokers among cultural organizations, tourist information offices, sector organizations, voluntary organizations, organized interest groups, chambers of commerce, organizations for the conservation and protection of the environment, etc. (Burns, 2004; Gibbs *et al.*, 2001; Miller & Hadley, 2005; Parra, 2010).

Brokers can work in a formal as well as in an informal way, from discussion sessions to focus group meetings

about a particular theme. When working in a more formal way, a tool or instrument may be used such as specific documents (e.g. the minutes of the meetings). In a further stage of development, these documents or reports may include program and product development, feasibility assessment, an implementation plan and even organization schemes for monitoring and evaluation (George *et al.*, 2009).

A very specific type of document is a *white paper*. A report, called white paper, structures the results from meetings or from other formats of consultation in terms of vision, objectives, future perspectives, assets, strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats while focus is on the will to establish change by developing tourism, collaboration between public and private sectors and long-term thinking. In general, an action plan or agenda is added. In some cases - e.g. the *Tourism White Paper* of South Africa (1996) or of Australia (2003) - the report concerns elements about tourism development for the whole country as a tourism destination while in other cases the white paper focuses on a region (Fayos Solà, 2002). In our research the *UNIZO* white papers (*Witboeken*) are at stake; they exist for several Flemish (clusters of) municipalities. The report is drawn up by and for local tourism entrepreneurs with the support of other stakeholders such as representatives of local public agencies. Therefore these reports may differ considerably except that, in all cases, focus is on the will to establish change.

The previous paragraphs show that an extended field of collaborative principles and policy tools are put forward but the question arises if these principles and tools are efficient in practice. Earlier research gives rise to the hypothesis that, at least in tourism, networking is

often limited to routine supply of goods and services without much innovative collaboration (Vanneste & Vanderstraeten, 2008) while Hall (2008) mentions an implementation gap between policy rhetoric and strategies in practice. Warnings have been formulated about the lack of institutional capacity in regional development in general (Gibbs *et al.*, 2001). Since research on networking and institutional governance has often limited empirical focus, the aim of presenting the results of our case study in the section below, is to assess tourism *practice* in so far as the implementation of networking, governance for collaborative strategies and participative policy (and tools) are concerned on a local level.

IV. THE STUDY AREA AND METHODOLOGY

The area of the *Vlaamse Ardennen* (17 municipalities) has been chosen as a study area for testing the facilitation and implementation of networking and collaboration among the local entrepreneurs in tourism. First, the *Vlaamse Ardennen* constitute a typical rural area with relatively low population density (less than 250 inhabitants per km²) (Figure 1), although a few small towns such as Ronse, Geraardsbergen, Oudenaarde and Zottegem, push densities upward. Many census areas, especially outside the village cores, are characterized by a relatively high share of people active in agriculture (10% and over, while the Flemish average is less than 2%). The number of firms and self-employed is considerable; the area counts 21.158 companies and self-employed or 9,5 per 100 inhabitants which is only little less than the 9,7 per 100 inhabitants for the whole of Belgium (UNIZO, 2009).

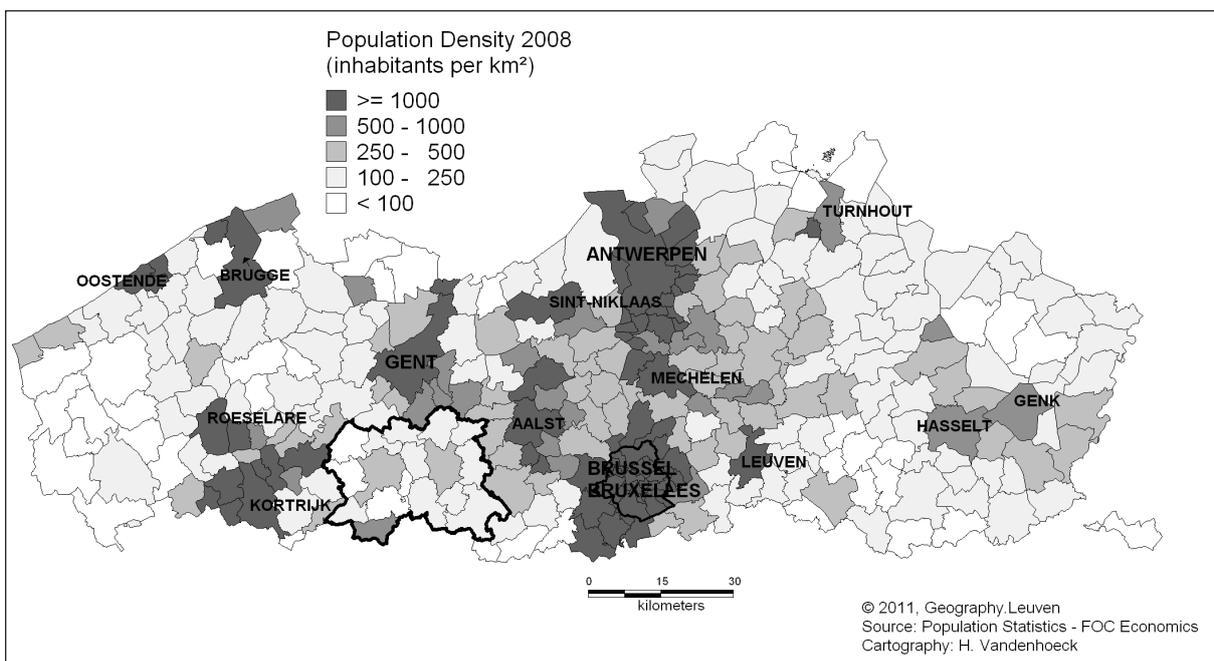


Figure 1. Flanders/Brussels and the location of the *Vlaamse Ardennen* – population density

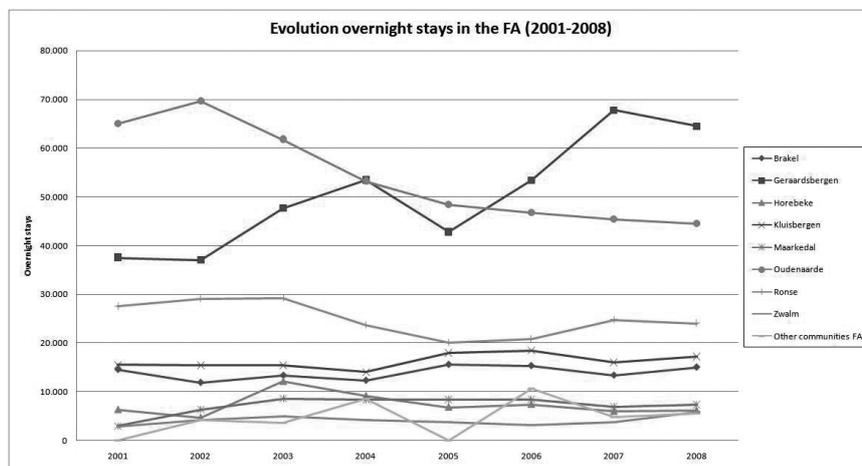
Furthermore, this area cannot be labeled as a remote countryside since major cities such Ghent and Brussels are quite close (within about 40 km from its boundaries) but nevertheless, out of reach for suburbanization and with a well preserved rural character (landscape and types of accommodation) (Figure 2). Tourism is not predominant but the number of overnight stays is not negligible as can be seen on figure 3. The accommodation capacity can be summarized as follows: 6.405 in total of which 2.605 classified as 'tourism capacity', additional to 3.800 classified as 'residential capacity' in second homes (Steunpunt Toerisme en Recreatie, 2009). Again, because of its proximity to larger cities and densely populated areas, the *Vlaamse Ardennen*

are especially popular for day tourism and leisure (no figures available), while a particular kind of tourism has to be mentioned, namely cycle tourism (Figure 2) that is rooted in the well know cycle race '*Ronde van Vlaanderen*' (Tour of Flanders). According to employment statistics the tourism industry (core as well as supportive companies for tourism) consists of more than 500 companies (503) while 2.566 gainfully employed (RSZ, 2007) and 1.225 self-employed (RSVZ, 2006) are involved.

