

**COUNCIL OF EUROPE / CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE  
EUROPEAN LANDSCAPE CONVENTION /  
CONVENTION EUROPEENNE DU PAYSAGE**

***22<sup>e</sup> REUNION DES ATELIERS DU CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE POUR LA MISE EN  
ŒUVRE DE LA CONVENTION SUR LE PAYSAGE***

***22nd MEETING OF THE WORKSHOPS FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION  
OF THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE LANDSCAPE CONVENTION***

***“Water, landscape and citizenship in the face of global change”  
« Eau, paysage et citoyenneté face aux changements mondiaux »***

***Seville, Spain / Séville, Espagne, 14-15 March / mars 2019  
Study visit./ Visite d'études, 16 March / mars 2019***

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***WORKSHOP 2 – Water landscapes: international experiences***

**BELGIUM: Water-Land-Scape: A new approach in Flanders for a climate-resilient aquatic landscape built with farmer organisations, nature, water and landscape**

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**The Flemish Land Agency**

Flanders is the northern region of Belgium, and is one of the most densely populated regions in Europe. Liesbeth Gellinck works for the Flemish Land Agency as the Water-Land-Scape Project Manager. The Flemish Land Agency is a Flemish governmental agency. We actively enhance our countryside and open spaces, enabling them to better endure climate change. We collaborate on policy and invest in soil and water quality, biodiversity and infrastructure. The Flemish Land Agency strives for beautiful, healthy urban and rural environments that are a pleasure to live and work in, and where there is plenty of space for relaxation. We do so with uncompromising passion and expertise, and in constant collaboration with our partners.

**Water-Land-Scape**

The aim of Water-Land-Scape is to resolve issues pertaining to water in rural areas across Flanders. This is accomplished in close collaboration with those who use the area, including farmers and businesses, residents and landscape managers. The Flemish Minister for Environment, Nature and Agriculture initiated Water-Land-Scape, and the programme is managed by the Flemish government, including the Flemish Land Agency.

The intended programme output is a stronger agriculture, sustainable water supply, improved water quality, excess water collection, both in built environments and natural systems, and a more resilient landscape in the area. Water-Land-Scape will also factor in the additional stress that climate change is expected to place on the water system.

### **Water-Land-Scape context**

Watercourse systems throughout Flanders are under intense pressure due to urbanisation and agriculture. The water quality is poor and there is insufficient space for flood storage. Land and water resources are also being intensively used for agriculture. This is placing the landscape and water system (and ultimately agriculture) under pressure.

Climate change also plays a role. Indeed, the recent dry summers have highlighted the need for public authorities and users to tackle these challenges collectively and in a sustainable way.

A new, accelerated and wide-sweeping approach to tackling open-space issues: programme operation  
The Government of Flanders already takes numerous measures for improving the quality of the environment and landscape. This is done, for example, by drawing up land development plans. This involves various target groups (local authorities, associations, and private individuals) analysing multiple open-space issues for a specific area and collectively formulating a vision for it. A land development plan comprises the vision for that particular area and the specific measures required to implement this. The government also supplies the financial means for implementing these measures, together with the target groups. The government additionally creates river basin management plans, in order to improve the quality of the local environment and landscape. Numerous governmental sectoral plans and measures also strive for a high quality environment and landscape.

However, the results of these operating methods are limited to the specific areas in which the project is active, whilst themes such as drought, environment and landscape must be tackled throughout Flanders. An approach with an impact that extends beyond a single project in one specific area is therefore required.

This new approach resulted in what we call the 'programme operation'. In a programme operation, Flemish stakeholders and local coalitions (private individuals, organisations and local authorities), organise themselves around specific issues that recur across Flanders.

Knowledge and tools are bundled at the Flemish level and supplied to local initiatives, which can subsequently set to work with them. This encourages local involvement, makes improved use of existing knowledge and accelerates implementation on the ground. Such a thematic approach enables a single common challenge to be tackled in multiple parts of Flanders simultaneously, and as a supplement to existing project operations or a sectoral approach.

### **Water-Land-Scape Programme**

The Water-Land-Scape programme is adopting and testing this method for the first time. Water-Land-Scape focuses on the common theme of water-related issues. The Water-Land-Scape programme's intended output is climate-robust agriculture, a sustainable water supply, high water quality, excess water collection in both built-up environments and open spaces, and a more beautiful local landscape.

The programme will also factor in the additional stress that climate change is expected to place on the water system. The measures must therefore go beyond ad hoc interventions and ensure that the system is more resilient to climate change. Measures in both built-up environments and open spaces, as well as on private plots and public grounds are therefore essential.

### **Water-Land-Scape appeal**

Local knowledge and engagement are crucial for ensuring the right measures are adopted in a specific area. It is therefore essential that local stakeholders take the lead and collaborate on water sub-projects in their area. The Water-Land-Scape appeal was consequently launched in October 2017.

The appeal was directed at farmers, businesses, local residents, and water and landscape managers who wished to join forces and collectively address challenges, including drought, flooding, water quality and salinisation, more effectively. The purpose of the appeal was to unite these groups into “local coalitions” that would submit proposals for initiatives on collectively tackling water-related challenges.

The Water-Land-Scape programme pools these initiatives regionally and supports them with knowledge and financial resources. 14 of the submitted initiatives were selected and subsequently bundled into a Water-Land-Scape land-development project.

What makes this land development project unique, is that it covers numerous areas throughout Flanders, in which local stakeholders closely collaborate on achieving a common goal: solving water-related issues.

### **The Water-Land-Scape programme’s 14 sub-areas**

The 14 selected sub-areas encompass various areas across Flanders. This includes projects in horticulture regions where vegetables are intensively farmed either outdoors or in greenhouses, and which consequently require a significant amount of water for food production, as well projects in mixed agriculture regions in upstream areas where water can be collected. There are also projects in valley areas with species-rich rivers and grasslands, or highly urbanised areas in which the watercourse is a mere remnant of the former ecosystem.

The aim of Water-Land-Scape is to initiate demonstration measures which strive for an improved environmental and landscape quality in all 14 sub-areas. These measures can encourage local farmers to consider the design of their own plot and the surrounding area. New forms of environmental agreements are therefore being tested, riparian buffer strips are being constructed to prevent erosion, and experiments are being conducted on using water basins as a water supply. The local coalitions, comprising the various stakeholders that are participating in the project, will be regularly convened in order to share their experiences with the demonstration measures and to learn from each other.

The measures shall be monitored by scientific institutions and will additionally harness expertise from various European water management and climate change projects.

This approach is generating considerable interest within the Government of Flanders. It highlights Flanders’ desire to design high quality water-land-scapes in collaboration with the users concerned and

in direct response to climate change. A 5.7 million Euro subsidy was allocated for the climate-adaptive measures that the local coalitions will implement in the 14 sub-areas.

### **Searching for inspiration across borders**

The Flemish Land Agency is constantly searching for prime landscape design examples for rural areas as inspiration for the 14 sub-areas. The Flemish Land Agency is keen to exchange ideas in an international context on water collection for drought prevention, the sustainable use of water in agriculture, the buffering of urban areas against flooding, and all manner of solutions for interweaving agriculture and countryside in valley areas.