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## Conference Paper

# The countryside in urbanized Flanders: towards a flexible definition for a dynamic policy

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## THE COUNTRYSIDE IN URBANIZED FLANDERS: TOWARDS A FLEXIBLE DEFINITION FOR A DYNAMIC POLICY

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**Keywords:** rural policy, criteria, definition, rurality

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### Abstract

The countryside, the rural area, the open space, ... many definitions are used for rural Flanders. Everyone makes its own interpretation of the countryside, considering it as a place for living, working or recreating. The countryside is more than just a geographical area: it is an aggregate of physical, social, economic and cultural functions, strongly interrelated with each other.

According to international and European definitions of rural areas there would be almost no rural area in Flanders. These international definitions are all developed to be used for analysis and policy within their specific context. They are not really applicable to Flanders because of the historical specificity of its spatial structure. Flanders is characterized by a giant urbanization pressure on its countryside while internationally rural depopulation is a point of interest.

To date, for every single rural policy initiative – like the implementation of the European Rural Development Policy – Flanders used a specifically adapted definition, based on existing data or previously made delineations. To overcome this oversupply of definitions and delineations, the Flemish government funded a research project to obtain a clear and flexible definition of the Flemish countryside and a dynamic method to support Flemish rural policy aims.

First, an analysis of the currently used definitions of the countryside in Flanders was made. It is clear that, depending on the perspective or the policy context, another definition of the

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countryside comes into view. The comparative study showed that, according to the used criteria, the area percentage of Flanders that is rural, varies between 9 and 93 per cent.

Second, dynamic sets of criteria were developed, facilitating a flexible definition of the countryside, according to the policy aims concerned. This research part was focused on 6 policy themes, like ‘construction, maintenance and management of local (transport) infrastructures’ and ‘provision of (minimum) services (education, culture, health care, ...)’. For each theme a dynamic set of criteria or indicators was constructed. These indicators make it possible to show where a policy theme manifests itself and/or where policy interventions are possible or needed. In this way every set of criteria makes up a new definition of rural Flanders. This method is dynamic; new data or insights can easily be incorporated and new criteria sets can be developed if other policy aims come into view.

The developed method can contribute to a more region-oriented and theme-specific rural policy and funding mechanism.

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## **1. Introduction**

The countryside, the country, the rural area, the open space, the provinces, ... a wide range of terms and concepts is used to denominate the non-urban space. Many different definitions and criteria are linked with these concepts, depending on the vision and the aim of the involved actors. This makes sense because the countryside is more than just a geographical area: it is an aggregate of physical, social, economic and cultural functions, strongly interrelated with each other.

In the course of history, the difference between rural and urban areas was usually quite obvious. Cities were delimited by walls and fortifications. All space lying outside, could be considered as rural. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century this distinction has faded dramatically. Due to industrialization, an improved and increased mobility of persons and goods, urban sprawl and modern telecommunication both the morphologic as the mental contrast between rural and urban areas is gradually diminishing<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Lauwers, L. H., Kerselaers, E., Lenders, S., Vervaeet, M., Vervloet, D., 2005, Alternative Territorial Breakdowns of Statistics for Supporting Rural Policies, in: *2005 International Congress of European Association of Agricultural Economists*, European Association of Agricultural Economists, Copenhagen, Denmark.

Today, the morphologic extremes of settlement structures can still be easily recognized: a person who is standing in the middle of a big city, is fully aware that he or she is situated in an urban structure, whereas a visitor of an uninhabited wilderness or an agricultural plain will undoubtedly realize that he is in a rural area. But when we move from these extremes towards the imaginary border between urban and rural, the uncertainty in our definitions increases<sup>4</sup>. At some point the border between rural and urban is crossed, but where?

Although many politicians, researchers and government administrations would be too happy to have a standardized, general definition at their disposal, today there is no universal agreement on the definition of the term 'rural'<sup>5</sup>. Definitions often fall back on stereotypes and personal experiences. The term is associated with traditional landscapes, unique demographic structures and settlement patterns, spatial isolation, a low population density, extractive and extensive economic activities and specific sociocultural environments. However, these aspects cannot fully grasp the concept of 'rural'<sup>6</sup>.

In scientific literature several attempts can be found to come to a definition of rural areas, all leading to the conclusion that it is nearly impossible to develop a universally applicable, exact and unambiguous definition<sup>7</sup>. Although we can reach some agreement on the principles and relevant statistical indicators, all definitions have 'grey areas' where the result is influenced by large historical and structural differences between areas, differences in methods and quality of statistical data collection and differences in rural policies, which at their turn are influenced by global economic and political fluctuations and changes in government<sup>8</sup>.