Furthermore this area was selected for research because Ronse (Renaix) has a white paper on Tourism (2002), stimulated by the Association of Independent Entrepreneurs (UNIZO, 2002).



Figure 2. Rural landscape in the *Vlaamse Ardennen* and cycle tourism. © Stijn Audooren, 2011; D. Vanneste, 2011.



Source data: FOD Economie- Statistiek, 2009.

Figure 3. Overnight stays in the *Vlaamse Ardennen*

We focused on measuring the involvement of local tourism entrepreneurs in this tourism development, together with local public agents, especially their participation in and commitment to collaboration and networking, by a quantitative research (survey) and on tracking the process as well as interpretations by a qualitative research (interviews).

With the collaboration of UNIZO, the biggest entrepreneurial organization in Belgium, 1.054 of its members in the area (even beyond the tourism sector) were contacted for a web survey. Unfortunately, because of the law on the privacy, we were not allowed to have a list of their members - the local UNIZO divisions¹ were in charge of contacting them - and therefore we know little about the original dataset except the number mentioned above and the fact that they are located within one of the 17 municipalities in our study area. The procedure was as such: first an introduction letter was sent to the UNIZO members by the local UNIZO agencies which added to the importance attributed to our request for collaboration. In a following email, the web survey link was sent and finally a reminder was published in the UNIZO E-zine² together with a small text explaining the aim of our research once more.

Because a number of entrepreneurs in tourism do not have UNIZO-membership, we contacted another 144 entrepreneurs in tourism from a database of the Flemish Tourism Board (Toerisme Vlaanderen), that consisted in licensed accommodation keepers and some other stakeholders such as attractions, information offices etc. If they appeared to be a UNIZO member (information gathered by phone), they were omitted as to avoid overlap with the UNIZO database as well as if they were explicit in not wanting to participate in the research. This resulted in an additional 113 or a total of 1.167 entrepreneurs in tourism provided with the web link.

This resulted in a response of 253 (almost 22%) of which 128 respondents mentioned a link with tourism. From this 253, 165 (65% of the respondents) indicate being a UNIZO member. Another 88 didn't mention UNIZO-membership. If we suppose that all of them belong to the additional group; this implies a response of 78% which is very high unless some UNIZO-members did not take trouble in mentioning their membership. The difference in response rate is probably quite easy to explain. Since we could not select UNIZO members in the tourism industry in advance, the survey was open and suited from all entrepreneurs but many of those from other sectors may have quit answering as soon as they recognized the focus on tourism. The high response from the additional group has probably to do with their coordinates being provided by a tourism source, added to the fact that we could omit people who refused to collaborate from the very start and therefore were not provided with the survey link.

We decided to focus on the 128 respondents that could be associated with tourism or tourism related activities.

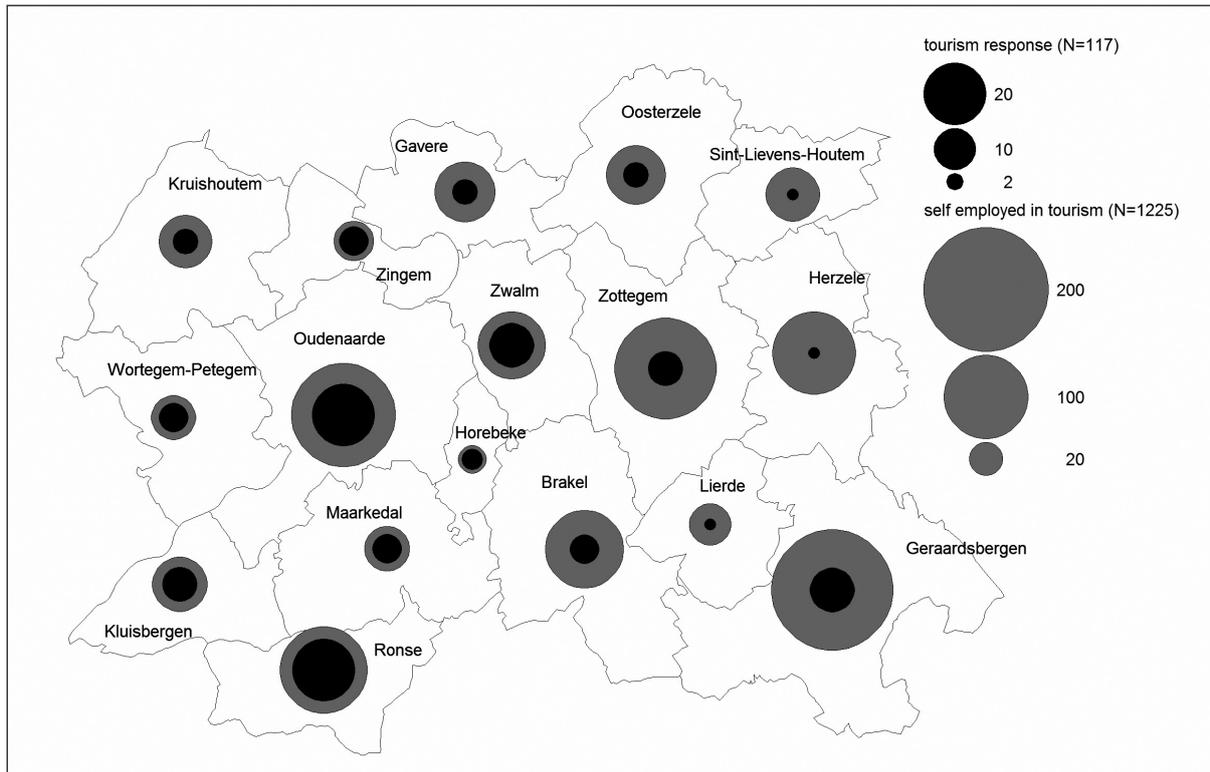
Those respondents crossed one of the tourism subsectors mentioned in a closed question (62) or the 'other tourism' category (48) or they were a member of the additional group (without crossing any category (18)).

Since we have very little information on the characteristics of the objects in the databases nor on the population of tourism entrepreneurs in the region, we must rely on indirect evidence.

Since the number of self-employed in tourism and leisure is 1.225 (Toerisme Vlaamse Ardennen vzw, s.d: 184), our respondents from the tourism sector (128) may represent about 10% of the population of tourism entrepreneurs. Since we do not know the exact figures of the UNIZO members per municipality, it is not possible to calculate the exact response per commune but we can compare our response rates with the number of tourism companies that is known from the data from the National Institute for the Social Security of the Self-employed (RSVZ). Figure 4 shows the number of self-employed in tourism and our response rate. We can ascertain that all municipalities are represented. In general we have a higher response in the small market towns (Geraardsbergen, Oudenaarde, Zottegem and Ronse) than in the rural communes which is perfectly sound since they have a higher number of self-employed in tourism (ranging from 108 to 191) than in rural communes (ranging from 98 to 14), although with an underrepresentation in Zottegem (only 7 on 140) and Herzele (1 on 98) and an overrepresentation in Zwalm (11 on 69) and Ronse (21 on 108).

