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# An instrument to communicate social services in (regional) branding

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## **Abstract**

Our European landscapes are much appreciated by tourists. Agricultural entrepreneurs try to profit from the landscape through multifunctional activities such as agri-tourism. Regional brands and labels are a new direction for sustainable rural development. In the Netherlands, the representatives of a regional brand requested the development of a new type of certifying system, not for products or production systems but for enterprises. In this paper we describe a new instrument that allows different enterprises to show, in a transparent way, how they contribute to the quality of the region in terms of sustainability and social services. A simple diagram communicates the results and invites people to discuss the outcomes and possible improvements.

The instrument was modified for a group of estates that seek new methods to bring their social services and contributions into the spotlights, in order to raise public and political support for their activities. We describe the development of the instrument and the lessons learned from that. We aim to accommodate the instrument to a wider range of stakeholders and invite cooperation with parties with similar approaches.

## **Key words**

Regional branding, social services, communication instrument, rural enterprises, estates

## 1. Introduction: regional branding

Over centuries, farmers and local communities have shaped much of Europe's countryside. These landscapes are now often appreciated by citizens and tourists. This appreciation is not automatically translated into revenues for the farmers. Agricultural entrepreneurs try to make a profit out of the landscape through multifunctional activities such as agri-tourism and on-farm sales of traditional and regional products. Regional (agricultural) products are often brought on the market under regional brands or trademarks (Lifescape, 2012 and ARZ, 2011)<sup>1</sup>. Place branding or regional branding has quickly evolved as a tool with the potential to build ecological, social and economic sustainable landscapes and regions (see e.g. Ashworth and Kavaratzis, 2010 and Govers and Go, 2009). However, the realisation of that potential depends on whether all local and regional stakeholders are actively involved in defining the region's vision and in developing a broad strategy on what the region wants to become in the long term (Ashworth and Kavaratzis, 2010).

## 2. A new approach: certifying enterprises instead of products and production methods

Regional branding can have different starting points or focusses: sustainability (e.g. Warner, 2007), quality food (e.g. Sims, 2009 and Marsden and Smith, 2005) or the landscape (e.g. Mettepenningen et al., 2010 and Maessen et al., 2008). Many regional initiatives have chosen to use a regional brand or label for their *products* (and the production method) as a way of marketing their region, often through certification schemes for the quality production of these regional products.

However, we were approached by the cooperative association of the regional brand '*Het Groene Woud*' (see below under Case study 3a) with a different question:

*Can we develop a certification scheme not for products, but for the enterprises comprising the 'Groene Woud' association?*

Such a certification scheme should focus on quality criteria for individual enterprises to enter the registration of the regional brand '*Het Groene Woud*', on how individual entrepreneurs can contribute to the quality of the region (in terms of sustainability and social services) and –last but not least- how they can communicate these contributions in a transparent and verifiable method.

In this paper, we describe the construction of an instrument that could be used as part of the certification scheme of the regional brand. And we describe how this instrument was subsequently adapted for another target group: i.e. a group of estates (case study 3b) seeking a method to present and quantify their significance and achievements in social services for the regional communities. Their goal is to negotiate more support, freedom and space for experiments from citizens, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and city and provincial authorities.

The task of developing an instrument for '*Het Groene Woud*' was financed by the Ministry of Economic Affairs, Agriculture and Innovations (EL&I) and was given to a team of Applied Plant Research (Wageningen University, business unit PPO-AGV) and '*Bureau Praedium*' (a private, regional consultancy service on rural innovations). A steering committee was formed by members of the cooperative '*Het Groene Woud*', the Ministry of EL&I, the Taskforce Multifunctional Agriculture and Wageningen University.

The initiative for adaptation of the '*Groene Woud*' instrument for estates was taken by four estate owners working together in the 3D project (see case study 3b) and the Ministry of EL&I, and together these parties also formed the steering committee for the instrument development. The Ministry of EL&I financed the adaptation of the instrument.