Bealer et al. introduced the widely accepted idea that definitions of rural areas have to be based on ecological, cultural or land use criteria, or a combination of them<sup>9</sup>. The land use criterion has lost strength in recent decades, due to changes in the economic structure of the countryside. Therefore rural areas can no longer be considered only from their relation with agriculture, but rather from a broader perspective, including socio-economic characteristics<sup>10</sup>. Nevertheless the relation with agriculture persists in recent definitions. Montessor for example

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<sup>4</sup> Muilu, T., Rusanen, J., 2004, Rural definitions and short-term dynamics in rural areas of Finland in 1989 - 97, *Environment and Planning A* **36**(8):1499-1516.

<sup>5</sup> OECD, 1994, *Creating Rural Indicators for Shaping Territorial Policy*, OECD, Paris, pp. 93.

<sup>6</sup> Hart, L. G., Larson, E. H., Lishner, D. M., 2005, Rural Definitions for Health Policy and Research, *American Journal of Public Health* **95**(7):1149-1155.

<sup>7</sup> Pacione, M., 1984, *Rural geography*, Harper & Row, London.

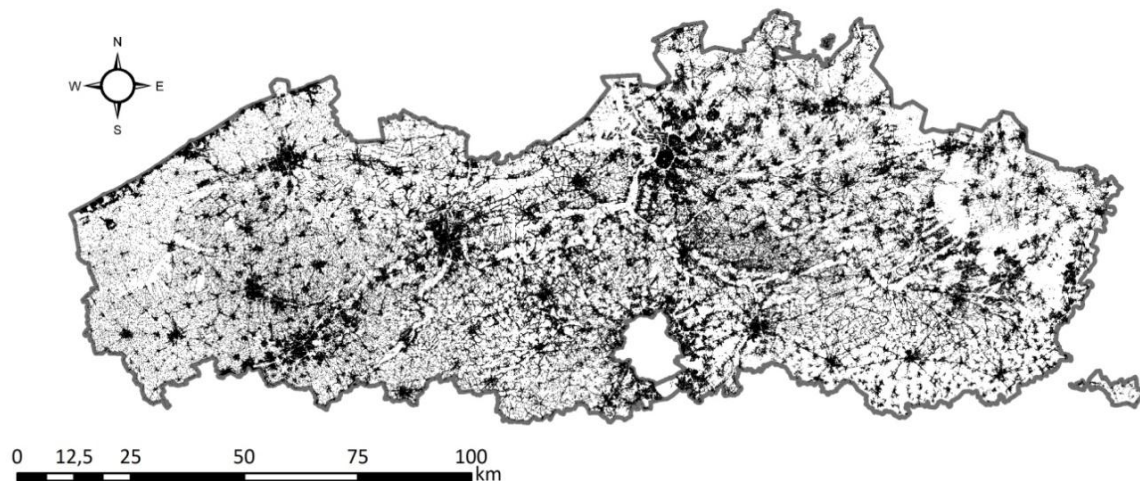
<sup>8</sup> Muilu, T., Rusanen, J., 2004, Rural definitions and short-term dynamics in rural areas of Finland in 1989 - 97, *Environment and Planning A* **36**(8):1499-1516.

<sup>9</sup> Bealer, R. C., Willits, F. K., Knulesky, W. P., 1965, The meaning of rurality in American society, some implications of alternative definitions, *Rural Sociology* **30**:255-266.

<sup>10</sup> Gilg, A. W., 1985, *An Introduction to Rural Geography*, Edward Arnold.

stipulates that a rural area has to meet three conditions: the agrarian employment has to exceed the national average, whereas the economic differentiation and the demographic density have to be lower than the national average<sup>11</sup>.

In Flanders, the northern part of federal Belgium, the difference between urban and rural areas is pre-eminently hard to make. Many authors agree that both terms are ideals that no longer exist, but can be found scattered and fragmented across the Flemish landscape. The Flanders region can be seen as one big, dispersed city, with built developments all over and a patchwork of open space fragments in between<sup>12,13</sup>. This highly fragmented state can be clearly seen on a map with the building pattern (figure 1). It is impossible to make a clear morphologic distinction between urban and rural areas.



**Figure 1. Building pattern in the region of Flanders (Source: cadastral data, Kadvec\_gebouwen, 2005)**

Urbanity has entered the Flemish countryside to a great extent. Almost everywhere an urban influence is present, if not morphological, than in mentality and life style. The so-called ‘countryside’ is no longer a monofunctional open agricultural production area, but rather a complex spatial structure consisting of fragments with different densities and functions, where people reside, work and recreate. Recent research reveals that several urbanization

<sup>11</sup> Montresor, E., 2002, Rural Development: an Analytical Approach at Different Territorial Levels, in: *2002 International Congress of European Association of Agricultural Economists*, European Association of Agricultural Economists, Zaragoza, Spain.

<sup>12</sup> De Meulder, B., Schreurs, J., Cock, A., Notteboom, B., 1999, Patching up the Belgian urban landscape, *OASE (DELFT)* (52):78-113.