The 11 subsectors of tourism, represented as categories gathered in a closed question (Figure 5) can be considered 'core tourism sectors'. Therefore, it is striking that more than one third (48) indicated 'other' (tourism & tourism related, with and without visitors). Some added specifications such as information office, educational center, children's theater, wellness, activities in photography, design, advertising or ICT, retail (food, sweets, fashion, jewelry, cars and bicycles, books), bank office, building company, paramedic practice etc. None of these activities were large enough in number as to create additional categories but they indicate that many self-employed feel related to tourism (supportive for tourism) although this is not their core business.

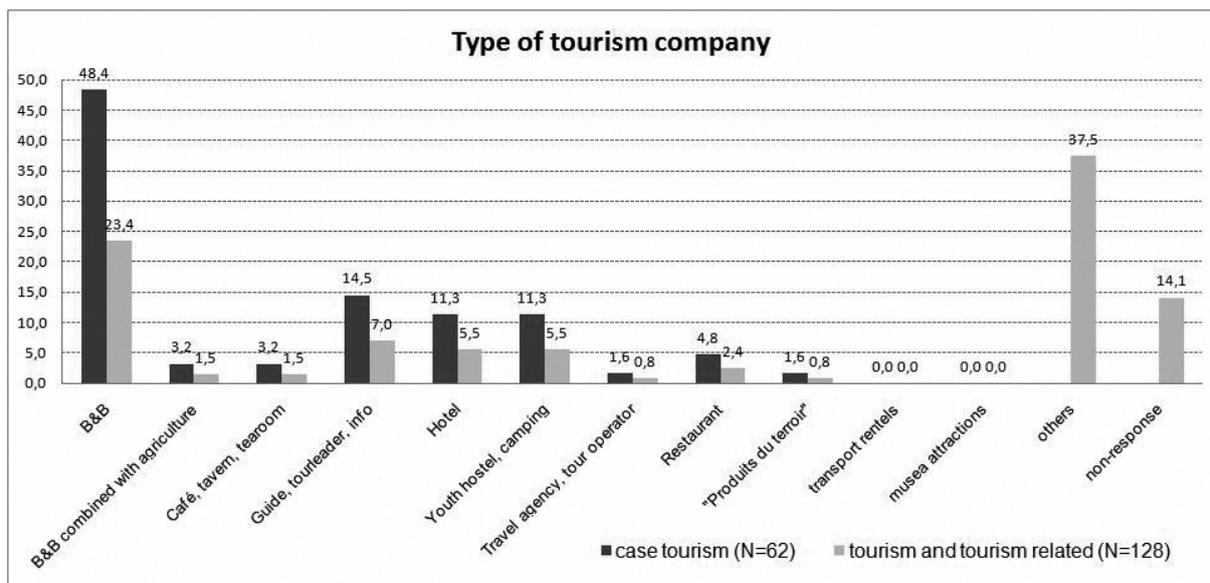
The dominance of HoReCa (hotels and other forms of accommodation, restaurants and cafés) among our respondents may be due to the source of the additional group. In our survey 51 on 110 respondents (this is without the 18 missings for type of company) crossed one of the HoReCa categories, which counts for 46% if we take into account the group 'other' and 82% if we omit the group 'other'. This can be compared with figures from the Strategic policy plan for tourism and recreation for the Flemish Ardennes 2009-2012 (Toerisme Vlaamse Ardennen vzw, s.d: 184) that mentions 931 self employed in HoReCa on 1.225 (2006) self-employed in tourism and leisure or 76%. Therefore we consider our sample in line with the population.



Note: 11 of 128 respondents did not mention their postal number.

Source data: Toerisme Vlaamse Ardennen vzw, s.d., table 26 & Ryckaert, UNIZO members Vlaamse Ardennen, survey 2010.

Figure 4. Self-employed in tourism in the *Vlaamse Ardennen* versus respondents in tourism from the survey

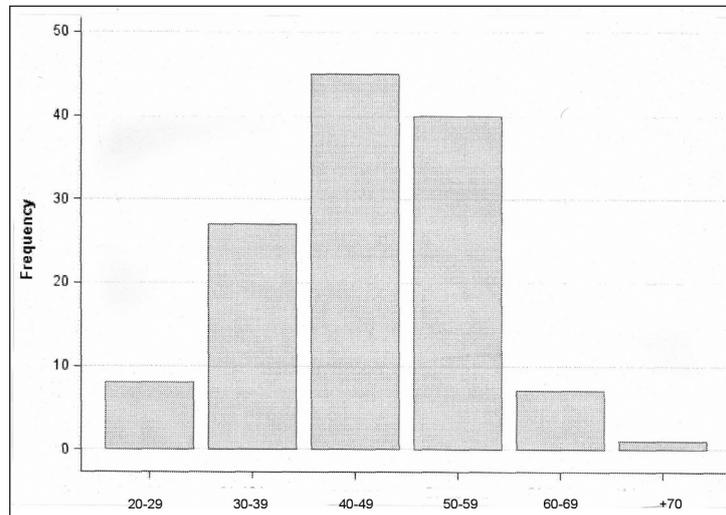


Source data: Ryckaert, UNIZO members Vlaamse Ardennen, survey 2010.

Figure 5. Type of tourism companies from the survey

Finally about the age structure. The age structure of the respondents is almost normally distributed with a modulus in the category of 40 to 49 years old entrepreneurs, closely followed by the age category 50-59 (Figure 6).

It is not possible to compare this age structure with the population of tourism entrepreneurs in the study area or with the age structure of the UNIZO membership database, but the distribution is not beyond expectations.



Source data: Ryckaert, UNIZO members Vlaamse Ardennen, survey 2010.

Figure 6. Age structure of the respondents

The duration of their professional activities varied from 'just started' to 'about 50 years', with an average of 14 years and a median of 11 years. It may be interesting to note that 84% of the respondents have their dwelling and their business in the same municipality while 55% originate from the immediate area (34% even from the same municipality).

In the web survey, most of the topics were translated into a number of statements measured with a 5-point scale going from 'completely agree' to 'completely disagree'. These statements focused on tourism development, assets and (local) policy. Further, the entrepreneurs were asked about their interest in initiatives or activities to enhance entrepreneurship and tourism development and they were sounded out on their knowledge about institutions that had/have a positive impact on the development of their business and/or on the development of the area of the *Vlaamse Ardennen*.