## 3. Introducing the two case studies

### a. Regional brand "*Het Groene Woud*" (the green forest)

'*Het Groene Woud*' is a National Landscape between the three cities of 's-Hertogenbosch, Tilburg and Eindhoven in the South of the Netherlands. It is an agricultural region with high nature and landscape values in a fast growing and densely populated area. Typical of the area are small-scale agricultural fields lined with trees, plots of forest, swamps and heath and picturesque villages with

small chapels. The 'regional festival' yearly attracts thousands of visitors to the region (Messely et al., 2010; Oostindie and Renting, 2005).

At the same time, '*Het Groene Woud*' is the name of a regional brand, formed by a cooperative association of about fifty farms and enterprises. This label aims to stimulate a regional economy that contributes to the quality of the small-scale landscape. The cooperation markets regional products and stimulates farmers to engage in landscape and habitat management and development. The enterprises that are member of the regional brand meet the sustainability criteria of the brand and are allowed to valorise the regional brand in the marketing of their products and activities (Oostindie and Renting, 2005).

This regional brand is considered a success, mainly due to the passion and leadership of the initiators involved and to the vital coalitions that developed between entrepreneurs, recreational organisations, NGOs, landscape and nature organisations, city and provincial authorities and research organisations (Horlings, 2010, 2011a,b; Oostindie and Renting, 2005).

In the case of '*Het Groene Woud*', a platform of regional stakeholders, represented by rural entrepreneurs, NGOs and regional political bodies, is responsible for the development of sustainability criteria for activities that belong to the regional branding initiative. Among other things, they realised the establishment of a regional savings account as an additional source of income in support of the sustainable development of the area (Lifescape, 2012 and Maessen et al., 2008). More information on the label, regional fund and region can be found under the EU Lifescape project (Lifescape, 2012; Maessen et al., 2008). The Lifescape project published the book "Branding the landscape", a practical guide for branding regional products.

#### **b. Project 'Estates in 3D'**

The second case study involves a group of four estates that have organised themselves in a project 'Estates in 3D'. Estates have a long history of preserving traditions and properties and at the same time developing new activities and services in response to changes in society. In the Netherlands, many estates have become green 'oases' in quickly growing urban areas. However, in developing different activities as part of their innovation, estates often struggle to meet the numerous, sometimes conflicting regulations of different authorities. To preserve their opportunities for innovation and development, estates ask for a more integral approach of their plans. In 2011, four innovative estate owners in the Netherlands came together to formulate a position paper on the new roles of estates in an urbanised society under the project title 'Estates in 3D' (Van Hövell, 2012). The four estates involved are the estates '*Beekzicht*' in Voorst, '*Vilsteren*' in Vilsteren, '*Tongeren*' near Epe and '*Grootstal*' in Nijmegen<sup>2</sup>. One of the differences with the case study of the '*Groene Woud*' association is that in that case, all enterprises strive to contribute to the qualities of *the same region*. In contrast, the estates in case study 3b are situated apart in different regions in the Netherlands, and contribute each to *a different region* (with different characteristics, stakeholders, etcetera).

The project 'Estates in 3D' receives advice from Wing Consultants and is financially supported by the Ministry of EL&I under the programme 'Business in Nature'. Within this project, discussion meetings with other estates were organised in order to debate visions on new roles and activities for estates, in response to public needs and demands. An instrument to present and quantify their significance and achievements in social services for the regional communities may help to raise public support and to negotiate more freedom and space for experiments. An adapted version of the '*Groene Woud*' instrument might possibly help these estates in their communication with citizens, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and city and provincial authorities. Therefore, the four estates working together in the 3D project approached us with the request to adapt the '*Groene Woud*' instrument to the situation and requirements of the estates. The Ministry of EL&I financed this adaptation.