<sup>13</sup> Van Eetvelde, V., Antrop, M., 2005, The significance of landscape relic zones in relation to soil conditions, settlement pattern and territories in Flanders, *Landscape and Urban Planning* 70(1-2):127-141.

phenomena are occurring in Flemish rural areas, both ‘hard’ (increasing built-up area, economic diversification) as ‘soft’ (increasing private use of space for gardens and hobby pastures, increasing recreational use of space), leading to an ‘urbanized’ countryside<sup>14</sup>.

On the other hand there is an increasing need for a clear demarcation of rural and urban areas, because many policy initiatives are based on such a distinction. Defining the countryside is thus a necessary exercise, since a definition forms an important supporting tool for a differentiated spatial policy. When economic stimulation instruments and financing mechanisms use these definitions, drawing a border however becomes a very difficult and sensitive balancing act<sup>15,16</sup>.

Also in Flanders a feasible definition of the countryside is needed. In the fragmented Flemish landscape the current rural policy discords again and again with the unclear borders of the countryside. A clear definition of the Flemish rural areas is needed to support the further development of a Flemish policy vision, the realization of the rural development fund and the execution of the European Rural Development Policy. This is why the Flemish Land Agency<sup>17</sup> – a Flemish government agency responsible for rural policy in the rural and suburban areas of Flanders – asked the Ghent University to carry out a study on this topic. They asked us to analyze the existing definitions of the Flemish countryside and to develop a new flexible, feasible definition method. The new method should make it possible to visualize where specific rural policy themes manifest themselves, so that policy can be tuned to it. This conference paper gives an overview of the most important findings of this study, leading to a final conclusion and a critical reflection on the use of the newly developed method for the Flemish rural policy.

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<sup>14</sup> Tempels, B., Verbeek, T., Pisman, A., Allaert, G., 2011, The urban entering Flanders' rural areas : a comparative study of underlying dynamics and spatial effects, in: *Spatial planning in Flanders/Belgium : challenges for policy, opportunities for society : book of abstracts*, Vlaanderen. Ruimte en Wonen. Steunpunt beleidsrelevant onderzoek 2007-2011, pp. 26-26.

<sup>15</sup> Hart, L. G., Larson, E. H., Lishner, D. M., 2005, Rural Definitions for Health Policy and Research, *American Journal of Public Health* **95**(7):1149-1155.

<sup>16</sup> Lauwers, L. H., Kerselaers, E., Lenders, S., Vervaeke, M., Vervloet, D., 2005, Alternative Territorial Breakdowns of Statistics for Supporting Rural Policies, in: *2005 International Congress of European Association of Agricultural Economists*, European Association of Agricultural Economists, Copenhagen, Denmark.

<sup>17</sup> in Dutch: Vlaamse Landmaatschappij (VLM)

## 2. Analysis of existing definitions of the Flemish countryside

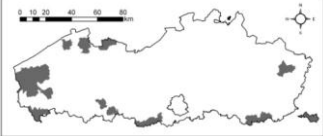
As a base for the development of a new dynamic analysis tool, the Flemish Land Agency asked for a thorough analysis of the existing delineations and definitions of the (Flemish) countryside. Comparable studies have already been made in Flanders<sup>18</sup> and other countries, including Canada<sup>19</sup> and Finland<sup>20</sup>.

Prior to the evaluation of specific Flemish definitions, one of the most known international definitions was analyzed, i.e. the definition of the OECD<sup>21</sup>. They use an arbitrary criterion of 150 inhabitants per square kilometer to demarcate the rural area. This criterion can easily be computed for different geographical entities, can be universally understood, is neutral for differences in area and does not have a political connotation. On the other hand the criterion does not agree with local perceptions<sup>22</sup>. According to this criterion only some fifteen municipalities in Flanders can be classified as rural (see table 1, nr. 1).

Next, a set of specific Flemish definitions of the countryside were examined. Within this study about ten different definitions were studied, paying attention to the used criteria and the scale. In table 1 a summary is presented of the most important results of this analysis. For each definition, the map shows in grey which part of Flanders can be seen as 'rural'.

Considering this multitude of definitions, it is shown that, depending on the approach or policy context, another delineation of the countryside emerges. Depending on the used criteria the percentage of Flanders, indicated as 'rural', varies from as much as 9 to 93 percent.

**Table 1. Summary of definitions of the Flemish countryside**

	Name	Map	% 'rural' Flanders	Scale	Criteria
1	OECD definition		9%	municipality	150 inhabitants/km <sup>2</sup>

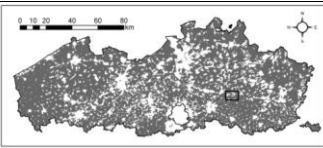
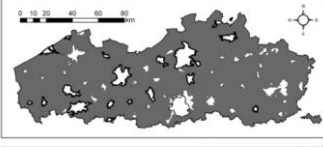
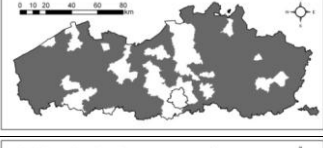