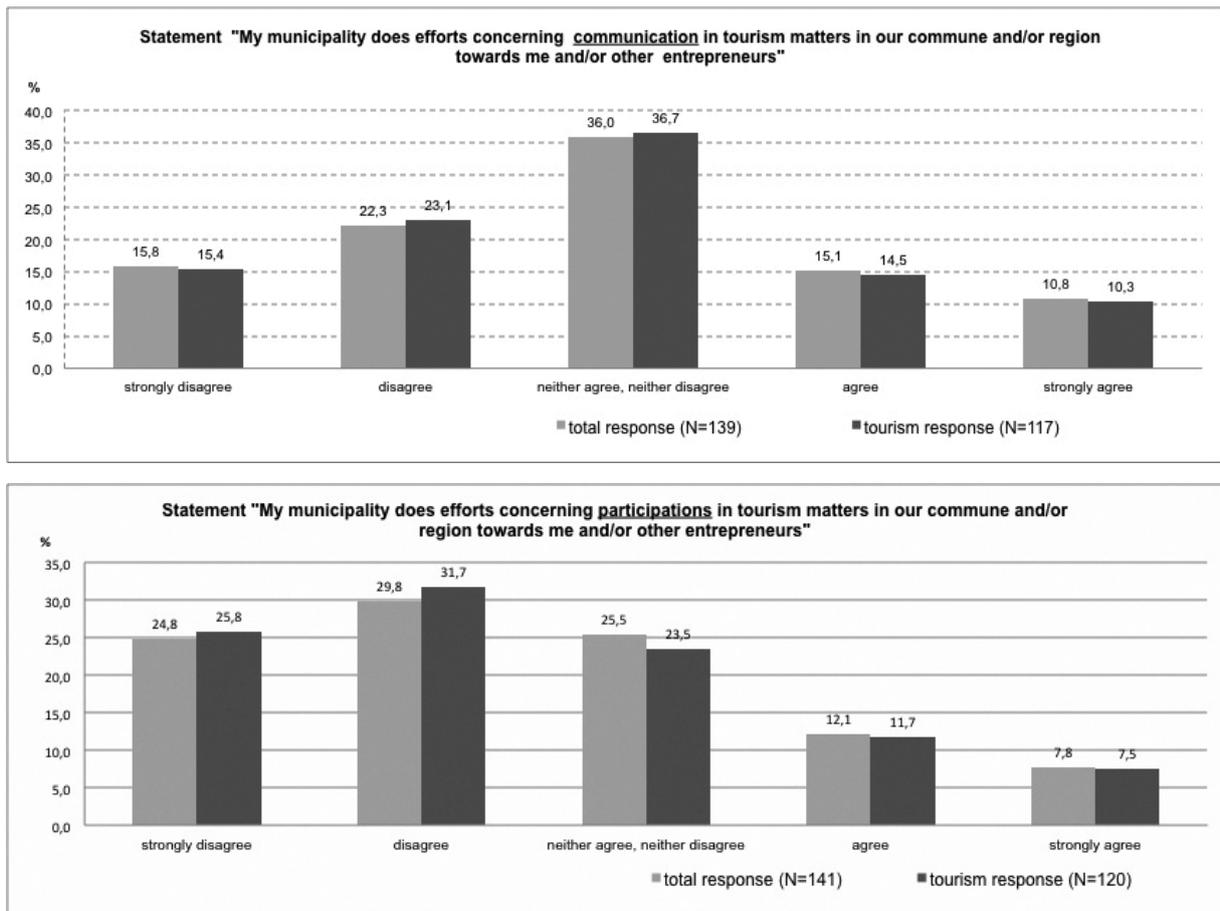
In addition to the quantitative part of the research, interviews took place with a number of local stakeholders from the entrepreneurial associations and from the tourism policy side. The survey sounded the respondents on their readiness for an interview. Seven entrepreneurs were willing to do so (all B&B or hotel keepers). Two were contacted among civil servants and policy agents in tourism or tourism related activities (administrator of the local UNIZO division, person in charge of the tourism office of Ronse), especially as part of our special interest in the white paper develop-

ment process in Ronse. Unfortunately no more than two stakeholders could be found with knowledge about the events and process leading to the white paper since, at the time, no attendances were listed or the attendance list was not kept.

V. MEASURING GOVERNANCE AND NETWORKING

A. A quantitative approach via survey

First, we present some results from our survey (N=128) among tourism entrepreneurs. Figure 7 shows that a significant proportion of the tourism entrepreneurs feel excluded from participation and even from information about tourism development and/or policy. It is clear also that most of them feel involved only on the lower levels of the participation ladder (information rather than participation). It is interesting to note that they seem to put the blame on the municipality (refer to the way in which the statement was formulated) but further on, during the qualitative part of the research, some of them take the blame themselves and agree that they are not able or willing to participate for several reasons. It has to be said that the view among tourism entrepreneurs (survey, N=128) is barely different from entrepreneurs in general (survey, N=253), although most of the entrepreneurs from other industries left this question unanswered.

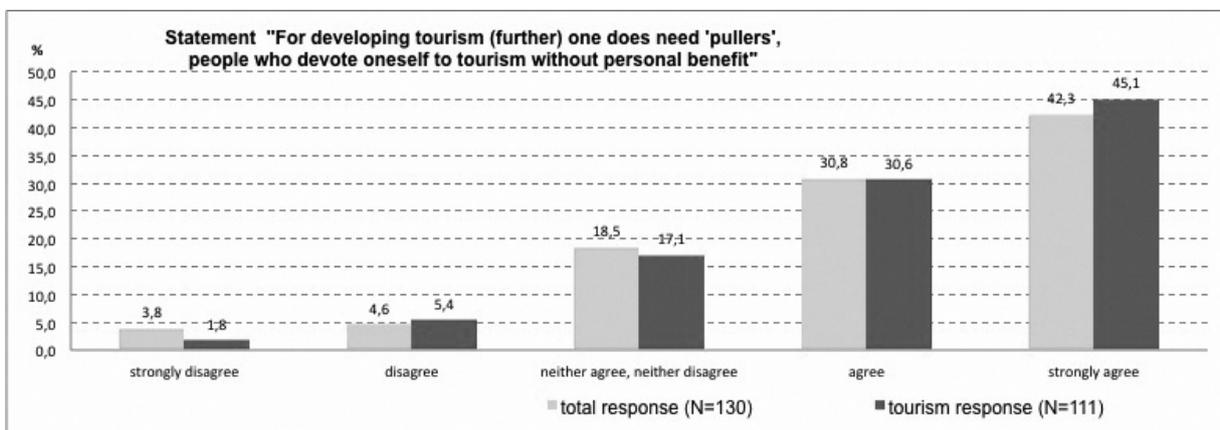


Source data: Ryckaert, UNIZO members Vlaamse Ardennen, survey 2010 (marking a statement).