#### 4. Methodology: developing the instrument

As a first step, we investigated the certification schemes of several regional brands in the Netherlands ('Waddengoud', 'Groene Hart Landwinkels', 'Vechtdal Convenant' and 'Kempen Goed')<sup>3</sup> and initiatives in Europe ('West Cork'-Fuchsia and 'Regio Eifel')<sup>4</sup> for their applicability to whole enterprises instead of products. However, almost all criteria under these schemes are focussed on products and production methods, but not on the enterprise or the region of production. We also investigated several Dutch instruments for Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) but found that these have almost no relation with the region where a company is situated. Thus, it was decided that a new instrument had to be developed.

##### a. From regional values to themes

In both case studies, workshops were held to brainstorm on the values of the region and the enterprises or estates involved. These values concern physical, natural, cultural, social, historical and economic attributes and characteristics of the region, the landscape, the inhabitants and enterprises or estates. Workshops in the 'Groene Woud' region were attended by sub-national stakeholders only: local villagers, farmers, recreation entrepreneurs, regional NGOs, members of village and town councils and the province of Noord-Brabant. For the estates, a workshop was held with the four estates of the 3D project only. In both cases, more than 200 keywords for such values were gathered in the workshops. Some examples of values are given in Table 1.

Table 1. *Examples of regional values proposed by stakeholders from 'Het Groene Woud'*

| People              | Planet                   | Profit                 |
|---------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|
| Local associations  | Flora and fauna          | Regional economy       |
| Hamlets             | Hedges, tree rows        | Short chains           |
| Families            | Peace                    | Small scale businesses |
| Religious heritage  | Space                    | Education              |
| Agrarian heritage   | Hiking and biking trails | Cooperation            |
| Architectural style | Region-specific          | Organizational skills  |
| Tradition           | Diversity                | Innovations            |

These values were subsequently evaluated for their suitability as indicators of sustainability and social services. Selected values were clustered in a number of themes under the three sustainability domains of People, Planet and Profit (PPP). These themes summarise values and attributes that express the performance and achievements of an enterprise in terms of social services and governance. In the two case studies, as a result of different priorities of the steering committees, themes were chosen and organised slightly different. These are summarised below (Table 2).

Table 2. *Different themes in the instrument, for two cases studies, as indicators of social services*

| Domain                         | People  | Planet                | Profit  |
|--------------------------------|---|-----------------------|---|
| Themes in<br>'Het Groene Woud' | External Appearance<br>& Cultural History<br>Community building | Nature &<br>Landscape | Entrepreneurship &<br>Economy<br>Customer Satisfaction &<br>Hospitality |
| Themes in<br>'Estates in 3D'   | Cultural History<br>Community building<br>Hospitality           | Nature<br>Landscape   | Economy<br>Entrepreneurship   |

##### b. From themes to questionnaires

The aim of the instrument is to show what a specific enterprise or estate currently contributes to the improvement of the region's quality and sustainability. To make these contributions explicit, a

questionnaire was developed to determine the actual achievements of enterprises or estates in terms of visible and verifiable facts and figures with respect to the different themes.

Furthermore, our objective was to make a self-evaluation instrument for which no expert advice or supervision is necessary, and therefore it should be simple and low-cost. For each theme, a set of approximately 25 – 40 questions was developed, based on the sets of regional values clustered under that theme. Questions were formulated in such a way that they could simply be answered by either a 'yes' or a 'no'. Table 3 illustrates examples of the type of questions involved. Each question answered with a 'yes' resulted in a score of points, that was added to a subtotal number of points per theme.

The instrument is flexible in attributing more or fewer points to specific questions, themes and/or domains. Thus, regional stakeholders can discuss and modify the priorities in themes or specific achievements, adapted to their own region and situation. Priorities can be translated into the maximum number of points that can be obtained per question or theme and thus can be weighted in the final result. The instrument can thus be made region and brand specific.