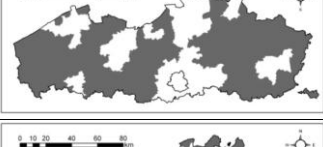
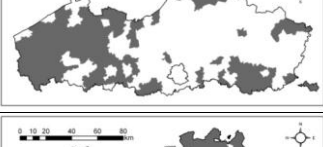
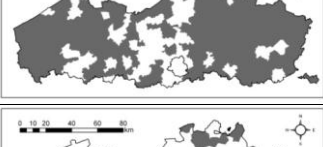
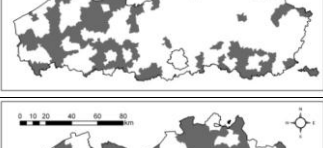

<sup>18</sup> Lenders, S., Lauwers, L., Vervloet, D., Kerselaers, E., 2005, Afbakening van het Vlaamse platteland: een statistische analyse, Ministerie van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap, Administratie Land- en Tuinbouw, Afdeling Monitoring en Studie & Centrum voor Landbouweconomie, Brussel & Merelbeke, pp. 60.

<sup>19</sup> du Plessis, V., Beshiri, R., Bollman, R. D., Clemenson, H., 2002, Definitions of "Rural", Statistics Canada.

<sup>20</sup> Muilu, T., Rusanen, J., 2004, Rural definitions and short-term dynamics in rural areas of Finland in 1989 - 97, *Environment and Planning A* **36**(8):1499-1516.

<sup>21</sup> Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

<sup>22</sup> Lauwers, L. H., Kerselaers, E., Lenders, S., Vervloet, M., Vervloet, D., 2005, Alternative Territorial Breakdowns of Statistics for Supporting Rural Policies, in: *2005 International Congress of European Association of Agricultural Economists*, European Association of Agricultural Economists, Copenhagen, Denmark.

2	ADSEI <sup>23</sup> : non-residential areas		74%	statistical sector	morphologically connected developments
3	RSV <sup>24</sup> : non-urban areas		90%	cadastral parcel	legal translation of spatial policy choices
4	study of Lenders et al. <sup>25</sup>		79%	municipality	600 inhabitants/km <sup>2</sup>
5a	metropolitan areas definition <sup>26</sup> : non-agglomeration		86%	municipality	adaptation of municipal boundaries to terrain study of morphologically connected developments (see nr. 2)
5b	metropolitan areas definition <sup>27</sup> : non-metropolitan		69%	municipality	banlieue criteria: population growth, median income, migration, work and school commuting, built-up area
6a	SPRE <sup>28</sup> : rural cluster		43%	municipality	population density, population growth, employment in agricultural sector, area of agricultural land
6b	SPRE: rural + amorphous cluster		77%	municipality	population density, population growth, employment in agricultural sector, area of agricultural land
7a	vrind <sup>29</sup> : rural area		32%	municipality	combination of RSV non-urban areas (nr. 3) and SPRE definitions (nr. 6)
7b	vrind: rural area + hybrid area		58%	municipality	combination of RSV non-urban areas (nr. 3) and SPRE definitions (nr. 6)

<sup>23</sup> Directorate General Statistics and Economic Information Belgium (in Dutch: Algemene Directie Statistiek en Economische Informatie)

<sup>24</sup> Spatial Structure Plan for Flanders (in Dutch: Ruimtelijk Structuurplan Vlaanderen)

<sup>25</sup> Lenders, S., Lauwers, L., Vervloet, D., Kerselaers, E., 2005, Afbakening van het Vlaamse platteland: een statistische analyse, Ministerie van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap, Administratie Land- en Tuinbouw, Afdeling Monitoring en Studie & Centrum voor Landbouweconomie, Brussel & Merelbeke, pp. 60.


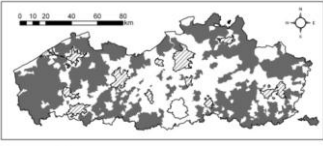
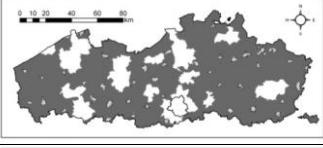
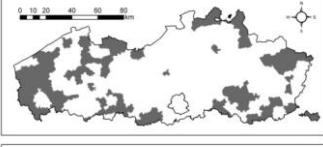
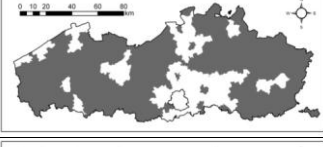
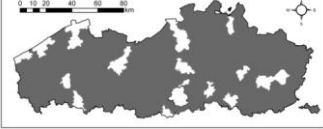
<sup>26</sup> Van Hecke, E., Halleux, J. M., Decroly, J. M., Mérenne-Schoumaker, B., 2009, Woonkernen en stadsgewesten in een verstedelijkt België, Algemene Directie Statistiek en Economische Informatie, Brussel, pp. 203.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Strategic Spatial Economic Plan (in Dutch: Strategisch Plan Ruimtelijke Economie)