Figure 7. Degrees of participation in tourism management and planning

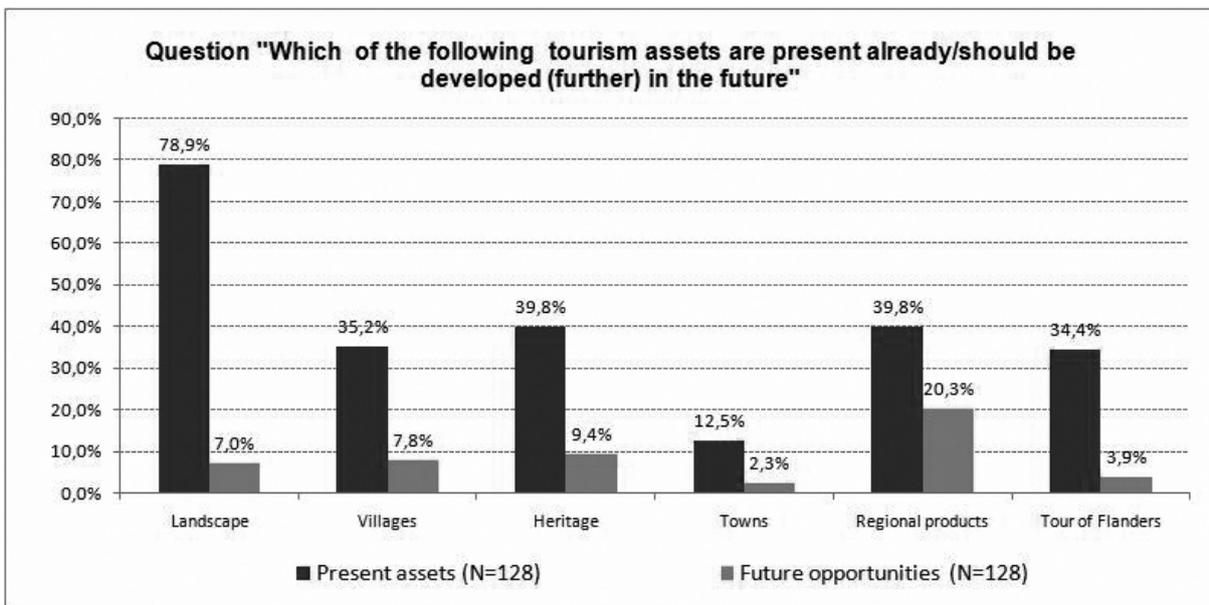
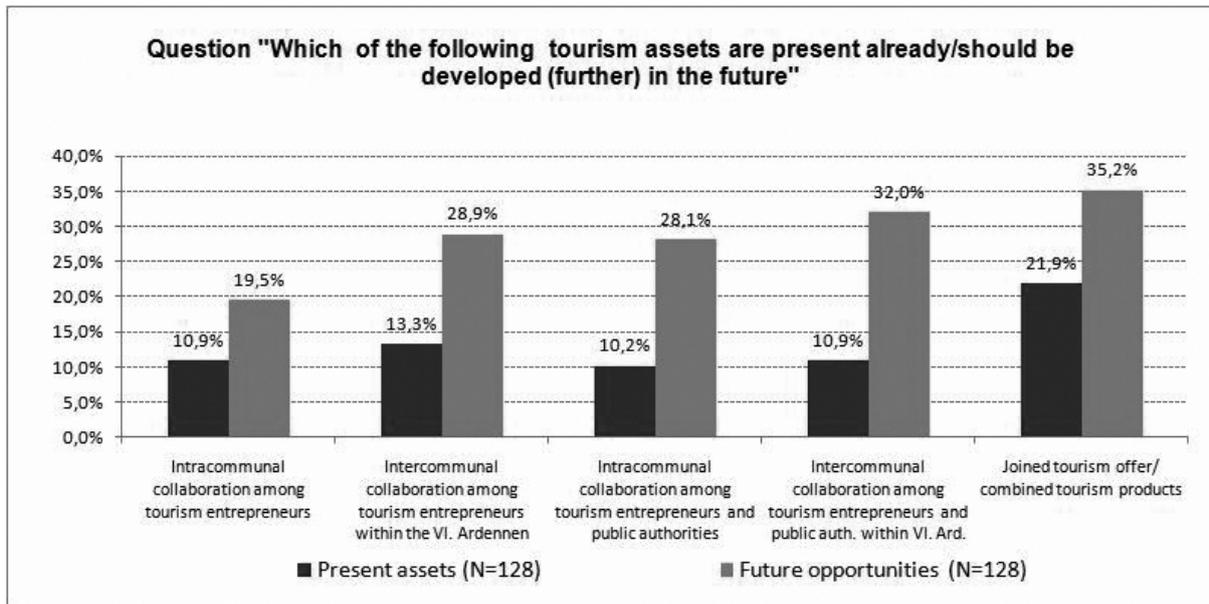
This is equally the case for their view about local 'heroes'. Figure 8 shows that 85% of the respondents among the tourism entrepreneurs agree with the fact that brokers ('pullers') or eventually local heroes (being those who invest time and energy and eventually money in a matter that is not of direct interest to them) are needed to

develop tourism (further). From this information, it is not clear if the entrepreneurs advance that conviction from a fundamental awareness of the added value a broker can bring or if, on the contrary, this shows a lack of commitment and the expectation that others will/can/must take care of the (tourist) development.



Source data: Ryckaert, UNIZO members Vlaamse Ardennen, survey 2010 (marking a statement).

Figure 8. Importance of brokers or (local) heroes ('pullers')



Source data: Ryckaert, UNIZO members Vlaamse Ardennen, survey 2010 (crossing a category)

Figure 9. Present assets and future opportunities

The tourism entrepreneurs were also asked if one (or several) organization(s) had an effective and/or considerable *impact on their business*; 25 of 128 of the respondents or about 20% said 'none' while 80% mentioned at least one organization. The most 'popular' were the regional tourism organization 'Toerisme Vlaamse Ardennen' (43%), UNIZO (37%) and the 'Regional Landscape Vlaamse Ardennen' (23%)³. The high score for UNIZO can be explained by the fact that the UNIZO database was used for mailing most of the potential respondents in this research but it nevertheless stresses the impact of a professional organization. The same was asked about the *impact on the development of the Vlaamse Ardennen area*. The 'no impacts' answers are lower (13%) and the organizations that are mentioned most are 'Toerisme

Vlaamse Ardennen' (71%), the 'Regional Landscape Vlaamse Ardennen' (45%) and UNIZO (19%). Besides these, two other organizations/projects come into the picture 'Streekoverleg Zuid-Oost-Vlaanderen' (13%) and Leader area/projects Vlaamse Ardennen (16%). It is striking that, for a relatively small area, many organizations are ticked off while regional organizations seem to contribute also on an individual business level and professional organizations on a regional level. When asked what kind of impact these organizations had (open question), several elements were put forward: 'promotion' via brochures and websites (35%) and support that implies e.g. training courses and instructions (27%); the fact of giving better publicity to the region as a whole is third in line (15%) and only after that, facilitating and

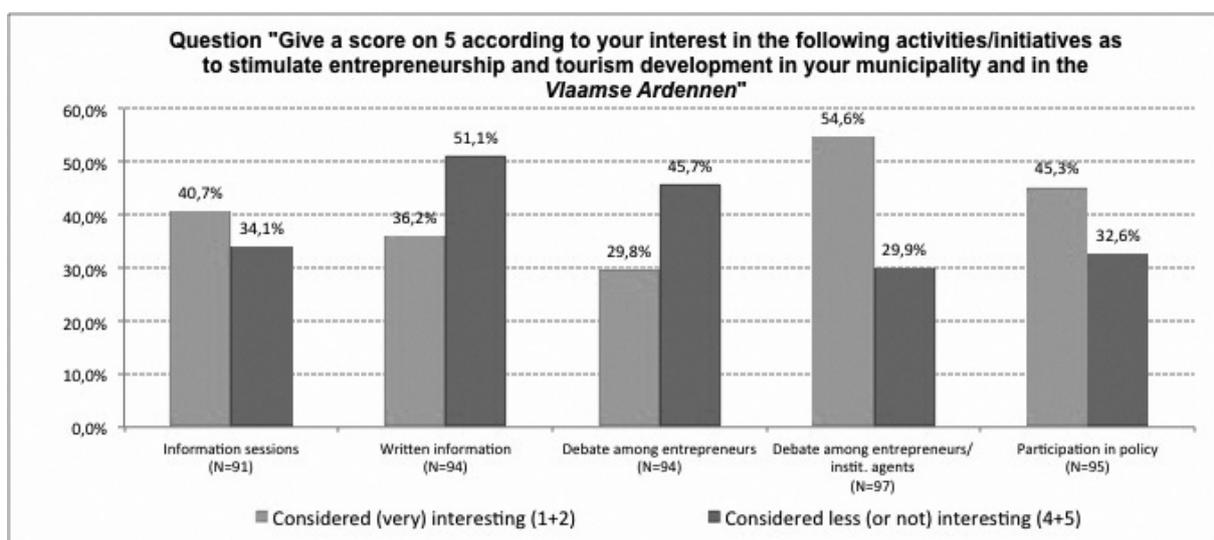
promoting collaboration was mentioned (11%). Although collaboration is said in literature to benefit from the involvement of institutional organizations, our research does not reveal that. It is clear that material advantages for which they (probably) paid, were actively mentioned while 'networking' may have been overlooked because it is free of charge and networking events are not labeled as such.