Table 3. *Examples of the types of questions used in the instrument, for case study 'Estates in 3D'*

| Theme            | Examples of questions   |     |
|------------------|---|-----|
| Cultural History | • Is your estate or one of its buildings on a municipal list of historical or cultural heritage?  | y/n |
|                  | • Do you provide information to visitors on the history of your estate and buildings (in websites, leaflets, billboards or guided tours)? | y/n |
| Nature           | • Is part of your estate assigned and managed as nature reserve or ecological area?   | y/n |
|                  | • Which biotopes or ecosystems are present on your estate?  |     |
|                  | ○ deciduous forest  | y/n |
|                  | ○ coniferous forest   | y/n |
|                  | ○ heathlands  | y/n |
|                  | ○ etcetera ...  |     |
| Economy          | • How many employees and tenant farmers work directly on your estate (in terms of full-time equivalents of employees = fte)?              |     |
|                  | ○ 0 – 5 fte   | y/n |
|                  | ○ 6 – 10 fte  | y/n |
|                  | ○ etcetera ...  |     |
|                  | • How many visitors and clients do you receive yearly on your estate?   |     |
|                  | ○ Less than 1000 per year   | y/n |
|                  | ○ 1000 – 5000 per year  | y/n |
|                  | ○ etcetera ....   |     |

Results of the questionnaire are presented as relative scores per theme, i.e. the realised score divided by the maximum attainable score. This allows – if desired – the use of a 'minimum attainable level', i.e. a minimum quality standard that is set for candidates before they are allowed to become member of the regional brand.

### c. Testing and improving

In case-study '*Het Groene Woud*' a concept of the questionnaire was tested on ten multifunctional farms and rural enterprises with different activities such as a farm campsite, a large scale camping, self-picking of fruits, strawberries and/or asparagus, a farm shop, a nursery, a restaurant, etcetera. Many comments helped to improve the questionnaire. It became clear that the use of one questionnaire for both farms with agricultural production and landless enterprises did not work well. Therefore, two separate versions of the questionnaire were developed for farms with agricultural production and for landless enterprises respectively. A second test with another ten enterprises showed many improvements, i.e. opportunities for farms and enterprises to show their qualities and achievements in different themes and domains. However, it also showed that

the wide diversity of enterprises and activities made it difficult to develop one format of questionnaire to fit them all.

The adaptation of the '*Groene Woud*' instrument for the characteristics, values and activities of the estates required a thorough revision of the questions for different themes. The adapted questionnaire was tested by the four estates in the 3D project, improved, and tested again by the same four estates. The conclusion of the estate holders was that questions in the domain of Profit (themes Entrepreneurship and Economy) did not yet sufficiently reflect the realised public services as perceived by the four estate owners themselves.

#### d. Instrument Outcome

The result of the instrument is a series of relative scores (the total realised score divided by the maximum attainable score) per theme. These scores summarize the degree in which an enterprise succeeds in realising social services in different themes and domains. For communication purposes, these scores are presented in a so-called 'radar-diagram' (Figure 1).

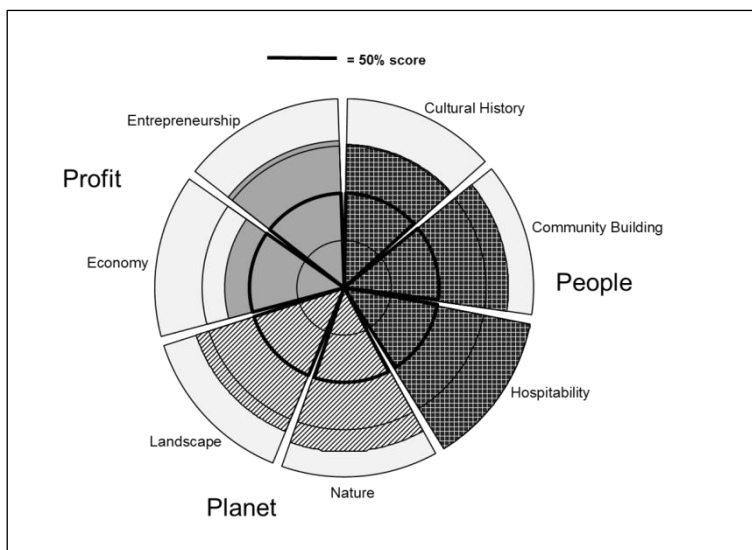


Figure 1. An example of the outcome of the instrument, presented as a radar-diagram showing the relative score for the different themes and domains, in this case of an estate