<sup>29</sup> Flemish Regional Indicators (in Dutch: Vlaamse Regionale Indicatoren)



8a	PDPO <sup>30</sup> II As 3/4 and VVP <sup>31</sup> countryside		93%	cadastral parcel	definition of metropolitan and regional urban areas RSV (nr. 3)
8b	PDPO II As 3/4 and VVP rural countryside		51%	formerly independent municipality	≤ 300 inhabitants/km <sup>2</sup> ≤ 15% built-up area
9	ZORO <sup>32</sup> - en STeR <sup>33</sup> project calls		78%	municipality	without metropolitan or regional urban municipalities (see RSV, nr. 3) with local urban municipalities, except for the RSV urban areas (see RSV, nr. 3)
10	VVSG <sup>34</sup> selection rural policy		31%	municipality	population, population density, municipal financial power based on cadastral incomes/personal income taxes, percentage built-up area
11a	migration zones rural <sup>35</sup>		76%	municipality	household typology criteria: early marriage, living together without being married, singles, one-parent families, etc.
11b	migration zones rural + suburban <sup>36</sup>		89%	municipality	household typology criteria: early marriage, living together without being married, singles, one-parent families, etc.

This analysis leads to four important conclusions.

### 1. A multitude of definitions

A striking fact is the multitude of coexisting definitions, each with a different approach and other criteria. Also Hart et al.<sup>37</sup> noted that the definition of the countryside for one aim is often inappropriate or inadequate for another purpose. A strong example is the OECD definition (table 1, nr. 1), which is not practicable in the Flemish context.

<sup>30</sup> Programming Document for Rural Development (in Dutch: ProgrammeringsDocument voor PlattelandsOntwikkeling)

<sup>31</sup> Association of Flemish Provinces (in Dutch: Vereniging van Vlaamse Provincies)

<sup>32</sup> Project call 'Local care networks in a rural setting' (in Dutch: Projectoproep 'Dorpsnetwerken voor zorg in een rurale omgeving')

<sup>33</sup> Project call 'Promotion of silence and quietude experience in a rural setting' (In Dutch: Projectoproep 'Stimulering van stilte- en rustbeleving in een landelijke omgeving')

<sup>34</sup> Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities (in Dutch: Vereniging van Vlaamse Steden en Gemeenten)

<sup>35</sup> Willaert, D., 1999, Stadsvlucht of verstedelijking? Een analyse van migratiebewegingen in België, *Planologisch Nieuws* 19(2):109-126.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Hart, L. G., Larson, E. H., Lishner, D. M., 2005, Rural Definitions for Health Policy and Research, *American Journal of Public Health* 95(7):1149-1155.

Remarkably, also for rural policy initiatives each time another specifically constructed definition is used. This demonstrates the lack of consensus on the borders of the countryside, even within the Flemish rural policy.

## 2. The countryside as residual space

Another finding is that many definitions do not have a rural background, but rather an urban one. From this point of view the rural area is only a residual space. Within the rural policy framework a positive definition of the rural area is needed, based on its own characteristics, functions and values.

## 3. Narrow view on indicators

Several definitions work with a very narrow view to define the countryside. Some definitions only consider population density or land use, whereas the countryside is definitely more than just an area with a low population density and extensive land use. Some rural policy themes – like the provision of minimal services, local accessibility and the viability of the local economy – have nothing to do with these basic criteria.

Furthermore, this focus on population or building density gives the impression of a countryside uniform in all other characteristics, while in reality large differences can be observed. Some rural areas are characterized by a large amount of nature, while other areas are focused on agriculture, some rural areas are important from a recreational or landscape point of view, while others are under a strong urbanization pressure.

## 4. Focus on an unambiguous definition

Most definitions strive to an unambiguous classification urban-rural, while in reality a continuum exists with different degrees of rurality. In fact, rural areas differ a lot and by combining rural areas of different size and degree of isolation or rurality, local differences and problems can remain underexposed<sup>38,39</sup>.

These four conclusions reflect the need for a new approach. This new approach has to be developed in a uniform way and be easily adaptable to different purposes (1). The countryside has to be approached in a positive way, starting from its specific characteristics (2), with both morphologic and demographic, as well as social, cultural and economic indicators, all taking into account the typical sociocultural history of Flanders and its specific spatially fragmented

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ocaña-Riola, R., Sánchez-Cantalejo, C., 2005, Rurality Index for Small Areas in Spain, *Social Indicators Research* 73(2):247-266.

structure (3). Finally it is not the purpose to develop an unambiguous classification, but rather to supply a continuum of different degrees of 'rurality' (4).

### **3. Towards a flexible definition through a dynamic set of criteria**

In international literature a few examples can be found of methods that go beyond a pure demarcation urban-rural, like a detailed statistical and spatial rurality index for England and Wales<sup>40</sup>, a rurality index for Spain based on principal component analysis<sup>41</sup> or the urban-rural classification used by ESPON<sup>42</sup>, with different combinations of high vs. low urban and human influence. For Flanders, Lauwers et al.<sup>43</sup> developed a rurality index, considering rurality as a continuum.