As far as collaboration is concerned two interesting elements have been questioned: (ways of) collaboration in tourism as a present asset and collaboration as a future opportunity to be developed. It has to be mentioned that we selected only the collaboration items while the question dealt also with assets such as heritage, landscape, the Tour of Flanders cycle race, regional products etc. It is clear that only about 10% of the respondents consider collaboration an asset at present. Referring to the section about types of networking (section II), it is clear that communication networks are harder to put in place than exchange networks (refer collaboration on a joint offer). Even for the future, only one third is convinced one should develop collaboration and especially intercommunal collaboration as an asset. Again a combined offer (clustering?) is seen as the most interesting opportunity (Figure 9). When compared to the other items mentioned above, one can find that landscape, villages, heritage, regional products and Tour of Flanders are mentioned much more frequently as present assets while they are much less considered as opportunities to be developed in the future.

Finally, figure 10 illustrates that the tourism entrepreneurs do not consider all participatory activities and initiatives of equal value. They are against written information and consider, surprisingly enough, debate among peers not as very interesting. On the other hand, face-to-face contact (debate) with local authorities and institutional agents are appreciated. More than half of the group of respondents are very much in favor of debate with public authorities and institutional agents but, at the same time, about 30% consider this useless. It is interesting to link these differences in assessment with attitudes and entrepreneurial profiles (table 1 and 2).

From the previous graphs, it becomes clear that different attitudes can be found within a group and that different profiles emerge, even on a local level. As to put this to the test, we applied a multivariate analysis technique (principal component analysis) as a method of summarizing some indicators from the survey that can shed light on the kind of tourism entrepreneurs in our survey and, by extension, in the area of the *Vlaamse Ardennen*.

Table 1 shows that, indeed, a marked differentiation exist among the entrepreneurs according to their aims, hospitable attitude and expectations. It is clear that the most important factor (44% of the variance) reveals the profile of a very dedicated entrepreneur with a positive vision on the potential of the region for all kinds of tourism. Factor 3 stands clearly for the non-entrepreneur as mentioned in literature while factor 2 can be considered a mixture.



Source data: Ryckaert, UNIZO members Vlaamse Ardennen, survey 2010 (marking a statement)

Figure 10. Appreciation of information, debate and participation in tourism development

Table 1. Motivation and hospitable attitude (matrix of loadings, after varimax rotation)

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Eigenvalue	5.23	1.55	1.17
Variance	44%	13%	10%
Statement			
I attach importance to being an ambassador for my commune		0.93	
I attach importance to being an ambassador for my region	0.32	0.85	
Contacts with visitors/tourists are very important for me	0.71		-0.35
I do not know much about the places of interest in my commune or region	-0.27		0.54
When visitors/tourists have questions about the places of interest in my commune or region, it's my duty to help them	0.65	0.33	
When visitors/tourists have questions about the places of interest in my commune or region, I feel prepared to help them	0.55	0.27	
Tourism is important for the local economy and the well being of my commune/region	0.59		
I am no advocate of tourism development in my commune/region	-0.28		0.70
I run my business/ practice my profession because I believe in the potential of the region for day tourism or leisure	0.89		
I run my business/ practice my profession because I believe in the potential of the region for overnight stays	0.88		
I run my business/ practice my profession because I believe in the potential of the region for stays with educational purposes	0.78	0.27	
I run my business/ practice my profession because it allows me to spend more time with my family and/or to enjoy a peaceful, green and/or more authentic environment	0.47		0.70

Note: Loadings < 0.2 or > -0.2 are omitted; eigenvalue of other factors; 4, 0.90; 5: 0.78; 6, 0.58; 7: 0.54; 8: 0.41; 9; 9: 0.25; 10, 0.24; 11, 0.17; 12: 0.15

Source data: Ryckaert, UNIZO members Vlaamse Ardennen, survey 2010 (based on marked statements).

Table 2. Appreciation of local tourism policy and participation (matrix of loadings, after varimax rotation)

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
Eigenvalue	2.77	2.32	1.21	0.97
Variance	28%	23%	12%	10%
Statement				
I think tourism needs no planning; tourism will take care of itself		-0.58		0.87
There were no steps by local authorities towards tourism development (TD)			0.59	
There were no steps by professional organizations towards TD			0.89	
I think TD should be handled in a different way	0.33		0.56	
'Pullers', persons who engage without proper benefit, are needed for (further) TD				-0.66
My municipality does efforts concerning communication about tourism matters		0.93		
My municipality does efforts concerning my/our participation in tourism matters		0.91		
Promotion on a regional level should be clustered for the Flemish market	0.86		0.24	
Promotion on a regional level should be clustered for the whole of Belgium	0.87			
Promotion on a regional level should be clustered for abroad	0.75	0.23		-0.29

Note: Loadings < 0.2 or > -0.2 are omitted; eigenvalue of other factors; 5: 0.86; 6, 0.61; 7: 0.54; 8:0.29; 9: 0.27; 10, 0.18

Source data: Ryckaert, UNIZO members Vlaamse Ardennen, survey 2010 (based on marked statements)

These various profiles can explain why networking and collaboration differ among entrepreneurs, as well as why appreciation of local tourism policy and participation in tourism development of the area is very divergent (table 2). It is interesting to consider the results - factors from a PCA - as four collaborative profiles. The first profile ('marketer') is somewhat dissatisfied with the current situation and especially with the promotion of the region at all levels but by doing so, shows some involvement. The second group ('participator/renewer') is very much aware that planning is needed and shows satisfaction with the way public authorities deal with things, although a major promotion effort is requested on an international level. A third group ('absentee/complainer') is probably on the side line; they are not aware of any (considerable) effort of public authorities or institutional organizations. Finally, a fourth group ('conservative') is not only indifferent but reacts reluctantly to change and action. This illustrates a major issue already mentioned in the introduction, pointing to a drive towards professionalism on the one side of the entrepreneurial spectrum (factor 2) and towards a lack professionalism and vision, obstructed by a lack of motivation on the other side (factor 4).