## 5. Discussion

For two different cases and target groups, we have succeeded in developing (a prototype of) an instrument that helps in showing what a specific enterprise or estate contributes to the quality of the region (in terms of sustainability and social services) in a transparent and verifiable method. But our instrument is far from finished and work remains to be done. Questions can be improved and (many) new questions could be added. Themes could be added, and changing scores per question would allow for specific fine-tuning, if desired. Two reports (in Dutch) describe in detail the development and outcome of the instrument (Alebeek et al., 2011 and Vijn et al., 2010).

From the tests done in '*Het Groene Woud*' and with the four estates, it can be concluded that the instrument presents individual results that can differ widely between farms, enterprises and estates, reflecting real differences in performances and achievements. In meetings with the steering committees, it also became clear that the presentation of the radar diagrams immediately initiated lots of discussions on the differences between enterprises, the underlying characteristics and activities, and on remedies to improve one's performance. From that we conclude that the instrument may be especially useful as a *communication tool*, either for internal use or external communication (see below).

### a. Purpose of the instrument

Based on the experiences in the tests of our instrument, several goals of the instrument can be formulated:

- As an entrance test to be admitted into the regional brand and to produce and market products under the regional label. This supposes a minimum score for the test as a whole and/or per theme. Not all aspects of quality control and best practices under a regional label can be translated into this instrument. It is recommended that an additional "code of conduct" is used for enterprises that request to be admitted into the regional brand. This is the approach that was adopted by the association of the '*Het Groene Woud*' regional brand.
- As a communication tool for internal discussion and awareness within a group of stakeholders on the sustainability criteria and regional qualities that are desired under the regional brand. Thus it is part of the internal communication within the group of stakeholders around a regional brand.
- In addition to the previous option (and possibly as part of the previous option) this instrument can be used to establish a baseline of the 'state of the art' of an enterprise in relation to pre-set quality standards of the regional brand. It could be part of a quality management and improvement programme of the regional brand. In this approach, a bench-marking system and guidelines for quality improvement measures are recommended.
- And finally, as an external communication instrument in discussions and meetings with stakeholders, NGOs and authorities around the cooperative of a regional brand. A regional brand can use the instrument to present and quantify its significance and achievements in social services for the regional communities. This may help in raising public support and in negotiating more freedom and space for experiments for their innovations and activities.

As stated above, the radar diagram that summarizes the outcome of the instrument has proven to be a quick and stimulating initiator for discussions and debate. Therefore, we consider the (internal and/or external) communication function of the instrument to be most promising and effective. In the case of the four estates working together in the 3D project, the goals of internal and external communication (and to a lesser extent, the instrument as part of a quality management programme) were considered as the most important.

### b. Lessons learned

The tests with different entrepreneurs in '*Het Groene Woud*' revealed that the instrument in its present form cannot satisfactorily accommodate both farms with agricultural production and landless enterprises in one. For example, landless enterprises (such as a restaurant) have few means or opportunities to present achievements for the themes Nature and Landscape. It can be discussed whether such enterprises with "natural handicaps" could be allowed to compensate for these themes by excellent performances in other themes of the instrument.

Regarding estates, our instrument has only been tested for the four estates in the 3D project. A larger sample of estates is necessary to test our questionnaire for more diverse activities and characteristics of estates. In 2012, we have planned to test the estate questionnaire on ten different estates, in order to improve the flexibility of the instrument.