All these methods have their merits, because they don't strive to strict classifications and take the local context into account. It can be commented however that these methods still use a limited range of indicators, eventually leading to one single index or classification, what in fact is a quite limited approach.

The general conclusions drawn from the analysis of existing definitions support the question of the Flemish Land Agency for a dynamic set of criteria, enabling a flexible definition of the countryside. This method has to go beyond a mere classification urban-rural or a simple rurality index. It should allow for a different definition of the countryside depending on the policy theme concerned, based on corresponding indicators. This way can be visualized where specific rural policy themes are at issue.

#### *Six themes and corresponding indicators*

Just because rural policy in Flanders is very diverse and related to very different problems and challenges, the method does not opt for one summarizing indicator. By contrast a set of indicators was developed, related to six themes, relevant for the current Flemish rural policy. The selection of these themes was based on various policy documents, an analysis of projects

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<sup>40</sup> Cloke, P. J., 1977, An index of rurality for England and Wales, *Regional Studies* **11**(1):31-46.

<sup>41</sup> Ocaña-Riola, R., Sánchez-Cantalejo, C., 2005, Rurality Index for Small Areas in Spain, *Social Indicators Research* **73**(2):247-266.

<sup>42</sup> European Spatial Planning Observatory Network (see <http://www.espon.eu/>)

<sup>43</sup> Lauwers, L. H., Kerselaers, E., Lenders, S., Vervaet, M., Vervloet, D., 2005, Alternative Territorial Breakdowns of Statistics for Supporting Rural Policies, in: *2005 International Congress of European Association of Agricultural Economists*, European Association of Agricultural Economists, Copenhagen, Denmark.

funded by rural development funds and close consultation with the Flemish Land Agency and a team of experts in the field.

The six selected themes are: preservation and/or strengthening of *open space*; construction, maintenance and management of *local infrastructures*; ensuring a minimum and/or appropriate *accessibility*; preservation and/or strengthening of the *local economy*; conservation and management of *local heritage*; provision of (*minimum*) *services* (education, culture, health care, ...).

For each theme relevant corresponding indicators were constructed, that enable to visualize where these policy themes manifest themselves today and/or where a policy driven intervention is possible or needed.

The indicators were selected 'data driven'. The focus of the study was rather on the development of a dynamic method, and not so much on the fine-tuning and practical use of these method based on the most recent data. Within this research we opted therefore for a maximum use of existing data, analyses and indicators, although these are not always up-to-date (e.g. the results of the ADSEI Socio-Economic Enquiry of 2001). Further, only static indicators were used, while it can be interesting for rural policy to visualize evolutions. In table 2 a summary is given of the corresponding indicators per selected rural policy theme.

**Table 2. Six rural policy themes and corresponding indicators**

<b>THEME</b>	<b>INDICATORS</b>
<b>Preservation and/or strengthening of open space</b>	Availability of open space (%) Building density (%) Green space contiguity (ha) Agricultural space contiguity (ha) Human pressure on open space (inh/ha) Scenic value (%)
<b>Construction, maintenance and management of local infrastructures</b>	Local roads (m/inh) Local verge management (m/inh) Local watercourses (m/inh) Local bicycle network (m/inh) Local sanitation costs (€/inh)
<b>Ensuring a minimum and/or appropriate accessibility</b>	Car ownership (cars/household) Satisfaction with public transport (% malcontents) Time distance to nearest city during rush hours (mins)

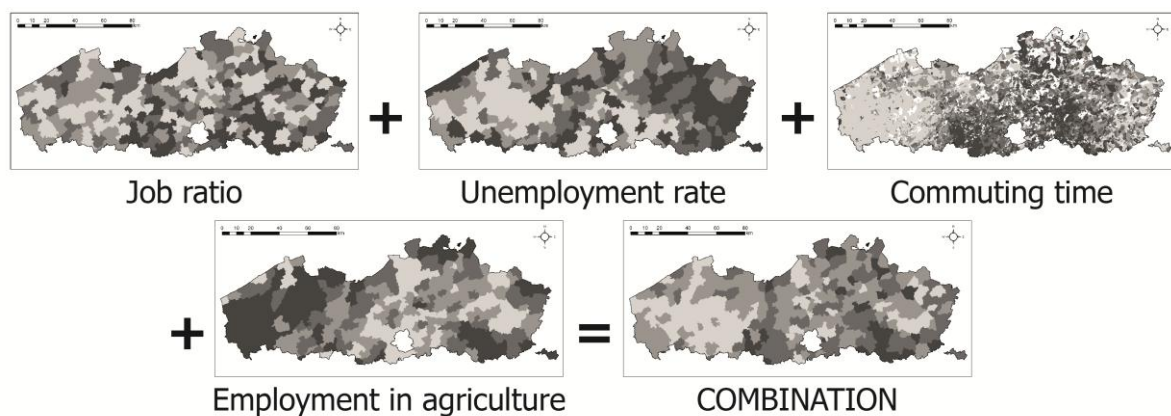
<b>Preservation and/or strengthening of the local economy</b>	Job ratio (%)
	Unemployment rate (%)
	Commuting time (mins)
	Employment in agriculture (%)
<b>Conservation and management of local heritage</b>	Architectural heritage (# sites)
	Landscape point relics (# relics)
	Protected city- and townscapes (ha)
<b>Provision of (minimum) services (education, culture, health care, ...)</b>	Population density (inh/km <sup>2</sup> )
	Address density (# addresses/km <sup>2</sup> )
	Satisfaction with local shops (% malcontents)
	Satisfaction with social and education facilities (% malcontents)
	Satisfaction with culture and leisure facilities (% malcontents)