In the survey, respondents were asked about their active participation in meetings and events that had to do with (further) development of tourism. It is obvious that not many entrepreneurs attended such meetings. Only 32% (41 on 128 respondents) mentioned that he/she ever participated in such an initiative. It is interesting to know why (not). Below some of the most noteworthy statements from entrepreneurs who did participate: "*By this I get more in contact with (other) entrepreneurs*", "*It's useful for information exchange*", "*Only when a concrete project or initiative exists, results can be booked*", "*One learns anyway*", "*Better to organize and develop initiatives than passively sit and wait*", "*When one collaborates this enforces our voice on the decision level*". Many have not participated yet for the following reasons: "*This is not my task; I have plenty of work with my guests*" (N=7), "*I have no time for that*" (N=8), "*I do not see the use of it*" (N=9) or "*As far as I know, such contacts do not exist and, if they exist, then it is not well communicated*" (N=16). The good news therefore is that 83% of the entrepreneurs in general were willing to participate in a meeting or event in the future and even 93% of those who had been involved in initiatives before. It is striking that this share is much higher than when presenting meetings in a more abstract way (refer figure 10 'debate').

B. Qualitative approach: interviews on the tourism white paper of Ronse

Although, the results from the previous section A are interesting, they fail to contribute to explaining the facts. Therefore, as mentioned before, interviews were

conducted with a number of members from the entrepreneurial associations and from the local tourism policy side. Furthermore, since in the *Vlaamse Ardennen* one of the communes (Ronse) has developed a white paper (2002) with the support of the organization UNIZO, we found it useful, not only to try to explore in-depth the general motives for (not) collaborating but also if and how this white paper might have (had) an impact.

1. Creating a white paper, facilitating agents, leverage tools

The story of the tourism white paper of Ronse starts at the beginning of 2002 with a number of information sessions. We should mention here that we tried to find stakeholders who were present during these evening sessions but since no registration or attendance list was available, only two eye witnesses could be detected (at the time, local administrator of UNIZO and representative of the Ronse tourism office). The former UNIZO-administrator states "*Something had to change. Something had to get going. Ronse didn't do well at all... we wanted to do something and thought of tourism that could mean an extra source of income for our town and our local economy*". Therefore the next step was to invite the local entrepreneurs - members of UNIZO - and local policy representatives for a series of sessions. These were organized and conducted by an advisor and expert on tourism from the UNIZO 'Entrepreneurship and tourism' section in Brussels. In his role of a broker, the advisor for tourism put a number of issues forward to promote debate: "*Everyone could express his/her opinion; everything about tourism in and around Ronse was thrown on the table*". The importance of this facilitator and moderator, as a person, was stressed by many: "*He was very good in provoking debate, in putting forward the right questions at the right moment*". The representative of the tourism office felt she should not get involved too much in the debate since she was not the organizer nor part of the target group although, at the same time, she felt the urge to defend and justify local policy which was very difficult "*since we had nothing in our hands, no policy plan, no figures that could prove that certain things did happen*". In those circumstances she felt lost, confronted with questions from the entrepreneurs about what institutional agents did or didn't do and particularly WHY.

The eye witnesses mention the low attendance. Among the 15 or so people present, very few were directly involved in tourism which, in their minds, was disappointing and incomprehensible. Nevertheless, three evening sessions were held and an official UNIZO white paper on tourism was not only prepared but also handed over to the local authorities (alderman responsible for tourism). The representative of the tourism office - young and new on the job at the time - reported that she felt the experience was 'unique': "*Twenty pages [of white paper], completely dedicated to 'Ronse and tourism', this was really something unique, certainly because the different issues enumerated in them described a quite objective*

image and a vision on tourism from people ...with a sound view on business". Furthermore she stresses that this was particularly useful since, at the time, tourism policy was out of the question and a tourism policy/development plan was non-existent.

2. Further developments

The young representative of the tourism office in 2002 has now become the head of the tourism office. She remembers that, although the white paper was handed over to the alderman for tourism, they didn't work really with the document. The white paper was considered a snapshot in time with a number of limitations and not made for adjustment to changes and new opportunities. Furthermore, the introduction of the white paper mentioned the need for a priority actions' list and a time table, but eventually, no such list was developed. Apart from that, the white paper was clearly an incentive to start thinking about their own ideas, their own design of a plan, their own policy document. The white paper fulfilled the function of a 'status questionis' about tourism beyond the policy angle; this stimulated internal reflection and, in fact, the white paper made the tourism office realize that a professional (strategic) plan was needed.

Since 2008, Ronse does have a tourism policy plan that is approved by the city council and this plan is integrated into the general communal strategic plan that is based on 3 pillars 'living in the municipality, working in the municipality and *leisure*' (Ronse, s.d.). According to the tourism representative, it is no surprise that many action items in the tourism policy plan were mentioned already in the UNIZO white paper. That the city council was willing to approve the tourism policy plan, could not be taken for granted, since financial resources were and are involved but it certainly convinced the members of the city council "*of [the potential of] tourism, from an economic perspective, of the need to detach tourism from culture and of the necessity to develop tourism in a professional manner*". The process from the white paper to the tourism policy plan was able to create this strong and convincing basis.

This does not imply that the white paper was a (complete) success. The (former) local administrator of UNIZO focuses on a sentence in the introduction of the white paper that stipulates: "*within a steered tourism development, it is desirable to elaborate the dialogue with the entrepreneurs from the very beginning. Development should be worked on together*". This made him mention his unfulfilled expectation about the establishment of a committee for tourism with volunteers from the tourism industry and members of the tourism office that would evaluate the white paper on a regular basis. Although he is positive about the achievements in terms of tourism development, a sense of disappointment can be detected in the following: "*We do not have sight on what was done with the white paper but I think that those people [from*

the Tourism Office] know what they are doing. Finally, it's their job and not ours to bring the tourism potential of Ronse into the picture and to turn it into concrete initiatives". In the white paper, 10 propositions were formulated. Some were more or less put in practice, such as the renovation of some parks. Others such as reception functions and tasks continued to be amateurish in many cases and in need of improvement. Therefore, as a result from the white paper, the direct collaborative capacity building among the tourism industry stakeholders, was and is rather disappointing although the incentive of the researched white paper was intended for them in the first place. Besides the communal tourism policy plan, collaboration initiatives have been taken such as the 'Verenigde Logiesuitbaters van Ronse' (United Accommodation Keepers from Ronse) who gather alternately in one of the B&Bs as to see each others' accommodation and exchange ideas and tips. The aim of the network is to refer a visitor to another B&B if this visitor is better served with another type of accommodation (and not only when a B&B is full). Furthermore, effort is invested in a Culinary Circuit based on a menu where starter, main dish and dessert are taken at restaurants at different locations; the Tourism Office coordinates the path and places oneself in the service of the restaurant keepers. For the 'volksspelen route' (Folklore Games Route) the Tourism Office got the help of the private sector based on the conviction that private professionals are far more capable to organize this in a successful manner. The representative from the Tourism Office is convinced that the entrepreneurs in the tourism industry have started to look not only to their proper interest but more and more to the interest of the tourist: "*When the tourist is satisfied than he comes back to Ronse or the surrounding area and everyone will benefit from that.*"

Question: is all this the merit of the white paper? The fact is that the entrepreneurs in the tourism industry – at least in Ronse – show an eagerness and willingness to develop things together that could hardly be found in other municipalities. Professionals doubt if this has to do with the UNIZO white paper; they attribute most of the credit to the good functioning of the Tourism Office and a new and dynamic local policy in general. However; it should be stressed that this white paper resulted in a more effective and stronger leadership among the public tourism sector as well as unexpected capacity building and understanding of the tourism business among institutional agents.