Our results show that the current instrument is sensitive to the size of estates. Small estates are limited in realising different activities, resulting in limited scores, whereas larger estates can more easily diversify their activities and performances, resulting in higher scores in our instrument. The conclusion of the four estate owners was that questions in the domain of Profit (themes Entrepreneurship and Economy) did not yet sufficiently reflect the public services of the four estates as perceived by the four estate owners themselves.

One of the advantages of the instrument is that it is transparent, based on simple questions that concern direct, visible and verifiable results, attributes and activities of the farms and estates. At the same time, this simplicity does not adequately describe the complex goals, interactions, networks and achievements in the real world. Some of the entrepreneurs and estate owners feel that this practical approach does not account for the underlying principles, intentions and visions of the enterprises and estates involved. According to some of them, the "spirit" of entrepreneurship and innovation is not rewarded enough in the instrument. However, in a self-

evaluating instrument as ours is, it will be very difficult to verify (objectively) the outcomes on ideas, vision and intention.

The instrument setup allows regional stakeholders to choose the priorities in themes or achievements specific to their own region and situation. Priorities can be translated into the maximum number of points per question or theme and thus can be weighted in the final result. Minimal attainable scores (for entrance into a brand) can be modified per theme or as a whole. However, this flexibility raises the question how results from different brands and certification schemes can be compared among each other. A very flexible instrument, that is tailor made for each regional brand separately, may be contra-productive for its purpose as a communication instrument.

The instrument development was guided in both cases by the regional owners/producers of the label, was facilitated by the (national) Ministry and carried out by a team of regional and national advisors and researchers. As such, it currently is a supply driven approach. Citizens and NGOs have not yet had a say in determining the priorities in sustainability criteria and how to translate these into themes and relevant questions. If the instrument is really to communicate 'social services', then we have to come to agreements with these stakeholders on which services are really desired. That is one of the next steps planned for 2012.

So-far, we have not come along other (published) examples of instruments in regional branding with an approach comparative to ours. But it may very well be that such examples have not (yet) reached (international) literature. We would very much like to meet and discuss with groups that follow comparable approaches, and we kindly invite critics and supporters to reflect on our steps so-far.

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## Notes

All websites below were last accessed in the period February 22 - 28, 2012.

- 1: For several European initiatives on regional branding, see: [www.regional-products.eu](http://www.regional-products.eu) or [www.ruralquality.net/en/home/index.html](http://www.ruralquality.net/en/home/index.html) and [www.lifescapeyourlandscape.org/index.html](http://www.lifescapeyourlandscape.org/index.html)
- 2: The four estates in the 3D project: *Landgoed Beekzicht*, Voorst (NL) [www.landgoedbeekzicht.nl](http://www.landgoedbeekzicht.nl), *Landgoed Grootstal*, Nijmegen (NL) [www.moetjeproeven.nl/landgoed\\_grootstal](http://www.moetjeproeven.nl/landgoed_grootstal), *Landgoed Tongeren*, Epe (NL) [www.landgoedtongeren.nl](http://www.landgoedtongeren.nl) and *Landgoed Vilsteren*, Vilsteren (NL) [www.landgoed-vilsteren.nl](http://www.landgoed-vilsteren.nl) (all four websites in Dutch)
- 3: Regional brands in the Netherlands that were studied: 'Waddengoud' [www.waddengoud.nl](http://www.waddengoud.nl), 'Groene Hart Landwinkel' [www.landwinkel.nl](http://www.landwinkel.nl), 'Kempen Goed' [www.kempengoed.nl](http://www.kempengoed.nl), and 'Vechtdal Convenant' [www.vechtdalproducten.nl](http://www.vechtdalproducten.nl) (all these websites in Dutch)
- 4: Regional branding initiatives in Europe that were studied: 'West Cork' - Fuchsia Brand [www.fuchsibrands.com](http://www.fuchsibrands.com) and 'Eifel Regio' [www.eifel.de/go/home-english.html](http://www.eifel.de/go/home-english.html)



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