### *Combined maps*

Next step is the combination of the different indicator maps into one combined map, enabling the visualization of the areas where the policy theme is the most relevant (see figure 2 for a representation of the combination method for the theme *local economy*).

The indicators are combined by summing the quartile scores. For each individual indicator the respective spatial units (statistical sectors, municipalities or formerly independent municipalities) are ordered into four equal groups or quartiles, starting with the 25% units with the weakest score on the indicator up to the 25% with the highest score. Subsequently a score from 1 to 4 is assigned to these groups, the 'quartile score'. These individual indicators are visualized on a map, with the quarter of the municipalities/statistical sectors with the weakest<sup>44</sup> score represented in the darkest shade of gray. For the construction of the combined thematic indicator the average of these quartile scores is calculated. This average is again ordered into four quartiles and visualized on a map in grayscale, with the darkest shade of gray for the weakest scoring units. The combination method uses quartile scores because other options, like the standardization per indicator, can lead to a loss of essential information. For example, the standardization of population density can level off the differences within the group of sparsely populated municipalities and enlarge the urban-rural differences, while both are relevant.

<sup>44</sup> For some indicators, like job ratio, low scores are the weakest scores; for others, like employment in agriculture, high scores are the weakest.



**Figure 2. Combination of indicators for the theme 'Preservation and/or strengthening of the local economy'**

The scale level of the six combined maps is different (figure 3) and is determined by the scale of the available data and the relevance for the theme. For the policy theme *open space* it is useful to visualize as detailed as possible where open space is available and can be preserved or strengthened. For a theme like *local economy* it is logical that a higher scale level is used, since this theme is especially relevant at the scale of municipalities or even at a higher regional level.

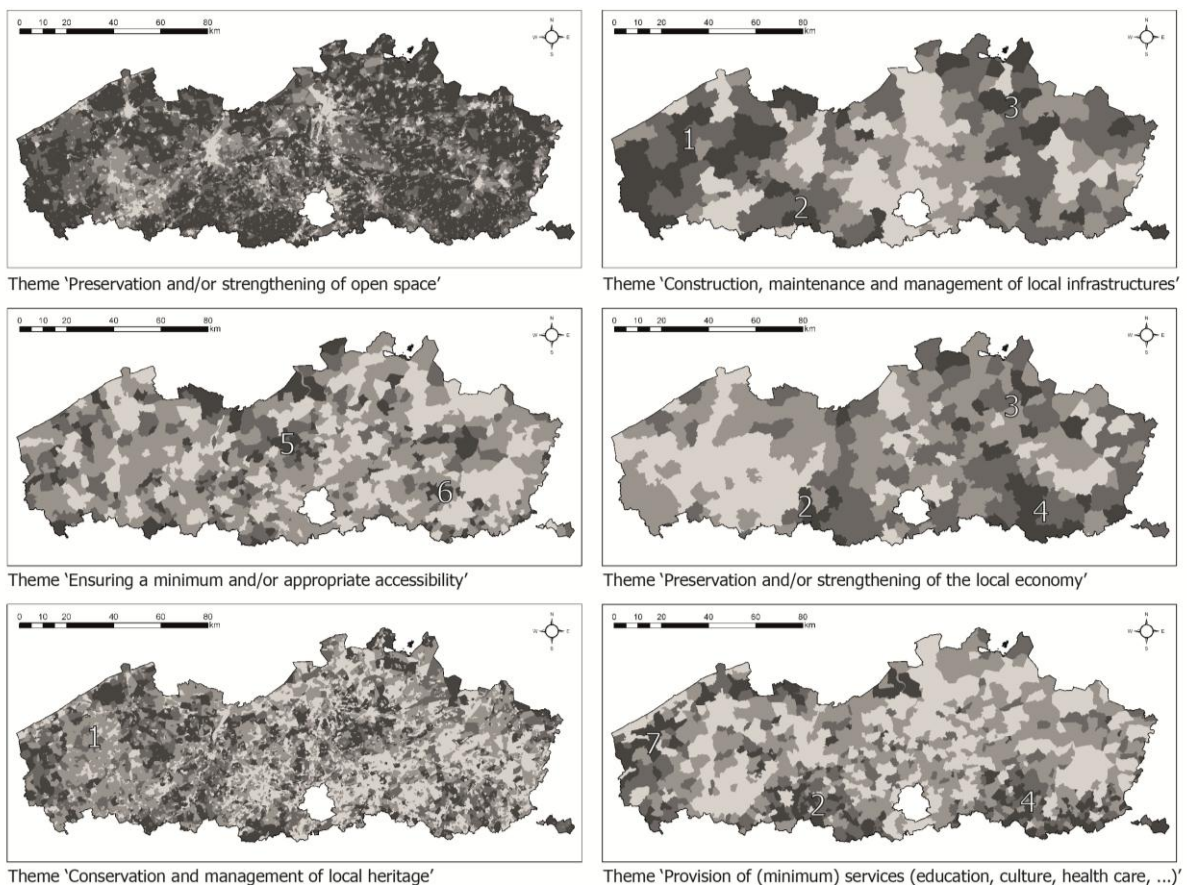
Of course this method does not have the intention to present six new, unambiguous definitions, corresponding to the six policy themes. Depending on the policy questions at issue only a few indicators per theme, or even across themes, are relevant. Then these indicators can be combined in a specific synthesis map. Moreover, the six presented synthesis maps in this paper are based on a combination of indicators without weighting factors.