In the previous section, we recognized a (small) group of entrepreneurs with poor motivation and attitudes, but the ones we interviewed constituted certainly a positive selection, since they volunteered for the interview via the survey. Even among this group it is striking that they still not consider public authorities or policy agents or even peers as partners in tourism development. The following citations are illustrative: "*When you want to contribute to the sustainability of tourism, than you should go for it by*

yourself, take initiative; I fear it [support] will not come from local authorities”, “The project presented during such gatherings [organized by the Tourism Board of the Vlaamse Ardennen] are always too theoretical while we need real action”, “Networking and recommending each other; I think this is OK but collaborate... do not forget we are competitors”, “If we want to put certain things together, it should be in a professional way; it should be someone with time and knowledge, creative and someone without a personal agenda; someone from a policy angle could do that”, “I think it is very difficult to develop an arrangement beyond the municipality and open up to the whole region; of course it is interesting, an added value... but very difficult”. It is striking that no interviewee linked networking with innovation; innovation was mentioned only once during the interviews and in a way that does not give proof of empowerment: “One [public authorities] seldom knock at our door as to share views; participation... very little. Of course, (financial) means are needed but if they [public authorities] would think somewhat more innovative and creative, much can be done” (B&B owner, Geraardsbergen).

VI. CONCLUSION

Let’s bear in mind that the aim of this paper was an assessment of the tourism *practice* as far as networking, collaboration, participation and governance is concerned. We have put to the test the situation in the *Vlaamse Ardennen*, an area that has no exceptional assets for (international) tourism although it has a potential for day tourism and leisure because of its typical small scale and diversified rural landscape and its proximity to urban areas, while characterized by a relative importance of SMEs and self-employed in tourism.

We mentioned already in the introduction that some of these rural entrepreneurs may show a non-entrepreneurial attitude that hinders a competitive development of the destination. Our results show that this is also the case in the *Vlaamse Ardennen*. More in general, several groups of entrepreneurs can be found, even on this local scale. They constitute a complex set of different profiles (deduced from our PCA results) that can be labeled as ‘the entrepreneur/ developer/ educator’, the most important group, ‘the ambassador’ and ‘the life-style entrepreneur’. It is clear that this results also in various appreciations for local policy and degrees of participation. We could recognize ‘the marketer’ and ‘the participator/ renewer’ as the most important profiles but with a non negligible group of ‘absentees/ complainers’ and ‘conservatives’. It is obvious that the latter, although small as a group, can hamper the collaboration and participation process and therefore the development of the destination when not recognized or approached in a proper way. Quite often, these are the people setting a tone of distrust of public authorities: “*I am unmotivated for doing this [participating in initiatives for tourism development]*

because I believe that public authorities who are dealing with this [tourism development] do not function well and only hinder such initiatives” (B&B owners, survey 2010, comment).

From our results we can detect a rather ambiguous attitude towards networking and participation. The share of tourism entrepreneurs that considers collaboration as a future asset is rather low (ca. 30%) while inter-communal collaboration is preferred to intra-communal collaboration and collaboration with public authorities, to collaboration with peers. They are very ambitious and prefer debate to information sessions or written information although only about 60% were under the impression that public authorities put enough effort in communication and only 40% are satisfied with the efforts concerning participation. These aspirations are not in line with the finding that (these) tourism entrepreneurs seem to have difficulties with a communication type of network (see the low percentages for collaboration at present; ca. 10%) and/or their preference for an exchange type (“joint tourism offer”). They seem to blame local authorities but at the same time they advance a multitude of personal reasons to explain their lack of participation in meetings and events. In general the lack of capacity is felt by agreeing on the need of a broker and the way they refer to public authorities to play that part. Implicitly, most tourism entrepreneurs see public authorities as a natural alliance who combines time with professionalism –“*it is their job*”- while not being a threat (no competitor) and probably even able to control the effectiveness of the collaboration or, at least, invest financial resources. On the other hand they complain that many projects are too “*theoretical*”. These results show a lack of awareness about the possibilities but also about the preconditions of effective networking. In practice, a mismatch can be found between the expectations of the entrepreneurs who, in general, expect real participation in decision making, often without assuming responsibility and without investing time (refer the low attendance for the three ‘white paper’ meetings in Ronse). On the other hand they are aware that networks constitute an added value, especially when developed beyond the own municipality borders but they image this network as a product or activity (e.g. a cycle or hiking route) rather than a “governance structure” or a “process of socialization”. Nevertheless the Ronse case shows that a combination of both (as suggested by Michael Hall in 2005) with communicative relationships that coincide with movement and consumption paths of tourists, is possible and working. Therefore it may occur to us that networking is not only a cure but also part of the learning process. These self-employed people and SMEs need education and training in collaboration or at least an incentive to network and to overcome their distrust, not only in words but also in deeds.

In these circumstances, the role of a broker and the impact of a leverage tool such as a white paper, may be very important. Therefore, we studied the outcomes

of the white paper -process and product- on tourism in the municipality of Ronse. It is clear that Ronse is more active and successful in developing a strategic vision and various kinds of collaboration among tourism entrepreneurs (compared with other municipalities in the area). The assumption that the white paper played a part in it, is only partially confirmed and from an unexpected angle. First, our key informants doubted if the white paper could be attributed much credit for the significant tourism development in Ronse and the fine list of collaborative initiatives. On the other hand it is clear that the white paper stimulated internal thought among policy agents and a whole new way of (pro-)active and innovative thinking which implied (and still implies) a dynamic approach, professionalism and collaboration with the private sector. The initiatives are very much inspired by the idea of clustering (circuits, routes). Awareness exists that more can be realized together, beyond the sum of separate, individual actions, as well as by territorial spread so as to translate networking on a territorial (destination) basis.

Therefore, it seems that brokers such as UNIZO can be very useful as to bridge the gap between private and public and to enhance a discussion and debate (the result in the format of a white paper may be even irrelevant). None of the stakeholders has to justify themselves, defensive attitudes can be avoided, all participants can react freely and everyone can put forward what he or she wants to say. This may be the final element that made the white paper in Ronse a success after all, not the result on paper but its contribution to a free and challenging state of mind among the few who attended the meetings. Therefore, and partly because of the white paper, Ronse may be ahead of the other municipalities in developing the premises for collaboration such as trust and dialogue while in some other communes distrust towards public authorities and towards competitors is very much alive.

From this survey it is clear that no magic tool exist. Rather than looking for the ideal tool or fit of an ideal collaboration model, an implementation gap between the arsenal of tools and instruments on the one hand and the lack of skills in networking and institutional capacity on the other hand should be handled first, since this may cause the real problem, especially in rural areas. The process, rather than the product that goes with the development of a white paper (or other documents) may have the same effect as larger development programs on a regional level, namely as a 'template for action' (Amin, 1999), even when the document does not turn into a real agenda or action items. The main result being an uplift of the institutional capacity of *local* authorities or *local* policy agents. This, in turn, has the potential to initiate and support networking and collaborative actions among private sector agents such as SMEs, by grappling with the history, context and structure of the local economy, and by extension, of the local community.

Notes

¹ UNIZO Aalst-Oudenaarde Division (962 members in the study area) and UNIZO Gent-Meetjesland (92 members in the study area).

² Our request for a reminder by mail was denied.

³ We should mention that several organizations were enumerated as part of a closed question.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank the UNIZO divisions Aalst-Oudenaarde and Gent-Meetjesland for their support and the main office of UNIZO in Brussels, especially the 'Entrepreneurship and tourism' section, as this research fits in with the collaboration agreement between UNIZO and K.U.Leuven.

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