Consequently, the six maps depicted in figure 3 have few direct policy relevance and are just meant to show the possibilities of the method. This generalized analysis yet clearly shows the regional variability in different rural areas with respect to the themes. This way, each time an 'other' countryside is constructed.

- The synthesis map for the theme *open space* displays at a very detailed scale where financial support for the preservation and conservation of open space is possibly needed or wanted. On this map all classic Flemish rural areas come to the fore and this representation thus comes very close to the mental distinction between city and country that many Flemish people make.
- On the map for the theme *local infrastructures* the province of West-Flanders (1) and the rural areas Flemish Ardennes (2) and Campine (3) are highlighted. These areas

possibly have to contend with high costs because of a wide range of local infrastructures compared to a limited number of tax payers.

- West-Flanders clearly is not a problem area with respect to the theme of *local economy*. The focus is rather on the Hesbaye region (4) and – to a lesser degree – the Campine (3) and Flemish Ardennes (2).
- The map for the theme of *accessibility* is very fragmented, with some outlying areas standing out the most. Also in the center of Flanders (5) and in the west of the Limburg (6) province some areas have a weak score.
- Also the map for the theme of *local heritage* is very fragmented, with West-Flanders (1) having relatively high scores. Not surprisingly, assessing local heritage – a very local issue – at an aggregate level is a difficult challenge.
- Finally three problem areas can be noticed on the combined map for the theme (*minimum*) *services*. Especially the western part of the West-Flanders province (7), the Flemish Ardennes (2) and Hesbaye (4).



**Figure 3. Six synthesis maps, based on six rural policy themes (darker grey where the policy theme is more relevant)**

#### **4. Discussion and policy relevance**

The presented dynamic method to define the countryside, based on thematic sets of criteria, can provide an answer to the important question of "What is rural?" and thus support the Flemish rural policy.

This method doesn't give an unambiguous definition of rural areas. Conversely, the method enables the construction of an adapted definition, according to the specific rural policy aim. The indicators and policy themes presented in this paper are guiding examples, but can be easily adapted. New policy themes can be incorporated in the method and indicators can be added or removed when new data become available or the focus of a policy theme changes.

The method can be an important tool for the Flemish rural policy by defining the areas on which to concentrate, taking into account the policy priorities and the available budgets. For some policy themes clear regional variations within the Flemish countryside can be observed, justifying a differentiated region-specific policy.

Besides, the method can be used as an evaluation instrument for financing projects. This application would require quite some efforts, but at the same time provide a well-founded base for the selection of projects. It goes without saying that the location is only one of the aspects that have to be evaluated.

Finally the indicators and synthesis maps can be employed in the communication about rural policy and rural projects.

Nevertheless this method is not yet quite perfect, mainly because not all rural characteristics are covered by existing indicators, and many indicators are based on outdated data. If this method effectively would be used in future rural policy, then up-to-date indicators are needed, that are monitored regularly. The dynamic character of the set of indicators thus points also to a continued attention to developing and updating efficient sets of indicators, to give a current picture of the Flemish countryside at any time.

Although the method certainly can be improved, it offers a refreshing view on what can be considered as rural in Flanders. It is clear that the Flemish countryside is too complex to grasp in a single, unambiguous definition. A flexible definition, linked to specific rural issues, is much more helpful to the Flemish rural policy. The developed method uses dynamic sets of criteria and can contribute to a more region-specific and efficient realization of the rural policy aims, as well as a better use of corresponding funding mechanisms.



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